

Initiation by White Snake and the Acquisition of Supernatural Knowledge

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores narratives about eating the flesh of a dragon or white serpent. It is argued that these narratives can be interpreted as examples of initiation. The snake's association with wisdom is a common motif in Scandinavian folklore, stretching back at least to the Middle Ages. The author argues that folklore accounts of eating a white snake correspond symbolically to initiation. Different texts explain and legitimise how certain persons gain abilities such as wisdom, second sight, and the ability to understand the language of birds or other animals. This motif shows continuity over time and space, and does not have to have taken place as an actual ritual for the interpretation to be valid, particularly as, in the 19th century, such stories legitimised such people's position in society as 'cunning folk'.

RESUME: Denne artikel udforsker fortællinger om at spise kødet af en drage eller hvid slange. Den foreslår, at de kan tolkes som eksempler på initiering. Slangens tilknytning til visdom er et almindeligt motiv i skandinavisk folklore, der strækker sig tilbage til middelalderen, hvis ikke længere. Forfatteren hævder, at folkloreberetninger om at spise en hvid slange symbolsk svarer til initiering. Forskellige tekster forklarer og legitimerer, hvordan visse personer opnår evner som visdom, synskhed og evnen til at forstå fugles eller andre dyrs sprog. Dette motiv udviser kontinuitet gennem tid og rum og fortolkningens gyldighed afhænger ikke af, at de handlinger reelt har fundet sted som et egentligt ritual, især eftersom sådanne historier i det 19. århundrede legitimerede disse menneskers position i samfundet som 'kloge folk'.

KEYWORDS: Snake; serpent; cunning folk; folklore; initiation; rites of passage; wisdom

In *Initiation Between Two Worlds* (2008), Jens Peter Schjødt presents a model for understanding initiations as a form of rites of passage. It was originally submitted in Danish as a habilitation thesis (*doktordisputats*) in History of Religions at Aarhus University, later translated into English for the Viking Collection (volume 17), becoming more easily available for scholars all around the world. One major advantage with his model, compared to many other theories on initiation, is its usefulness for analysing not only actual ritual practices, but also different types of narratives. In this article, I will compare Scandinavian folklore accounts (folk legends and belief utterances) about eating the flesh of the white snake with medieval stories (folktales) about heroes eating the flesh of dragons/snakes and gaining supernatural abilities and/or acquiring supernatural knowledge. In my opinion, the use of the same motif for a similar narrative element points to a relationship and to a long continuity in the Scandinavian oral tradition.

Jens Peter Schjødt uses the following working definition for initiation: it is a certain sequential structure, that can be either ritualistic or narrative, or both – which in turn makes use of a series of symbols. These symbols mark a difference and a transition between the initial and the final stages of the sequence. Something central to this sequence is the acquisition of numinous potential (such as knowledge or certain abilities) by the individual who takes part in the initiation (2008, 83). According to Schjødt, this acting figure is thus to be designated as a subject in the initiation sequence; they gain a new level after taking part in this sequence, emerging at a higher level that is irreversible (2008, 12). The five phases through which the acting person is transformed are: initial, separation, liminal, reintegration and final. Schjødt uses the word “numinous” to describe the knowledge gained during this transformation. I think “numinous” is too strong for the experience and knowledge discussed in this paper; therefore, I will refer to it as supernatural knowledge/wisdom instead. Rudolf Otto coined the word numinous within a theological framework. The central experience that Otto refers to as the numinous (from Latin *numen* “spirit”) is when the transcendent divine appears as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, something secretive, enigmatic, esoteric and reverent. For Otto, this is the notion of the more terrifying, overwhelming and attractive side of the divinity to which humanity at the same time trembles and is fascinated, is repelled and attracted (Otto 1917).¹

Most models of initiation or rites of passage are concerned with actual rituals that have significant consequences for and importance to the community – or at least for social groups – as a whole. One of the strongest benefits of Schjødt’s model is that it is not limited to actual ritual practices; it also allows us to understand and interpret narratives, myths as well as folk legends and folktales:

Myths and mythical themes (and we might as well add folk legends) form variations of a common phenomenological basic theme, namely that of initiation. They deal with ‘the same things’, but they do so in different ways. The common features are a basic structure and certain stable elements. The difference are the ways in which these elements are

¹ “Numinous” has later been used by many other scholars, for example Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade and C.S. Lewis.

brought into play in order to form constellations that constitute transformations of one another. (Schjødt 2008, 461–462)

One of the conclusions drawn from Schjødt's study is that there existed an initiation structure and an initiation symbolism in the minds of the pre-Christian population of Scandinavia. It is likely that this had an impact on ritual performances. We can approach this through myths and other stories that allow us to see different sequences and an outline of a general structure. Contradictions or different ideas are natural for worldviews, even in the same time and geographical areas. The latter statement goes against romantic notions that there are no contradictions in a pagan worldview; it also goes against some source critical perspectives that attempt to find pure and true narratives from the oldest sources and therefore choose to disregard younger sources (Schjødt 2008, 462). I would say that contradictions and differences are what characterizes oral tradition; it is typical and to be anticipated for a folklorist. Even the same tradition bearer might give contradictory details on different occasions, but the core of the stories are still valid and does not change (cf. Dégh 2001; Siikala 1990; Honko 1962). This is one of the reasons why stories about how the preparation and cooking of a white snake can be compared to stories that are almost one thousand years older – they show similar sequences and the results of the ritual are the same. They explain and legitimise how a certain person gains supernatural abilities, in these cases linked to wisdom, second sight and an ability to understand the language of birds or other animals. We do not need to look for an actual ritual ever practiced by people; the stories in themselves are enough. Before we look at some examples of folklore of white snakes, let us take a closer look at the medieval sources.

