

individual subject matter and bring forth new insights into, and understanding of, each of the particular topics and their study.

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Andreas Schmidt & Daniela Hahn (eds.), *Unwanted. Neglected Approaches, Characters, and Texts in Old Norse-Icelandic Saga Studies*, München: Utzverlag 2021, ISBN 9783831649426, 312 pp.

The concept of “the unwanted” central to this book appears rather similar to the concept of “the other.” And many of the articles in the book do treat aspects of saga literature close to the latter concept. It is therefore not surprising that the editors in their introduction discuss the understanding of “the other” at some length. There are still, however, aspects of the unwanted, as it is treated in the individual chapters of the book, that to me appear to belong outside of the category of the unwanted as it is presented in the introduction, and in some instances perhaps it could have been made clearer what this concept encompasses.

The book is the result of a workshop for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers held in Munich in 2018 as a follow-up to the workshop *Bad Boys and Wicked Women* organised by the same researchers in 2015. The papers from both workshops have been edited by Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn, and published in the same series, *Münchner Nordistische Studien*. The present book consists of nine contributions and the already mentioned introduction by the two editors. All the contributions adhere to some degree to the concept of “the unwanted,” but the rather wide definition opens up for diverse aspects. The overall impression of the book can therefore be said to be that of a rather loose construction. This said, the individual chapters of the book are all engaging and present interesting approaches to saga literature and the research in this literature.

The group of sagas gathered under the sub-category of *skáldasögur* (sagas of poets) are studied in the inaugural article by Alexander J. Wilson. He starts by stating that

[t]he protagonists of the *skáldasögur* as “unwanted” figures in the sense that their continued insistence on the primacy of their own desires, at least in their native Iceland, is shown to lead to long-lasting hostilities with their neighbours (p. 28)

This illustrates at once the problem with a wide definition of what is meant by “the unwanted.” Does this concept bring anything new into the discussion of the role of these poet marauders occurring in the *skáldasögur*, a role that has been discussed at some length in the scholarly tradition? Wilson treats examples from a number of the

sagas in this group to sustain his statement. He has a focus on the relation to a beloved woman in *Kormáks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappi* and how this relation is at the centre of all conflicts. And these conflicts are definitely central to the chosen sagas. The suggestion that “these men’s romantic desires are often not satisfied simply by being with a woman: they also require rivals against whom they can strive to prove their love” (pp. 30–31) may therefore appear as rather obvious. Wilson’s discussion of examples from the three sagas is, however, interesting and relevant, despite this critical note.

A central topos not only in the *skáldasögur* but also in relation to skaldic poetry in general and also in other prose narratives, concerns *níð*, the use of verbal abuse in feuds and conflicts. Sebastian Thoma concentrates on how the relation between gender and *níð* is displayed in *Njáls saga*. He scrutinises *níð* from a gender perspective as it appears in *Njáls saga*, in the feud initiated by the wife of Gunnar á Hlíðarendi, Hallgerðr, and Bergþóra, the wife of Njáll at Bergþórshvöll, which soon spills over to encompass all members of both households. Like the subject of Wilson’s article, this topic has frequently been discussed in earlier scholarship. It is therefore interesting to see whether Thoma’s approach can provide new understanding, using the concept of “the unwanted.” However, I again lean toward the position that this concept does not bring much new insight to the theme. Thoma reads the saga narrative closely and provides a good presentation of the role played by the women of *Njáls saga*, primarily Hallgerðr and to some extent Bergþóra. But at the same time, the reading seems a bit narrow in its choice to focus only on *Njáls saga*. This is further confirmed when Thoma states that

[w]omen do not usually take part in the discourse of *níð* directly, which demands several strategic measures on a narrative level when a female user of *níð* is about to be displayed in action. (p. 78)

Can this statement really be sustained by the extant saga material? What about women like Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*, a number of women in *Gísla saga*, or, admittedly not in *Íslendingasögur*, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in eddic poetry and *Völsunga saga*? The impression is rather that verbal abuse is depicted as a useful tool for women in the storyworlds of the medieval saga literature at large.

In a third article, Anita Sauckel continues the investigation of “the unwanted” in *Njáls saga*. Sauckel is primarily interested in the “borstal boy” of the saga, Skarpheðinn Njálsson, the young man breaking norms, or perhaps just a teenager out of bounds. She states correctly that Skarpheðinn, as he is presented in the saga, is a rather ambiguous character, both central and at the same time “unwanted.” But here she also equates “unwanted” with “unpopular,” which I find a bit confusing; are these two words really synonymous? Like the first two articles, Sauckel’s article treats a subject that has been frequently dealt with in earlier scholarship; is she challenging the earlier interpretations with her approach? Sauckel contributes to the discussions of female power initiated in the article by Thoma to change the perspective on Skarpheðinn. She concludes that matrilineality seems to play a central role in *Njáls saga*, and argues that Skarpheðinn is related primarily to his mother’s ancestry at the same time as his “extraordinary male skills make him a transgressive figure, like his father” (p. 95).

