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# Mother Remembers Best: Remembering and Forgetting in *Ála Flekks Saga*

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The *Ála Flekks saga* was included by Jürg Glauser and Gert Kreutzer in their selection of translations from original *riddarasögur*, *Isländische Märchensagas* (1998: 19-40).<sup>2</sup> The saga originated around 1400 and is extant in c. 35 manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> It features a lively and imaginative theme of expulsion and re-integration as Ali is repeatedly cursed and has to overcome these curses to re-enter his father's kingdom and its social structures. In his brief comments on the saga, Kreutzer (1998: 411) characterises it as a typical *Märchensaga* which includes a number of folklore themes such as the exposition of a child at birth, the werewolf, curses and shape-shifting (*hamhleypa*). This short critical reading will focus on three passages connected with memory and forgetting and thus with depictions of processes of remembering in literature, to employ Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning's terms (2005: 4). These instances occur within two of the folklore-themes mentioned above and testify to an at times imaginative representation of memory-strategies in this hitherto underappreciated text. Remarkably, the episodes describe highly personal acts of remembering a recent past (and not a more distant, collective past). These acts of remembering are clearly important in a personal context (for Ali Flekk), but not less meaningful on a narrative and a social level (for Ali's family and the kingdom). Thus, even though these acts of remembering do not reflect a sense of objectivity, pastness and authenticity commonly found in Norse sagas (Hermann, 2013: 341), they are still central for the saga as a whole.

The continuous transgression of courtly boundaries starts with Ali's birth, as his father demands that his first child be left to die in a nearby forest if it was a boy. The new-born boy is thus exposed and spatially removed from his family and court. He is found and raised by Gunni and Hild, a poor, old and childless couple living in the forest. Although the couple love the boy dearly they are unable to name him, a scene narrated on the folio reproduced here from the paper manuscript AM 182 fol (Safn Árna Magnússonar, 17th century). Whenever they bestow a name on him they have forgotten it the next day: *en[n] huort það naffen[n] er þau gáffu h[onu]m að*

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<sup>2</sup> Gert Kreutzer centres his translation on the edition by Åke Lagerholm (1927; *Ála flekks saga*), which is based on AM 589 e 4to (15th century).

<sup>3</sup> Lagerholm estimates that the text originated just before 1400 (*Ála flekks saga*, LXVII). Hendrik Lambertus (2013: 129) agrees with this dating. See also Glauser/Kreutzer (1998: 410).

hun fædde Sveimbarn. Og var fæ bædi mikit og vænt. Þen  
hafde fleck að hægri hinn. Dröttninga skipar tuemr þral  
inn að bera ut Sveinm. Þen gauva suo að bera Sveinm að  
skog að una. būgu vinn hín und' einu tue. fóru heim sýðan  
að sogdu Dröttningu að fór hefdu tortyntt Sveinm. en hún  
trude. En hvorn dag gieb Guðne til skógar sinn að æt  
lade að skjóta dýr. Þann heyrði þa Óp mikit, skund fang  
að sier. Barnid. Og sýmist Svermín fagur. tekur upp að fari  
kiellingu sín að bidur hana legiast að golp. Þum grotver suo  
letur sem hín fæde Sveimbarn fæta. kall að kiellingu um  
mikit Sveinm. Og hín fær upp. en huort þad nagn er fari  
gjáðu hín að krolla mundu þau ekke að morðni.

— Nu er þar til að taka er þing kiem heim ur leid  
ángre. Og fínur Dröttning hín að seig hín húsu hún hér grótt  
hann spiv huar fír siccum sem Sveinm hófðu íaborð. fír vnu  
kallað að saugdust hapa deydt Sveinm. en kongur kvaðst ey  
trua. Æm húsin. morgin stod Guðni upp stilliliga. og gieb  
að kúme þui er sonur hín. Láu j að mælti. Þa færði þu Ale  
fleckkur. en hín sagðist vaka. fæta nagn biv hín sýðan  
þa var hán við. reta. og bædi var hín næm að mikill  
Kóngur letur stopna veislu. og biða ollu stórmennar  
i landim voru. Og þær þar kommuðu veður prýs að gleði  
i hollmæ. Guðne að kiellingu þóru til fíras veislu. að voru  
ítarliga i hollmæ. Og Ale fleckur var fær inn fimm.  
hín gieb innar fí kóngsbord. Dröttninga sat a em stóle

*kvollði mun[n]du þau ecke að morgn[n]i* (AM 182 fol, 40v; my transcription and translation). At the very beginning of the saga, the boy is thus associated with repeated processes of forgetting. This is solved when one day Gunni goes to wake their foster-son. He asks: *Sefur þú, Ále flekkur?* (“Are you asleep, Ali Flekk?”) (AM 182 fol, 40v; my transcription and translation). This name now ‘sticks’ with the boy – and to the memory of his parents – throughout his life.