Initiation by Snake: The Hero and the Serpent

The best-known dragon slayer in Germanic myth and legend is Sigurðr, also known as Siegfried or Sifrit, who killed the dragon Fáfnir, tasted his blood and ate his heart.² This is not a myth *per se*, instead it can be characterised as a heroic legend, but as Schjødt writes, that “does not imply that the text tells us less about the world-view that ruled in pre-Christian Scandinavia than actual myths do” (Schjødt 2008, 298). The story appears in different versions, variants and retellings. But as Schjødt writes, “In the light of the last fifty years of structuralist analyses, it ought to be a commonplace point of agreement that sources, irrespective of their difference in age and genre can supplement each other on the subject of representations of a specific mythical complex” (Schjødt 2008, 284).

The motif of Fáfnir's roasted heart occurs in textual sources (*Völsunga saga*, Snorri's *Edda* and in eddic poetry) and as carvings on stone and wood. Sue Margeson has distinguished six different scenes or episodes from the narratives about Sigurðr in medieval iconography, three of which are relevant for the motif under study here: Sigurðr roasts the heart; Sigurðr burns his finger or thumb; and birds warn Sigurðr of Reginn's

² We could argue that Sigurðr is rivalled by Beowulf for the title of most-famous dragon slayer, but only for a contemporary audience. We have no idea how well-known the story of Beowulf and the dragon was in the Middle Ages, and it is only known from one manuscript.

betrayal. All of her six criteria appear in the images on the Ramsund carving (Sö 101, 11th century) and on Norwegian church portals (Hyllestad c. 1200). Some appear on rune stones and other objects, such as stone crosses from the Isle of Man (Margeson 1980; von See et al. 2006, 478; cf. Ney 2017, 154), but never all six together. The legend of the hero who slew (and ate the heart of) a dragon was popular and appeared in different forms, places and contexts in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Evidently, the oldest known motif of the acquisition of supernatural knowledge through the blood or flesh of a serpent dates to the Viking age and might be even older.³

The best descriptions appear in textual sources. Let us examine a couple of them, before we move on to compare with later folk tradition, according to which eating the broth of a white serpent gives supernatural power and/or the knowledge of bird-speech. The fullest accounts can be found in two medieval sources, the legendary saga *Völsunga saga* (whose oldest manuscript dates from c. 1400, although the saga itself was compiled not later than the mid-13th century) and the heroic poem *Fáfnismál* found in the Poetic Edda (whose oldest manuscript, the *Codex Regius*, dates to c. 1270).

Völsunga saga (chapter 19) gives us the most detailed account of the roasting of Fáfnir's heart:

Sigurðr fór ok steikti á steini. Ok er freyddi ór, þá tók hann fingri sínum á ok skynjaði, hvárt steikt væri. Hann brá fingrinum í munn sér. Ok er hjartablóð ormsins kom á tungu honum, þá skildi hann fuglaródd. Han heyrði, at iðður klökuðu á hrisinu hjá honum: "Þar sitr Sigurðr ok steikir Fáfnis hjarta. Þat skyldi hann sjálfr eta. Þá mundi hann verða hverjum manni vitrari." (Guðni Jónsson 1950, 155)

Sigurd went and roasted it on a spit. And when the juice sputtered out he touched it with his finger to see whether it was done. He jerked his finger to his mouth, and when the blood from the dragon's heart touched his tongue he could understand the language of birds. He heard some tits twittering near him in the thicket. "There sits Sigurd, roasting Fáfnir's heart. He should eat it himself, and then he'd be wiser than any man. (Finch 1965, 33)

In *Fáfnismál*, Reginn first drinks the blood of Fáfnir while cutting out the heart (prose between stanzas 26–27). Then he bade Sigurðr to roast the heart for him. The prose before stanza 32 describes how Sigurðr roasts the serpent's heart and burns his finger:

Sigurðr tók Fáfnis harta ok steikði á teini. Er hann hugði at fullsteikt væri, ok freyddi sveitinn ór hiartano, þá tók hann á fingri sínom ok skyniaði hvárt fullsteikt væri. Hann brann ok brá fingrinom í munn sér. En er hiartablóð Fáfnis kom á tungu hánom, ok skilði hann fuglsródd. Hann heyrði at iððor klökoðu á hrisinom. (von See et al 2006, 466)

Sigurd took Fáfnir's heart and roasted it on a spit. And when he thought that it was done, and the juice was dripping out of the heart, he prodded it with his finger to see if it was done. He burnt himself and stuck his finger in his mouth. And when Fáfnir's heart-blood

³ The effect of the dragon's blood differs geographically in different sources; in Scandinavia Sigurðr learns the language of birds, in Germany, the hero Sifrit does not learn the language of birds, instead he becomes almost invulnerable. In another source, the effects combines. What the versions have in common is the prophylactic effect of the blood – it saves the hero from a specific danger, see Finch 1965, xxxix.

came on his tongue, he understood the speech of birds. He heard that there were nut-hatches twittering in the branches. (Larrington 2014, 159)

The rest of the poem is concerned with the warnings Sigurðr gets from seven birds (a magical number). He then kills Reginn by cutting off his head, eats Fáfnir's heart and then drinks the blood of both Reginn and then Fáfnir.

