

The Assassination of Olof Palme

A Reflection of the Modern Effects of Scandinavian Mythology?

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Trigger Warnings: *Discussions of political violence and radicalization*

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the continued intermingling between modern politics, Scandinavian folklore and Old Norse texts. This is done through the medium of the assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, an event that permanently changed the course of Swedish political history. Palme's untimely murder was influenced by the Scandinavian folklore, sagas and eddas (a term for two important Old Norse texts) that are deeply intertwined with modern Swedish modes of politicking. Whether it be the alt-right radicalization of one suspect, the degeneracy of another, or the socialist and environmentalist politics of Palme himself, this paper aims to give readers a better understanding of how key Scandinavian literature is relevant in the everyday political lives of the Swedish public and political elite alike.

The assassination of Olof Palme was a critical event in Swedish history that forever changed the political landscape of Scandinavia. To some extent the morals and politics of pre-modern Scandinavian texts and folktales can be explored through the suspects and the politics involved in Palme's unfortuitous death. Viktor Gunnarsson as a suspect allows a deeper understanding of the alt-right's connection with Old Norse texts. Christer Pettersson's characterization as a psychopath incapable of a calculated assassination can exemplify the shift away from the ethics of the Viking Age. Whereas, Palme's socialist views and policies are reflected in a variety of cornerstone Scandinavian texts, which may have inspired him from childhood. The environmentalist aspects of Sámi and Finnish folklore as well as medieval Norse texts, could also have shaped Palme's policies. Overall, the death of Olof Palme allows for the analysis of the remaining significance of mythological texts and tales from Scandinavia during a crucial point in Swedish history.

There were two key suspects in the assassination of Olof Palme: Viktor Gunnarsson and Christer Pettersson. Though Christer Pettersson continues to be widely considered the true assassin and was convicted as such, some people continue to believe Gunnarsson was involved in the killing which was a wider conspiracy involving the American government (Bondeson 171). Gunnarsson was initially the prime suspect and was a former member of the ultra-right European Workers' Party (Jenkins 22). This group was closely associated with known fascists and anti-semites, such as Lyndon LaRouche (Gilbert 5-7). Gunnarsson's radical and extremist views, and open vitriol towards Palme made him appear even more suspicious to investigators. As well as being a right-wing extremist, it was said "The female sex was Gunnarsson's prime interest in life" (Bondeson 62). The behavior of Gunnarsson towards women, as described in *Blood on the Snow: The Killing of Olof Palme* is indicative of the modern "incel" (involuntarily celibate) behavior, a mode that can be associated with Odinism and Asatru (Kitts 14). "Incels" commonly believe that a

woman is owed to them, often with certain implications of sexual purity and servitude included. This is relevant to the hyper-masculine tendencies and stringent gender roles that are reflected throughout Old Norse texts, particularly in the cult of Odin. The links between anti-semitism, Odinism and Asatru are even stronger; the belief held by the German National-Socialist party that the Aryan race is the most supreme and all others should be eradicated was inspired by Norse mythology. The Nazis used this rhetoric based in Scandinavian legend, to rationalize the horrors of ethnic cleansing committed during the holocaust. Most notably lauded psychologist Carl Jung's essay "Wotanism" which became the basis for this rhetoric points to *The Lay of Rig* and the Æsir-Vanir rivalry to support this view (Jung 20). This belief had began prior to the second world war in Scandinavian paganism and by Gunnarsson's time was already firmly rooted in some right-wing circles (Asprem 48). After the second world war right-wing extremists and white supremacist continued to use this line of thinking to vindicate their racism. Gunnarsson's political beliefs likely had a plethora of influences, yet his upbringing in Sweden makes it undeniable he would have been exposed to Norse mythology. Being exposed to hyper-masculine characters such as Odin and Thor in childhood possibly contributed to the earliest formulations of his belief of ownership over women that eventually led him down the path of the radical right. Ultimately, given a modern perspective it seems unlikely that Viktor Gunnarsson killed Olof Palme, but the influence of Norse mythology on Gunnarsson and other haters of Palme is undeniable.

Christer Pettersson, the most likely suspect of Palme's assassination, appears to have no political motivation. Pettersson, also known as "the Bayonet Killer," appears to have been a violent psychopath, with a history of crime and murder; his only motive for killing someone as notable as the Prime Minister would have been attention. In many ways Pettersson is a much better representation of the fearless warrior of the Viking era than Gunnarsson. Pettersson's history of violently attacking people with seemingly

little notice, has been equated to going "berserk" (Bondeson 116). The morality presented in medieval Scandinavian literature is vastly different to the morality of modern society and Pettersson embodies several of the values put forth in *Sayings of the High One*:

Quite enough baseless blather comes
from the man never silent;
a quick tongue, unless it's held in check
often talks itself into trouble
(*The Poetic Edda* 17).

