The Formula in Oral Poetry and Prose
New Approaches, Models and Interpretations
1st Symposium of the Project “Formulae in Icelandic Saga Literature”
Tartu, December 5-7, 2019

In 1928 Milman Parry presented his definition of formula in the Homeric epics. It was followed by a series of articles which resulted in a new view of oral poetry in general. The “Oral-Formulaic Theory”, with its prominent role of precisely the formula, brought together poetry from genetically unrelated traditions into a universal model. It affected the research on various literary traditions, not least the Eddic poetry and the saga prose, and resulted in many reinterpretations. But the theory has also been questioned and revised. New approaches in the study of formulas have been developed among linguists and folklorists. The present symposium aims to discuss new approaches, models and interpretations of formulas in traditional poetry and prose. The symposium will have a special focus on Old Norse literature, but it attempts to integrate the research on several different cultures and let the knowledge of and research on them shed light on each other.

Keynote speakers:
Stephen Mitchell, Harvard University, “Memory, Formulas, and Merging Revisited”
Frog, Helsinki University, “Formulaic Language and Organizing Principles of Discourse: Making Sense of the Phenomenon in ‘Poetry’ and ‘Prose’”
William Lamb, University of Edinburgh, “The Formula in Narrative Prose: Recent Research and Future Challenges”
Paul Acker, Saint Louis University, “A History of Oral Formulas and Eddic Poetry”
Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen, University of South-Eastern Norway, “The Eddic Formula: Methodological Considerations”
Slavica Rankovic, Independent scholar, “The ‘No Reaction’ Formula in Íslendingasögur: A Distributed Reading of Grettir’s Temper Management”
Chiara Bozzone, Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich, “Chunks, Collocations, and Constructions: Cognitive and Linguistic Perspectives on Formularity in Homer”
Jonathan Roper, University of Tartu, “Formulas in Anglophone Tales”

All researchers (including PhD students) who are interested in presenting their ideas or research results connected to these or similar topics are encouraged submit proposals for 20-minute paper presentations (followed by 10 minutes of discussion). The venue of the symposium will be University of Tartu, Department of Scandinavian Studies.

Please send short abstracts by September 10 to daniel.savborg@ut.ee. Further information can be found on the symposium website: https://www.maailmakeeled.ut.ee/en/departments/formula-oral-poetry-and-prose

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The symposium will focus on the following sub-topics:

- **The degree of universality of the formula concept**: Is it possible to see formulas as a universal phenomenon, as Albert Lord did, with an essentially similar function and manifestation in unrelated traditions, or is it necessary to define the concept ‘formula’ for each tradition?

- **The function of the use of formulas**: While Lord claimed that the use of formulas mainly was a practical tool for the performer, more recent scholars such as John Miles Foley have argued that formulas are signals to the listener for how individual passages should be interpreted. How should the function of the formulas be understood and is there a universal answer?

- **Formulas in narrative prose**: Prose is left outside Parry’s and Lord’s model, since that model is already in its definition related to the metrical form, but several scholars have nevertheless used the concept of ‘formula’ in research on traditional prose. Can formulas in prose be analyzed in the same way as formulas in poetry, or do they differ in fundamental ways? Which tools can be used for analyzing formulas in prose?

- **The relationship between formulas and other meaning-bearing units**: If one accepts that a ‘formula’ must not be a completely fixed string of words, as in Parry’s and Lord’s definition, it might be a problem to decide the degree of variation that can be allowed. How can we draw dividing lines between e.g. formulas and motifs, or do we need to define new concepts for formulaic units of a borderline character?

- **Formulas in oral poetry and ‘formulaic language’ within linguistic theory**: In which relation do these formula concepts stand to each other and to what extent can the linguistic formula concept, developed for analysis of ordinary discourse, be used for analysis of poetic formulas?

- **Formulas and oral tradition**: Is the concept of ‘formula’ applicable to only oral tradition or is it possible to talk about formulas (of essentially the same character) in written literature too, when that has a background in oral tradition? Is it possible, as some scholars have claimed, to use the frequency of formulas as a criterion for determining the oral origin of a work?