



# Nordic News

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240 Sparks Street, PO Box 55023, Ottawa, ON K1P 1A1

## **Shamanism in the Icelandic Sagas: the Case of Seiðr**

*by Hilde Huus*

An audience of 64 people turned out on January 18 (a very good turnout for a January evening of freezing rain), to hear Dr. Céline Leduc's talk on "[Shamanism in the Icelandic Sagas: the Case of Seiðr](#)". Included in the audience were 17 who are not CNS members. The event had attracted quite a bit of interest on our Facebook page so we were curious to see who would show up for what seemed to us to be a fairly obscure and esoteric topic. It turned out that some of the non-members had a scholarly interest in the Viking era and others were fascinated by shamanism in general, including modern shamanism. A couple of people in the audience actually practise modern shamanism and Dr. Leduc told us that she herself had practised shamanism at one time.

Dr. Leduc's approach to the subject was based on the thesis that earned her a PhD in Religious Studies in 2015. She presented the argument that the ritual described in the Saga of Erik the Red is a shamanistic ritual, contrary to the position held by some earlier academics.

Most of us in the audience had at least some knowledge of the Icelandic sagas because of our Nordic backgrounds and interests. So we knew that they were written around the 13th century and describe the exploration and settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and North America in the Viking era, with more or less historical accuracy depending on your opinion. But not many of us were familiar with the precise details of the Saga of Erik the Red, which is based on events that occurred around 950 A.D.

The Saga of Erik the Red starts out by describing a particular family's roots in Norway, where the death of a patriarch in battle causes his son and widow to flee to the Hebrides. There the son becomes a warrior chief. When he dies, his mother flees to Iceland and occupies much of it. Her descendant Erik and his family get involved in some feuds with neighbouring families and are outlawed. They then flee to Greenland, but eventually return to Iceland, reconcile with their enemies, and recruit other families to settle with them in Greenland. When hard times and famine fall on the settlers, one of the families invites a woman named Thorbjorg to come to their farm and perform a seiðr ritual.

The photo below is of a display in the Saga Museum in Reykjavik that depicts “Thorbjorg lítilvölva” carrying out the ritual. As Dr. Leduc explained, Thorbjorg is dressed in a specific way and carries special objects on her person that distinguish her from the other settlers.



The Saga says that she wore a dark mantle ornamented with stones over her dress and a black lambskin hat lined with white catskin. Her gloves were also lined with catskin. She wore a necklace of glass beads, a purse, and a belt made of tinder (a kind of mushroom), and she carried a special staff. Dr. Leduc explained that Thorbjorg’s outfit shows that she is special and to be respected and that she was probably also somewhat feared for her powers.

On her arrival at the farm, Thorbjorg is served with the heart of each type of animal found there. She spends one night there, probably to prepare herself for the ritual. Perhaps she was getting in touch with the *natturur*, the non-human entities that may have been associated with that location. Or she may have been attempting to gather information to assist her in her ritual, including the possibility of lucid dreaming.

To begin the ritual, she seats herself on a pillow on a raised seat or platform and asks for a woman to sing or recite the *varðlokkur*, the special songs or chants that form part of the ritual. Somewhat reluctantly, since the songs are not Christian songs, the mistress of the farm agrees. The women of the farm form a circle around Thorbjorg as the mistress of the farm performs the chants.

We all sat quite spellbound as Dr. Leduc described this ritual as if it were taking place right in front of our eyes. It was not difficult to imagine being there. The sense of mystery, awe, and danger that must have been evoked as Thorbjorg communicated with the *natturur* was palpable. Would she be successful in contacting? What would they tell her? Thorbjorg tells the women that the *natturur* were pleased with the chant and describes future prosperity for the family.

With her vivid description of the ritual, we couldn't help wondering if Dr. Leduc herself believed in the existence of the *natturur*. Finally someone asked what we were all wondering... did she believe in them or not?

Her reply was non-committal. She explained that the extent of her immersion in these studies was bound to affect her perception. She told us that as a member of the faculty of the Department of Religion at Carleton University, she must maintain a professional objectivity for the sake of her students. She said that she has studied a great deal about religion in general and sometimes she believes and sometimes she doesn't, concluding by saying that she thinks there are too many religions in the world.

