Editorial
Fieldwork in Folkloristics and the Study of Religions: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

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It is perfectly possible to study religions without doing ‘fieldwork’. An obvious case in point is Friedrich Max Müller. A renowned Indologist, historian of Indian religions, and theorist of myth, Müller arguably was the single most important figure for the establishment of the study of religions as a field of research, and through his edition of the Rigveda (1st ed. 1849–1874) the philologist Müller made outstanding contributions to the study of early Indian religious history. Yet Müller never once travelled to India: as he saw it, the India he was studying was not the India of his time, but an India that lay several centuries in the past (Kippenberg 1997, 65). Similiar things can be said about many other traditional fields of research in the study of religions. Another classic of ‘armchair scholarship’ is James George Frazer: as the author of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer wrote one of the most monumental, most influential, and most successful studies of myth ever published. Since the publication of its first two-volume edition in 1890, one version or another of *The Golden Bough* has been in print continually, now for more than 130 years and counting. Much of the material that *The Golden Bough* is constructed from consists in anthropological data; and most of this, in classic ‘armchair’ fashion, Frazer quarried from books in library reading rooms.

Much, but not all. While today Frazer is best known and most notorious for the great (and now very dated) mythological theories of his *Golden Bough*, his most ageless work – also still in print today – is his six-volume translation of and commentary on Pausanias’s *Description of Greece* from the 2nd century AD, probably the most detailed account of a mythological landscape to have survived from antiquity. The landscape whose myths Pausanias described so much captured Frazer’s imagination that he engaged with it not only as a philologist and historian, but also visited it in person and on this basis in 1917 published a volume of *Studies in Greek Scenery, Legend and History* that combined myth and history with a narrative of personal experience.

Was this fieldwork? Maybe not in a strict sense, but it certainly had an element of it. As such the example of Frazer goes to show that elements of fieldwork have enriched the academic engagement with religions in the most unexpected places, and – I would claim – still are able to do so. This, essentially, is the message the authors of this special issue want

to communicate to student readers. The aim of this issue, which seeks to address students rather than researchers, is to motivate beginners in those fields that engage with the study of religions to explore the rich possibilities of doing fieldwork for themselves – and to be aware of (but not deterred by!) some possible pitfalls.

This special issue of *Marburg Journal of Religion* – 'Fieldwork in Folkloristics and the Study of Religions: An Interdisciplinary Introduction' – has grown out of a multidisciplinary seminar, in which seventeen participants from nine countries who represented nearly half a dozen disciplines (folkloristics, Scandinavian Studies, anthropology, history, and the study of religions) offered, each from their own distinct perspective, introductions to the *do*s and *don't*s of fieldwork for a student audience. The intention never was to offer a systematic introduction to fieldwork methodology. Rather, we wanted to give our students some first impressions of how varied 'fieldwork' can be, how different individual fieldwork experiences are, but also how even very different approaches to fieldwork time and again have to struggle with the same recurring challenges. To achieve this effect, each seminar contribution consciously spoke from the perspective of each contributor's own individual, sometimes very personal perspective. After the enormous success that the seminar had with the students who attended it, this basic schema has been carried over into this publication.

This special issue therefore brings together nine essays, each of which explores an aspect of doing fieldwork that to the authors, speaking from their own personal experience, seemed particularly worthwhile highlighting to students who face the exhilarating challenge of still having to find their footing 'in the field'.

The collection starts at home, as it were, with an essay by two Icelandic folklorists, Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson, about 'Doing Fieldwork at Home: Enchanted Spots in Strandir', exploring what it means to do fieldwork in one's own community and thus in a place that one knows well and that one has deep personal connections to. The Finnish folklorist and yoga teacher Lotta Leiwo then addresses 'When One's Life Becomes the Field: Assessing the Field in Collaborative Autoethnography' – or in other words: how can you do fieldwork ('autoethnography' and 'collaborative autoethnography') about what you do yourself, using the researcher's own experiences as data? This is followed by a contribution by Sara Kuehn who works at the interdisciplinary juncture of (art) history, anthropology, theology, religious and cultural studies. Introducing us to 'Sufi Devotional Aesthetics', which she explores through her fieldwork experience in contemporary Sufi communities in the Balkans, Kuehn illustrates how an immersive, multisensory, and collaborative approach to fieldwork can enrich one's findings as well as one's life.

Next, the Helsinki-based folklorist Frog talks about being outside of one's comfort zone and wondering: 'Who Am I and What Am I Doing Here? Learning to Take Yourself and Your Experiences Seriously'. He discusses how doing fieldwork can be an educational experience, yet at the same time it can be bewildering, terrifying, and the situation itself can

produce an existential crisis – and how to deal with that, as well as with questions of research ethics. Katharina Wilkens and Anna Daniel Sanga then tell us about ‘Spirit Possession and Exorcism in Tanzania – Reflections on Participation, Perception and Spirituality’. They recount the process of ethnographic fieldwork on spiritual healing and exorcism in Tanzania and take this as their basis for reflecting on methods employed in participant observation and interviewing, and on how cross-cultural friendships can help to navigate the fieldwork process.

Susanne Rodemeier puts her focus on the challenges that face an anthropologist working in a museum: her topic is ‘Research on the Historical, Cultural and Religious Significance of a Museum Object’. Taking an object in the collection of the Museum of Religions of the Philipps University Marburg in Germany as her starting point, she presents facets of object studies in the field of religion, including both archival research and work in the (in this case: Indonesian) field.

Already the metaphor of ‘the field’ implies space – and space requires movement. Modes of movement are the topic of two contributions. Matthias Egeler discusses ‘Pedestrian Research or Walking as Method’. Drawing on some traditional landscape mythology from the Icelandic Westfjords, he explores how it can be a fruitful approach to traditional narratives to systematically walk both the sites and the connecting routes between the sites that the stories are associated with – a seemingly trivial pursuit that can yield most unexpected insights. The British historian Clive Tolley then illustrates the potential of another means of non-motorised locomotion, advocating ‘Cycling as a Fieldwork Aid to Historical Interpretation’: taking the reader on a trip to early medieval England, particularly as related by the ecclesiastical historian Bede (*c.* 730), he illustrates how cycling can be used as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of ecclesiastical history in its geographical context.

While most of the contributions in this special issue put the researcher and his or her experience centre stage, we should never forget that fieldwork, especially ethnographic or folkloristic fieldwork, not only involves the researcher but also the ‘researchee’: the people who are being researched. The special issue therefore concludes by giving space to an, in this context, perhaps surprising voice: that of Kestrel, a Pagan who in their role as an office-holder in Pagan groups in the UK repeatedly has been on the receiving end of field research and of the misconceptions that often bedevil the way that research is directed. Their perspective is markedly different from that of most researchers; but it is one well worth keeping in mind when one is trying to make one’s first steps in the chaotic, challenging, and wonderful range of research methods that we summarise under the umbrella term ‘fieldwork’.

Frankfurt am Main, March 2024
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Acknowledgements

Editorial work on this special issue was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – project numbers 453026744 and 495416732, and supported by the Institut für Skandinavistik of the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main as well as by the Institut für Sozialanthropologie und Religionswissenschaft of the University of Marburg, with special thanks to Maike Wachs, Edith Franke, and Michael Pye.

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