

Verba Volant, Scripta Manent?
Aspects of Early Scandinavian Oral Society

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We all have our problems.

President Charles de Gaulle of France said, probably with a huge sigh, ‘How can you govern a country which has 246 varieties of cheese?’. Another French sovereign, however, in quite another time, Charlemagne of Francia, had his ruling problems: in Italy, c. 806, faithful men claimed not to be bound by the additions made to *Lex Salica* by Charlemagne in 803, because they declared that they had not heard the ruler announce them personally. Thus the Italians at that time did not feel forced to accept a written decree: the orally declared word was given supremacy (Nelson 1990: 267; cf. Clanchy 1993: 186 and 262-3).

This problem – not de Gaulle’s, but Charlemagne’s – becomes acute for everyone working with early Scandinavian society and culture: when does the transition from a predominantly oral society to one based primarily on literacy take place? And is it possible to reconstruct early Scandinavian oral culture in some way? What I am particularly aiming at in this chapter is to try to understand how decrees, communal rules and official proclamations were transmitted and remembered in a society with no written documents or records. Hence what I would like to explore here is whether we can find any reminiscences of this oral tradition in our oldest written records, runic inscriptions and provincial laws, and thus to investigate the ‘communal language’ of pre-historic Scandinavian society.¹

¹ The oral culture of Scandinavia is a topic not so often addressed in research (cf. however recently Quinn 2000), while the culture of literacy has been highlighted by several scholars, e.g. in Sweden in a project initiated by Prof. Barbro Söderberg, Stockholm (Söderberg and Larsson 1993; Lindell 1994). Internationally this field has been more cultivated, by e.g. Parry 1930-32 for Homeric verse, Lord 1960 for Balkan folk-songs, Havelock 1982 and 1986 for early Greek culture, Vansina 1965 for general aspects on oral

‘An Oral Culture is a Different Culture from a Book Culture’²

The shift from an oral society to a writing society is a shift in communication and memorization, which has decisive implications for a culture (Goody 1984: 51; Bloomfield and Dunn 1989: 13-16), to such an extent that it becomes the fundamental basis for an intellectual revolution. This shift is certainly not to be described as an event, a drastic change, but instead as a slow process (Green 1990: 268), which, in Scandinavia, took place especially during the Late Iron Age and the Middle Ages.³

Normally the shift from an oral culture to a literate culture in northern Europe is placed in the High Middle Ages.⁴ The literates were mainly the clergy while the laymen, even the King and the lay aristocracy, were very often illiterates, who never bothered to learn to read and write. The medieval aristocratic ideal was a military, not a literary one (Haubrichs 1976: 600-1; cf. Green 1994: 23-4 and 30).

The promotor of this cultural change was probably the aforementioned Charles the Great. He had to rule over a huge multilingual empire, encompassing Romance, Germanic and Slavic dialects. Since the emperor could not visit all the different parts of his realm as an itinerant ruler, he had to rely on a settled administrative centre (Aachen) and the written document as the essential instrument in governing, in the same way as happened in the earlier Roman Empire. This circumstance required a class of *litterati* for the administration of the different parts of the Empire, and the only body that could fulfill this task at that time was the Church. Charles consequently had to rely heavily on the Church and made it his closest ally.

But before we continue this discussion of oral fragments in a world of literacy in Scandinavia it is appropriate first to consider the concept of *orality*; what are we to look for? For a start, *orality* is not the oppo-

tradition, Finnegan 1970 for African oral literature, Ong 1982 for general aspects of orality versus literacy and Green 1994 for discussions especially from German evidence.

² Bloomfield and Dunn 1989: 16.

³ See e.g. Söderberg and Larsson 1993: 13. I here use the Scandinavian chronology of Middle Ages (c. 1100-1500) and Late Iron Age (c. 600-1100).

⁴ Green 1994 is an excellent and fundamental introduction and discussion of this crucial problem in our history.

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site of *literacy*, at least not during the Middle Ages, when literacy was synonymous with ‘knowledge in Latin’ and therefore the opposite of *illiteracy* (e.g. McKitterick 1990: 3 with refs).

The spoken language is – in contrast to the written language – a directly interpersonal mode of communication. That is why in an oral society there must, of course, be some kind of an arena for communal communication (cf. Lönnroth 1978: 389). When people are talking to one another, in casual talk, as a ‘mode of action’, at home, the work place or whatever, there is no need for an arena. But if we are addressing an audience, a certain arena must be at hand, for dealing with communal matters. In the Late Iron Age society of Scandinavia there were two major communal arenas: one for ‘vertical communication’, the hall of the king or chieftain,⁵ and one for ‘horizontal communication’, the assembly site (for different levels in society), where people met for communal matters (Brink 1999, 2003 and forthcoming). What we are dealing with here, is not the everyday, casual talk, but the spoken language addressed to an audience, to be memorized and delivered in some kind of a lasting form, which, in turn, was to be mentally preserved by the audience. The former is immediate communication; the latter preserved communication (Havelock 1986: 63-5).

Thus we come back to the two questions addressed above: how is it possible to remember ‘preserved communication’ in a non-literate society? And also, with regard to our modern, retrospective, scholarly approach, how is it possible for us to gain any insight into this oral culture? An archaeologist may reconstruct an early culture out of physical remains, ancient artifacts and fossilized organic material. In the same way orality is fossilized when it is written down in some way. Thus, we have to have some written sources to be able to trace a former oral culture. This then takes us to the transitional period in our society, between orality and literacy. The Russian historian Aaron Ja. Gurevich has analyzed this problem in early Scandinavia, and found that:

the oral tradition of the distant past could not be directly recorded, and everything which we learn of it in the sources, the texts of the literary tradition, is only an indirect reflection.

⁵ Cf. Herschend 1993 and 1997 for the importance of the hall in an oral culture of this kind. See also Green 1994: 22 and 63-5.

What is more, this reflection of the oral through the written, which is always and inevitably transformed and distorted, has been filtered through ecclesiastical ideology (Gurevich 1984: 51).

It is extremely difficult, perhaps futile, to find anything of an old oral tradition in the medieval texts and written records, according to Gurevich. However, as I shall try to demonstrate below, it is perhaps possible to find scattered information. Another important source of knowledge of orality is anthropological analogues from known and analyzed historical oral cultures.

Constructing a general theory of orality must be set in a social context; it requires communication as a social phenomenon, not a private, casual transaction between individuals (Havelock 1986: 68). Thus it is essential to get some insight into how oral communications may be transmitted from generation to generation. In a literate society this is normally no problem with words preserved in documents. The communication is fixed and the ideas behind this act of communication preserved, at least as long as the text survives. Havelock's answer to this is that 'Ritualization becomes the means of memorization' (1986: 70). The memories are in a way personal, everyone has his personal interpretation and remembrance, but the content, the language preserved, is communal, expressing tradition and historical identity.

This theoretical insight resembles in a way the main conceptions in the *oral-formulaic theory*, presented by Parry and Lord, a theory that has been so important in the discussion of orality and literacy during recent decades. As is now well known, they found that Balkan oral poets and folk-singers did not reiterate traditional folk songs in a fixed form, but had a basic repertoire of formulas that they wove the songs around; the words could be changed, but the story was the same. For Old Norse poetry, however, later research has found that the eddaic and skaldic poems are created around such formulas to a lesser extent than perhaps would be expected. Instead these poems must have more or less been memorized as wholes (Lönnroth 1971 and 1981; Fidjestøl 1982: 204; Harris 1994; Acker 1998; and see below). And for the Old Icelandic sagas Peter Buchholz has presented an interesting theory about their oral background, where the saga teller has used several mnemonic

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devices such as certain, often recurring motifs (Buchholz 1978 and 1980; Harris 1998).

Thus, it seems obvious that the tools an orator works with are mnemotechnics, which are fundamental for an oral society, but not so easy to understand in a society and culture built on literacy. However, as Havelock (1986: 68-9) correctly points out, we have even in our modern culture some people living within an 'oral culture', namely our small children, toddlers, who have not learnt to read and write. And a notable phenomenon with toddlers, well known to all parents, is the desire to listen to the same story over and over again. Very often a child gets hung up on one particular tale that the parents have to retell over and over again. The parents find this tiring, the child fascinating.

A personal experience from all my three children is that when a word was left out when retelling the favourite tale, or a wrong word was used, or when the story was changed – unintentionally or intentionally, for speeding up the go-to-bed procedure, by a tired parent – however minor the mistake was, the alert child always immediately protested and demanded that the story should be told in the proper and correct way.

I think it is possible to elevate this experience to a more general observation. For a small child, more or less totally framed within orality, the favourite story is important, and in these cases the child treasures every word and nuance in the story. A person in a literate culture may be more casual, flexible and less dogmatic in approach – they know that it always is possible to go back to the text and reread it to check. This is an option which someone framed in an oral culture lacks. Anyone in an oral culture ought therefore to have some kind of 'deeper predisposition' for the ability to remember things of importance.⁶ From anthropological studies as well as indications which can be found in historical sources this requirement often became the province of specialists, professional remembrancers, whose task it was to store memory, wisdom and knowledge in a society (see below).

⁶ Goody and Watt 1963; Clanchy 1993: 266-7; Goody 1984; Ong 1982 passim; Caruthers 1990. It seems that it is also possible today to establish some physical or biological differences in the actual brains of literates and illiterates, according to the results of a research group around Prof. Martin Ingvar at Karolinska sjukhuset in Stockholm (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2004-01-11/Vetenskap).

To go a step further, the most fundamental differences between a written and a spoken statement are, in my opinion, the intention of the message and the anticipated contextual knowledge that the one who delivers the message assumes to be at hand among the recipients. This problem was addressed in the early twentieth century by the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who wrote:

when we pass from a modern civilized language, of which we think mostly in terms of written records, or from a dead one which survives only in inscription, to a primitive tongue, never used in writing, where all the material lives only in winged words, passing from man to man – there it should be clear at once that the conception of meaning as *contained* in an utterance is false and futile. A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered. [...] In each case, therefore, utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other and the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of the words. Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages, a word without *linguistic context* is a mere figment and stands for nothing but itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the *context of situation* (Malinowski 1927: 307).

In an oral culture, the bulk of language produced is to be seen against the background of human activities, as a mode of human behaviour in practical matters and only partly as instantly expressed intellectual reflections, whereas a written language mirrors reflected, very often planned, thoughts; it is a condensed piece of reflection, a record of fact or structured thought (cf. Goody 1968: 48 and 67-8; Havelock 1986: 63-116; Finnegan 1988: 19-20; Green 1990: 273). In an oral society language may also have at least two other functions as has been hinted above, apart from being a mode of action: firstly of passing on memory or history, in songs and myths (Brink 2001), secondly of making imperative statements and for expressing power.