Let us return to Schjødts study of initiation and his analysis of the Sigurðr narrative as an initiatory sequence (Schjødts 2008, 282–299). Schjødts divides the narratives about Sigurðr into a schematic form, with a sequence of eighteen motifs. The first portion deals with how Sigurðr is fostered by Reginn, who is skilled in magic (motif 1); how he acquires magical objects and advice from Óðinn (motifs 2, 3, 5, 7); and knowledge from Grípir (motif 4). The motifs we are concerned with here are numbers 10 and 12: “10. Sigurðr tastes Fáfnir's blood and now understands the language of birds, which gives him knowledge of Reginn's plans”; and “12. Sigurðr drinks the blood of Fáfnir and Reginn and eats Fáfnir's heart” (Schjødts 2008, 288). This is at the core of the narrative, explaining how Sigurðr arrives in the final phase of his career (a higher and irreversible level of initiation than before), gaining the strength and knowledge that made him a legendary hero. This is explained with a sequence of events that corresponds to the structure of initiation. Another interesting detail with these motifs, as well as other initiation sequences, is that they all have an affinity with the underworld. Schjødts writes,

We must consider Fáfnir as a chthonic being from the time when, in the shape of a snake, he lies down on Gnitaeiðr, but his death brings about a transformation from a physical to an intellectual entity. With respect to both of them, it is their transformation to blood (and heart) via the killing, which gives the subject of the myth essential elements that are necessary in order to change his status. (Schjødts 2008, 296)

I think that Schjødts makes an important point in that the tasting of the dragon's/serpent's blood and subsequently understanding the speech of birds is part of a larger sequence in which the acquisition of “numinous” objects plays a major role.

In *Fáfnismál*, the dying dragon/serpent Fáfnir tells Sigurðr that he will be betrayed by Reginn. This again is stated by some birds when Sigurðr is roasting the heart from the dragon, accidentally burns himself on it, and sucks the finger stained by the blood of Fáfnir. The hero then kills Reginn, drinks more of the dragon's blood, eats its heart, and drinks Reginn's blood. I would like to compare this with the younger legends and belief utterances below, linking the killing of the dragon/serpent Fáfnir with the white snakes from the younger folklore accounts. With their physical deaths, their blood becomes an active object of knowledge. I think that Schjødts points to another interesting detail in the story that is also relevant for the younger sources about white snakes:

As a provisional hypothesis, one could propose that the ‘initiation’ which Sigurðr undergoes during the course of the narrative is reminiscent of some actual consecration-rituals – perhaps containing features that formed part of the esoteric knowledge that certain categories of initiated persons were to be given. In that case, it must have been a consecration at a very high level and not a common warrior-consecration. (Schjødts 2008, 298)

Sigurðr is raised from a lower social status and elevated to a higher level. A big part of this transformation is due to the knowledge and power gained from the serpent's blood, which in turn can be interpreted in the light of Schjødts model of initiation. This is interesting, as we find a similar movement in the much younger folk legends where someone with a lower social status is elevated to a higher level by eating the flesh or drinking the blood of a white serpent – as we shall explore momentarily.

Let us look at another interesting parallel. Like many scholars before him, Jan de Vries remarked that there was an analogue between the stories of how Sigurðr learned the language of birds by sucking his burnt thumb from the roasted serpent's heart, and a story in Celtic tradition about the hero Fionn mac Cumhaill. De Vries was of the opinion that the epic traditions of Siegfried/Sigurðr were at one time subject to strong influences from the Celtic heroic tradition, this particular motif being one example of this (De Vries 1962, 33). Fionn acquires the knowledge when he is cooking for his master, the druid Finnéces. In this case, he is preparing and cooking the Salmon of wisdom, but burns his thumb and tastes it to gain knowledge. The story forms a part of the twelfth-century *Macgnímartha Finn*, but it was also a part of the storytellers' repertoire in oral tradition in Ireland and Scotland, at least until the 19th century when they were written down and collected.⁴ The oldest versions do not feature the salmon: instead, Finn is chasing a group of supernatural women who try to escape into a burial mound, which were believed to be entrances into the otherworld. As they are closing the door, his thumb gets jammed in the door and water from a vessel carried by one of the women spills onto his thumb. He places his thumb into his mouth to sooth the pain, and thereby acquires supernatural knowledge. In many of the Celtic narratives, Fionn mac Cumhaill is a leader of a *Fian*, a roving war band, made up of young men who had just finished fosterage but could not yet own or inherit land. Such bands of warriors existed on the margins of society. If we compare this with Sigurðr and the story about his family, there are strong links with both Óðinn and outlaws (for example in the episode of Sinfjötli and Sigmundr). This Celtic analogue is interesting in that it also shows how a hero gains his supernatural powers with the support of an older mentor (the druid Finnéces) and accidentally gains supernatural knowledge by burning his thumb on a supernatural creature being cooked by the mentor. This would also work with Schjødts model of different phases of initiation, culminating in a scene where the hero of the story is finally, "characterised by being at a higher level than the initial phase and by this higher level being irreversible. This elevation is the result of a series of numinous elements which were given to Sigurðr [or Fionn mac Cumhaill] and which helped him both in the sequence itself and in the rest of his life" (Schjødts 2008, 289).

