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Anatoly Liberman, *In Prayer and Laughter. Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic Mythology, Literature, and Culture*, Moscow: Paleographic Press 2016, ISBN 978-5-89526-027-2, 588 pp.

Anatoly Liberman is a well-known scholar working on various aspects of medieval Scandinavia: mythology, linguistics and literature. The present work includes a number of articles previously published but all of them have been reworked and expanded. Some sections appear for the first time, i.e. the chapters on Viðarr, the god Lytir and the cow Auðhumla. The main chapters address the myths associated with Óðinn, Loki and Baldr.

The present review does not claim to do justice to every aspect of the book's rich contents. I shall concentrate on Liberman's contributions to mythology and history of religions; they occupy after all the main part of his book. My discussion will hopefully give the reader an idea of Liberman's approach and interpretative methods. Some general remarks will conclude the review.

A comprehensive study of the god Óðinn opens the book (Ch. 1, "Óðinn's path to greatness"). With respect to the origins of Woden/Óðinn the author deserves credit for clarifying his opinion right from the outset. The god's name is derived from an early Germanic **woðu* which under the form *Wode* denoted either the leader of the wild hunt or the demon who chased it. The problem is that *Wode* and the idea of the wild hunt is only attested in relatively late folklore. Instead, we have to base our interpretation on the earliest sources mentioning *Woden/Óðinn*. The Old Saxon baptismal creed from the late eighth century is one of these. It is followed by an abrogation formula where the catechumen is enjoined to reject the main "pagan" gods: Thunær, Wōden and Saxnote. Together with the attestations from the ninth and tenth centuries including theoforic place-names we get reliable evidence for the worship of the god among Germanic peoples at an early period. Adding the information of Tacitus in *Germania* Chapter 9 that "among the gods they worship most eagerly Mercurius" we reach the first century C.E. There is general agreement among scholars that Mercurius is the *interpretatio romana* of Woden/Óðinn. From a methodological viewpoint, this material carries the weight of evidence against recent folklore traditions. In the early sources Woden/Óðinn appears already as an elevated deity and the idea of his origin as an obscure demon of death is in my opinion built on shaky ground.

Liberman's treatment of Loki (Ch. 6) provides a good example of his emphasis on etymological questions. He devotes an entire section

(pp. 175–194) to discussing the name of Loki and its bearing on the interpretation of the myths in which this figure appears. Among the different explanations of the name, Liberman opts for the connection of Loki with the verb *lúka* ‘close, bolt’ and the beginning of “Loki’s career” was as a chthonian deity and he may have been a personified enclosure or lock. Subsequently, Loki developed into the ruler of the underworld, into Útgardaloki. The next step was his elevation to Ásgarðr and brotherhood with Óðinn but Liberman points out that the circumstances for this promotion are obscure. In the end, Loki found himself enclosed in a cave awaiting the Ragnarök. Etymology and mythic performance thus come together again.

The myth of Baldr’s death has attracted much scholarly interest and a wide range of diverging interpretations is at our disposal. The meaning of the myth is not obvious and Liberman seeks to follow up the loose ends that are left in the account of Snorri in *Gylfaginning* 22 and 49 (Ch. 7, “Darkness engulfs Baldr”). For that purpose, Liberman’s historical perspective seems to be the best approach. Details in the myth point to earlier more consistent versions. The reconstruction offered by Liberman is worthwhile to repeat here, because—like the one of Loki—it represents the way he analyses Old Norse myths in general. Baldr, ‘the shining one,’ was originally a sky god with various functions and his counterpart Høðr, a deity of the dark underworld, which explains his blindness. A plant—possibly the reed—was sacred to Baldr. The two deities wooed the same woman, Nanna. She preferred Baldr and Høðr, seeking revenge, wanted to injure Baldr. Since the sky god was invulnerable to all weapons and objects except the sacred reed, Høðr visited Frigg, the mother of Baldr, who was the only one to know where the reed grew. By cunning and deceit, he made her reveal the location of the plant. Høðr travelled all the world over and managed to find the reed and pierced Baldr with it. Frigg lamented her son and made an attempt to get him back from the realm of the dead. She failed and Baldr was stuck in the underworld “where he continued to protect crops and other plants.” According to Liberman the story of Baldr represents a version of a widespread myth of a dying god.

What, then, was the role of the famous mistletoe? Here Liberman has a clear answer. The Old Norse *mistilteinn* is a calque on Old English *misteltān*. Legends about this plant reached Scandinavia from England and the word’s connotation with the element *-mistr*, ‘-fog’ (in *þokumistr*), made it appear as a suitable weapon in the hands of Høðr. The reed (or the thistle) of the original story was replaced by a plant which neither the poet of *Völuspá* nor Snorri had ever seen. The alleged ignorance of the mistletoe in Iceland and Norway seems less probable in view of the

fact that the plant is not uncommon around the central part of the Oslo fjord, in the Viking Age a culturally important area; it is also found in the Mälars region (see map 612 in Hultén 1950).