Long before printed documents were available, the usual way of declaring new laws and regulations was by an orator's proclamation (Clanchy 1993: 263-4). In the latter case, for expressing power and esoteric knowledge, many cultures have developed a special, archaic

language for such situations, in contrast to the everyday spoken language. It was vital to refer to ancient wisdom, to the traditions of the kind or community and to one's ancestry (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989: 114-15; Norr forthcoming).⁷ The old, oral tradition, *forð fræði*, was essential for the maintenance of society,⁸ and therefore the ultimate procedure giving maximum credibility was to 'talk the language of the forefathers' (cf. Bloch 1975; Roberts 1979: 44; below). As for the Australian aboriginals it has been stated that: 'References to the mythical past constitute the final word on any debated matter' (Luomala 1975: 93). In traditional Samoan culture for example, orators used an archaic, ritualized language in certain rituals and ceremonies, as this description of a *kava* ceremony reveals:

The words used during *kava* ceremonies are difficult to translate into English and they often allude to the mythical origins of the ritual. [...] Many of the words spoken during the ritual I cannot understand. Such language is heard only during this ritual and it is only the older people who understand it. It is the function of the orator or *tulafale* to know all the myths and traditions that are associated with ceremonies at which he will speak, each of which will have its prescribed language and mode of behavior. Although we do not understand some of the language, people like myself are able to share in the spirit of the occasion; nevertheless a message is conveyed to us, and we feel a sense of sharing and joy (Amituana'i 1986: 37 and 39).

Another example is the ancient *Avestan* language in Persia some 3000 years ago, which was a purely ritual, sacred language, probably never

⁷ A special case of this kind is the discussion about 'archaicizing' runic inscription, a discussion started by Magnus Olsen (1933) with his analysis of the Setre inscription. The idea is that sometimes runic carvers have consciously used archaic words and spellings to achieve an elevated style or to allude to the 'tradition', to the ancestry; see Nielsen 1969: 51 for the Rök runestone; Krause 1966: nr 59 for the Ellestad runestone; E.A. Makaev (see Antonsen 1978: 284-8) for the Stentofte inscription. Cf. Jacobsen 1935; Antonsen 1978; Santesson 1989; Snædal 1997.

⁸ Buchholz 1978: 321. This kind of *forneskja* 'old knowledge' was later suppressed by the Church, see Quinn 2000: 36-41.

used as a spoken language for everyday use, and, in the same vein and region, but somewhat later in history, Old Persian, which was construed with a special kind of cuneiform writing and used for monumental epigraphy only, in a couple of mural inscriptions, and never used for practical purposes (Utas 2003).

The culture of literacy in Western Europe was very much synonymous with the Latin-speaking world, although vernacular literacy was important in some parts of Europe especially before Christianity. The term *illiterate* was often applied to someone not knowledgeable in Latin.⁹ The Christian Church introduced literacy and the language of literate culture was predominantly Latin. In Sweden Latin was the only language found in documents for a long time. Not until the fourteenth century was it challenged by the vernacular (Larsson 2001). With this knowledge in the back of our minds, the question is what we shall make of the thousands of runic inscriptions in Runic Swedish. Do they reflect a pre-Latin literacy culture, or what?

Inscriptions with runes on stones, artifacts, weapons, bone or wood are reflections of an existing literacy in society. For Scandinavia, one could state that literacy started around AD 150, with the first runic inscriptions,¹⁰ and the literacy custom became more common during the Late Iron Age, with the new futhark, and especially in the eleventh century, with the thousands of runestones in eastern Sweden. This is a stance that has been advocated by Aslak Liestøl, Erik Moltke and Elias Wessén to different degrees (Wessén 1957; Liestøl 1971; Moltke 1985).¹¹ But the crucial question in this respect – at least for me – is when is society ideologically and mentally changed so that the written word gets supremacy over the spoken word? This change, this ‘mental revolution’, is probably most easily noticeable in the legal process, the expression of power by a ruling elite and the administration of people and territories.

The runic inscriptions are undoubtedly written down language and represent a kind of literacy in society (e.g. Liestøl 1971 and 1981; Meijer 1997). But do these reflect a culture of literacy? In my opinion they

⁹ Clanchy 1993: 224-52 and 218; McKitterick 1990: 3. D.H. Green (1994: 8-17) has qualified this aspect.

¹⁰ A stance which has an advocate in Roe 1983: 53.

¹¹ A balanced discussion on this problem is recently presented in Stoklund 2000.

do not.¹² In my opinion the early runic inscriptions – even the Rök and Sparlösa runestones – are primarily to be seen as the product of an oral culture, although the oral message is written down, in runes, thus a contradiction in terms. Bjarne Fidjestøl (1997: 229) stated on this matter: ‘Knowledge of writing is not enough to produce a literacy culture, and until Christianity was introduced, there was no foundation in the North for what we can call a culture of literary kind’. In a thorough and interesting literacy analysis of the runic evidence Barbro Söderberg comes to the conclusion: ‘Så vitt jag kan förstå kan förhållandena redan under äldsta tid i vissa avseenden ha liknat dem som under sen tid rått i Dalarna. Runskriften tillhör i båda fallen en övervägande muntlig kultur, där epigrafisk runskrift för en marginaliserad tillvaro...’ and ‘De folkvandrings- och vendeltida germanerna har använt runorna för i stort sett samma epigrafiska ändamål som dalfolk, dvs man har ristat in namn, ägarformler o d på lösföremål men man tycks, med vissa sentida undantag, inte ha skrivit brev och längre texter med runor’ (Söderberg and Larsson 1993: 39).¹³

When the fashion for erecting runestones took off in the eleventh century in Sweden, especially east central Sweden, was this evidence of a shift to a literate society? Not in the way I define a literate society. Of course, the runic inscriptions reflect a kind of literacy, but these runic inscriptions bear all the characteristics found in oral cultures, in a non-literate society: short, formulaic statements, patterns, fixed sentences repeated on runestone after runestone, something written down not primarily for ‘communication’, but for ‘memorialization’, ‘monumentalization’ and obviously in some cases also for bragging and for purely

¹² An opinion also shared by Williams 1990: 10-14, Harris 1994: 131-2 and 137-8; Green 1994: 23 and 35-6; Fidjestøl 1997: 229; Quinn 2000: 30. Cf. Herschend 2001 for a discussion of the links and associations between the inscription and the object.

¹³ ‘As far as I can understand, the situation during earlier times may in some respects be compared with that of Dalarna during later times. The runic script belongs in both cases to a predominantly oral culture, where epigraphic runic is marginalized...’ and ‘The Germanic people during the Migration and the Vendel Periods have used the runes for practically the same epigraphical purposes as the people in Dalarna, i.e. they have carved their names, ownership formulas etc. on loose objects, but they seem not, with some very late exceptions, to have used runes for writing letters and more extensive texts’. My translation.

magical purposes. The cultural setting is evidently an oral society, but a society in transition. This transitional phase in Nordic language evolution has now and then been called *runic literacy* and Terje Spurkland has coined the term *runacy*. These runes are thus in my opinion reflections of an oral culture and society, although admittedly an oral culture in some kind of transformation. I agree with Barbro Söderberg (Söderberg and Larsson 1993: 40), who assumes that the Viking Age scribal reforms, the revised futhark and the greatly increased number of runestones reflect a wider knowledge among the population of runic literacy, but I think Joseph Harris hits the nail on the head when he describes the situation: ‘early Norse culture [...] was, though predominantly oral, for many centuries also runically literate’ (1994: 140).

The texts on several of the early Viking Age runic inscriptions are more or less riddles for us today. It is extremely difficult to grasp their meaning. We can decipher the letters, but have huge problems in decoding the cultural context in which they were produced; therefore our interpretations become tentative and vague – this is of course the reason for the many hypotheses we are faced with; nearly every interpreter has his or her own interpretation.

It is probably apt to illustrate this fact with what an anthropologist is faced with in listening to an ethnic conversation, and I will go back to Bronislaw Malinowski who presented an illustrative case from the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia:

<i>Tasakaulo</i>	<i>kaymatana</i>	<i>yakida;</i>	
We run	front-wood	ourselves	
<i>tawoulo</i>	<i>ovanu;</i>	<i>tasivila</i>	<i>tagine</i>
we paddle	in place;	we turn	we see
<i>soda;</i>	<i>isakaulo</i>	<i>ka’u’uya</i>	
companion ours;	he runs	rear-wood	
<i>oluvieki</i>	<i>similaveta</i>	<i>Pilolu</i>	
behind	their sea-arm	Pilolu	

(Malinowski 1927: 300-1)

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A newcomer anthropologist of course does not understand anything of this; it is just a meaningless jumble of words. To understand what is spoken of it is not enough to understand the language, to be able to translate the words. Malinowski states that it becomes graspable when we know that particular culture, we know of the situation in which the words were spoken. We need to place them in their proper setting of indigenous culture; thus we need the context to be able to understand the text, or to put it in Malinowski's words in 1927: 'language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture' (1927: 305).

To understand the Trobriand statement special knowledge of technical terms and concepts must also be at hand, to know that *kaymatana* is something that may be translated 'front-wood' and *ka'u'uya* 'rear-wood'. But even this is not sufficient, because here these technical terms are used *metaphorically* for canoe. This knowledge is then to be framed in the Trobriand cultural context of seafarers, and especially their love of competitive activities, and then you grasp that a 'front-wood' is a 'leading canoe'. Finally, Malinowski writes, to the meanings of these words and concepts 'is added a specific emotional tinge, comprehensible only against the background of their tribal psychology in ceremonial life, commerce and enterprise'.

Several basic characteristics of an oral society may be identified, such as the language containing many formulaic 'elements', proverbs and patterns that correspond to the written sentences of a literate culture. In the same way, in an oral culture, experience and memory are memorized in verbal mnemotechnic patterns: songs, poetry, moral and didactic tales and proverbs. In an oral culture the spoken words often have 'power', that is knowing or uttering a name gives one power over that thing, animal or person (e.g. Ong 1982: 32-3).

However, the fundamental tool for understanding a statement or 'text' in an oral culture is to have a contextual knowledge, which Malinowski calls 'context of situation'. For something written, for example a runic inscription, it is possible to identify at least three contexts of importance for understanding the message: firstly, a linguistic context or knowledge of the language's vocabulary, grammar and syntax which is more or less possible to reconstruct, if we have enough runic inscriptions; secondly, a context of situation, that is, the social, emotional or perhaps religious situation in which the message is produced (such a context being more or less impossible to reconstruct); and, finally, a

general context of culture, the overall social and perhaps religious reality, something that is partly possible to grasp and reconstruct, something that will be illustrated below by the famous Rök runestone.

Reminiscences of Orality in a World of Literacy?

In my childhood, on the farm *Brinks* in a small rural hamlet in the remote northern parts of Sweden, a sofa of wood stood close to the entrance to the kitchen, as was the rule in practically all farms in this part of Sweden. For everyday socializing these sofas were *axes mundi* in our society. Neighbours and relatives could just drop in and sit on the sofa, quietly visiting and participating in the work in the kitchen or socializing more actively. The common start of a conversation was to discuss neighbours and relatives, and how he/she and we were related. In these introductory, highly complex discussions – a kind of *íþrótt* in the Old Norse sense – family ties and long distant relatives were discussed: ‘who was related to whom’.