Pettersson embodied this verse in his trial by keeping his story short and sweet and never giving away more details than necessary. His honesty about previous crimes and his description of his rather pathetic life as an alcoholic and habitual drug user, persuaded the Swedish public that he was far from a calculated assassin (Bondeson 133).

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
the reputation of each dead man
(*The Poetic Edda* 23).

In the previous stanza the speaker mentions "a good reputation," something Pettersson definitely did not have. However, I would argue that killing the political leader of Sweden would come with much acclaim in medieval times, despite murder now being considered widely amoral. One thing widely agreed upon in the case of Olof Palme's assassination, is that it would have been highly difficult for someone to have calculated Palme's whereabouts that night; this means that if Pettersson was in fact the killer he was most likely an opportunist. In the case Pettersson truly was the killer, and there was no larger conspiracy at play, he certainly made a lasting reputation for himself. Rather than his memory being lost in time, Pettersson has become a crucial player in modern Swedish history. However, Pettersson being portrayed as an ideal man of the Viking age is not wholly accurate, as stated:



Let no man hold onto the cup, but drink
mead in moderation
let him say what's necessary or be silent;
no man will scold you
because you go off early to bed
(*The Poetic Edda* 15).

Pettersson certainly was not consuming his alcohol in moderation, and though amphetamines were not invented at the time *The Poetic Edda* was composed, it can be assumed that drug use would fall under this umbrella as well. Overall, analyzing Christer Pettersson through an Old Norse lens, reveals that he may have fit within the medieval moral workings in regards to violent crime, but his drinking and drug use would have prevented him from becoming a respectable Viking.

Fascists have borrowed from Norse mythology; however, socialists (and democratic socialists) also employ ideals expounded from folk tales dating back centuries. There has been some debate as to whether Palme's killing was of a political nature. However, the also seemingly random stabbing of another leftist politician, Anna Lindh in 2003 suggests the politics of Lindh and Palme may have been their downfall. Sweden is generally considered to be a safe country and thus the assassination of the Prime Minister was seen as a freakish one-off incident, when the Foreign Minister was killed, Sweden was forced to accept political violence as part of its identity as a nation (Eyerman 75-76). Olof Palme was a member of the Swedish Social Democratic party, a left leaning party that embraced socialism. The socialist anti-capitalist views of modern-day Scandinavia are reflected in *The Kalevala*, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *The Poetic Edda*, and *Snorri's Edda*. In *The Kalevala*, a mystical device called the Sampo is responsible for all the prosperity in Pohjola. The Sampo is kept under lock and key, and the prosperity it brings is not shared with the people of Kalevala. After Pohjola's leader Louhi refuses to share the Sampo, Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen and Lemminkäinen opt to steal it for their people (Lönnrot 547). A great battle occurs between the soldiers of Pohjola and the heroes from Kalevala, resulting in the Sampo being destroyed. Kalevala retains a



Illustration by Sophia Foder

few pieces, but the prosperity brought by the Sampo will never be matched after its destruction (Lönnrot 562-574). This folktale dates back over a millennium, and at the time of its collection by Elias Lönnrot it continued to be sung about by peasants laboring away in the harsh conditions of menial farmwork. This presents a decidedly anti-capitalist idea, that shames the bourgeoisie for hoarding prosperity and highlights the threat accompanied with the rise of the proletariat, and the destruction to infrastructure that this may cause. Both *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and *The Prose Edda* (and to a much lesser degree *Snorri's Edda*) recount the story of Sigurd the dragon slayer and more importantly the curse of Andvari (*The Poetic Edda* 147; Byock 57-59). Possibly another analogy for the defects of capitalism, Andvari curses his hoard of gold to bring death and misfortune to whomever it belongs to. Between the two renditions of this tale there are multiple discrepancies, even within the *Poetic Edda* having The Poem of Atli and The Greenlandic Lay of Atli providing two different accounts of Atilla the Huns downfall, both ending in gruesome bloodshed (*The Poetic Edda* 211-234). Regardless of the lack of one concrete storyline, the gold hoard to various degrees is responsible for the massacres that occur between kin and brethren. The tale of Andvari's gold posits that even when someone as pure and good as Sigurd holds immense riches, the people around him can still be corrupted by it. This is displayed in Palme's politics and in the overwhelmingly socialist politics throughout Scandinavia. Socialism aims to spread wealth more evenly, preventing situations such as Sigurd's.