Before we leave the medieval sources, we can add two more stories that are of interest. The Dane Saxo Grammaticus wrote his Latin *Gesta Danorum* in the early 13th century, and in the text he presents narratives about pre-Christian Scandinavia. Many of them may very well go back to oral traditions in Denmark and elsewhere. In book five, he writes the most elaborative text that we have about the effect of the flesh of

⁴ Nagy, Appendix I (1985, 209–221); cf. Scott 1930.

certain serpents, describing in detail how the meat of the magically-prepared serpents enliven supernatural powers and wisdom in the one who consumes it:

When they [Regnerus and Ericus] were seated at the table and her [Craca, Ericus' step-mother] son and step-son were just about to eat, Kraca pushed towards them a bowl of food, of two different shades; half of it looked pitch-black flecked with splodges of yellow, the other half whitish, for the dissimilar hues of the snakes had made the pottage variegated. They had each only tasted a single morsel when Erik, sizing up the dish not from its colours but from the feeling of strength inside him, turned the bowl as quickly as he could to transfer the darkish part of the concoction, prepared with stronger juice, to his own side, and gave to Roller the paler portion which he had been offered to himself. Thus he dined more auspiciously [...] So Erik, now refreshed by his meal of good omen, achieved through its internal workings the most authoritative human wisdom. This potent feast generated in him a bulk of knowledge beyond credence in all subjects, so that he was even skilled in understanding the speech of wild animals and cattle. For he was not only expert in man's affairs but could interpret the way animal noises conveyed sense and indicated their feelings. Besides this, his conversation was so gracious and refined that whatever he chose to discourse upon was embellished with a string of witty maxims.⁵ (Saxo Grammaticus 1996, 124)

In addition to wisdom, the magical snake stew also gave Ericus success in combat. Another detail is worth considering: Craca seems to be associated with the pagan gods, making her a kind of mediator for the initiand. In addition, there is a similarity between Ericus and both Sigurðr and Fionn – they unwittingly tasted special food intended for someone else. In the stories about these medieval superheroes, it is important to emphasise how they are or become superior to other men in both combat and intellect, in physical as well as mental capabilities; as Schjødt noted regarding Sigurður (1994, 119; 2008, 287).

The second story of interest connects snakes, blood and the underworld. In *Skáldskaparmál* G57, the blood of Kvasir is one of its central ingredients for the mead of poetry.⁶ In Snorri's account, he says that two dwarfs, Fialarr and Galarr, invited Kvasir to their home and killed him, before pouring his blood into three containers: "Þeir

⁵ Translation of "Superuenientes deinde Regnerus et Ericus, ut fumidam aspexere casam, ingressi discubitum petiuere. Quibus ad mensam sitis Craca priuigno filioque una cibum capturis catillum discoloris dapis admouit. Pars quippe picea, sed croceis guttis interlita, pars albida uidebatur. Quippe pro uaria serpentum specie geminus pultem color infererat. Cuius quum solam uterque particulam delibasset, Ericus non ex colorum habitu, sed interni uigoris effectum epulas estimans nigrantem dapis partem, sed succo potiore confectam, catino quam celerrime uerso ad se transtulit albidamque sibi admotam prius Rollero applicans coenam felicius gessit [...] Ericus itaque fausta iam dape refectus interna ipsius opera ad summum humanę sapientię pondus euasit. Quippe epuli uigor supra quam credi poterat omnium illi scientiarum copiam ingenerauit, ita ut etiam ferinarum pecudaliumque uocum interpretatione calleret. Neque enim solum humanarum rerum peritissimus erat, uerum etiam sensuales brutorum sonos ad certarum affectionum intelligentiam referebat. Pręterea tam comis atque ornati eloquii erat, ut, quicquid disserere cuperet, continuo prouerbiorum lepore poliret." (Saxo Grammaticus 2005, 290)

⁶ For the symbolism of the mead of poetry, see Schjødt 1983; Drobin 1991.

blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjöðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr” (They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar; Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3; 1995, 62). This is a clear statement that the one who drinks this magical brew will become very wise and acquire supernatural knowledge, exactly as the later narratives mention about the blood or the flesh of a serpent/snake. In the narrative about the mead of poetry, Óðinn steals the brew from the giant Suttungr. He does so by transforming himself into a snake to get inside the mountain where the giant keeps the mead, guarded by his daughter, Gunnlǫð. The snake is a chthonic being and its sexual connotations in relation to Óðinn having intercourse with the giant maiden (to get access to the mead) are not hard to grasp. Schjødt considers this as well in his discussion of a journey to the underworld, where the snake in the Gunnlǫð-episode is considered “an unambiguously chthonic symbol” (Schjødt 2008, 291). In the mythical narrative, we can discern the following: Óðinn acts as a chthonic being (a snake), he gains access to the underworld where the mead is (in the form of a snake), then he drinks it and transports it to the gods (and by extension to humans). The brew is supposed to make the one who drinks it wise.⁷

To sum up: in these early texts there are motifs and narrative sequences that connect snakes, blood, and the underworld; a mixture that gives the one consuming it supernatural knowledge and abilities. As noted above, the hero is usually fostered by an older or more experienced figure, who can be seen as the hero’s initiator and plays a part of the elevation between of different phases from initial to final. This elevation of the hero is also the result of different supernatural elements, including tasting the blood or flesh of a special serpent. Let us leave the medieval period and move forward several hundred years to the pre-industrial society of 19th-century Scandinavia.

