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# I: 17 Trauma Studies

## 1 Definition

Trauma affects memory as terrifying or extremely disrupting events influence the way memories are formed and processed by individuals and groups. Trauma studies explore and explain these phenomena.

## 2 State of research

Trauma studies have grown considerably over the last few decades (Alexander et al. 2004, 1–10). Until recently, however, scholars in the field of pre-modern Nordic studies have shown little interest in them, despite the fact that many of the literary sources, be they poetry or prose, show a strong preoccupation with issues of violence, loss and memory, which are also at the heart of trauma studies. In this entry trauma studies will be briefly presented and, even more succinctly, the results of several recent attempts at bringing them to bear on medieval Icelandic sagas.

Neuropsychology informs us that several parts of the brain collaborate in constructing memories (Baddeley et al. 2015, 159). Under great stress, however, the brain is disturbed in this activity. Parts of the central nervous system that are essential for memory formation are inundated with stress hormones making it very difficult for the brain to process an event and form normal memories (van der Kolk and Fisler 1995). Nevertheless, it continues to register what is happening, albeit in a different way. Immensely stressful experiences, such as being subjected to extreme violence, rape, severe accidents, or even being a witness to such events, can result in a specific type of memory: so-called traumatic memory. In the words of one of the leading specialists on trauma, Bessel van der Kolk, “traumatic memories are fundamentally different from the stories we tell about the past. They are dissociated: The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography” (van der Kolk 2014, 196). Indeed, traumatic memories are patchy and confused. They are also linked to unexplained emotions, smells, bodily sensations. In that sense, van der Kolk tells us that “all trauma is preverbal” (van der Kolk 2014, 43). This is because “the essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable” (van der Kolk 2014, 197). The victim of trauma is often

unable to process what has happened. Memories of the event are fragmentary and in some cases more or less entirely repressed. Nevertheless, they live on as a persistent traumatic memory which can invade the person's present with feelings, symptoms, even flashbacks, because side by side with "the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present", there lives "a ruinous, ever-present past" (van der Kolk 2014, 197). Dealing with trauma is, however, possible and many therapeutic approaches recommend helping the victim reconstruct the memory of the traumatic event as a step towards overcoming the symptoms of what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Re-telling the experience invests it with meaning and is a crucial step towards recovery (Herman 1992, 176–197; van der Hart et al. 1989). Artistic expression can be very useful in overcoming the symptoms trauma victims may suffer from, be it through narrative or other modes of expression, though little scientific research has been done to establish this more firmly (van der Kolk 2014, 234).

The links between literature and trauma have been studied however (Caruth 1996) and since 2012 the *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* is devoted to clarifying this relationship. Literary works can represent traumatic events as well as the experience of being a trauma survivor. In some cases these works also signal the impossibility of this representation. At the same time they can find other ways to suggest both the event and the prolonged experience of it, often through a creative manipulation of the medium of expression itself, i.e. the poem or the story. In this case, the trauma is not remembered in the habitual sense of this word, since it is so overwhelming that the mind cannot process it. Nevertheless its impact will influence afterwards the way the mind constructs representations, among others of the past. It has been said that for the trauma to exist, it has to be expressed later (Caruth 1996, 17). In other words, the trauma itself may be repressed but shapes the way the mind remembers. Trauma's relationship to time is therefore quite paradoxical as one can say that time disappears in trauma but also that the trauma persists through time, since in any attempt to construct a representation of time, the result of this structuring activity will be affected by the trauma.

### 3 Pre-modern Nordic material: Trauma, memory, and the construction of the past in poetry and sagas

The concept of traumatic memory is relevant for the study of pre-modern Nordic society as it was quite violent, not the least in Iceland during the period when the sagas were composed and most of the poetry we have preserved was written down. During what is often called the Age of the Sturlungs, or the period from 1220 to 1262, an exceptional number of battles were fought, with numerous casualties. Farms were besieged and burned to the ground with their inhabitants, and individuals were hunted down for revenge (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1953). The exercise of violence must have been traumatising for many people and an experience of trauma and its effects must have accumulated within the culture.

It is indeed difficult to find a more violent time in Icelandic history. The power structures that had developed in this stateless society relatively isolated from the rest of the world by were collapsing and being replaced by something different. This was not a simple process but it must have been quite traumatic for the dominant segments of the Icelandic population at the time, not only because of the violence inflicted upon so many people: in battle, in attacks and the burning down of farms, as well as in individual vendettas (Fechner-Smarsly 1996, 19–28).