For a child, these were socially important occasions for learning and positioning one’s place in the large and complex social web. As a grown up, living in an individual, urban society, I started to wonder: Why this obsession with relatives and family? Why were these discussions of persons and their relations so extremely important? Why always start social meetings with finding out if we were related and, if so, in what way? I cannot prove this, but I assume that we here have a reminiscence of a very old tradition, emanating from an oral culture, in which it was important to place people and to be able to trace people’s background, to control the social web.

The same obsession with declaring who is who and who is related to whom and where people come from we of course find in the Icelandic sagas, where the story is very often interrupted by a long and tedious digression about ancestors and relatives, every time a new person is introduced into the story. In *Njáls saga*, chapter 19, Gunnar is introduced:

Gunnarr hét maðr; hann var frændi Unnar. Rannveig hét móðir hans ok var Sigfússdóttir, Sighvats sonar ins rauða; hann var veginn við Sandhólaferju. Faðir Gunnars hét Hámundur ok var

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sonr Gunnars Baugssonar; við þann er kennt Gunnarsholt. Móðir Hámundar hét Hrafnhildr; hón var Stórólfsdóttir, Hœingssonar. Stórólfr var bróðir Hrafns lögsögumanns; son Stórólfs var Ormr inn sterki. Gunnarr Hámundarson bjó at Hlíðarenda í Fljótshlíð (*ÍF12* Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 52).¹⁴

After this digression the teller or author is ready to continue the story for a short while, until Njáll has to be introduced:

Njáll hét maðr; hann var son Þorgeirs gollnis, Þórólfsssonar. Móðir Njáls hét Ásgerðr ok var dóttir Áskels hersis ins úmálga; hón hafði komit út hingat til Íslands ok numit land fyrir austan Markarfljót, milli Níldusteins ok Seljalandsmúla. Sonr hennar var Holta-Þórir, faðir þeira Þorleifs kráks, er Skógverjar eru frá komnir, ok Þorgríms ins mikla ok Skorar-Geirs. Njáll bjó at Bergþórshváli i Landeyjum; annat bú átti hann í Þórólfsfelli (*ÍF12* Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 55-7).¹⁵

This emphasis on family, relatives and geography must have been essential in early Scandinavian culture. We even have a special genre, called *langfeðgatal*, made up of long enumerations of ancestors.¹⁶ This

¹⁴ ‘There was a man named Gunnar, who was a kinsman of Unn. His mother was named Rannveig. She was the daughter of Sigfús, the son of Sigvat the Red, who was slain at Sanhóla Ferry. Gunnar’s father was named Hámund and he was the son of Gunnar Baugsson, from whom Gunnarsholt received its name. The mother of Hámund was named Hrafnhild. She was the daughter of Stórólf Hœingsson. Stórólf was the brother of Hrafn, the law-speaker. The son of Stórólf was Orm the Strong.

Gunnar Hámundarson lived at Hlíðarenda in Fljótshlíð’ (Bayerschmidt and Hollander 1955: 53).

¹⁵ ‘A man was named Njál, the son of Thorgeir Gollnir, the son of Thórólf. Njál’s mother was named Ásgerd and she was the daughter of the chieftain Áskel the Silent. She had come out to Iceland and taken land east of the Markar River between Oldustein and Seljalandsmúli. Her son was Holta-Thórir, the father of Thorleif Crow, from whom the people of Skógar are descended, and of Thorgrím the Tall and of Skorargeir.

Njál lived at Bergthórshvái in the Landeyjar. He had another farm at Thórólfsfelli’ (Bayerschmidt and Hollander 1955: 54).

¹⁶ See Halvorsen 1965: 311-13; *langfeðgatal* is to be seen in the same literary context as *áttvísi* and *mannfræði*.

fixation had also a legal background, at least in Scandinavia. Normally, to be able to claim the land you were living on you had to be able to enumerate (normally) five generations of family ancestors living on the land. If you could, you were the legal owner of the land, it was your *óðal* (Brink 2002: 103-5; cf. Gurevich 1973: 77-84 and 1977: 3-7; Guðni Jónsson 1960: 247).

Today it is said that keeping control of the social web is a female occupation, and it would be easy in a retrospective way to assume that this was true also for earlier periods; no one would probably question such a statement. But at least in my youth men were as occupied and knowledgeable in these social matters as many women. Some men and some women had more interest and knowledge than others, so it was not a matter of gender, but of individual interest and gifts.

The shift from an oral society to a society of literacy was not only a shift of cultures, it was certainly also a shift of mentalities for the individual, or as Michael Clanchy has written, we must reckon with a 'different habit of mind' (1993: 267). During the Middle Ages a text was read out loud and the 'recipient prepared himself to listen to an utterance rather than to scrutinize a document visually as a modern literate would'. Medieval 'reading' (*lectio*) was thus equal to 'hearing'. As will be discussed below, this constant declaring out loud of matters that happened and decisions taken is something that is typical of an oral society.¹⁷

An excellent example, although non-historical but most certainly reflecting an early medieval traditional knowledge of legal procedure for the late Viking Age and the early medieval period, is the famous story in *Njáls saga* in which Njáll, a master of legal procedure, gives Gunnarr extremely intricate instructions on how to summon Hrótr to court for a case of demanding back the latter's wife's dowry. Njáll tells Gunnarr how to be dressed, well covered with a big hat pulled down over the eyes, and to bring two followers, taking two horses each on the journey, and to bring samples of homemade wares. People will be curious and ask who the tall man is and Gunnarr's companions shall then answer that he is Hawker-Hedin the Mighty from Eyjafjord, with handiwork for sale, and that he is bad-tempered and loud-mouthed and

¹⁷ Cf. Green 1994: 30-5. Green points to the fact that the Old High German word *lesen* can mean 'to read out loud', as well as 'to teach' and also 'to learn' (34-5).

thinks that he alone knows everything. Gunnarr will finally be invited to Hrútr's house, placed on the lower bench, facing Hrútr's high-seat. In the discussion that then takes place Gunnarr should after a while mention Mord Fiddle, the father of his wife, Unnr, and state that no one can fill his place, because he was so clever and legally experienced. Thus, he will make Hrútr talk about their dealings and even recite the correct summons against himself, for his apparently blunt guest to repeat.

The trick for Gunnarr is to issue a summons to the accused, Hrútr, either so that the accused could hear it himself, or by shouting it out in his home, or even just to mumble the words, but, most importantly, by using correct words according to the legal prescription; if wrong, the case would have to be dropped. The smart Njáll, *via* Gunnarr, tricks Hrútr, a legal champion who knows the correct procedure and the judicially binding words, to himself utter the words that were legally decisive for the case. And after this trick, Gunnarr whispers in a low voice so that only his followers – witnesses – can hear him: 'I summon you in Unnr's case...'. The accusation had to be orally uttered to the accused and the summons had to be spoken, at the right place, so that witnesses could hear it. By these oral acts, the legal case became valid and irreversible (this passage is pointed out in Clanchy 1993: 274).

A reminiscence of the old culture, explicitly known from medieval England, is the use of a *perorator*, corresponding to the Old English *forespeca* in the Anglo-Saxon period, that is, an advocate. A (male) litigant had to be present at the court, but he did not always speak for himself. As in the Icelandic case of Njáll, in England the legal procedure was complicated and did not allow for mistakes in oral pleading. Therefore the litigant could let a *forespeca* speak for him in his case (Clanchy 1993: 273-4). Another person, similar to a *forespeca* or *perorator*, was the *narrator*. He was the one who had the knowledge to summon someone to court, to make the formally correct claim. This claim or pleading was called *narration*, corresponding OE *talū* 'tale; narrative' in Anglo-Saxon times. These 'tales' seem to have been very formulaic and uttered in the vernacular. Michael Clanchy actually compares this *narrator* with *The Singer of Tales*, known from Parry and Lord's Balkan studies, but where the *narrator* knew the technique of legal pleading, the latter knew the epics and tales. Both used some remembered formulas for their 'tales'. They were both professional

‘remembrancers’, ‘very necessary before law and literature were committed to writing’ (Clanchy 1993: 274).

Later on, in the Middle English period, around 1300, a litigant in England required both a *narrator* and an attorney. The *narrator* was a layman, but an expert in oral pleadings, while the attorney was often a cleric, and thus an expert in writing. From the position of *narrator* later on derived the serjeants-in law and barristers, who dominated the legal profession, while attorneys, who represented the litigant, something that the narrator could not do, later on became associated with the humbler solicitors (Clanchy 1993: 273-4). All these examples from the judicial sphere in society – and many more can be found – are relics from an old, oral culture, so different from the culture that was to be built on the written word and the document.

In the pre-historic, pre-Christian oral culture of early Scandinavia one of the two fundamental social arenas was the *thing* assembly, found at different levels in society, from the small settlement district, up to the top of society. Such thing sites for the top level of society are probably to be found at Gamla Uppsala, Gula, Frosta, Lejre, Jelling etc. In conjunction with playing games, marketing, cultic activities, exchange of gossip, agreements of marriage etc., legal agreements and disputes were settled here.¹⁸ These discussions, agreements and settlements of disputes were conducted with dialogues, statements and speeches, by listening to old, knowledgeable men, giving oaths and binding pronouncements, accompanied by certain rituals and prescribed gestures, such as the rattling of weapons for giving consent (*vápnatak*) – acts typical of an oral society, acts both to be heard and seen (Green 1994: 99). Anyone reading Old Icelandic sagas gets a vivid illustration of how this kind of society might have functioned, at least in the eyes of thirteenth-century Icelandic interpreters.

However, the main texts to focus on are the provincial laws.¹⁹ To a large extent law and wisdom are quintessential in oral culture; law is said to be ‘the concretization of social wisdom’ (Bloomfield and Dunn

¹⁸ For ways of settlement of disputes in early medieval Europe, see Davies and Fouracre 1986; Barnwell and Mostert 2003.

¹⁹ See Harris 1994: 114, who, also, beside law, correctly points to the genealogies as early written-down orality. An important work on the oral background to the Icelandic early law is Gísli Sigurðsson 2002: especially ch. 1.

