

Bergsveinn Birgisson
II: 34 Kennings

1 Introduction

Skaldic Poetry

Old Norse skaldic poetry possesses great theoretic and heuristic value for the study of memory, not least due to the fact that the oldest examples of this genre are said to have been generated in an oral society, and could thus have been imbued with mnemo-techniques under such circumstances. There can be little doubt but that skaldic poetry was meant to be memorized by heart and passed through generations without significant emendations. This attitude can be detected among medieval writers of *konungasögur* [kings' sagas] and *Íslendingasögur* [sagas of Icelanders], who employed the oldest examples of this poetry (from the ninth century) as historical data or notes for reconstructing major historical events. Scholars have pointed out that the highly advanced metre most common in the genre, *dróttkvætt*, with prescriptive rules for rhyme, alliteration, and fixed number of syllables in each line, must have been of great help in memorising and rendering the stanzas stable during their oral transmission (Frank 1978, 25; Fidjestøl 1993, 7; Kuhn 1983, 253). Since every second word basically rhymes in *dróttkvætt*, it is clear that it would generate a different Oral Theory than the one based on the thousand-line epic poetry of the Balkan (cf. Lord 1991, 20–21, for a comparison between the Greek and Germanic situations).

2 Case study: Memory and Old Norse skaldic poetry

The Kenning

While some studies have emphasised the mnemonic assistance provided by the strict metre in question, less attention has been given to the visual imagery of skaldic poetry in these regards. There is a consensus among scholars that the image is a key concept in the classical *memoria*-traditions, the rule is to see for one's inner eye that which is to be remembered (Yates 2001 [1966], 187), indeed this seems to be a universal when it comes to memory. The Old Norse tradition is no exception to this rule, since the very word for image,

mynd, has etymological connections both with *muna* [‘remember’] and *minni* [‘memory’].

Imagery is usually associated with metaphorical expressions in verbal art, and in skaldic poetry we find poetical images in metaphorical figures known as *kennings*. As long as scholars were convinced of the infallibility of classical aesthetics, poetical circumlocutions such as ‘horse of the sea’ were condemned as ‘immature attempts’ to make beautiful metaphors (Finnur Jónsson 1920, 385), and the kenning in many ways was dismissed as a “barbarisch[e] Stilfigur” (Krause 1930, 10) [barbarian figure of style (author’s translation)]. The pre-Christian skalds finally got their spokesmen in modern times with scholars like Hallvard Lie (1982 [1952]; 1957), who pointed out that the oldest skalds in Scandinavia could not have known classical aesthetics, and should therefore not be judged by them. Although, as Rudolf Meissner rightly commented, the skalds of old, “die bizarresten Verbindungen oft mit Absicht aufsuchen” (1921 12) [look for the most bizarre combinations (author’s translation)], it has since been pointed out that this aspect of the kenning images could have something to do with mnemonic function: “Nettopp fordi dei er så merkelege, er dei lette å feste i minnet” (Mundal 2004, 257) [because they are so eccentric, they are easy to memorise (author’s translation)].

Two distinct traditions, *memoria* in Roman literature and modern cognitive psychology, specifically in studies addressing memory and mental imagery, shed light on this question. The methodological point of departure is cognitive metaphor theory, or *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; 1989), later developed in *Conceptual Integration Theory*, often referred to as ‘blending’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

Following this theory’s mode of thought, the Old Norse kenning could be presented as a double-faced cognitive figure: A conceptual metaphor and a novel metaphor in one. The kenning is always based on an abstract rule or a fixed way of paraphrasing, which could be referred to as kenning-models, and these ‘rules’ remind one very much of the conceptual metaphor, an essential term in cognitive metaphor theory, pointing out that what makes language make sense, often has invisible, non-linguistic rules governing from behind, as it were. In modern English, the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY can, for example, be detected in linguistic expressions of the sort, ‘you must keep on going’ and ‘do not let this stop you’. In the same way, the Old Norse paraphrasing rule for a SHIP in the kenning-system is ANIMAL OF THE SEA. The aforementioned kenning-model can easily be detected in the kenning-variants of the skalds, the metaphorical or novel extension of the underlying model, such as “marblakkr” [‘horse of the sea’], “ǫldu fill” [‘elephant of the waves’] or “fjarðar elgr” [‘moose of the fjord’], and so forth. Skaldic poetry is, of course, alien to us since we do not share the conceptual rules of the skalds.