The day after her presentation I came across an article in *The Daily Beast* about the release of the results of a CIA study in the 1960's on a famous psychic. ("Secret CIA Tests Found TV Psychic Uri Geller Really Did Have Special Powers", *The Daily Beast*, January 19, 2017). The article states "a remarkable cache of freshly declassified documents reveals that the agency did indeed conduct a week of experiments in 1973 on one of the U.K.'s most famous TV personalities of the day: Uri Geller" and goes on to say that "Geller—who has been much mocked in the British media over the years for his claims—completely convinced the CIA of "his paranormal perceptual ability in a convincing and unambiguous manner."

So perhaps it is the case that certain individuals have abilities that cannot be explained. Maybe the ancient Norse were, at least some of the time, tapping into something real.

## **Distinguished Speaker Series**

Our Speaker Series takes place at the Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West at 7:30 PM, but we recommend arriving a little early so you can get your name tag and socialize a little if you wish. Speaker events are free for members, with a \$5 charge for non-members. There is some parking available at the mess itself in the evenings.

### **Trygve Ringereide, the story of one young Norwegian airman**

On **February 15**, CNS member Trygve Ringereide will tell us about his father's eventful life in a talk entitled "Trygve Ringereide, the story of one young Norwegian airman, and two countries in war and peace, as told by his son, Trygve John."



*Trygve and Mabel Ringereide in around 1943*

Trygve Ringereide was in his final year of high school in Bergen, Norway in April, 1940, when his country was brutally invaded by Nazi forces. Like many of his young compatriots, Trygve chose to resist. A perilous escape by boat to the Shetlands, led him to service in the Royal Norwegian Air Force and Little Norway in Canada and much more, including meeting the love of his life, Mabel Young of Toronto. Love, family and success in Norway and Canada is a story that will be told by their son, CNS member Trygve John, on Wednesday, February 15th as part of the Canadian Nordic Society's Distinguished Speaker series.

### **My Unusual Grandmother**

Anita Maclean's grandmother was an entrepreneur in Stockholm in the 1930's. Starting with a horse-drawn carriage, she built up her own taxi business in a time when female entrepreneurs were uncommon. Come hear her remarkable story as told by Anita on Wednesday, **March 15**.

### **Other Upcoming Events of Interest**

- [Bright Nights: The 7th Baltic-Nordic Film Festival](#) takes place during the month of February at Carleton University's Richcraft Hall. It is held in partnership with the Embassies of the Baltic and Nordic Nations and the Winterlude Festival. On Thursday, **February 2nd**, join the Canadian Film Institute for the kick-off at 6:30 PM at the Arts Court Theatre.

The main entertainment for the evening will be a collaborative cinematic performance of the Norwegian silent film “**Under forvandlingens lov / Under the Law of Change**” – the oldest Norwegian film to survive in its entirety. The film will be accompanied by live music, created specifically for this presentation by local musicians Chime of Wrens and Depth of Field. The plot summary provided is: ”Camillo and Francisca discover that their spouses, Julia and Arthur, are having an affair. They sedate the two and lock them into cages, until they get sick of each other.”

Admission is \$7 in advance and \$10 at the door. For more information or to reserve tickets, go to: [Bright Nights: The 7th Baltic-Nordic Film Festival](#). The schedule of films will be posted on that site as it becomes available. Watch for notifications of all the Nordic films on the Canadian Nordic Society Facebook page.

- Canada is not the only country celebrating a big milestone in 2017 (its 150th anniversary), [Finland is celebrating 100 years of independence](#). The CNS hopes to work with other Finnish-related organizations to mark the occasion. More information will follow. If you would like to help please contact CNS President Tim Mark ([president@canadiannordicsociety.com](mailto:president@canadiannordicsociety.com) or (613) 733-1744)

### **Third CNS President Knut Magnusson (1968-69)** *(by Hilde Huus, with assistance from Inger Marie Løken)*

Knut Erik Magnusson was born in Sweden in 1909. He studied engineering and land economics in Stockholm before starting a career with the Swedish government. He met his wife, a Canadian girl from Alberta named Helen Anderson, when she was visiting Sweden with her family. Knut and Helen married in 1936 and he continued his government career, working on various land consolidation projects with the Swedish government. When Helen’s father died, Knut and Helen moved to Alberta and in 1947 took over his farm, Fogelvik Farm. They turned it into one of the highest producing farms in Alberta and are credited with introducing Landrace pigs and Viking ponies to Canada. Knut Magnusson was also involved in some early efforts to introduce reindeer farming to Alberta.