1989: 120). One would expect to find in the earliest Scandinavian laws reminiscences of an old, oral, legal culture, a stance that was argued for in the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, up to the 1950s and 1960s. This standpoint was however challenged by several leading legal historians, with opinions moulded in the 1960s but delivered even in the 1980s.²⁰ They stated that the provincial laws are merely reflections of a society from the time when they were written down, for Sweden, the fourteenth century. This stance can today be challenged in its turn,²¹ in the same way as the Old Icelandic literature has been revalued during the last two decades, where there have been advocates (among others Preben Meulengracht Sørensen) for an – in my opinion – more fruitful way of using, understanding, and interpreting it.²²

One interesting question is whether the use of a rhythmic structure and alliteration in the law rules in the provincial codes are to be understood as an archaic element or as a learned, young, literary introduction to the laws. The traditional view was that alliteration, alliterative proverbs and word-pairs (i.a. *full ok forn, arf ok orf, haug ok heiðni, ha ok hamna*) were old and archaic mnemonic tools, suitable for mouth and mind, reflecting the oral past of the predecessors of the written provincial laws (see for instance Ståhle 1956, 1958 and 1965). This was challenged by some scholars in the 1970s and 80s, who were able to show that this kind of alliteration was used as a stylistic device in medieval literature, thus in use in the contemporary literacy culture of the written laws (e.g. Utterström 1975), while at least one scholar, Carl Ivar Ståhle (1965: 168 and 1976), in part backed up by Peter Foote,²³ argued for the possibility that alliteration was to be seen as an archaic leaven in the

²⁰ For Sweden, see for example Sjöholm 1988; cf. also Utterström 1975 and 1978, and a recent citation by Johnson 1998: 3-5, esp 5.

²¹ Important contributions are Foote 1977a, b and 1987; Fenger 1991; Hagland and Sandnes 1994; Sandnes 1995; Bagge 2001; Brink 2002.

²² For a discussion and a reevaluation of the early legal texts as historical sources, see Norseng 1987; Brink 1997 and 2002.

²³ Peter Foote, however, notes the striking difference between the lack of such rhetorical formulas in the Icelandic *Grágás*, written down much earlier than the Old Swedish counterparts; an observation admittedly already made by Ståhle (1965: 168), cf. Foote 1977a: 206-7.

laws. This kind of argumentation was typical of the scholarly approach of the 1960s; if one could find a cultural trace in the texts that was also found in Christian culture, then that trace was demonstrably to be labelled as ‘young’ and contemporary, rather than archaic (for example Baetke 1964 *passim* has several arguments of this type). This argument – that alliteration was found in contemporary literary styles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – was obviously seen as having interpretational precedence over an association with alliteration in, for example, runic inscriptions. Of course Ståhle is at least partly right. Since alliteration is commonly used as a mnemonic tool (e.g. Assmann and Hardmeier 1983: 270; Klingenberg 1984; Gschwantler 1985: 103; Green 1994: 23), it becomes evident that this technique was used also in our early oral culture, which is exemplified by the Rök runic inscription from around AD 800. The fact that alliteration was also used in medieval writings does not disqualify or exclude the possibility of the earlier culture using the same tool, which could be found as an archaic leaven in provincial laws.

Furthermore, in a fairly recent study Nils Jörgensen (1987) has examined the relationship between syntax and textual structure in the Scandinavian provincial laws. One would expect that he would be able to confirm the results of the ‘new’ stance, advocated by Utterström, Sjöholm and others, and once for all dismiss the traditional view, held by Ståhle and others. Curiously enough, Jörgensen’s results instead support the traditional arguments. The language in the laws is of an older stage than other contemporary literature, he argues. The Icelandic *Grágás* is, in many respects, more ‘modern’ in style than especially the so-called Svea Laws of central and northern Sweden.²⁴ Hence Jörgensen’s results confirm that the Icelandic *Grágás* is written in ‘dense, business-like style’, to use the words of Peter Foote (1977a: 207), different from the language and style found in the Swedish laws. And finally, regarding the observation made by Utterström, who found stylistic features characteristic of the time in the written laws, Jörgensen (1987: 173) comes to the completely opposite conclusion: ‘Däremot

²⁴ Jörgensen 1987: 102-3 and 167. This result is quite interesting but confusing, since the Svea Laws are considered to be younger than the Göta Laws in Sweden (see e.g. Söderberg and Larsson 1993: 100).

synes inflytande från annat håll, t. ex. av för uppteckningstiden typiska stiltendenser [...], varit i det närmaste obefintligt'.²⁵

An oral statement has two sides: it is spoken communication but with a non-verbal performance – it has an acoustic as well as a visual dimension. D.H. Green identifies two medieval genres that frequently refer to both these dimensions, namely the medieval drama and legal literature; both genres were supposed to be both seen and heard.²⁶ In early Scandinavia the legal act must also have been mainly oral well into the Middle Ages (and admittedly also today to a large extent): a legal case was stated, a binding pronouncement or oath was made, accompanied by some prescribed gestures or objects, witnesses testified what they had heard and seen (Green 1994: 99). This fact makes the law especially interesting to focus on when discussing orality.

Early Law and Reminiscences of Orality in Written Law

Let us then proceed to a rather odd text: a passage of the Nestorian Chronicle. The Dutch legal historian, Martina Stein-Wilckshuis (1991, 1994 and 1998), has highlighted some treaties between 'Rus' and Greek merchants. In the text in question we find three tenth-century charters included, treaties between Rus and Greeks after Rus attacks on Constantinople. In the treaty from 911, signed by Rus' 'princes' or chieftains and merchants bearing Scandinavian names, we find articles regarding the legal position of merchants with respect to the procedure that was to be followed in cases of manslaughter, injury, theft, and robbery.

After a thorough legal analysis, including Byzantine law as well as Germanic law, Stein-Wilckshuis comes to the conclusion that this treaty from 911, well before any provincial law is known in Scandinavia, again and again has fundamental resemblances to rules and an overall legal system found in Scandinavian provincial laws. She focuses on, for instance, the necessity for the publication of offences and charges by

²⁵ 'Instead it seems that influence from some other source, for instance from typical stylistic trends from the time of textualization, [was] practically non-existent'.

²⁶ Green 1994: 62; cf. Clanchy 1993: 254 (and see below); Schmidt-Wiegand 1982; and, for the early Scandinavian drama, Gunnell 1995.

means of witnesses and the taking of oaths. She also notes that punishment had to be in accordance with the offence and directly related to the crime. This punishment was meant to compensate the victim and the oral act had to take place at the scene of offence, at the moment it happened, and then be taken to court. Victims of a theft should bind the thief and bring him to court, and so on.

What we find in this treaty from 911 is a legal procedure typical of an oral society: everything has to be publicly announced. When you have committed a crime, when you have been robbed, when you have agreed on a marriage, when you have sold or exchanged land or property, you have to state the offence or action at the assembly. Both parties, the defendant and suer, have to come up with witnesses *en masse*, and you have to take oaths. The actual law was orally transmitted by a law-speaker and the arena for the law-speaker and for the settlement of disputes and crime was the *thing* assembly. In her analysis Stein-Wilkeshuis shows that these rules are to be found in legal paragraphs in several Scandinavian provincial laws, something that is a strong indication that there are reminiscences of pre-Christian, pre-Roman law, that there is an early Scandinavian legal tradition in the provincial laws of Scandinavia. This is important to state, since we now have a new foundation to stand on when analyzing our old legal material. Law was not introduced into Scandinavia with the literate culture of the Church.

With this discussion and new knowledge as a background, it becomes extremely interesting to focus on two early Scandinavian legal texts that have been handed down to us from a period before the provincial laws, and even prior to the Rus-Greek treaty of 911. I am referring to two runic inscriptions, the Forsa rune ring and the Oklunda runic inscription (on a hilltop), both to be dated to c. 800 or the ninth century. The inscription on the Forsa rune ring must be the oldest law or legal custom we have any trace of in Scandinavia; it is probably a regulation for keeping a pagan cult and assembly site in order, and a 'law of the people' (*liuprætt*) is mentioned (Ruthström 1988 and 1990; Brink 1996a and 2003). The Oklunda inscription is a statement by a certain *Gunnar* that he had cut the runes for declaring an offence (probably a homicide) he had committed and therefore sought the cult site (*vi*) at Oklunda, according to the hypothesis of Bo Ruthström (1988), for asylum (*gruþ*) (Brink 2003; Ruthström 1988; Lönnqvist and Widmark 1997).

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What we find here are two very formulaic inscriptions, showing several characteristics of having been produced in an exclusively oral culture. In the case of Oklunda, we actually get the impression that Gunnar cut the runes on this hilltop – to really be sure!?! – writing down what he had stated word by word at the *thing* assembly.

If we look at early Germanic Europe as a whole we note that the normal situation was that the laws were written down in Latin, with the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian laws being exceptions. The reason *why* these laws were written down in Latin (and in books) has been discussed to some extent, e.g. by Patrick Wormald, who here sees a kind of image-building with the Roman empire and Roman law as a background, which would be a fitting mould for barbarian rulers imposing new laws, and another answer could be that these rulers tried to ‘copy’ the Christian holy book, the Bible, the ‘law for the Christians’, which, of course was in Latin (Wormald 1977a: 115 and 125-35; Green 1994: 39). Why the Anglo-Saxons and later on the Scandinavians did not follow this natural path, but instead wrote down their laws in the vernacular, has not been discussed or reflected upon (cf. Larsson 1993: 146-8). However, there are also vernacular sections to some small extent in the laws of the Franks, the Burgundians, the Langobards etc., namely a fragmentary translation in Old High German of the Lex Salica (Sonderegger 1964; cf. Green 1994: 46-7), and many Germanic glosses in the Latin law texts (Schmidt-Wiegand 1979; Green 1994: 46 and 51). These vernacular intrusions in the Latin law text are, according to e.g. D.H. Green (1994: 51), to be seen as evidence of the transposition of earlier oral law into written law in Latin, hence relics from ancient oral law.

Legal custom in early Iceland was obviously based on oral acts. We know the duties of the lawspeaker – to learn the law and to recite it during his term of three summers at the Althing – and we are aware of the process of textualization of the law, found in law codes and in other texts (Quinn 2000: 31-4; Gísli Sigurðsson 2002). In the lawbook *Grágás* (Ia: 216) it is stated that all of the fifty members of the law council (*lögrétta*) had to be present whenever the lawspeaker recited the laws, a way of spreading the knowledge and memory of law to as many as possible. The decisive shift at the Althing in Iceland from a mainly oral legal procedure to a legal custom based on the written word took place in the year 1118, when the laws were read out, not by the

lawspeaker, but by clerics. This is assumed to be because the actual lawspeaker was an illiterate, unable to read, underlining the transitional phase of this legal process.²⁷ This new phase eventually resulted in several lawbooks and law texts functioning in a hierarchical system that required legal experts who could decide which text had supremacy over the others. Top ranked among these texts and thus the ultimate authoritative text was the lawbook in the hands of the bishop of Skálholt (*Grágás* Ia: 213).

Now let us turn to the East Scandinavian provincial laws. If these laws were to be set in a predominantly literate culture, one would expect to find frequent allusions to written documents, letters and written rules. However, this is not the case. Instead, allusions to written documents are extremely few in the provincial laws; ‘letters’ are only a necessity when dealing with a king (Holmbäck and Wessén 1933: 154 n. 3), otherwise a settlement or a transaction did not have to be put on parchment, just announced, with witnesses, at a *thing* assembly. It is first with the king’s laws, in Sweden with the Law of King Magnus Eriksson (*Magnus Erikssons landslag*) from c. 1350, that a sale of land and property had to be confirmed with a letter of the transaction (*ML J* 20). It cannot be coincidental that from this time (c. 1350) we begin to find thousands of letters in Old Swedish about buying, selling and donating land and property (Larsson 2001).

