

Stefka G. Eriksen, Karen Langsholt Holmqvist, and  
Bjørn Bandlien

# The Self in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, and Beyond: Between the Material, the Social, and the Cognitive

**Abstract:** In this article, the editors summarize how the different starting points for studying the self in the articles of this book, lead to different conclusions with regard to the nature of the self and the distribution of agency: cultural / social / practice theorists give priority to the context, the discourse, the practice when defining the self, while cognitive theorists give agency to various human agents behind cultural expressions. Based on this synthesis of the articles' approaches and results, the article, and the book as a whole, conclude that every given expression or conceptualization of the self is certainly conditioned by its specific historical and socio-cultural context. However, the emergence of the self in itself appears as a constant cognitive process of traveling and unfolding, wayfinding and choice-making, that happens continuously in all historical and social contexts and in all individuals, known and unknown.


**Keywords:** agency, cultural theory, social theory, practice theory, cognitive theory, blending theory, choosing / choice-making, wayfinding

“A discussion of what we are . . . calls upon a philosophical orientation, an ability to loosen the categories, juggle the frames, and be free enough to question even those ideas one has held most dear.” (Hustvedt 2010, 27) The desire to loosen the categories and to juggle the frames has been a main motivation for the present book as a whole. Once we have done that, the desire emerges to collect the treads, or at least attempt to, which is the goal of this concluding article. The two main narratives in this article will therefore concern the two main goals of the book, as accounted for in the introduction: (1) the variety of parameters that emerge as significant for the self, when the self is studied from various theoretical perspectives and approaches; and (2) the dynamics between the self and the multitude of social spaces in Viking and medieval Scandinavia,

---

**Stefka G. Eriksen, Karen Langsholt Holmqvist**, Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage  
Research

**Bjørn Bandlien**, University of South-Eastern Norway

Open Access. © 2020 Stefka G. Eriksen et al., published by De Gruyter.  This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110655582-016>

c. 800–1500, as conditioned by type of materiality, genre, language, and discourse of medieval sources.

## Theoretical Starting Points: Agency and Parameters of the Self

In this book, the authors have used a variety of theoretical starting points and approaches that lead to various definitions of the self, as well as identification of different parameters that are significant when discussing the self.<sup>1</sup>

The authors who engage actively with cognitive theory (Eriksen and Turner, Steen, Eriksen, Holmqvist) define the self as primarily the minds behind various cultural expressions, or the literary characters, with their thoughts, intentions, emotions, that are represented in a cultural expression. These include:

- Patrons, as kings, religious leaders, and aristocrats who commission or create their own literary portraits (Steen);
- Writers, poets, and translators behind Old Norse literature and poetry, copyists who created new versions of various texts (Eriksen and Turner; Eriksen), or rune-carvers expressing aspects of themselves in various contexts (Holmqvist);
- Readers of medieval manuscripts who could find their own meaning in the texts they were reading or listening to (Eriksen);
- Literary characters who act within narratives (Eriksen and Turner).

The authors who engage in discussions inspired by cultural or practice theory (Shaw, Bandlien, Torfi H. Tulinius, Naumann, Croix, Bonde, Holmqvist) emphasize the self differently, and define it more broadly. Agency is given to:

- The creating or created self, but always conditioned by the cultural context and norms (Bandlien, Torfi H. Tulinius);
- The community in which the self participates, for example the kin, the congregation, and the community (Torfi H. Tulinius, Bonde);
- The practices themselves that individuals engage with through their minds and bodies, such as consuming and sharing meals, weaving, participating in Mass, or rune carving (Naumann, Croix, Bonde, Holmqvist);

---

<sup>1</sup> Detailed descriptions of the articles are given in the introductory chapter of the book.

**Table 1:** Variety of possible agents, as defined by various theoretical approaches, as discussed in the book's articles.

Agency is given to:	Cognitive theory	Cultural / Practice theory	Focus on empirical material	Eclectic theory
Patrons, kings, religious leaders	X		X	X
Writers, poets, scribes / rune carvers	X		X	X
Readers / users	X		X	X
The community and its social norms		X	X	X
Practices and rituals		X	X	X
Physical surrounding		X	X	X

- The physical surroundings that give space and boundaries to human existences and practices, such as buildings, urban spaces, churches, and ancient monuments (Croix, Bonde, Holmqvist).

A few of the authors engage in close readings of various empirical material, and the way they relate to theory is indirect and implicit, by references to such discussions as Morris on individuality (Rønning Norby), or by using terms such as ‘agency’ (Diesen, Johansson), or by describing processes through which an individual asserts himself publicly (Bauer). These authors project agency onto:

- Poets, writers, scribes of literary expression, as well as the communities within which they create (Johansson, Diesen);
- Creators of new practices, such as the agents behind secular and religious laws (Rønning Nordby);
- The physical space of a medieval town, or phenomena such as fires or the Black Death that give boundaries to human existences and practices (Bauer).