This transgressive role, Sauckel argues, provides a better understanding of the saga structure, which she considers to be modelled on the eddic poem *Lokasenna*; Skarpheðinn would be comparable to Loki in what she considers “an Old Icelandic trickster discourse” (p. 102). Her approach thereby provides a partly new understanding of Skarpheðinn, as well as of the saga structure, which is in line with earlier suggestions by, for example, Lars Lönnroth. However, I am not convinced that the concept of “the unwanted” has contributed much to this interpretation.

We now move our interest in the direction of *samtíðarsögur*, the sagas written in the thirteenth century, covering the period of the internal struggles in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Lucie Korecká presents a study of the unwanted and excluded as a hero, as described in *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* and *Sturlunga saga*. She points out the difference between the sagas of outlaws such as, for example, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, where the outlaw motif is central, and the contemporary sagas:

It is therefore surprising that the contemporary sagas, by contrast, contain so few fully developed outlaw stories: outlawry is frequently mentioned in passing, but as a rule it does not receive much narrative attention (p. 119)

Korecká sets out to discuss this difference between the two saga-genres, arguing that the outlaw motif was not relevant to the contemporary sagas as “the power relations and principles of justice in Iceland had become different from the Saga Age” (p. 120). This seems to indicate that the discrepancy between the genres reflects changes in society over many centuries, and not differences in narrative strategies. Korecká continues her reasoning by providing examples from the Sturlung period of outlaws having a rather different status than that described in the *Íslendingasögur*, something which, she argues, may explain the changes of the motif.

The shift in how the sagas set in the Sturlung Age depict the development of conflicts may explain why the outlaw motif subsided in the contemporary sagas despite its popularity in the Sagas of Icelanders, in some sense being an unwanted motif in light of the focus of the central sections of *Sturlunga saga* (p. 123)

Another explanation could of course be that the motif was irrelevant in the narratives of the contemporary sagas. An interesting question, therefore, is whether the use of “unwanted” brings new insights into the strategies of the contemporary “authors” who, needless to say, may very well have been identical to the ones composing the *Íslendingasögur*.

Lucie Korecká goes on to discuss the outlaw hero Aron of the *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*. After a thorough presentation of Aron’s outlawry, his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and his life in the retinue of King Hákon, she concludes that the narrative patterns of outlawry and travel are retained, ending with the reconciliation between Aron and his antagonist Þórðr Sighvatsson. It might have been relevant here to compare this pattern with the conflict and reconciliation between Kári and Flosi of *Njáls saga*, a more or less contemporary text, but Korecká rather continues her line of argument by providing a further analysis of the relation between Aron and Þórðr Sighvatsson.

Her analysis is convincing and interesting at the same time as it is hard to see how the concept of the “unwanted” has any significance for her discussion.

Rebecca Merkelbach takes us back to the *islendingasögur*. Her study concerns the post-classical sagas and explores the social dimension of these late sagas. Merkelbach states initially that humans are social animals and

[t]hus, it is impossible for human beings to exist without society, and, I would argue, it is equally impossible for humans to envisage storyworlds that have no interest in society, its formation and reproduction, or in the issues that arise out of each individual human’s membership in it (p. 143)

She argues that some of the late *islendingasögur* have been treated as if they completely lack the social dimension, and states that she intends to counter this far too simple view, often based on a nationalistic idea of the later sagas being influenced and deteriorated by foreign influence. Was the social dimension from this point of view “unwanted” by the saga writers of the fourteenth century or was it scholars of later centuries that did not wish to see the social dimensions of these less regarded sagas? she asks. She sets out to study the social dimensions as reflected in the later sagas concerning outlawry, public opinion, honour and fosterage.

Outlawry is an obvious form of “unwanted,” even though the outlaw in the more “classical” sagas is not necessarily regarded as unwanted. In Merkelbach’s reading of some of the later sagas it is obvious, however, that the social dimensions of outlawry are at the centre of interest. While, according to Merkelbach, public opinion on social (and anti-social) behaviour, for example on the outlaw, is not as frequently expressed in the later sagas, it does exist. And the opinion concerning the individuals’ honour is ever present in the later texts, just as frequently as in the earlier sagas. Finally, fosterage is an interesting institution described in many sagas. And the late sagas are no exception, as the relation between foster-parents and the young heroes are frequently central also in many of the later sagas.