Instead we find that settlement of disputes, transactions and agreements have to be announced at *thing* assemblies, with witnesses, so typical of an oral culture. In early European cultures with stronger kingships than those found in early Scandinavia, we can see that while the Church represented a culture of literacy during the tenth and eleventh centuries, the administration to a large extent – and especially when it came down to the rules and decrees pronounced by the king – was still embedded in an oral culture; it was the king’s spoken word that counted, it was the *verbum regis* that gave it the force of law, as among the Anglo-Saxons (Wormald 1977a: 105-38, 1977b: 111 and 1978: 48; Keynes 1990: 228 and 243). Michael Clanchy (1993: 42) states that England was not governed by an administration based on written documents before c. 1066, and the ‘tenth- and eleventh-century legisla-

²⁷ *ÍF1* Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 24; Quinn 2000: 34. For the Icelandic lawspeaker, see Gísli Sigurðsson 2002: 65-81.

tion was not formally promulgated by *the king* in written form', according to Simon Keynes (1990: 229). The crucial event in England differentiating between an oral administrative and legal culture and one based on literacy was the watershed in the year 1066 if we follow Michael Clanchy,²⁸ although we are dealing with a process and not an event, which Simon Keynes underlines: 'It would seem reasonable to conclude that royal government in the tenth and eleventh centuries depended to a very considerable extent on the use of the written word' (1990: 255).

Some Scandinavian provincial law rules even present archaic-looking dialogues, that no one during the last couple of decades has dared to call 'old', but perhaps today may (again) be looked upon as reminiscences of orality found in our provincial laws.²⁹ One example is from *Rättslösabalken* (5)³⁰ in the older law of the *Västgötar* (*ÄvGL*).

Kallar *máþær* man bykkiuhælp har ær. þæt sighthir. han þu kop hæn. Iak skyskutæ þy at þu kallæþe mik vkuæþins orþ. þæt ær sextanörtughæ sak i hvan lot. han skal hanum þig uisæ at skyskutæ vittni lataþ bæraþ at endagha ok vitæ *mæþ* tylptær eþe. biþi sva sær guþ holl. ok vattum sinum at þu kallæþe mik. vkuæþins orþ. ok þu æst sandær at sak þerri. ær iak ginær þær Sva skal vkuæþins orþ sökiaþ ok sirnær orþ. §1. Kallær *máþær* annæn frælsgivæ. þæn ætboren ær ællær sigir iak. sa at þu rant en firi enom ok hafþi spyut a baki. þæt ær vkuæþins orþ. þrænni sextanortoghæ sak. §2. Iak sa at *máþær* sarþ þik hvar ær þæt. þu kop han. Iak skyskutæ þy at þu kallæþe mik vkvaþins orþ. ok firnær orþ. þæt ær sextanortoghæ sak. i hvan þriþiung. §3. Iak sa at þu atti þin viliaþ. viþ ko. ællær mæraþ. þæt ær firnær orþ. þrannisaxtanörtoghæ sak. þæt skal sökia a hændær hanum. kumbær eigh ne viþ. §4. Iak sa at þv atti moþor þina. þæt ær firnær orþ. ok þrennisextanortoghæ sak ok kombær eigh ne viþ. §5. Þættæ aru kvæþins orþ kono. Iak sa at þu reet a quiggrindu lösharæþ. ok i trols ham þa alt var iamrift nat ok dagher. kallar

²⁸ See Clanchy 1993: 31-2, however, cf. Keynes 1990: 229 n. 13

²⁹ For a discussion of the problem of whether a law code may be labelled 'old' or archaic-looking, see Ståhle 1965; Utterström 1975; Ståhle 1976.

³⁰ I.e. 'the chapter dealing with persons without legal rights'.

hanæ kunna firigæræ kono ællær. ko. þæt ær. vkuapins ord.
kallær kono hortutu. þæt ær vkuapins ord. (Collin and Schlyter
1827: 38)³¹

I would very much like to see this as an example of a legal rule created in an oral legal culture. Whether it is also ‘old’, I do not know, but there is no indication of it being young, to be dated to the thirteenth century; and here, of course, I make a distinction between the written legal text and the legal case, the actual law rule. Instead some rather archaic words and allusions may give us a hint that it is an old substrate in the law, a legal custom in this province for the punishment of abusive words that was transmitted orally over some time and then codified in the written *Older Västgöta Law*.

In this way it is possible to pick out rules and paragraphs in our provincial laws which have a palpable resemblance to laws and legal customs functioning in an oral culture, such as giving the farm and land to the oldest son (*skötning*) (Hafström 1971; Hamre 1971), manumission with its strange rituals, in Norway with *frels*-giving and the *frelsis öl*,³² in the Göta laws in Sweden with the process of *ætteleping*,³³ etc.

³¹ ‘Someone is calling someone else a puppy. “Who is that?” he says. “You,” he answers. “I proclaim before witnesses, that you called me with abusive words”. This is a case with 16 örar in each lot. He shall sue him to court and on a single day present witnesses of the proclamation and strengthen it with oaths by twelve witnesses [...], “as true as you called me with abusive words, and you are guilty in this case, which I charge you with”. This is the proper procedure for prosecuting someone for abusive and bad words. If someone calls another an emancipated, a freeborn, or says: “I saw that you ran for another man, and had a spear on (or at) your back,” those are abusive words, a case of thrice 16 örtugar. “I saw that a man had fornication with you.” “Who is that?” “You,” he said. “I proclaim for witnesses that you called me with abusive and bad words”. That is a case of thrice 16 örtugar. “I saw that you had your lust with a cow or a mare”. Those are abusive words, a case of thrice 16 örtugar. That he shall be prosecuted for. He cannot say no to that. These are abusive words to a woman: “I saw that you straddled a gate with the hair brushed out and in the shape of a troll, when the night turned into day”. If they say that she can destroy a woman or a cow, those are abusive words. If you call a woman a whore, those are abusive words’. My translation from Holmbäck & Wessén 1946: 110.

³² E.g. Gulatings Law 61; cf. Iversen 1997: 212-28.

³³ Holmbäck and Wessén 1933: 139 n. 50; cf. Iversen 1997: 229, 231 and 264.

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Michael Clanchy (1993: 253-60) has highlighted such cases from medieval England found in laws and written documents from courts. Twelfth-century charters are often addressed to ‘all those seeing and hearing’ and until the thirteenth century a will was still essentially an oral act, although it was written down. Witnesses testified that they had heard the testator’s bequests ‘with his own mouth’, an oral act that was to be replaced by the sealing of the written will in front of witnesses. A gift or a sale was witnessed by people who stated that they had heard the seller or the donor utter the words of the sale or grant and had seen him transfer a symbolic object – ‘the memory of the conveyance’ – such as a knife or a turf of the land. Cases like these, also found in Scandinavian provincial laws and in early written documents, are according to Clanchy evidently vestiges of an oral culture.

I therefore rest my case, stating that, although it is extremely difficult to identify older or younger strata in law books, it is possible to ‘label’ certain law rules as belonging to an oral legal context or as a scholarly, written law made in a literate culture. One would assume that a chronological difference was also embodied in this observation.

The Rök Runestone – the Power of Knowledge and Oratory

In an oral culture a speech becomes *per definitionem* important, you have to listen to what is stated; there are no possibilities of checking it up in a text later on. In a speech the orator naturally tries to evoke certain sentiments in his or her audience, tries to make references to known stories, memories and myths. The speaker may not deliver the full text, but only give a hint or an allusion to a well-known myth, and the audience understands. Here, again, we are faced with the problem of ‘context of situation’ that for us is more or less impossible to reconstruct. This kind of fragmentary ‘texts’ and traditions may be read especially in some early Viking Age runic inscriptions. The Sparlösa rune stone is more or less impossible to understand and reconstruct – we do

not have a clue about the context of situation of this text.³⁴ We think (perhaps falsely) that we can grasp a little more of the Rök runic inscription, which runs:

Aft Væmoð standa runar þar. En Varinn faði, faðir, aft faigian sunu.

Sagum mogminni þat, hværiar valraubar varin tvar þar, svað tvalf sinnum varin numnar at valraubu, baðar saman a ymissum mannum.

Þat sagum annart, hvar fur niu aldim an urði fiaru meðr Hraiðgutum, suk do meðr hann umb sakar.

Reð Þioðrikr
hinn þurmoði,
stillir flutna,
strandu Hraiðmarar.
Sitir nu garur
a guta sinum,
skialdi umb fatlaðr,
skati Mæringa.

Þat sagum tvalfta, hvar hæstr se Gunnar ety vettvangi an, kunungar tvair tigr svað a liggia.

Þat sagum þrettaunda, hvarir tvair tigr kunungar satin at Si-olundi fiagura vintur at fiagurum nampnum, burnir fiagurum brøðrum. Valkar fim, Raðulfs synir, Hraiðulfar fim, Rugulfs synir, Haislar fim, Haruðs synir, Gunnmundar fim, Biarnar synir...

Nu'k minni meðr allu sagi. Ainhvarr...

Sagum mogminnin þat, hvar Inguldinga vari guldinn at kvannar husli.

Sagum mogminni, hvaim se burinn niðr drængi. Vilinn es þart. Knua knatti iatun. Vilinn es þat...

Sagum mogminni: Þorr. Sibbi viavari ol nirøðr.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. Jansson 1987: 41. Several scholars have tried to interpret the Sparlösa runic inscription and iconography, see e.g. von Friesen 1940; Lindquist 1940; Marstrander 1954; Norr 1998: 189-219; Grønvik 2001.

³⁵ 'In memory of Væmod stand these runes. And Varin wrote them, the father in memory of his dead son.'

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Today there seems to be a consensus among runologists that the interpretation of the inscription presented by Elias Wessén in 1958, which has been termed the ‘repertory theory’ in contrast to a ‘revenge theory’, advocated by Otto von Friesen, Otto Höfler and others, is the most acceptable and has the highest explicatory potential. In short, this theory interprets the inscription as a series of allusions to various legends and myths, well known to people around AD 800 in the province of Östergötland. Later important new aspects have been presented by Lars Lönnroth in 1977, Ottar Grønvik in 1983, Helmer Gustavson in 1991 and Gun Widmark in 1992 and 1997.

It seems fairly obvious that the Rök inscription alludes to certain well known myths and legends, such as the legend of Theoderic the

I tell the ancient tale which the two war-booties were, twelve times taken as war-booty, both together from man to man. This I tell second who nine generations ago lost his life with the Reidgoths; and he died with them, because of his offences.

Theodric the bold,
king of sea-warriors,
ruled over
Reid-sea shores.
Now sits he armed
on his Gothic horse,
shield strapped,
prince of Mærings.

That I tell the twelfth where the horse of Gunn [i.e. steed of the Valkyrie, the wolf] sees food on the battle-field, where twenty kings lie.