Knut Magnusson was interested in politics and made a submission to the Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects (the Gordon Report) in 1955. He ran as a Liberal candidate in the 1962 federal election for the riding of Red Deer but was defeated. (Prime Minister Diefenbaker won a tenuous minority government in that election.)

Perhaps it was his interest in politics that eventually drew the Magnussons to Ottawa where he joined the Canadian Nordic Society and served as its President of the Canadian Nordic Society in 1968-69. He died on April 13, 1970, while on a visit to Sweden. His widow Helen returned to Alberta where she died in 1986.

## A Special Memory from our Christmas Luncheon



This table at our 2016 Christmas luncheon included four Norwegian ladies. On the left foreground is Kari Rogstad. On her left and partially hidden is our Vice-President Karin Birnbaum. Across from them are Kari Williams in the red jacket and Hjørdis Weibust on her left. These ladies had a wonderful time together and got thoroughly into the Christmas sing-along spirit singing along and performing the actions with great enthusiasm and gusto. As Tim Mark pointed out, they especially seemed to enjoy the Norwegian song, “På låven sitter nissen,” about the poor little “julenisse” (Christmas elf) sitting in the barn trying to enjoy his bowl of Christmas porridge while the little barn rats dance around him in a ring and tease him for a taste. As Tim remarked, “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen four ladies have such a great time together!” Sadly this was the last time we were to see Kari Williams at a CNS event, as she passed away on December 25. We will miss her and are glad to have this special memory of her to share.

## Recently Recommended

- CNS Council member Hanne Sjøborg recommends the Norwegian television series “Nobel”, now streaming on Netflix. The series depicts Norway’s military involvement in Afghanistan. IMDb (the Internet Movie Database) sums up the plot. “In NOBEL, two stories carefully intertwine as a returning soldier and family man becomes a pawn in a political international game. As the stakes grow higher he is forced to discover just how far one should go in the name of peace.”
- CNS has been contacted by “Carl in Uppsala Sweden” who is an enthusiast and promoter of the Linnaeus laptop desk, which he describes as a chair “originally built by Carl Linnaeus in 1741 after he was inspired by chairs in foreign cloisters and university libraries in Holland”. You can visit his website, <http://www.laptopdesk.se> for more information and to obtain free instructions for building the desk yourself.

## Contributions to Nordic News

We appreciate receiving your articles and news to include in the *Nordic News*! Please email them to the editor, Hilde Huus, at [communications@nordicsociety.com](mailto:communications@nordicsociety.com)

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## Join CNS

You can join CNS online, by mail, or in person.

### **Online**

To join online, go to the CNS website (<http://www.canadiannordicsociety.com/join-cns.html>) and complete the membership form . Payment may be made through PayPal.

Note: it is not necessary to have a PayPal account.

### **By mail**

Please print and complete the membership form below, enclose a cheque payable to the Canadian Nordic Society and mail to:

Canadian Nordic Society

240 Sparks Street

Box 55023

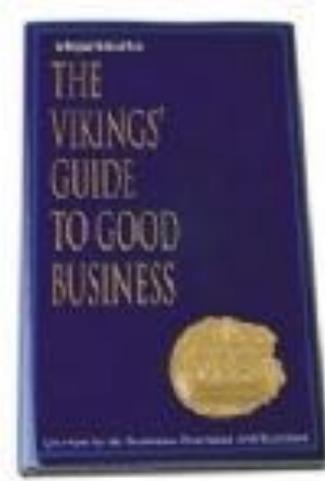
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K1P 1A1

### **In person**

You can join in person when you attend one of our luncheons or speaker events. Please speak to any one of our Council members

## **Gudrun Publishing**



Gudrun Publishing was established in Reykjavik in 1992. Gudrun books are now represented in museums and bookshops right across Scandinavia and all over the world.

Our focus is on books about Scandinavian literature and culture. We offer a number of series on these topics. The best-known is called "The Viking Series". It includes the "Vikings Guide to Good Business", "The Sayings of the Vikings", "The Viking Gods", and many more.

Children can learn about Nordic mythology in "The Adventures of Thor the Mighty".



Gudrun Publishing also offers the book series "Art Souvenir". They introduce the reader to different Scandinavian artists and art genres, for example Edvard Munch and Viking Art.

To view the books we have on offer, please visit our website [www.gudrunpublishing.com](http://www.gudrunpublishing.com)



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**Family Membership \$45, Individual Membership \$30, Student \$20**