Merkelbach concludes by stating that

it has become obvious that these late sagas do not operate in a “social void”; instead, they engage with complex ideas about social roles, exclusion and belonging, public perception, and the creation of kinship ties (p. 170)

She argues that the narratives of later sagas engage in issues of contemporary interest in society, as well as issues of more “enduring importance” (p. 170). From this, she concludes convincingly that the later sagas are important as part of our understanding of *islendingasögur* and the culture in which they thrived. It may seem a bit farfetched, however, to argue for the article’s place in the present book by referring to these sagas as “unwanted.”

Zuzana Stankovitsová moves our focus to the post-medieval tradition of re-writing the medieval sagas. She argues that what has been handled as corruption of the medieval texts in earlier scholarship should rather be studied in its own right as a result of the contemporary reception and tastes. With this as a starting-point, Stankovitsová approaches one branch of the extensive manuscript tradition of *Króka-Refs*

*saga* in order to explore the function in contemporary reception of changes and modifications in post-medieval text-witnesses.

Regarding the description of characters in the *saga*, Stankovitsová concludes that the changes found in later text-witnesses to some extent amplifies the portrayal of the *saga* characters. As for the dialogue, the *saga* hero seems to have been made an even stronger figure by the additions noted by Stankovitsová. In some of the text-witnesses, the context is made more explicit with descriptions of the scenes, which seems to be part of a tendency to expand and amplify the descriptions already initiated in the medieval *saga* text. Stankovitsová's study of text-witnesses found in post-medieval manuscripts of *Króka-Refs saga* yet again points to the relevance of further studies of these manuscripts as representative of reception and use in later traditions. It is good that the author avoids forcing her study into the stipulated theme of "the unwanted," as such a perspective would have been of little relevance here.

In his contribution to the volume, Yoav Tirosh starts by asking "[w]hat makes one text wanted and another unwanted?" (p. 206). This is a rather more complicated question than perhaps was intended. First, because the concept of "unwanted" is rather difficult to define in a clear way. As the editors of the volume mention, "unwanted" is to some extent related to "the other," but that does not seem to hold for its use in Tirosh's article; a book may represent "the other," but can it in itself be approached as "the other"? It seems that the use of "unwanted" in this context, an unwanted book, runs into a similar problem. Is a book unwanted because its content is outdated or because it, according to contemporary standards, lacks the quality expected? Or is it rather just outdated and lacks quality?

In order to discuss the unwantedness he postulates for *Ljósvetninga saga*, a late and in scholarship rather neglected *íslendingasaga*, Tirosh chooses a mishappen film from 2003, *The Room*, by Tommy Wiseau, unknown to most and perhaps mercifully forgotten by all but the real aficionados. Tirosh states:

What makes the twenty-first century movie *The Room* particularly interesting to compare with the thirteenth century *Ljósvetninga saga* is the cult that has been established around the film, and the resulting audience participation during its screenings. The audience shouting slurs, corrections and responses to the characters, filmmakers and writing of *The Room* will be compared with the editorial practices employed with *Ljósvetninga saga* from medieval times to the twentieth century (p. 207)

He argues that both traditions reflect the participation of the audience, its reception, and throws into relief the difficulties of retrieving the authorial intent, both for the participating audience and for scholarship.

In his conclusion, Tirosh states that "[a]s *Ljósvetninga saga* and *The Room* show us, each in their own way, authorial intent is intangible, elusive, and impossible to prove" (p. 234), and this is easy to agree with. But does the comparison in any way strengthen this understanding? It seems rather that we have read two discussions concerning authorial intent without very much to connect the two, while obviously both cases are interesting in their own right. Finally, I cannot really see that the initial question of "[w]hat makes one text wanted and another unwanted?" (p. 206) has been treated or in any way answered.