This I tell the thirteenth which twenty kings sat on/at ‘Siolundi’ for four winters with four names, born to four brothers: five Valkes, sons of Rådulv, five Reidulvs, sons of Ruguly, five Haisls, sons of Hord, five Gunmunds, sons of Björn.

Now I tell the tale in full. Someone...

I tell the ancient tale which of the kinsmen of Ingvald was avenged by a wife’s sacrifice.

I tell an ancient tale to which young warrior a kinsman is born. Do you want that? He could crush a giant. Do you want that?

I tell an ancient tale: Thor. Sibbe, defender of the *vis*, ninety years of age, begot [a son]. Translation by Peter Foote (in Jansson 1987: 41). – I have changed ‘Zealand’ to ‘Siolundi’, since I am not convinced that this is to be interpreted as Zealand in Denmark, and ‘Sibbi of Vi’ to ‘Sibbi, defender of the *vi*’, thus assuming that Sibbi’s epithet is a designation of a cult leader rather than Sibbi’s homestead.

Great, contains some kind of riddles (e.g. ‘That I tell the twelfth where the horse of Gunn sees food on the battle-field, where twenty kings lie’) and also a kind of a *þula* with the enumeration of kings on/at ‘Siolundi’ (‘Valkar fim, Raðulfs syniR, Hraiðulfar fim, Rugulfs syniR’ etc.).

Important is Lars Lönnroths’s identification where parts of the inscription are understood as *greppaminni*, i.e. a kind of question-and-answer stanza (Vésteinn Ólason 1969; Lönnroth 1977: 16-17), something that is in line with the often-repeated **sakummukmini**, which is most certainly to be interpreted as *sagum mǫg-minni* or *sagum mǫg minni*, i.e. ‘we say the folk-memory or “legend”’ or ‘we tell people (that) memory (or legend)’. Gun Widmark (1997: 174) has contrasted the *greppaminni* with this *mǫgminni* on the Rök runestone and suggested that the first could be understood as the memories or/and traditions for a region or a larger community, while the latter could be the memories and traditions that were the common treasure of a family or a kind, lineage.

In her discussion of the Rök runic inscription Gun Widmark has also asked why Varin told us his story and why it is so fragmentary and cryptic. Although not focusing on a discussion on orality, she thinks that the inscription is to be seen as a source of memory, knowledge and myths, obvious and well-known at least for knowledgeable people of that time, but more or less obscure to us today. Widmark concludes that there must have been certain individuals in that society that carried on the wisdom, the myths and the memories, and that Varin probably was such a person. This kind of knowledgeable person that told the stories and myths and carried the memories for the people she connects with the *þulr*, a term found in place-names, in eddaic poems and on at least one Danish runestone;³⁶ clearly linguistically identical to the OE *þyle*, mentioned in Beowulf and Widsið.³⁷

³⁶For the *þulr*, see Olrik 1909; Noreen 1921: 19-20; Vogt 1927a, b and 1942; de Vries 1934 and 1964: 31-2 and 403-4; Olsen 1960: 53-5; Rosier 1962; Baird 1970; Fleck 1970: 47-8; Hauck 1970: 98-100; Polomé 1975: 661-2; Halvorsen 1976; Hollowell 1976; Haugen 1983: 20-1; Gurevich 1993; Simek 1993: 331-2; Newton 1993: 91-3; Brink 1996b: 256-8; Liberman 1996: 71-7; Widmark 1997: 167-8; Bech 2001: 66-7; Sundqvist 2003: 431-2. – This identification, with Varin as a *þulr*, was already made by Wessén (1958: 72-3), but with other associations.

³⁷Cf. the references in the preceding footnote, and Clarke 1936; Eliason 1963; Vaughan 1976; Hughes 1977; Clover 1980; Fulk 1988.

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Making a speech requires silence and concentration from the listeners. This then becomes quite an unnatural situation in an oral culture, where silence in a congregation is very often looked upon as something alarming and dangerous. A stranger who cannot speak the language is in early societies a natural enemy (cf. e.g. Basso 1970). The breaking of silence, the communion of words, is the first act in establishing ties of friendship. This kind of *phatic* communion (Malinowski 1927: 315), later on described in the theory of the 'performative' use of language (Gellner 1998: 148), where ties of union are created by the exchange of words, has a social function and requires no particular intellectual reflection; it is not a means of transmission of thought, it is a way of creating social bonds, an atmosphere of sociability and a communal inclusiveness.

By focusing on speech and ('active') silence, one could try to place this in the theory of power which Michel Foucault (1980) has presented, where silence is not the opposite of speech, but rather a means of executing power, where speech and silence are used in a conscious strategy. But the silence addressed here, listening to speech in an oral society, is a far more passive act. However, to be quite honest, Foucault talks of not just one kind of silence, but several different kinds (1980: 38).

Making a speech, on the other hand, is an act of exclusiveness and therefore often follows certain rules and a recognizable behaviour or plan. An official orator's main purpose is to be as authoritative as possible. In a culture where you cannot write these statements on parchment or paper, signing it with authoritative titles, seals or other attributes attached to the document, to give it a proper authoritative image, you have to use other means. Very often you use certain, well established rhetorical figures in the speech, allusions to tradition and ancestors, or, something that is also common, an archaic language, 'the voice of the forefathers', giving the speech authoritative help from knowledge, memory and the ancestry. Normally, this kind of language is intermingled with mythological references, acting as sanctions for the spoken statement.

This kind of 'talking', where the spoken words are full of power, action, meaning and certain consequences, in contrast to phatic communion, has been called existential speech or talk by the historian Eva Österberg (1995: 50). That which is uttered counts, is valid, cannot

easily be denied, tempered or refuted. Speech is meant to have consequences. Österberg focuses on the language in the Icelandic sagas, where language is never phatic, always existential – charged, powerful and instigated.

I think it is apt to place the Old-Nordic *pulr*, for example, and the Anglo-Saxon *pyle* in this oral cultural framework, for in that context his role becomes more understandable. The words contain semantic meanings like ‘to talk’, ‘to rattle off’ but also probably ‘to sing’,³⁸ i.e. activities that we know certain specialists in oral cultures engage in when they recite memories and traditions. In this light Gun Widmark’s assumption, that Varin, the one who gave us the Rök runic inscription, with its fragmentary myths and allusions to a well-known history (however unknown to us), may very well qualify as a *pulr*, one of the most important persons in the oral Old Swedish society, the one who could transfer memory and traditions. An Old Swedish *pulr* might be seen as equivalent to the OE *forespeca* (who could perform the OE *tal*) who knew the formulaic ‘tales’ and the Balkan ‘Singer of Tales’ mentioned above. For Gun Widmark the inscription on the Rök runestone is obviously something recited, evidenced by rhetorical figures such as *sagum* ‘I say/let us say’, *vilin is þat* ‘Do you want that?’ etc. I think she has here formulated something important for understanding the Rök runic inscription. I think we here find ‘fossilized orality’ in written text.

We end up with a picture of an oral Scandinavian society where we must have had orators and specialists in traditions and customs, later on called *minnuga mæn* ‘men with memory’.³⁹ The legal cases and social matters and events were placed in a frame of public ceremonies, witnesses giving oaths and ceremonial masters declaring customs, traditions, tales and poetry.

³⁸ See Vogt 1927a: 110-25; de Vries 1962: 626. This esoteric knowledge, by reciting, singing and uttering certain words, charms and proverbs, partly goes back to exercising control over nature, faith and future, see Wesche 1940: 51-5 and *passim*, cf. Klingenberg 1984; Green 1994: 21.

³⁹ E.g. in the Hälsinge Law, see Holmbäck and Wessén 1940: 280.

Archaic Skaldic Language in the Hall

After this discussion I think it is possible to tie together some of the themes and results presented above, and ask if they also may have some bearing on cultural aspects not only in the legal sphere. It is often stated that Old Nordic poetry must to a large extent have had an oral background (Harris 1983 and 1985). I think it is possible to qualify this statement with some remarks on skaldic poetry. It is well known that the language that the skalds in the tenth and eleventh centuries used in their poems was complex and sometimes archaic, with ancient, sometimes obsolete words, very often found as *heiti* and in *kennings* (Turville-Petre 1976: xl-lix), and with allusions to past heroic times and events (cf. the Theoderic legend in the verse on the Rök runestone). This is of course one of the major reasons for Snorri to write his *Edda*, as a handbook for skalds *in spe*, with legends, an eschatology and mythology, and archaic words, often enumerated in *pulur*, some of which according to Snorri were from the pre-Christian time. In the skaldic poems – as well as in eddaic ones – we find many archaic words, some probably still (barely) living in the language at that time, some obviously died out; many of these words are *hapax legomena*. Ancient words, found in skaldic poems, but hardly ever else, are e.g. *drasill* ‘horse’, *edda* ‘great-grandmother’, *frón* ‘land, earth’, *fúrr* ‘fire’, *hjǫrr* ‘sword’, *hlúki* ‘a small man’, *jara* ‘fight’ (also in the Sparlösa inscription), *jǫfurr* ‘cheiftain’, *kellir* ‘helmet’, *marr* ‘horse’, *mǫsmar* ‘precious things’, *són* ‘blood’ and *tyggi* ‘king’. The question one must ask is why the skalds made all these efforts to find tricky words and allusions when making the poems. One answer is of course that it was honourable to compose a poem that was a challenge for the listeners, and it also made the poem exclusive, worthy of the king or nobleman the poem was addressed to. This was the ideology behind the poetry in a hall. Making a poem and listening to (= decoding) it was a challenge for the knowledgeable, a veritable *íþrott*. It separated boys from men, so to speak. However, the decisive tool in this ideology was, in my opinion, to charge the poem with esoteric knowledge that also was most honourable and dignifying, namely to make allusions to past events and heroes, to use ancient words, to stir up emotions by making the audience remember past glory days, to flatter the recipient of the poem by emphasizing great past relatives and underline their noble honour (which

of course rubbed off onto the present chieftain or king),⁴⁰ hence, to use the voice of the forefathers, to bring back the past and the ancestry to the present – acts typical of an oral culture. This way of using an archaic language for these kinds of occasions – in a hall – has many illustrative counterparts in other oral cultures around the world, as we have seen. The oral Old Norse society did not stand out from the rest in this respect. I think this aspect is extremely important when trying to understand the function of the hall and also the mentality in early Scandinavian oral society.

Summing up Some Aspects of Early Scandinavian Oral Society and Culture

I will sum up the above discussion and contrast a medieval literate society with a Viking Age oral society in Scandinavia. In the later medieval society authority was based on a kind of bureaucracy, where rules and decrees were sent out in written documents. ‘Memory’ was kept in written records in archives and registers.⁴¹ Morality was firmly in the hands

⁴⁰ For the importance of *honour* in this culture, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1993.