White Snakes in Folk Legends

The central motif of the white snake is well-known in Europe. It is frequently found in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in Scotland, Ireland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic countries, as well as occasionally outside Europe.⁸ The flesh or blood of the white snake as a source of knowledge is a fairly frequent motif in folk narratives about the cunning folk and/or sorcerers. There are hundreds – if not thousands – of such stories in the folklore archives from all around Scandinavia, from Denmark in the south, to the

⁷ The role of the snake in the myth of Óðinn’s acquisition of the mead of poetry is an interesting analogue, albeit a weak one because the blood consumed is not that of a snake. We might add another implication of blood symbolically linked to alcoholic drink: in one version of the creation myth, the gods kill the giant Ymir and form the world from his body. The blood that gushed forth from his wounds became the oceans, which I interpret as all water (i.e. *Vafþrúðnismál* 21; *Gylfaginning* 8). Water is one of the principal ingredients for brewing mead and beer, something that symbolically corresponds to the blood of a primordial giant – even if the myth actually speaks of salt water, something that is not really used in brewing in this world.

⁸ Not to be confused with the white snake in Chinese folktales, for which see Idema 2009.

northern landscapes of Sweden, Norway and Finland. In Reidar Christiansen's collection of migratory legends – a type of legend transmitted through trans-cultural diffusion (Christiansen 1958; cf. Reichborn-Kjennerud 1944, IV, 177–179) – primarily based on Norwegian material, the motif is catalogued as “ML 3030: The White Serpent's Flesh”. In other collections, “Die weiße Schlange” is one of the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, published in their famous collection of Fairy Tales (KHM 17); while in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index, it is classified as “ATU 673: White Serpent's Flesh”.⁹ Of course, it can be difficult to pin down and find the perfect definition for what constitutes a legend. According to Linda Dégh,

The legend can be characterized as the conveyor of information that concerns subjective human experience and answers an implicit or openly uttered question [...] Each legend informs, explains, instructs, warns, or exemplifies through the telling of an extraordinarily, unexplainable experience that a known person has encountered. Something in its extranormality is neither absurd nor completely impossible, which suggests that ordinary human beings may have similar experiences (Dégh 2001, 98).

With this definition of legend in mind, legends about eating the white snake must answer one fundamental question – how did a certain individual acquire magical or supernatural abilities?

In Bengt af Klintberg's catalogue of Swedish folk legends, he lists the most common legend types in a useful classification system. The legends about white snakes are categorised under the larger heading “M. Sorcerers” with the following numbers and brief summaries of the legend types:

M1 White serpent gives understanding of language of birds: A person finds a white serpent and orders his servant to cook it. The servant tastes its flesh and then understands the language of birds (and is warned against a danger).

M2 White serpent gives knowledge of sex of unborn calf: A person comes into a house where a soup made from a white snake is boiling. He/she takes a sip and can then tell the sex of a calf that is about to be delivered in the cowshed. The person becomes an omniscient healer.

M3 Berries touched by white snake make person omniscient: A white snake runs over a berry-tuft (a basket filled with berries). A person eats the berries and becomes an omniscient healer. (Klintberg 2010, 243)

These legends thus function as a way of explaining how certain individuals got access to their abilities and powers. One such group, believed to be skilled with supernatural knowledge and abilities, were cunning folk or wise ones, who were folk healers and

⁹ It might be worth mentioning here that what constitutes the legend actually turns up as a first or explanatory section in the folktale (ATU 673), in which the supernatural ability obtained rescues the protagonist from a threatening situation. Several other motifs can be linked to these narratives: D1358.1.1 (Eating dragon's heart makes courageous); D1358.1.2 (Eating serpent's and wolf's flesh makes courageous and impetuous); D1811.1.1 (Thumb of knowledge. Man cooks magic animal and burns thumb. When he puts thumb in mouth he has magic knowledge); B217.1.1 (Animal languages learned from eating serpent); and N451 (Secrets overheard from animal or demon conversation).

possessed knowledge in magic. They could find lost goods, knew how to interact with the supernatural world, and they could both hurt and cure people and cattle. Obviously, what such persons were called varied depending on language, dialect and region.