In treating the Germanic verb **sendan* as a ritual term (Ch. 10), Liberman suggests that it acquired the special meaning ‘to make a (human) sacrifice,’ attested in *Hávamál* 144 and in *Beowulf* 600. Admittedly, the occurrence in *Hávamál* is a link in a string of terms that point to a sacrificial context but it is not at all evident that human victims are the object of *senda*. In support of his interpretation the author refers to a stanza in *Atlakviða* (36/38) and to the above-mentioned line in *Beowulf* where *senda/sendan* is assumed to be used in the sense of ‘to feast on corpses.’ Both passages are much discussed, however, and many attempts have been made to explain the meaning of *senda/sendan* in the lines referred to. Liberman’s explanation is well argued and appears equally possible as the one that sticks to the meaning ‘dispatch’ (in different ways).

Returning to *Hávamál*, I agree with Liberman on the ritual meaning of *senda* but the verb can still be interpreted within the semantic field of its early attestations. In the Gothic Bible, *sandjan* and its prefixed forms translate different Greek verbs signifying ‘send, dispatch.’ This is no doubt the original meaning, which Liberman also is aware of. Transposed to the ritual sphere *senda* in *Hávamál* 144 refers, in my opinion, to a moment in the ritual process when the sacrificial material is “sent” to the deity; that is, being transferred into the divine sphere by means of a particular gesture or formula.

The god *Lytir* has attracted considerable scholarly interest despite the fact that he is mentioned only once in the entire Old Norse literature. A late, short story, the *Hauks þáttur hábrókar*, reports that *Eiríkr*, king of the *Svear*, worshipped “that god who is called *Lytir*.” The deity used to manifest himself from a wagon, which should be brought to the cult place and stand there during night. In the morning the god would appear and be ready for consultation. In 1910, *Löffler* drew attention to some place-names in eastern Sweden which he connected with the god *Lytir* and this enhanced further discussion. Liberman’s solution of the problem takes up the interpretation line from *Strömbäck* (1928), *Schröder* (1938) and *de Vries* (1956–1957) who consider *Lytir* to be another name of the god *Freyr*. The identification with *Freyr* gives the clue for understanding what is meant by *Lytir* or *Litir*; the latter was the god’s real name according to Liberman. In rejecting *Elmevik*’s proposal that *Lytir* (or *lytir*) derives from a **Hlytir* where *hlyt-* refers to *hlaut*, ‘lot,’ Liberman turns instead to the account of the creation of humankind found in *Völuspá* stanzas 17–18. Here we learn that *Ask* and

Embla were without *litir góðir* but that the god Lóðurr gave them precisely that. The expression *litir góðir* is usually interpreted as ‘good colours,’ i.e. a good appearance. Liberman finds the mention of ‘a good appearance’ somewhat odd in the context. What the newly created man and woman better needed was the ability for procreation and Liberman consequently suggests that *litir góðir* means ‘good genitals.’ The reference to Hárbarðsljóð 50 where the word *litir* also occurs is intricate since the expression *fara litum* is open to different interpretations and none appears immediately convincing. According to Liberman, the word *litir* seems to designate ‘oars’ but the step he takes from oar(s) to penis is not self-evident. The allusion to stanza 48 where Sif is said to have a lover at home when Þórr is absent gives the background for interpreting the latter part of stanza 50; in Liberman’s version: “you would have been right in it if you had worked with your oar(s), (as Sif’s lover is now doing).” Liberman concludes that his interpretation of Lytir or Litir as the god “having a penis” would have been a perfect cognomen for Freyr: “The phallic statue in Uppsala made it clear to anyone who cared to look at it which part of the god’s anatomy was supposed to be worshiped” (p. 268).

Liberman’s essay on the god Lytir and the expression *litir góðir* in *Völuspá* 18 conveys innovative thought but the parallel passages he builds his argument upon are themselves subject to widely divergent interpretations. This detracts from the value of his conclusions. In discussing Elmevik’s contribution on Lytir Liberman refers to an article of 1966 but he should have used Elmevik’s revised version from 1990.

Interesting, though not primarily concerned with mythology, are Liberman’s contributions to the study of the runes (Ch. 17, “The emergence of the runes”) and the term *edda* (Ch. 19, “The origin of the name Edda”). In the former case, Liberman points to the origin of the Latin term *elementum* as a parallel to the semantic history of the word for ‘rune.’ The plural *rúnar* was applied to the runic alphabet and meant ‘an ordered sequence of letters’ and stands at the end of the semantic development from **runo*, ‘consultation,’ to *rūnō*, ‘letter’ (p. 364). As to Edda denoting the compilation of Snorri Sturluson, Liberman suggests that *edda* is a “pet name” of “æðr, pronounced æ:ðr, f., eider duck” that follows a fashion of giving bird names to Icelandic manuscripts. The most famous example is the law codex *Grágás*, ‘grey goose’ (p. 405). In my view Liberman’s proposal is the best so far presented.

In modern research a tendency appears to disregard what was written by the nineteenth century scholars on Germanic religion. Liberman is an exception, however, and this adds to the book’s merits.

Liberman puts much emphasis on etymology and historical recon-

struction throughout his book. His interpretations of Scandinavian mythology usually have their starting point in etymological analyses that often lead to new and surprising results. He is much preoccupied with origins and tries to follow the evolution of the myths from distant times up to the point when they were written down in the manuscripts of the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson. Liberman's interpretations are sometimes provocative but in general consistently argued. Reading his texts is always stimulating and we meet with an independent thinker well versed in the Germanic and Old Norse sources.

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