There was also an ongoing identity crisis among elite Icelanders. It involved their relationship to the Church which was undergoing change in the great movement of *libertas ecclesiae* (freedom of the Church from lay authority) that had been challenging power structures throughout Europe at the time, as well as with a Norwegian monarchy which was becoming stronger, more confident and claiming authority over Iceland. The crisis was also in their relationship to each other. Indeed, the concentration of power in the hands of a few families with the establishment of territorial domains also lead to a change in the self-perception of this small group but not less in the attitude to society of those who previously had felt themselves to be on an equal footing with its members (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016).

One could say that the society which generated these stories about its own origins has been subjected to a double trauma: that of extreme violence and – closely linked to this violence – a serious challenge to its identity. It is in this period that we witness the first flourishing of the literary genre which most thoroughly explores the identity of medieval Icelanders, i.e. the *Íslendingasögur* [Sagas of the Icelanders].

Descriptions of the debilitating effects of trauma on the individual are also known from this literature. An example of grief leading to an inability to speak followed by death can be found in the contemporary saga *Þórðar saga kakala* [Saga

of Thord kakali] where Kolbeinn kaldaljós, who cannot get over his son's death, is unable to articulate his sorrow and soon dies (*Sturlunga saga*, Ch. 355). Another is the famous account of Egill, the warrior-poet, who locks himself in his bed and wants to die after the drowning of his beloved son, but is tricked into composing an elegy by his daughter who thereby saves his life (*Egils saga*, Ch. 80).

If we move now from individual to collective or cultural trauma (Alexander et al. 2004), we see that the late thirteenth-century saga, *Brennu-Njáls saga* [Njal's Saga], shows a strong awareness of what happens to a society that has been torn apart by violence. The received date of this saga's composition is in the 1280's, when one to two decades had elapsed since the most brutal fights took place in the country. As a representative of the genre of the sagas of the Icelanders, *Brennu-Njáls saga* portrays a past distant by almost three centuries from the time of writing. If it is based on some kind of memory, it is more of a cultural memory than that of events that actually took place. The narrative and the characters must therefore be shaped by whoever composed the saga and reflect her or his interests, values and preoccupations, and at the same time those of its intended audience and/or readers.

It is therefore interesting to see that the saga shows a deep psychological understanding of the workings of the human psyche and of the unleashing of what Sigmund Freud named the death drives in situations where violence prevails. Indeed, Freud's theory of the death drive, with its relationship with violence, trauma and memory, can help us understand many features of this great work of art: the urge to repeat despite clear warnings of the terrible danger involved, the uncanny figures who exult in violence, the association of sexual passion with death, the inability of society to contain its destructive forces, not to mention the number of characters who go willingly to their death. All of this suggests that the image of the past given to us in the portrayal of Icelandic society during the years immediately preceding and following the Conversion of Iceland in the year AD 1000 was constructed by a person who had witnessed the unleashing of the death drives in her or his close environment, i.e. Iceland in the latter half of the thirteenth century (Torfi H. Tulinius 2015).

Recent work on *Eyrbyggja saga* also reveals a structuring principle underlying this seemingly haphazard assemblage of sundry events that took place in the vicinity of Helgafell during the first hundred years or so of Icelandic history. Here it is the pressure put on sons to take over and defend the social position their fathers had. This pressure is thematised by the number of dead fathers who appear in the saga. At the same time they must compete with other equally well-born sons of dead fathers, some of whom are better warriors than themselves. The prime example of this is the rivalry between Arnkell goði and Snorri Þorgrímsson and their conflict for power in the area (Torfi H. Tulinius 2014).

These examples of current studies suggest that in a traumatic time of collapse it seems very probable that the experience of crisis and violence – which was to a great extent impossible to conceptualise – shaped the way thirteenth-century Icelanders constructed stories about the time of the ancestors who founded the society in which they lived, a society which was falling apart.

## 4 Perspectives for future research

Future research should concentrate on the way trauma studies can show how different types of trauma with differing degrees of intensity had an impact on the different literary genres of medieval Iceland. Thereby a new and possibly more detailed and elaborate explanation of the links between the turbulence of thirteenth-century Iceland and its exceptional literary output could be proposed.

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