Below, I will present a couple of examples of belief utterances and legends dealing with the motif of the white snake. Let us start with five belief utterances:

(Denmark, Vestsjælland) "Just as there is a King of adders, there is a King of grass snakes. It wears a crown on its head and has a mane. – The one who can catch it, have it boiled and eat the soup acquires second sight, can see calves in the cow, the baby in a mother's womb, and also see seven ells under the ground."¹⁰

(Sweden, general) "The Lindworm, the white snake, very rare, spoken about in all of Sweden. By his fat, one acquires the highest form of wisdom, the ability to see hidden and concealed things."¹¹

(Sweden, Södermanland) "Under such oaks, that keep their leaves during the winter, lives the white snake. If someone succeeds in catching such a snake and boils him in water and, either alone or as the first of several persons, dips bread in the broth and eats of it, then that person will acquire the ability to see into the future and see many hidden things."¹²

(Sweden, Västmanland) "There is a snake, that is completely white and just about 8 inches long, called a wisdom serpent. Those who get to see it become wise, and know where stolen goods and other things are hidden. It is very quick, but if one gets hold of it, it ought to be boiled, and then one should eat the broth."¹³

(Sweden, Närke) "If they boil a white snake, and drink the broth, they become omniscient."¹⁴

Let us move on to some folk legends:

(Denmark, Vejrum) "A lord wanted the fat of the king of snakes [a white snake]. It ought

¹⁰ My translation of: "Ligesom der er en Hugormekonge til, er der ogsaa en Snogekonge. Den har Krone paa Hovedet og Manke. – Den, der kan fange den, faa den kogt og spise Suppen, bliver synsk, kan se Kalven i Koen, Barnet i Moders Liv og kan desuden se 7 Alen ned i Jorden", Boberg 1943, 83.

¹¹ My translation of: "Lindormen, den hivta ormen, högst sällsynt, omtalas i hela Sverige. Genom hans fett erhåller man den högsta visheten, förmåga att se dolda och förborgade ting". No. 1951 in Rääf (1957, 304). The reference for this information is *Bergs Journalen* 1787 (issue October to December).

¹² My translation of: "Under sådana ekar, som bibehålla löf under vintern, bor »hvitormen». Om man lyckas fånga en sådan och kokar honom i vatten och antingen ensam eller först bland flere personer doppar bröd i spadet och äter deraf, vinner man förmågan att skåda in i framtiden och se många förborgade saker" (Wahlfisk 1895, 116).

¹³ My translation of: "Det finns en orm, som är alldeles vit och är ung. 2 dm lång och kallas visdomsorm. De som få se den, bli visa, att tala om, var stulet gods är fördolt. Den är mycket kvick, men om man får tag i den, skall den kokas, och sedan skall man äta spadet" (ULMA 438, 1). Recorded in Hällefors, Västmanland by Ragnar Jirlow 1918.

¹⁴ My translation of: "Öm di kokar e vit orm, å dreeker spa't så blir di allvetande." (ULMA 1801, 15). Recorded in Kil, Närke by Hulda Hammarbäck 1928.

to be boiled, and it is the very first part of the stew that works. At that very moment,, a little goose girl came into the kitchen. She was hungry and found a piece of plain bread that she dipped in the stew. Then she became clairvoyant, and when she came out to the cow shed, she could see the calf that was inside the cow. But the lord became angry.”¹⁵

(Sweden, Östergötland) “An old woman boiled a white snake in her cauldron. The first one who tasted it would become wise. The woman went out for a bit, while the cauldron was simmering, and then her daughter took the opportunity to taste it. In the very same moment, the old woman returned and became furious when she learned what had happened. But the girl became wise and skilled in magic and from that moment she knew and saw everything.”¹⁶

(Finland, Åland) “Several people claim they have seen white snakes at the beach. If one is to eat such a snake, one becomes omniscient. A farmer once boiled a white snake. No one else was supposed to taste it. His maidservant became curious and dipped her finger in the cauldron to taste the broth. The farmer then learned about it and decided to kill the girl. But as she now was omniscient, she knew about his plan and fled.”¹⁷

(Finland, Eriksnäs) “A nobleman had caught a white snake and asked his coachman to boil it for a couple of hours in a cauldron but forbade him to look at it. The coachman became curious and could not help himself; he raised the lid and used a stick to taste the snake. Then he carried the cauldron to his master, who ate the whole snake. The coachman, who first tasted it, became wise, but the nobleman did not become any wiser at all. The noble man started to think that there might be some kind of mischief afoot. He ordered the coachman to fasten the horses to the carriage. Then they went on a trip. When they had travelled for a bit, they saw a bird in a tree. Then the master asked the coachman what the bird was saying. The coachman answered that the bird was saying that at the first bridge they came across, the master would drive the horses so hard that that one of them would break a leg. It happened just as the coachman said: at the first bridge they came to, one of the horses broke a leg. Then the master became so enraged that he immediately cut the head off the coachman.”¹⁸

¹⁵ My translation of: “En herremand vilde have fedtet af en hugormekonge. Den skal koges, og det er det allerførste, der skal virke. I det samme kom der en lille gåsepige ud i køjen, og hun var sulten og fik et stykke bart brød, som hun dyppede i gryden. Så blev hun synsk, og da hun kom ud i nødset, kunde hun se kalven i koen. Men herremanden blev gal” (Kristensen, 1980/1892–1901, 215).

¹⁶ My translation of: “En gumma kokte en vit orm i sin gryta. Den första som smakade på dekokten skulle bli spåkunnig. Gumman gick ut ett ögonblick, medan grytan kokade, och då passade dottern hennes på att smaka på det. I detsamma kom gumman och blev väldigt arg, då hon fick reda på då hela. Men flickan blev trollkunnig från den stunden och kunde allting och visste allting” (ULMA 2476, 12). Recorded in Älvestad, Östergötland by H. Aldenius 1929.