In the following chapter, Mathias Kruse approaches the genre of *ævintýri* (or *exempla*) in a study of the short narrative *Af sýslumanni ok fjánda* or, in a post-medieval manuscript, *Callinius saga*. Here we meet what must be a highly unwanted creature, the devil himself. Kruse discusses the dissemination of the motif of the devil, who offers deals to men in dire straits including the soul of the victims, but is finally tricked while the soul is saved. The narrative under scrutiny in Kruse's article also includes a Jew who offers advice and finally converts to Christianity. After a thorough treatment of the motif and its relation to other similar motifs, Kruse, in his final discussion, states that "[t]his story has no single template or framework that would explain its contents; rather, it has a vast range of parallels and relationships to multiple other texts and motifs" (p. 262). This is a sound conclusion and one that goes for many of the narrative traditions we study in the medieval material. Motifs interact and change over time, bringing new characters into the centre, while other characters are reduced or even replaced. This leads Kruse to state that "[y]et there remains the question not of *from where* the text originates, but of *what* it is and *what* it represents" (p. 262). It is easy to agree with this conclusion. It is interesting that Kruse does not relate to the concept of "the unwanted" even though he deals with the devil; perhaps he realised that the concept would not contribute any new perspectives to his investigation of the devil, the Jew and the Cross of Christ?

In a final article in the book, Jan Alexander van Nahl argues for the need for new approaches to the Old Norse chronicles or *Konungasögur*. From a discussion of the tradition of scholarship, van Nahl builds a case for new perspectives in a scholarship that meets new challenges and needs not encountered by earlier generations of scholars. However, in this discussion, which is certainly very relevant, I miss the names of the two brothers Curt and Lauritz Weibull and their source critical approach to the *Konungasögur* in the early twentieth century, and perhaps also Jonna Louis-Jensen's *kongesagastudier* from 1977. These works stand out as important in the scholarship van Nahl discusses and their inclusion in the argument could possibly have changed some of the conclusions, for example when he states:

Even as an interim conclusion, it would hardly be appropriate to build any sort of far-reaching theory on these few remarks. What they have hinted at so far is a continuous, yet difficult-to-grasp, tendency in scholarship to primarily consider the kings' sagas as sources for actual history in medieval Scandinavia (p. 284)

There have been voices critical of this belief in *konungasögur* as historical documents in our modern sense, but they have of course not been generally accepted. This said, van Nahl's suggestion that narratological approaches to the kings' sagas would open new perspectives needed to make this scholarship relevant definitely has much in its favour.

In the above, I have made some critical points on the individual studies presented in the book. A general and recurring question concerns the rather forced use of the concept of "the unwanted." In most, if not all, of the articles, this concept adds very little or nothing at all to the discussion. Some of the authors have, wisely I think, chosen not to use the concept. The subtitle of the book, "Neglected Approaches, Char-

acters, and Texts in Old Norse-Icelandic Saga Studies,” provides a more relevant list of themes that are approached in the individual articles. The book as a whole still appears a bit incoherent.

The publishing of a collection of articles presenting a new generation of Norse scholars, however, is worthwhile and each article is in itself an interesting contribution to the on-going research, as well as to the debate about the future of our field of scholarship.

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Anti Selart (ed.), *Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Livonia, 1200–1350* (The Northern World 93), Leiden: Brill 2020, xii + 303 pp.

Medieval Livonia comprises the territory of the contemporary national states Estonia and Latvia. In historiography, this territory is known as the land of the Teutonic Order on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. In historical writing it has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of “German” conquest of the “Baltic” peoples in the Middle Ages, a crusade which entailed Christianisation of the indigenous people.

In the book under review, the concept of “societal innovation” is understood as the results of “the mutual cultural impact and acculturation of groups of different ethnic origin, social status, and migrational background in this region.” The perspective is not one of conquest, subjugation and exploitation but rather of “Coexistence, isolation, and cultural interchange in medieval Livonia.” This was the title of a research project in 2017–2020 at the University of Tartu, funded by the Estonian Research Council. The research was carried out by historians and archaeologists in medieval studies, seven from Tartu University and one each from the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu and the Turaida Museum Reserve in Latvia and the University of Leipzig, respectively. The results are published in the book *Baltic Crusades*. The title may be understood as a subtle, ironic misnomer of the subject. The crusades are de-constructed and re-conceptualised. They are understood as an—albeit distinctive—conjuncture in a lengthy process of making the Baltic Sea region into a historic region in its own right.

The gist of the project is a post-colonial perspective. It is spelled out in the headlines of two of the nine case studies, “Domesticating Europe” by Tõnno Jonuks and “Exploiting the Conquerors” by Kristjan Kaljusaar and in the summary and conclusion “Changing Aliens, Chancing Natives” by Christian Lübke. The project leader Anti Selart’s empirical study on “Livonian Economic Resources, 1200–1350” elaborates on the change of focus in modern research from “clash” to “compromise.” This has mainly concerned cultural life and religion. Selart adds economic and social intercourse between the “settlers” and the locals as an additional dimension under the heading “Redistribution and Expansion.”