Memoria

In the Roman *memoria* tradition, a distinction is made between memorising texts word-for-word (*memoria verborum*) and memorising the basic aspects of a text, for example, a central argument or the gist of a story (*memoria rerum*). Although both methods could imply images, the Roman tradition seems to favour the latter, reflected, for example, in Cicero's statement that the memory of things was most appropriate for the speaker (*Ciceronis Rhetorica*, II, 87, 358). When it comes to Old Norse skaldic poetry, the distinction between *verbum* and *res* is somewhat inappropriate. The overall goal in the Scandinavian oral society must have been to remember the skaldic stanzas word-for-word, since this poetry is not suited to improvisation. But in the Old Norse case, the technique for the memory of things, *memoria rerum*, and the imagery attached to it, could have functioned synchronically in the process of memorizing and recollecting the more abstract words of stanzas. The image of the kenning cues the word, so to speak, and since every second word rhymes in a *dróttkvætt* stanza the image is a valuable starting point for remembering the words. In this regard, the kenning reminds one of the term *nota* or 'sign' that Quintillian argued could cue memory for the central things in a text, and as Mary Carruthers points out, those signs could take the form of associated images (1993, 74). It has even been argued, that the use of the terms *kenning* and *at kenna* among Norse medieval scholars such as Snorri Sturluson are translations of Latin *nota* and *notare*, as both are variants on the concept of characterizing by using a striking image (Malm 2016, 318–319). The Norse heathens had, of course, come to the same concept on their own, as Malm points out, since the phenomenon itself, later termed as kenning, was developed unrelated to those traditions.

What kind of images then, are the most suitable for memorisation? The Roman answer to this is best reflected in the oldest text on *memoria* – *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (from ca. 86–82 BC):

We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in memory. And we shall do so if we establish similitudes as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague but active [*imagines agentes*]; if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we ornament some of them, as with crowns or purple cloaks, so that the similitude may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too, will ensure our remembering them more readily (Yates 2001 [1966], 25–26).

The translation of Caplan from 1954, used by Yates above, translates *agentes* as 'active' from *ago*. As argued elsewhere it could be maintained that this adjective

rather stems from *agens*, *agentis* ‘effective, powerful’ (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2010, 204). In any case, it is of interest to see if and how the Old Norse *kenning* can be seen as fulfilling this old criteria of the effective or striking image.

Cognitive psychology

The Roman rule of *imagines agentes* is thoroughly discussed in cognitive psychology, resulting in the much debated ‘bizarreness effect’. Opinions range from those who see it as a “not very important factor” (Richardson 1999, 199) to others who are quite convinced of the mnemonic powers of bizarre imagery (Einstein and McDaniel 1987, 99); still others have argued that it is not bizarreness in itself but the *interaction* of images that proves most beneficial for memory (Kroll et. al 1986, 42–53).

Some theoretical problems are notable. The conclusions of modern psychologists are drawn from modern human beings in a cultural circumstances quite different from those of people in oral society. Modern humans are confronted with a process described as ‘externalization of memory’, and live in a society which favours a linguistic-based way of thinking, which can be seen as a constraint on other modes of thinking, such as the visual one (Helstrup 2005, 157–158). Moreover, the notion of ‘bizarre’ seems to be a fleeting one, even among modern scholars. Keeping these problems in mind, there is a general consensus in psychology about criteria for images most easily retrieved from memory:

- 1) *Attention*. Images that draw attention are easier to memorise. This is of course the alpha and omega of the advertising business.
- 2) *Communication/Understanding*. If the image ‘makes sense’ or is meaningful in some respect, it helps memory.
- 3) *Distinction*. That which is distinct from its surroundings is easier to remember. This law is generally termed as the ‘von-Restorff effect’ or the ‘isolation-effect’.
- 4) *Interaction*. It helps memory if images, two or more, interact in one way or another, whereas they do not advance memorization if they are isolated one from another (as paintings on walls).

Analyses

When applying these considerations to kennings, one finds out that the different criteria are not easily isolated from one another, but could rather be seen as dynamic and simultaneous processes when we visualize with our ‘inner eye’. One