¹⁷ My translation of: “Flere människor påstå sig ha sett vita ormar på havsstranden. Äter man en vit orm, blir man allvetande. En bonde kokade en gång en vit orm. Ingen annan än han skulle få smaka den. Hans tjänsteflicka blev emellertid nyfiken samt doppade sitt finger i grytan och smakade på spadet. Bonden fick veta det och beslöt att döda flickan. Då hon nu var allvetande, visste hon likväl hans tankar och flydde” (FSF 1931, 606).

¹⁸ My translation of: “En herre hade fångat en vit orm och bad sedan sin kusk att koka den vissa timmar i grytan. Men han förbjöd honom att titta på den. Kusken kunde ändå inte hålla sig, utan lyfte på locket och smakade med stickan på ormen. Sedan bar han in den åt herrn, och så åt herrn upp hela ormen. Kusken, som först smakat på den, blev klok, men herrn blev inte

(Estonia, Runö) "The one who eats of a white snake understands the language of the crows, because they count as a bird, which are second-sighted. A cook roasted a white snake for his master and licked a drop of fat that had splattered on to his hand. At once, he understood what the crows were saying. His master ate the whole snake, but he didn't learn this art."¹⁹

(Telemark, Norway) "At a cotter's place in Selfjord a long time ago, there lived a woman who knew all kinds of witchcraft [...] Once she found a white snake. It was a rare stroke of good luck to find that kind of snake; it has the power to heal all manner of sickness. When you boil a white snake, three stars appear in the brine. The first makes you wise and the second gives you second sight, but the third makes you mad, and it spins around like a wheel. The woman boiled the snake in the usual manner. Then she went out to the cow shed to take care of her animals. But her daughter Margit was alone in the house. She saw the pot sitting there, and being a child, she thought that it was broth. She took a piece of bread, dipped it into the pot, and got hold of the star that gives you second sight. When she had eaten the bread, she could see right through solid walls. She ran down to her mother in the shed and shouted happily: "Now I can see the colour of the calf Gold Rose is going to have!" "Oh, heaven help me, child, you haven't touched the pot?" cried the mother. She knew how much Margit would suffer if she had second sight. And Margit did suffer. She saw all the evil that happened around her in the village."²⁰

Of interest is the core of the stories: a person consumes some of a serpent/white snake and is rewarded with supernatural power (and, in some cases, the ability to understand the language of birds). I would argue these texts demonstrate long-term continuity, in that both the belief utterances and folk legends show how widespread the general idea is; and might very well preserve a mythic motif that is associated with initiation and the acquisition of supernatural powers known from the medieval sources examined above.

A consistent feature in these folk legends is that the one who tastes the flesh of the white snake will acquire supernatural knowledge and/or abilities, in line with the older stories already examined here. The snake as a vessel for understanding bird speech also exists in some of the texts, giving the person who tastes the boiled snake a warning that is learned from birds. One interesting detail in the folk legends worth mentioning here is the issue of social status: the lower social status of the persons who become cunning (daughters, maidservants, coachmen, cooks) accords with general notions of initiation, while the higher-status individuals intend to secure wisdom, but do not succeed. This binary opposition exists in all of the folk legends cited above (which

klokare, han. Herr började fundera, att det var något skålmstycke i fråga, och befalld kusken att spänna hästarna för vagnen. Sedan foro de ut på resa. När de färdats ett stycke, sågo de en fågel i trädet. Då frågade herrn kusken, vad fågeln sade. Kusken svarade, att fågeln sade, att på första bro, som de komma till, skulle herrn köra benet av ena vagnshästen. Och det gick som kusken sade: vid första bro, de kommo till, brast benet på hästen. Nu blev herrn så förargad, att han högg huvudet av kusken genast." (FSF 1931, 606).

¹⁹ My translation of: "Den som först äter av en vit orm, förstår korparnas språk, de gälla nämligen för förutsägande fåglar. En kock stekte åt sin herre en vit orm och slickade endast en liten droppe fett av, som stänkt på hans hand. Genast förstod han vad korparna sade. Hans herre åt upp hela ormen, men lärde sig icke konsten" (FSF 1931, 606).

²⁰ No 42.2 in Kvideland & Sehmsdor (1988, 189–190).

I believe are representative of the tradition) and is common throughout legends as a whole. This does not appear in the belief utterances, so there might be some tension here, probably stemming from how legends (as folk-poetry) spread among individuals who usually belong to the lower social strata.

Another noticeable feature of the legends is that the magical concoction is consumed or tasted accidentally by someone other than the person for whom it was prepared – just as Sigurðr also consumes the dragon’s blood accidentally. Although Sigurðr later deliberately consumes more blood and Fáfnir’s heart, such deliberate acts are not found in the legends. What exists in all of the texts is a link between the supernatural snake and wisdom. The snake is a vessel for extraordinary wisdom and abilities and a means to an end – by consuming it, a person acts an initiand, emerging irreversibly at a higher level, perfectly in line with Schjødft’s model of initiation rituals in medieval legends.