Two of the articles – the first (Shaw) and the last (Holmqvist) – are intentionally eclectic and acknowledge a combination of these agencies. As Holmqvist concludes, any activity the self engages in may be seen as a representation of a social practice. Every individual act, however, is an active cognitive choice, made at a specific moment and place. The variety of possible agents, as defined by the various theoretical approaches, is summarized in the table below.

Even though this table greatly simplifies the discussions in the book's articles, as it aims to highlight the difference in focus,<sup>2</sup> it visualizes two things very well. First of all, the main difference between the theoretical groups are not what parameters are related to the self, but rather the degree of agency given to the various agents. According to the scholars inspired by cognitive sciences, only cognitive selves produce meaning and have agency. Communities, practices, rituals, surroundings may have agency too but only if agency and a specific independent meaning is projected onto them by cognitive selves. In cultural / practice theory, the dynamics between animated / unanimated entities is the opposite, and primacy of agency is given to the social groups, their norms, practices, rituals, and surroundings. Interestingly, the scholars who perform close readings of their sources with only implicit theoretical influence define the self in more or less the same way, sometimes giving primacy of agency to cognitive creatures like patrons, poets, and creators, and other times to the cultures within which they create. Last but not least, those having an eclectic approach combine all these factors deliberately and consciously balance between the importance of both cognition and context.

## The Self and Social Spaces in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, c. 800–1500

A second aim for the book was to investigate whether the selves in Viking and medieval Scandinavia, c. 800–1500, emerged in a different way in this context if compared to the selves in medieval Europe. We remember that various authors argued for various symptoms or motivators of the emergence of the self in medieval Europe. Some argued that the Gregorian reform, for example, and its introduction of confession rituals was a huge instigator for the emergence of the medieval self, while others argued that the main reason was the clash between secular and priestly power, which pressured individuals to turn inwards, to engage in self-understanding and self-expression. In order to choose, individuals had to reflect, to examine their own desires, motivations, goals. As argued by Verderber (2013), it is the need to choose that demands of the self that it exist between the inside and several outsides. Similarly, Shaw's eclectic article on traveling selves in medieval England also demonstrates how the self

---

<sup>2</sup> Cognitive scientists certainly acknowledge that the self is social, distributed and embodied, and cultural / practice theorists similarly acknowledge that individuals have minds, own thoughts, emotions, and desires.

always endures despite constant new experiences. Shaw discusses familiarity and comfort during travel, as opposed to the process of alienation that may be triggered by the travel. Traveling necessitates performing, it necessitates active attitude in relation to the people and things on the way; the traveling self is thus “frequently emergent, just not constant” (Shaw, this volume, p. 36).

The argument for seeking a potential difference between the European and Scandinavian context was that Scandinavia became Christianized much later, which may have led to a different realization of such processes. On the other hand, the universality and pan-European character of the Catholic church is an argument for the opposite: the Gregorian reform, and any schism between secular and priestly power that came with it, was valid for the whole of Europe, including Scandinavia.

Many of the articles in the book demonstrate that it is indeed the need to choose that pressures, inspires, or allows the birth of agency. This necessity comes, however, from different conflicting situations. In some of the articles, it was the conflict between pagan and Christian norms in the decades prior to and following the political introduction of Christianity around year 1000 that inspired self-expression (see, for example, Johansson and Torfi H. Tulinius). Other times, it was the civil war and contest for the crown that was at the core of the inspirational conflict that pressured the emergence of the self (Steen and Bandlien). Yet other times, the trigger was the Icelanders’ aspirations to preserve a sense of independence, after their submission to the Norwegian king in 1262/64 (Torfi H. Tulinius).

The conflicts occurred on other occasions on a personal level: King Sverrir, trying not only to stay alive but also to become a king (Bandlien); a person finding himself in a legal conflict because he owes taxes to the Church and needing to convince the prosecutors of his true intentions (Rønning Nordby); a person choosing his/her meals (Naumann); a person needing to rebuild his house after a fire in medieval Oslo and to claim his “old” space back (Bauer); a person searching to save his soul through attending church and participating in the Mass (Bonde); or a person trying to make sense of a saga (Eriksen).

Such social and personal conflicts that pressure the emergence of the self may be referred to as “folds,” to use Verderber’s term, or as “travels,” to refer to Shaw’s study. On numerous occasions, the socio-political and personal “folds” or “bumps on the road” would have overlapped or existed in parallel in the mind of a person. This is well demonstrated, for example, by Holmqvist, who discusses an individual’s personal expression of thoughts and feelings through runic inscriptions in a grave mound in Orkney, while on the way to the ultimate goal for a Christian soul, Jerusalem. “Traveling” was perhaps an occasion for “folds” to appear, and “folds” triggered “traveling.” It is in this process that the self emerges, while actively

traveling and unfolding the folds. As Steen (this volume, p. 71) points out, the self is a verb rather than a noun, a function rather than an essence.