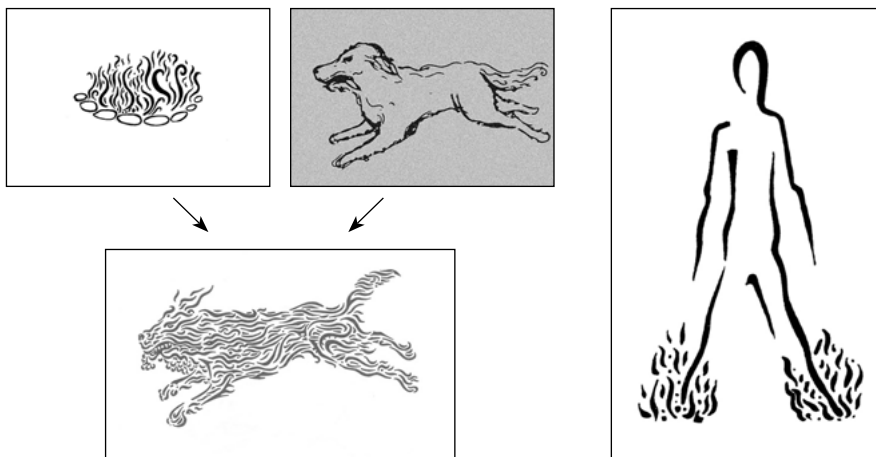


Fig. 1: The fire-wolf



Fig. 2: House-thief
in fire stockings

could, for example, maintain that the potential of *kennings* to draw our attention (1) mainly lies in the contrasting images (horse vs. sea or fish vs. valley) they systematically bring to interaction (4). Furthermore, these interactive images ‘make sense’ since they are based on a system of communication the skalds and their contemporaries shared (2). As noted elsewhere (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2012, 286), the skald could draw attention to himself and his poem with an unheard kenning-variant based on the model, and thus demonstrate his skills in making a catachresis of conventional images – a fresh visual blend, meeting the criteria of distinction quite well (3). This is easily done since both the source (horse) and target (ship) in kenning-metaphors are concrete or ‘high in imagery’. Elaboration, defined as an “unusual interaction or connective” between to nouns, is a keyword for mnemonic images in psychology (Wollen and Margres 1987, 118–119). Interestingly, the kennings can be said to manufacture such elaborated images in a systematic manner, counteracting the conventional processing or ‘automatisation’ of language (Mukařovský 1964 [1932], 19).

While it is uncertain exactly how people visualized kennings, one can be sure that the bizarre imagery of the kenning itself must be visualized in some manner, and not only the target (ship), in order to release their mnemonic power. One method would be to make a visual blending image as referred to above. The kenning allows us to blend two contrastive elements into a single image, the ‘horse of the sea’ (i.e. ship) which can be elaborated into a kind of ship-horse, and

similar blends can be detected in kennings like “sporðfjöðruð spáþerna nóta” [‘fishtail-feathered tern of nets’ or ‘herring-tern’], or in effective fire-metaphors like “glóða garmr” [‘fire-wolf’], “húspjófr á hyrjar leistum” [‘house-thief in fire-stockings’] or “éla meitill” [‘hail-chisel’] (*Skj* 1912 (AI), 74, 8, 13, 54) (see fig. 1 and 2).

The kenning metaphors are grounded in an Old Norse aesthetical concept of ‘contrast-tension’ (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007, 77–105; 2012, 289–291). It should be noted that skaldic aesthetics differ dramatically from classical aesthetics of the Roman *memoria*, demonstrated, for example, in *Ars poetica* by Horace when writing about artistic failure: “Similarly, the writer who wants to give fantastic variety to his single theme paints a dolphin in his woods and a wild boar in his sea” (*The Norton Anthology*, 124). This presentation of ‘failure’ by Horace happens to be the artistic rule for a good kenning among the old Scandinavians who favoured the clashing of contrastive nature elements like ‘land’ vs. ‘sea’ and thus called a snake for “dalfiskr” [‘fish of the valley’] and ship for “unnsvín” [‘boar of the sea’] among other things (Meissner 1921, 219–220).

The central point is that the principle of contrast-tension is very beneficial in creating bizarre imagery, and we hardly find anything similar until the Surrealists appeared in the twentieth century (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2012, 289–291), perhaps with the exception of such contrastive imagery in Baroque poetry.

The blending images of the kennings could be regarded as distinctive images, since they demand elaboration or even distortion of the common images in long-term memory. In their article on bizarre imagery, Wollen and Margres write: “The fact that the elaboration results in an unusual image means that bizarre images are more distinctive from (that is, share fewer features with) schematic images in memory than is the case with common images” (1987, 118). The blending image of a kenning is both a highly elaborated and a distinctive image, since it has no equivalence in the natural order of things – it is unseen and a-naturalistic. And since it is a distinct image, we could argue that it is easier to retrieve from memory than conventional images, remembering the so-called isolation- or von-Restorff-effect in cognitive psychology, where it is claimed that a thing which is distinct from its surroundings is easier to remember (3).

Additionally, the images of the kennings seem not only to fulfil the criteria of interaction (4), it seems that the contrasting nature of the kenning images also invite one to create the kind of specific and distinctive relationships between images to which scholars of cognitive psychology have attributed a high mnemonic value (Rubin 1995).

Conclusion

The bizarre imagery of the *kennings* could be regarded as mnemonic in nature when analysed in terms of modern cognitive psychology. The unique aesthetics of contrast-tension and the system of kennings as such could be seen as a tool for mass-production of distinctive and interactive images, which again tells us that the Scandinavians of old not only had insight into the mnemonics of the bizarre and effective image, but even created a system based upon this insight.