Some scholars such as Ursula Dronke have even theorized that the coming of Ragnarok as described in *Snorri's Edda* and *The Poetic Edda* is akin to the coming of a Communist revolution (*The Poetic Edda* 3-12; Sturluson 60-63). Dronke writes that "couched in the social and economic terms of Marx's political vision, the inevitable downfall of the world of capitalist society will lead to the emergence of the new world of the socialist order" (41). Though Palme's socialism is very different from pure Marxism, Marx's influence on all socialist thought is undeniable. Furthermore, the tight hold the Social Democratic Party had on

Sweden during their forty-year reign, broken only one term prior to Palme's appointment as Prime Minister, meant that no communist revolution was required to achieve socialism in Sweden. This insinuates that Sweden was able to push back the date of Ragnarok by using socialist values to keep workers happy, though in modern times Sweden appears to be gravitating towards capitalism once more. Perhaps Marx and mythology are correct, and Ragnarok/a communist revolution of the masses is inevitable. Overall, throughout Old Norse literature and Scandinavian folk history there are anti-capitalist themes that were reflected in Palme's politics, potentially creating a motivation for his assassination by the anti-communist far-right.

Olof Palme is notable in his generation for being a firm environmental advocate and campaigning for environmental change before it is too late (Sundström 83). Palme famously stated "it is absolutely necessary that concerted, international action is undertaken . . . solutions will require far-reaching changes in attitudes and social structures" (Palme). Carolyne Larrington theorizes that Yggdrasil's portrayal in *Snorri's Edda* and *The Poetic Edda* influences modern day environmental perspectives (*The Norse Myths that Shape the Way We Think* 25-52; *The Poetic Edda* 19; Sturluson 27-30). Larrington connects the idea of Yggdrasil as the center of the world and its existence providing sustenance for all, human or animal, to earth and the great duty it accords to humanity by allowing for our very existence (25-31). Even after Ragnarok, Yggdrasil is key to the survival of the new generation of humans that survived the battle of gods and giants (33). Furthermore, trees in Norse mythology are associated with wisdom and communication, as Odin hangs from a tree to gain his wisdom and Yggdrasil connects all the nine realms (31-33). Lastly Larrington emphasizes the myth that man came from driftwood, making the connection between humans and nature intrinsically linked to the existence of people (38-40). The connections extrapolated upon by Larrington show the importance of environmental protection in Norse mythology, this may be one reason why Nordic leaders such as Palme were so ahead of the curve in regards to counteracting the effects of

climate change. *The Kalevala*'s powerful natural imagery underscores the importance of the natural environment in Finnish life. Despite the moisty mires of Finland creating formidable conditions for farming, and the bitter cold creating an environment that seems vindictive at times, respecting and honoring nature is a key theme of *The Kalevala*. The national instrument of Finland, the Kantele, is hugely important in Finnish culture, and the appreciation for the services of the birch tree in creating this wonder are demonstrated by the forty fourth *runos* of *The Kalevala* (Lönnrot 575-584; Van Cleef 54-55). Though Palme was not from Finland the close geographic and diplomatic ties of Sweden and Finland means the cultural influence of *The Kalevala* in Sweden is not completely null and void. Lastly, the influence of Sámi culture and mythology on the environmentalism of Swedish politics is not to be forgotten. Palme was a staunch supporter of multiculturalism, including the rights of Sámi people to preserve their culture and communal life (Tawat 481). Juha Torvinen explores Sámi music in a "mytho-ecological framing," analyzing the significance of ecology and the natural environment in Sámi musical works inspired by the mythology (168). Thomas DuBois' work in regards to *sieiddit* reveals that many of the most sacred objects and sites in Sámi culture were and some still are naturally occurring (2). Through both Torvinen and DuBois' work the emphasis on nature's value in Sámi circles is clear. In spite of the colonialism that has wiped much of Sámi mythology from collective memory, the key aspect of rituals involving the natural world remain essential to continued Sámi practices. Thus, Olof Palme's environmentalism may have been tied to his pro-multiculturalism stance linked via the Sámi and their practice of earth-worship. Comprehensively, the texts and oral tales passed down over centuries of Scandinavian history may have been of influence in the environmentalist politics of the Olof Palme era; the very same politics that resulted in the *Palmehatet*¹ phenomenon and his assassination.

In conclusion, through the medium of Olof Palme's assassination an analysis of the effects of Old Norse Literature and

Scandinavian folktales on modern politics and morals can be performed. Upon closer examination of Viktor Gunnarsson and his right-wing radicalism, Norse mythology can be connected to a variety of right-wing modes, including antisemitism, racism, white-supremacy and misogyny. The second suspect, Christer Pettersson can be used as an exemplification of the changing morals between medieval and modern times. The socialism of Palme and like-minded politicians is uncovered through the potential influences of *The Kalevala*, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *The Poetic Edda*, and *Snorri's Edda*. The environmentalist aspect of Palme's policy may have also stemmed from Sámi and Nordic folktales and mythological literature. None of this is to say that Norse mythology and Northern European folklore played a direct role in Palme's death, but rather Palme's assassination can be used as a tool to understand the subtle influences it continues to have centuries later.

¹ This roughly translates from Swedish to "Palme hatred".

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