The book as a whole does not therefore anchor the emergence of the self to a specific point of time or cultural context, nor does it demonstrate a chronological development of the self. What the book shows, however, is that it is perhaps more sensible to trace the chronological development of the socio-political “folds” in a given cultural context. Once again, these socio-political folds would have occurred simultaneously with personal “folds,” which together would have pressured the individual to make choices. Presenting the emergence of the self in this way – through the “folds” it needs to unfold and the “travels” it needs to engage with – has a striking similarity to what Turner refers to as wayfinding: selves are choosers and choosers are wayfinders:

At each point along the way, the person may be flexibly different from the preceding self, and flexibly inhabiting a different story, a story that is a modification of the one the person originally inhabited. The possibility space of these alternative selves is large; it includes a range of on-deck alternatives; but one self precipitates in the instant when the choice must actually happen. (Eriksen and Turner, this volume, p. 55)

This takes us to the follow-up question, which concerns whether in the material investigated, the self’s agency and cognition come prior to expression, and whether agency and cognition may be seen as independent of texts, discourses, languages, and social structures, or vice versa. What we have seen is that the different parameters of the self, if at all separable from each other – cognitive, material, and social – are interrelated; some theories and scholars give priority to one, while others give priority to another. However, the observations in the previous paragraph – that the self emerges through its choices in all the possible and often simultaneous “folds,” through a constant process of traveling and wayfinding – seem to indicate that the self is at least not dependent on a specific mode of expression. The expression may indeed vary with regard to language, discourse, genre, and materiality, and thus be historical, but the choice needs to be made no matter which of these modalities is available and used to communicate the choice.

## **From Viking and Medieval Scandinavia Back to Modernity**

This new insight from the studies of selves in Viking and medieval Scandinavia, c. 800–1500, also has implications for the continuation of the current discussion

of the self in medieval Europe and not least modernity. If the main conclusion stated above is accepted – that the self emerges constantly in the choices necessitated by personal and social “folds” – the book as a whole, even including the studies inspired by cultural / practice theory, actually suggests that a similar situation may be valid for medieval Europe (as demonstrated by Shaw), as well as for modern contexts. Cognitive scientists would of course not be surprised by this, as from a cognitive perspective, medieval and modern cognition is the same, as our cognitive faculties and abilities have not changed over the past 50,000 years and do not change depending on cultural context. Cognitive abilities and needs are indeed realized differently in different cultures, but the cognitive premises for culture, stories, selves, and choices are the same.

This conclusion is interesting for historians of culture, literature, art, or material culture, i.e., for humanities scholars. For most of us, cultural peculiarity, similarities and differences, change and development are often at the center of our scholarly attention. What this book demonstrates, however, is that cultural change may also be seen as cognitive stability and variation. It is a variation in the cultural realization of the same stable cognitive potential or needs. As suggested by Eriksen and Turner: “Even when using the basic set of (mental) tools, one may build a different house.” Changing the focus from development / change / emergence / fall of culture, to variation in culture, emphasizes not only that humans may, and have, responded to their cognitive needs in an endless amount of cultural ways, but also that the creation of culture, or stories in itself, is the core cognitive ability of the self. And as mentioned already: stories work together to provide concepts of selves over causation, agency, time, and space. Humans compress and decompress the concept of self, through blending, analogies, and disanalogies. This may lead to a continuity or break in the sense of self and culture, but mostly it is a demonstration of the basic human cognitive ability for creativity and cultural diversity.

This leads to a last observation based on the studies in the book: it is true that medieval, and for that matter, all history is written by the winners, by individuals and selves in powerful or privileged positions, which allows for their voices to be heard. However, we can and need to discuss the selves not only of these known writers, poets, kings, or bishops, who have left behind prominent cultural traces like texts, manuscripts, buildings, and art, but also, we need to be conscious of and remember the selves of the anonymous book-maker, manuscript-illuminator, clothing or sail-weaver, and house builder, who constantly made choices in the same social and similar personal folds, as the other known and named selves. No matter how collective and normative a culture is, any individual has the cognitive ability to choose, and individuals chose all the time, even if they chose to adapt and be a part of the crowd. Both cognitive studies

and the studies of medieval sources in this book confirm that the self's core is in the constant process of choice-making and wayfinding. This changes the premises for how we can approach the self, both medieval and modern.

## References

- Hustvedt, Siri. 2010. "Excursions to the Islands of the Happy Few." *Salmagundi* 166/167: 16–29.
- Verderber, Suzanne. 2013. *The Medieval Fold: Power, Representation and the Emergence of the Individual*. New York.