Conclusion

The snake’s association with wisdom is a common motif in Scandinavian (and Nordic) folklore and is surely quite old, stretching back at least to the Middle Ages, where it appears in the stories (and iconography) about Sigurðr and Fáfnir. The acquisition of power or knowledge through consuming a snake/serpent/dragon is a central motif in these stories, and demonstrates continuity over time and space. While the dragon encountered and slain by Sigurðr might seem like a *fabula incredibilis*, a larger-than-life tale with imaginary creatures set in a mythical time, the narratives about white snakes correspond more to peoples’ preternatural side, and is closer to folk belief.²¹ Folktales and myths lead away from the mundane; they have different views of the supernatural world as well as of the real one. If we compare how Sigurðr or Ericus learn the language of birds (and other animals) and gain magical knowledge with how others do so from a white snake, then there seems to be no question that there is continuity in the motif of tasting a certain substance to gain esoteric knowledge and supernatural power. In the case of the white snake, there seems to be some variety in the stories, especially between legends and belief utterances: in some of the most common legend types, the supernatural wisdom is accidentally acquired by someone other than the one who initially prepared the snake for their own consumption. This is also in line with the medieval stories about Sigurðr (who prepares it, but not for himself) and with Saxo’s description of Ericus.

The folk legends certainly repeat some of the Sigurðr (and Ericus) sequence(s), but not in its entirety. One reason for this might have to do with different genres. Maybe one explanation is the fact that the legends are generally mono-episodic, while the folktales/heroic narratives contain more episodes. Fixed norms and laws govern the

²¹ I might add that a belief in dragons still existed in 19th century folklore; the border of belief extends through the genre and is constantly in flux. What is “believed” and “not-believed” is subjective and differs; it can even differ in the same person, depending on for example emotions, occasion, place and context.

supernatural in myths and folktales, and are distinguished in folk legends as well. We might ponder the various origins and functions of these stories and try to fit them into nicely constructed theoretical and scholarly models in pursuit of real rituals. However, we also need to consider that not all motifs from or descriptions of rituals were actually practised. Some probably never took place at all. Some motifs had a very strong symbolic value; they act as wonders that can fantastically exaggerate real life. The motif of eating the flesh of the serpent or snake is one of these. Why? If we rule out the possibilities of actually meeting a dragon, killing it and having a chance to taste its meat or blood, we still have the white snakes. Do they exist? Evidently, there are snakes that are white, but in the Nordic countries, this is extremely rare. A snake can be born with no pigment in its skin, which is then white, or in the eyes, which then become pink. Such snakes, born with albinism, have a very slim chance of survival and growing to a mature age. Another explanation is that some of these legends actually refer to a rare type of snake that is very real, the smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*), but this species is only found in southern Scandinavia. I believe the rarity of these snakes, and the exceptional stories told about them, are enough to explain how certain persons were believed to have become skilled in magic and gained powers. There is no need for actual initiation rituals to ever have taken place in real life. The supernatural elements in the stories link to reality on a symbolic level.

The snake is of importance in the different stories analysed here because it has a strong link to the underworld. This is mentioned and discussed by Schjødt in relation to the myth of the mead of poetry (Óðinn, in the shape of a snake) and Sigurðr (Fáfnir, a serpent; Schjødt 2008; 164). Both figures are associated with the underworld and with wisdom. As we have seen, the snake lingers on as an important symbol of wisdom in folklore in Scandinavia. One reason for this is that the snake has strong chthonic connotations, a motif that can be found in many religious and folk traditions around the world. One reason is that they disappear in the earth, mounds or similar terrain for some time and are in many cases symbolically linked to death and the underworld.

What we have encountered in this short study are texts about the acquisition of supernatural knowledge, stories that explain how certain individuals (usually from the lower social stratum) came into possession of such powers or abilities. They are not, however, ritual texts describing actual praxis, but express similar ideologies that we find in initiation rituals. In my opinion, this is what makes Schjødt's model so useful even when discussing folk legends. These symbols do indeed mark a difference and a transition between the initial and the final stages of the sequence that transforms the acting person and makes him or her changed into a new state – a person can even use this symbolism to explain how he or she gained knowledge and became one of the cunning folk. However, the symbolism of the actions in the texts discussed might also contain reminiscences of actual initiation rituals, that in turn might draw on a larger context of esoteric wisdom, of certain categories or levels that an initiand was supposed to pass, this is something that we have seen in sources dating from the Middle Ages up until the 19th century in Scandinavia (cf. Schjødt 1994, 122).

On the basis of the material examined here, Schjødt's model for initiation works for both different stories and narratives and actual rituals and practises. With this article, I believe that I have shown how a type of initiation lived on in oral tradition in stories (legends and belief utterances) explaining how certain individuals acquired supernatural wisdom. Whether a person actually consumed a white snake or not is beside the point – the stories legitimised their position in society as cunning folk, explaining why such folk could see and know things others could not. I would argue that eating a white snake, or tasting the broth it was cooked in, corresponds symbolically to the transformation of a person (the acting figure) through the acquisition of knowledge through the object (the white snake), sometimes by an initiator (the one for whom the dish was initially intended for). As noted several times, this has the same effect on a symbolic level as long as people believe it is a possibility. I therefore believe such consumption can be interpreted as a kind of symbolic initiation.

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