Åke Lagerholm (*Ála flekks saga*, 86) contends that all other names were rooted in the farming world of the foster-parents and thus literally kept ‘slipping’ from the noble child, a view that Hendrik Lambertus (2013: 134) shares. Kreutzer also assumes that the other names did not ‘stick’ to Ali Flekk because they did not reflect his royal nature (Glauser/Kreutzer, 1998: 349). Only the name Ali, together with the mention of the *flekk* (‘mole’ or ‘birthmark’) on his right cheek seems appropriate. It appears that the physical marker, the *flekk*, facilitates remembering: what is marked on the boy’s body and perceived daily by his foster-parents leads to the name being imprinted in their memories, to use a common metaphor of memory. In a clever interplay of sensual perception (visual and aural), the old couple now continuously voice the distinct appearance of their foster-son. Importantly, neither the name nor the actual *flekk* compromises Ali’s beauty. When Ali is born, it is said that he was tall and handsome, and also that he had a *flekk* on his right cheek. The *flekk* is thus a marker of individual distinction, not a flaw.

In the second passage to be discussed, it is the *flekk* which enables Ali’s mother to recognise her child when he visits the royal palace for a feast at the age of eight. The queen turns red when she sets eyes on the boy and when the king asks her if she knows him, she replies that she does not know him but that she has seen him before. This is an honest answer, as the queen only saw her son briefly after giving birth to him. Her comment introduces the importance of a visual component for remembering, as what she really remembers is *having seen this birthmark* before – on her own son. Through this *flekk* the boy is not only named but also recognised by his birth-mother and subsequently re-integrated into his ‘true family’ and at court. Lambertus (2013: 134) stresses that the recognition of a missed person by a physical mark, like a birthmark, is a classic *topos* of medieval literature. What to the modern mind might appear as a blemish becomes the most important trigger for a first re-integration of the eponymous hero at his father’s court.

This act of maternal recognition is echoed later in the saga at another occasion in which personal memory is tied to Ali’s body. After Ali is turned into a werewolf by a curse he seeks refuge at his foster-parents’ house and Hild recognises Ali’s eyes in the wolf. She offers her own life in return for the wolf’s when it is caught and thus lifts the curse. In original *riddarasögur* such *hamhleypa* (‘shape-shifting’) usually leads to a complete change in appearance. However, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (2007: 295) argues that during *hamhleypa*, the soul settles into a new body but remains unchanged. Since the eyes are perceived as ‘the mirror of the soul’ they frequently remain unchanged and can be recognised by another person. This is a marvellous example of what Glauser (2007: 13) has termed “the speaking bodies of saga

texts”, a body which through itself comes to mediate within a text. In these instances, where the human voice does not seem to convey enough authority or cannot be used, the body becomes a trusted sign that triggers personal memory.

In all three episodes, remembering is closely tied to the body – the eyes and the *flekk* – and therefore to something that is visually observable. In the end, Ali’s name, his status at court and his life have all depended on his ‘two mothers’ remembering his physical body. Remembering and the physical body are thus integral for the figure of the hero and for the ‘person Ali Flekk’; they are purveyors of identity in a specific, person-bound way, rather than in the collective sense which Jan Assmann (1992: 39-40) described in relation to cultural memory. Whether the body and its appearance (including the *flekk*) are stable, or even when the hero assumes the form of a wolf, there is always an unchanging bodily aspect present, and he can trust his mothers to recognise it. Although these acts of remembering are related neither to *Gedächtniskunst* (“art of memory”) nor to culture(s) of remembrance (*Erinnerungskultur(en)*), they are nevertheless remarkable examples of the at times decisive role of personal remembering *in* medieval texts.

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