⁴¹ Else Roesdahl has drawn my attention to one of the oldest preserved letters from Denmark, King Erik Lam’s privilege letter to St Peter’s monastery in Næstved from 1140, in which the writer thanks God for giving them the written word so that they are able to verify the gifts people donate to the Church. ‘But the almighty God’s grace, which so mercifully helps us, whenever it is necessary, has finally given us a merciful and wonderful tool, namely so we can know the agreements and charitable deeds, which the believers give to the Holy Church for the forgiveness of sins, for literate remembrance, so that which could be forgotten in our frailty and short memory could be preserved in the living script. Therefore this graceful custom has now spread among us, so that we, with the help of the script, take valid and good witnesses about that of which the Holy Church has need, so that one can, if a lost soul or a discorded son tries to make an unjust case against the righteousness, by presenting the document with the undersigning witness without any doubt can prove against the one who goes against’ (My translation. – *DRB* 1:2 nr 78 in Danish trans; original in Latin in *DD* 1:2 nr 78).

It is extremely rare in Scandinavia to find such evidence or testimony for the change from an oral to a literate culture. These words resemble a quotation edited by Simon Keynes (1990: 226) from an Anglo-Saxon charter of King Æthelred the Unready from 995: ‘Whatever is transacted by men of this world to endure for ever ought to be forti-

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of the Church and its written moral codes. Claims of possessions were made by means of documents and records. In the Viking Age and most certainly also early medieval society the act of ruling was made personal by the physical presence of the ruler (or his deputy in some cases) who gave oral ‘orders’ or decrees. Therefore there was a peripatetic king- or rulership, where the ruler was constantly on the move between his farms or estates, or visiting relatives or allies. Memory was kept alive in songs, poetry, rhymes (*ortsboöknamn* etc.),⁴² enumerations (*pulur*), genealogies (*langfeðgatal*) and traditions (*áttvísi, mannfræði*), repeated from generation to generation, and memory was looked upon as wisdom (*vit heitir ... minni*).⁴³ Morality was handed down from one generation to another in the form of proverbs and sayings. Claims of possessions were in the form of statements that were backed up by oath-taking witnesses, by physical objects, such as a burial mound (referring to ancestry) or statements on a runestone, and by the ability to enumerate the forefathers with witnesses giving oral testimony. The truth of an event or a transaction was also established by a personal statement, with an oath and witnesses. If the event was long past, the oldest and wisest men (*minnuga mæn*) were asked to act as witnesses.

It is also interesting to note the obviously different attitudes the two cultures had towards ‘truth’. The oral society had a very flexible approach to truth as well as memory. One could say that truth was ‘instrumental’ and ‘functional’ in an oral society, whereas literate society was somewhat more rigid – truth and memory were written down and could be verified. The task of the one who carried the memory and tradition in an oral society was to make history comprehensible, which might need some transformation and reinterpretation of ‘facts’. Although tradition is immensely important in oral societies, oral memory deals primarily with the present (Havelock 1982: 121-2) which may seem like a contradiction. History is ‘filtered’ through the present and

fied securely with ranks of letters, because the frail memory of men in dying forgets what the writing of letters preserves and retains’.

⁴² *Ortsboöknamn* can be translated as local or parishesal nicknames (‘blason populaire’), derogatory nicknames for people from a hamlet or a parish very often used in rhyming verses or lists (a kind of *pulur*), see Edlund 1984 and 1985.

⁴³ This proverb, ‘wisdom is memory’, is found in one of the *pulur* in *Snorra Edda*, see Quinn 2000: 54.

its needs (Goody 1968: 32-4). ‘An oral society requires its history to be meaningful to the present, rather than an objective record of the past’ (Green 1994: 240). This view gave way to a transitional phase in history with the introduction of written documents, where they were looked upon as ‘orally given documents’. There was no clear dividing line between a genuine or a forged document in this phase, in the sense of our source-critical stance of today. It is therefore incorrect or inappropriate to use the word ‘forgery’ for these documents; they were written in a period with a very relative and flexible understanding of what was ‘truth’, which was used instrumentally (Clanchy 1993: 322).

The typology of oral tradition
(according to Vansina 1965: 144, table 3)

A <i>Category</i>	B <i>Sub-category</i>	C <i>Types</i>
I. Formulae		Titles Slogans Didactic formulae Ritual formulae
II. Poetry	Official Private	Historical Panegyric Religious Personal
III. Lists		Place-names Personal names
IV. Tales	Historical Didactic Artistic Personal	General Local Family Aetiological myths Artistic Personal memories
V. Commentaries	Legal Auxiliary Sporadic	Precedents Explanatory Occasional comments

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After this discussion I think it is possible to highlight several characteristics representing oral culture in Scandinavia, pointing to tools used for memorization and for the transmission of ideas and knowledge over time.⁴⁴ This kind of systematizing of oral tradition has been done by some scholars,⁴⁵ the most elaborate perhaps by the anthropologist Jan Vansina, who has presented this typology. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Vansina's typology, based on anthropological evidence from cultures around the world, is that oral traditions found in early Scandinavia correspond to it. Oral Scandinavian culture was not exclusive or different, but incorporates the oral elements found in most cultures on the same evolutionary level. What we find is a common repertoire of mnemonic tools for remembrance.

For early Scandinavia the most prominent mnemonic tools for remembrance are, in my opinion:

1) *Landscape and place*. Several scholars have stated that landscape is memory (Vansina 1965: 38; Schama 1995 *passim*; Brink 2001: 81). This stance has supported the emergence of a special branch of landscape studies, the study of cognitive and symbolic landscapes. Man has over time invested esoteric knowledge in places, knowledge that may have some social, economic or religious background (Brink 2001). This tradition and this knowledge have been transferred from generation to generation. Highly significant are the Dreaming tracks and songlines of Australian Aboriginal culture, sacred places tied together and memorized in the form of such things as place names in songs and describing past events in the Dreamtime.⁴⁶ Similar is the memorization of borders in a time with no written documents. There is a story of a father taking his son out in the fields and walking the borders, and at each border marker telling him the name of the place, giving the son a slap on the head, so that he would certainly remember it. When a sale of a farm or a land took place, the land had to be identified at the *thing*. This was done by a ritual called *umferð*, a survey with the participation of the

⁴⁴ The concepts and phenomena below are not commensurable, but probably cover several of the aspects dealt with here.

⁴⁵ E.g. Judy Quinn (2000) systematizes oral Icelandic tradition in: laws, suppressed traditions (such as *galdrar*, *forneskja*), poetry, genealogies and lists (such as *pulur*).

⁴⁶ Gould 1969: 120-1; Luomala 1975: 92; Myers 1986: 59-60.

buyer and seller and old, wise men.⁴⁷ These old, wise men, in Old Swedish *minnuga mæn*, had a central position in oral society. They were very often called to the *thing* assemblies as witnesses, to retell customs and stories. A special case was when borders were codified. A famous Swedish example is when the old farmer Løpinn from Ulvkälla in the province of Härjedalen was at a *thing* assembly in Sveg in c. 1260-80, giving testimony of when and where he had walked the border between Norway and Sweden when he was young (Holm 2003). It is also interesting to consult oral traditions and legends and to see how history and traditions are tied to features in a landscape (e.g. Zachrisson 2003).

2) *Artifacts*. Very often objects, sometimes sacred objects, were handed down from generation to generation, or from man to man, so that a memory, tied to the object, would be memorized (cf. the *churunga* or *tjurunga* in Australia⁴⁸). We find the same mnemonic idea behind the string of beads in the Christian and Muslim religions, where each pearl is the mnemotechnic peg for a prayer, or, as in Islam, for the names of Allah. The Aboriginal tribes of southeast Australia used message-sticks for passing on messages, where marks in the stick were aids to memory (Howitt 1904: 691-710). In the Inca Empire in Peru we find ropes with knots, where each knot represents a certain memory or event, important to the family or tribe (Vansina 1965: 37). In Scandinavia we had the fiery-cross (*budkavle*) used to summon a force e.g. for defence, often a wooden stick with runes or letters, or *budkavle*, *budstikke* for the maintenance of a road, for clearing snow from the road, in the form of a stick with *bomärken* for the farms involved.⁴⁹ As we have seen above an artifact could also function as a ‘memory’ of a transac-

⁴⁷ This archaic-looking ritual is mentioned in the Older and Younger *Västgöta* Law (ÄVgL Jb 2, YVgL Jb 1, Collin and Schlyter 827, trans. in Holmbäck and Wessén 1946). The seller and the buyer made an oral agreement in the presence of four witnesses. The parties met later one day together with other witnesses and relatives, four generations from each family. They then had to hold their hands on a spear- or stick-shaft, followed by the *umferð*, i.e. walking around the arable land and the meadows. Cf. Hafström 1967: 599-600 (*omfärd*).

⁴⁸ Spencer and Gillen 1904: 257-82; Frazer 1913:I: 88, 199 and 335; XI: 219 and 234.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Scheffer 1957: 73-4 (*bomärke*); Grieg 1957: 338-40 and Granlund 1957: 340-2 (*budkavle*, *budstikke*).

tion or a gift, a mute testimony to the act, later coupled with a written document (Clanchy 1993: 254-5).

3) *Iconography*. We can see or assume that pictures have been made to remember events or traditions, in the form of rock carvings in the Bronze Age, picture stones on Gotland from the Iron Age, or runestones, especially from the Viking Age (cf. Norr 1998: 208-12). Sometimes we are able to decipher the iconography and couple the story told in the picture with some tradition or saga, such as the tale of Sigurd found on the rune carving called *Sigurdsristningen* (Sö 101) in Södermanland or Þórr's fishing for the Miðgarðsormr on the Altuna stone (U 1161),⁵⁰ but more commonly we do not have a clue to the iconography, because the story behind the carvings is forever lost, such as on the Sparlösa runestone (Vg 119) in Västergötland. The Nordic bracteates can be seen in the same context.⁵¹

4) *Stories and sagas*. It is obvious that stories and sagas have the purpose of preserving history. The problem with stories in an oral culture – well known to anyone knowledgeable of the discussion of the Icelandic sagas during the last fifty years – is that they probably have never had a fixed form. The story is constructed from a core of events, peoples and motifs, which the storyteller weaves his story around.⁵² For medieval Iceland we can see that the main saga genres are:⁵³ i) family sagas and sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*), ii) mythic-heroic or legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*), iii) historical sagas of Scandinavian kings (*konunga sögur*), iv) contemporary sagas (such as *Sturlunga saga* and *biskupa sögur*), v) continental romances and heroic tales in translation (*riddara sögur*, *fornaldarsögur Suðrlanda*) and the special genre of vi) short stories (*þættir*).⁵⁴ Of course, some of these genres do not have an oral background, but rather are translations of

⁵⁰ For the latter, see especially Meulengracht Sørensen 2002.

⁵¹ For a general discussion on iconographic material for preserving traditions, see Vansina 1965: 37.

⁵² For a short summary of this problem, see Fidjestøl 1997: 233-5.

⁵³ For recent discussion of the Icelandic sagas and their background, see Andersson 1964 and 1966; Lönnroth 1965 and 1976; Steblin-Kamensky 1966; Buchholz 1978, 1980 and 1992; Harris 1986 and 1998; Mitchell 1991; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988 and Meulengracht Sørensen 1993.