If skaldic poetry is as old as maintained by medieval writers and the majority of later scholars, its origins must be traced to an oral society where learning by heart was of outmost importance if collective memory was to endure. As pointed out by Hallvard Lie (1982 [1952]), this mode of expression has to be analysed on those very terms, and not by some different aesthetic dogma. What needs to be further investigated is if skaldic aesthetics, here termed as contrast-tension, could be seen as even better equipped than classical aesthetics to produce images that fulfil the criteria of bizarre or striking images, mentioned for their mnemonic power in the Latin tradition of *memoria*. At least it can be said that classical aesthetics seem to favour the ‘representation’ or ‘imitation’ (read: *mimesis*) of nature as the highest artistic ideal. The point made is that naturalistic imagery can never be said to share the same level of distinction as the a-naturalistic images of the Old Norse skalds. The term ‘mnemonic aesthetics’ might thus be proposed to describe the presumably oral nature of the poetic expression of the oldest skalds in the North. Hopefully, future studies will shed further light on this issue.

Works cited

Primary sources

- Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldediktning (Skj)*, vol. IA (Tekst efter håndskrifterne 800–1200).
Ed. Finnur Jónsson. Copenhagen, 1912–1915.
- M. Tulli Ciceronis Rhetorica / recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit*. In Vol I: Libros de oratore tres continens. Ed. A. S. Wilkins. Oxford, 1902.
- The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York and London, 2001.

Secondary sources

- Bergsveinn Birgisson. 2007. "Inn i skaldens sinn – Kognitive, estetiske og historiske skatter i den norrøne skaldediktingen." PhD Diss. Bergen. <http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/2732?show=full> (14 December 2017)
- Bergsveinn Birgisson. 2010. "The Old Norse Kenning as a Mnemonic Figure." In *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Lucie Doležalová. Later Medieval Europe, 4. Leiden and Boston. 199–214.
- Bergsveinn Birgisson. 2012. "Skaldic Blends Out of Joint. Blending Theory and Aesthetic Conventions." *Metaphor and Symbol* 27.4: 283–298.
- Carruthers, Mary. 1993. *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge.
- Einstein, Gilles O. and Mark A. McDaniel. 1987. "Distinctiveness and the Mnemonic Benefits of Bizarre Imagery." In *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes. Theories, Individual Differences, and Applications*. Ed. Mark McDaniel and Michael Pressley. Berlin. 78–102.
- Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. 2002. *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York.
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 1993. "Skaldekvad og Harald Hårfagre." In *Rikssamlingen og Harald Hårfagre*. Ed. Bjørn Myhre. Karmøy. 7–31.
- Finnur Jónsson. 1920. *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Copenhagen.
- Frank, Roberta. 1978. *Old Norse Court Poetry. The Dróttkvætt Stanza*. Ithaca, NY.
- Helstrup, Tore. 2005. *Personlig kognisjon. Kan vi kontrollere våre tanker og handlinger?* Bergen.
- Krause, Wolfgang. 1930. *Die Kenning als typische Stilfigur der germanischen und keltischen Dichtersprache*. Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft, 7.1. Halle.
- Kroll, N.E.A., E.M. Schepelern and K.T. Angin. 1986. "Bizarre Imagery. The Misremembered Mnemonic." *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Learning, Memory and Cognition* 12: 42–53.
- Kuhn, Hans. 1983. *Das Dróttkvætt*. Heidelberg.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Turner. 1989. *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago.
- Lie, Hallvard. 1982 [1952]. "Skaldestil-studier." In *Om Sagakunst og skaldskap. Utvalgte avhandlinger*. Ed. Øvre Ervik. 109–201. [originally in *Maal og Minne* 1952: 1–92].
- Lie, Hallvard. 1957. "Natur" og "Unatur" i skaldekunsten. Oslo.
- Lord, Albert B. 1991. *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*. London.
- Malm, Mats. 2016. "Two Cultures of Visual(ized) Cognition." In *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Scandinavia c. 1100–1350*. Ed. Stefka Eriksen. Disputatio, 28. Turnhout. 309–334.
- Meissner, Rudolf. 1921. *Die Kenningar der Skalden. Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik*. Bonn.
- Mukařovský, Jan 1964 [1932]. "Standard Language and Poetic Language." In *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*. Ed. P.L.Garvin. Washington DC. 17–30.
- Mundal, Else. 2004. "Edda- og skaldedikt." In *Handbok i norrøn filologi*. Ed. Odd Einar Haugen. LNU's skriftserie nr., 157. Bergen. 215–266.
- Richardson, John T. E. 1999. *Imagery*. East Sussex.

- Rubin, David C. 1995. *Memory in Oral Traditions – The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*. Oxford.
- Wollen, Keith A. and Matthew G. Margres. 1987. “Bizareness and the Imagery Multiprocess Model.” In *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes. Theories, Individual Differences, and Applications*. Ed. Mark A. McDaniel and Michael Pressley. Berlin. 103–127.
- Yates, Frances A. 2001 [1966]. *The Art of Memory*. London.