⁵⁴ This is a traditional grouping of the Old Norse sagas; cf. Lönnroth 1965.

literary (Continental) texts. Joseph Harris (1998) has recently presented a short but excellent introduction to the oral background to the sagas.

5) *Poetry*. In the same way as a song or a saga, a poetic form is a mnemotechnic tool for memorizing an event or a person. But since a poem is made in a constrained form, it has been assumed to be more historically 'true' than a saga.⁵⁵ The idea is that it is more difficult to change a poem than a saga. For early Scandinavia poetry can be divided into on the one hand Eddaic and skaldic poetry, and on the other the genres: i) genealogical or historical poems (*Ynglingatal*), ii) panegyric poems (*Hákonarmál*), iii) eschatological poems (*Völuspá*) or iv) didactic or explicatory poems (*Rígsþula*). In an interesting article, Lars Lönnroth (1971) analyzed an Eddaic poem against the background of Parry and Lord's *oral-formulaic theory* and found that these poems must have been memorized to a high degree, not improvised in a kind of composition-in-performance act in front of an audience.⁵⁶ Later Lönnroth (1981), together with Bjarne Fidjestøl (1997: 232-3), on skaldic poetry, and Joseph Harris (1994), on both Eddaic and skaldic poetry, have underlined and qualified the results, and also found skaldic poetry to contain even fewer oral formulas than Eddaic ones. In his analysis of *Völuspá* Lönnroth concludes that 'Eddic poems are comparatively short, tightly structured and only *in part* formulaic; they were obviously meant to be memorized or recited (or sung) from memory' (1981: 311).⁵⁷ Finally, several scholars, such as Eric Havelock, have looked upon the function of oral poetry as a source of knowledge and wisdom, a kind of tribal encyclopedia.⁵⁸

6) *Formulas, proverbs, maxims, riddles, oaths, charms, witnesses, rituals, rites*. Proverbs and other sayings are a kind of 'storehouse of

⁵⁵ A programmatic work for this methodological shift was Weibull 1911, cf. Weibull 1913.

⁵⁶ For a critique and qualification of Parry and Lord's *oral-formulaic theory* in this respect, see Finnegan 1977: 18; Jabbour 1968: 174-90; Liberman 1978; Andersson 1988 and Green 1994: 5-7.

⁵⁷ Several scholars have analyzed the oral background to Eddaic and skaldic poetry, see eg. Liberman 1978; Harris 1983 and 1985; Kellogg 1991; Meletinsky 1998; Acker 1998; Mitchell 2001; Acker and Larrington 2002.

⁵⁸ Havelock 1982: 61-90; Klingenberg 1984: 399-401; Bloomfield and Dunn 1989; cf. Green 1994: 21.

wisdom' for a people living in an oral culture. The proverbs and maxims often have a resemblance to legal rules, which must form a background for these sayings; proverbs must probably have supported a vital part of legal custom in early Scandinavia. On the other hand riddles seem to have been tied to the mythological sphere, as mnemotechnic pegs for remembering and explaining myths. Since an orally delivered formula often had great legal or religious importance, these sayings are probably archaic. This is underlined by the fact that very often archaic words are used in these formulas. When they appear, for instance, in the early laws, one may assume that they have been transferred from earlier legal customs. Klingenberg (1984: 399-404) has recently divided these kinds of formulas and 'poetry' (*Kleindichtung*) for the Germanic-speaking realm into: *i*) magic charms often accompanied by ritual action, for controlling nature,⁵⁹ *ii*) gnomic and wisdom poetry, containing wisdom necessary for life in the form of proverbs, legal sayings, riddles and short mnemonic poems, and *iii*) 'Merk-, Wissendichtung', i.e. tribal knowledge of theological or mythological kind, such as tribal origins and genealogical lists of rulers, which may be seen as a category of its own (cf. Green 1994: 21-2).

7) *Genealogies and enumerations*. As have been noted by many scholars, 'primitive' man has some kind of an 'obsession' for rattling off genealogical lists and enumerations. For early Scandinavia we have many lists of this kind, which may be divided in lists for: *i*) place names, *ii*) persons and personal names and *iii*) titles. These lists – a kind of name catalogue in metric form – were called *þulur* (e.g. Gurevich 1993), many of which are preserved in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, and genealogies, called *langfeðgatal* (such as *Ynglingatal*, *Háleygjatal*), *áttvísi* and *mannfræði*. We can furthermore see that *þulur* of this kind are the basis for many of our oldest poems, such as the OE *Widsið*, and the ON *Alvíssmál*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð* etc.

8) *Law rules*. In a culture with no written records or law books, law speakers and old, wise men had to remember the law.⁶⁰ Probably the 'Law' in Scandinavia, before we got our edited, written and codified provincial laws, consisted of certain law rules and legal proverbs, which

⁵⁹ Cf. the assumed function of the *þulr*, above.

⁶⁰ For the importance of law in oral culture as a storehouse of wisdom, see Bloomfield and Dunn 1989 *passim*.

made up a legal custom for a region, province (*land*) or district. We may find some reminiscences of this on the Forsa rune ring and in the Gulathing's Law and the Older Västgöta Law. These laws and law traditions must have been memorized and recited by the *lōgsögumaðr* 'the man who told (*segja*) the law'.

From anthropological studies we can see that law in oral cultures is very much built up around precedents (Vansina 1965: 161). This is, of course, to be expected. Legal tradition is very often made up from certain unique cases that have been analysed in court and given a judicial treatment, creating a precedent. The stranger or more unique the case, the more easily remembered it is. Many law rules in our earliest provincial laws are of this kind:

Marght ær ilz øki.
Oc wardir hani manz bani.
La bilder a wægh,
fløgh wp hani oc a bild niþir.
Fiol niþir bildir oc i quid kalli.
Døþ hafþi þæn karl af.⁶¹

These kinds of legal cases may – from anthropological comparisons – be assumed to be transferred from or influenced by an (earlier?) oral legal culture.

⁶¹ The Dala Law (Bb 46). 'A lot of bad things happen. Even a rooster (cockerel) may be a man's slayer. A blade lay on a wall. A rooster flew up and [sat] down on the blade. Down fell the blade and into the belly of a man, and he was killed by it'. My translation.

This famous passage in the Dala Law also has a rhythmic structure (Holmbäck and Wessén 1936: 77), which could actually be used as an argument to call its oral origin into question; that it was of an oral origin was however obvious for Ståhle (1954: 138-9). The same passage was later on consequently found by Utterström (1978: 199) to be particularly young, according to her textual analysis. However, the most recent syntactical and textual analysis by Nils Jörgensen (1987: 167) claims that the Dala Law must be 'old', representing the earliest stage of all the Scandinavian provincial laws. It is difficult for anyone interested in our provincial laws and lacking philological expertise to use the philological evidence when the opinions differ so greatly between philologists. The answer is, as always in reconstructive work in our older history, to weigh up all possible evidence and arrive at the best possible picture.

Summing up

I have focussed on the transitional period in early Scandinavia, roughly AD 800-1300, when society turned from an oral culture into a culture of literacy (Söderberg and Larsson 1993: 13), a period in which Scandinavia was transformed radically in many respects, with a new religion, monetary system, the emergence of towns, a new agricultural system, a new kind of kingship and territorialized ‘states’, the most fundamental cultural transformation ever known in the North. My intention has been to venture into the ‘communal language’, customs and ways of preserving memories with linguistic tools.

Spoken language, which was intended to be remembered, may be divided into: 1) *the language of power*, 2) *the language of tradition*, 3) *the language of law* and then we have the special case of 4) *fossilized (oral) language* (i.e. *runic*). These four aspects are in my opinion the major part of what might be the expressions of the *communal or collective memory* of a people. The language of power is the ‘vertical’ language in society, used by a king or leader to address his people, give orders and settle disputes. Hence the language of tradition may be called the horizontal language, making up the sagas, poetry, traditions, proverbs, folklore. The legal language must be seen as a combination of the two, containing old customs interwoven with new laws, implemented by kings and leaders. Runic language could perhaps be understood as petrified orality.

Of course, in modern society we have both orality and literacy, but what I am aiming at in this chapter is to see the change from a predominantly oral culture to a predominantly literate one. For a long time we find these two cultures – the oral and the literate – side by side in society, especially during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries according to the sources discussed here (cf. Stefán Karlsson 1986: 286; Hagland 1996).

An interesting literature in this connection is the provincial laws, since they betray obvious traces of orality. They are based on Continental Roman and Canon Law, and some agent, a king or an aristocracy had them written down for some purpose. However, they are ‘spiced up’ with archaic law rules and paragraphs that should most probably be understood as having a background in an oral society, and the judicial act was for a long time an oral act. In this respect, the Scandinavian

provincial laws become a most interesting material to analyse in a literacy context.

For Sweden the final steps towards a society based on written documents are taken around 1350, with the new King's laws, superseding the provincial laws. The rules in these new laws state that from now on, legal transactions should be documented in letters (in the vernacular), and not as before publicly announced in court at the assembly. This situation is then evidenced by the large corpus of written documents in the vernacular, starting from approximately the same time. For England this process was somewhat earlier, c. 1066-1300, according to Michael Clanchy (1993: 42).

For hundreds of years (c. 1000-1350) the two cultures lived side by side in Scandinavia, the oral culture with runic carvings for visual messages and the *thing* assembly as the focus and fundamental social arena, and the literacy culture with the Latin script for visual messages and documentation, and the church as focus and fundamental social arena.⁶²

Verba volant, scripta manent, says the proverb; but it is given the lie by those peoples the world over whose behaviour and institutions prove that the word is not quite so transitory as might be supposed. It is enough to have witnessed the guardians of oral traditions solemnly reciting the texts stored in their memory to be convinced of this. The listeners, motionless and intent, follow every word that is spoken, and there can be no doubt

⁶² Besides to the Literacy Conference in Aarhus in April 2002 this paper was presented to my own seminar in Uppsala (SSESSoC: The Seminar for the study of early Scandinavian society and culture) in December 2002, to the Scandinavian Seminar at Harvard University in May 2003, as a Socrates-lecture in Poznan, Poland in September 2003 and as an inauguration lecture to the Royal Gustav Adolfs Academy in Uppsala in October 2003; I am grateful for all comments on these occasions. I also thank for stimulus, suggestions, reflections and corrections during the writing process Professors Else Roesdahl, Århus, Stephen Mitchell, Harvard, Lars Lönnroth, Göteborg, Margaret Clunies Ross, Sydney, Joseph Harris, Harvard, Judith Jesch, Nottingham and Dr Judy Quinn, Cambridge, for sending me her excellent paper (Quinn 2000) which came to my knowledge during the wrap-up of this chapter; and finally I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the late Professor Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, Århus, who once put me on track to this chapter and for being such a helpful friend.

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that to them these words bring the past back to life, for they are venerable words that provide the key to the storehouse of wisdom of the ancestors who worked, loved, and suffered in times gone by. There can be no doubt that to them oral traditions are a source of knowledge about the past (Vansina 1965: xi).

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