



## SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

### Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen:36/18

Project manager: Claudia Lindén

Project title:

“Bear Traces: a study of the bear in national romantic literature around the Baltic Sea”

#### 1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

1) The project has confirmed that the bear, the Nordic region’s largest predator, indeed is one of its most mythical animals. The purpose of the project was to draw on animal studies theories to investigate how bears were used as actual animals as well as metaphors in national romantic literature, to legitimize, and naturalize a mythical connection between people and land in the formation of the national states in Sweden, Finland and Latvia around fin-de -siècle 1900.

When this older form of reverence for the bear coincides with an opinion against the extermination policy of bears pursued in the 19th century, the bear is given agency as a subject. The bear was vigorously hunted with a clear policy of extermination at the end of the 19th century. An opinion is created against this. In literature, this is expressed in the form of stories where the bear is portrayed as threatened by human progress. In particular, some stories emphasise the similarity between bears and humans. The bear is described as a moral subject with its agency in these stories.

Similarities between humans and bears are emphasised: for example, the bear is equated with the Good Samaritan or the bear is described as a mother who protects her children. Other examples are cross-species transformations, as in the poem *Lāčplēsis* (Pumpurs 1887). The main character *Lāčplēsis*, paradoxically called the bear killer because he also kills bears, gets his superhuman strength from his mother, who is a bear, and his appearance from his father, who is a human. His strength lies in his bear-like ears. As with Simpson, they are also his weak point because they can be cut off and when that happens at the end, he dies.

The project shows that when similarities between humans and non-human animals are emphasised it also evokes an ethical responsibility towards the bear, which, in turn, destabilizes the border between human and non-human animals. Literature probably also affected the opinion against the extermination of the bears.



2) The mythopoeic history of the bear goes back further and is more extensive than previously realised. Sami bear rituals are not an isolated phenomenon in the northern hemisphere; bear cults appear to have been spread across much of Europe before the Christian era. The French scholar Michel Pastoureau (2008) has in “The Bear – history of a fallen king”, shown that in ancient times in Europe the bear was regarded as the king of the forest and its animals, and it was deified by humans. With Christianity, the bear became dethroned and humiliated. This is a slow process though, that reaches its climax between the 11th to the 13th centuries AD when the bear was replaced in heraldry by the more exotic lion. After that, according to Pastoureau, the bear assumes three roles in mythology: -transformation, -the relationship between a male bear and a human female, a mother bear takes up a human child and nourishing it. The project has shown that all of these mythopoetical forms of the bear can in one way or another, be seen in national romantic literature in the Baltic region.

The practice of bear ceremonies throughout the northern hemisphere by various indigenous peoples is probably an offshoot of the earlier reverence for the bear shown by Pastoureau. In Scandinavia, bear ceremonies were practised by the Sami and are known to have taken place until the end of the 19th century. Pentikänen (2207) has shown that they left traces in the Kalevala. The project shows that around 1900 there was still a cultural memory of these bear ceremonies even in Swedish literature (Lagerlöf 1899), which is reflected in ideas about the bear as someone who understands human speech and must be respected in certain ways.

3) The project also shows that there are differences in the gender connotations of the bear between different countries in the Baltic Sea region at this time. In Finland and Latvia, where a struggle for national self-determination was underway, the masculine strength of the bear is often emphasised, as in the above-mentioned poem by Pumpurs or in the Finnish sports company Karhu= bear (founded in 1916). In Sweden, on the other hand, where many female authors wrote about the bear, bear hunting is problematised as a derailed masculinity. Instead, the mother bear's protection of her children is emphasised as a good role model for the nation. In *The Wonderful Adventure of Nils Holgersson* (1906), Mother Bear says similar things to what Lagerlöf would say five years later in her 'Home and State' speech at the 1911 Congress on Suffrage. The bear is used as a model for the nation in several countries around the Baltic Sea region, but with completely different gender connotations in Sweden, Finland and Latvia respectively.

## **2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline**

There is no previous single study on the role of the bear in literature. The project has thus highlighted that the bear is indeed a subject in literature, at least in the Baltic Sea region. It



has also shown that the bear appears there both as a real bear, which can be a moral subject and as a cultural artefact with political overtones.

Theoretically, the project has contributed to the field of human-animal studies. With its unusual focus on a specific animal species and its geographical and cultural history, the project shows how complex and entangled the long historical relationship between humans and bears is.

### **3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe**

The project has shown the great importance of the bear as a real animal and as a mythopoetic creature in the Baltic Sea region. It has also shown that animals are just as much out in nature as in literature and culture and, above all, highlighted that those spheres are not separate but, on the contrary, influence each other. When the bear was close to extinction, the authors wrote about it, which contributed to the fact that the bear did not become extinct here in the same way as in Europe.

The project has also shown that the bear in a political sense received different gender connotations in Finland and Latvia and Sweden respectively. In the former, the masculine power of the bear was emphasized as a way of strengthening the sense of nation. In Sweden, instead, Mother Bear was highlighted as a representative of the good home where women are an important part of the larger state.

### **4. New research questions that the project has led to**

I have become very interested in examining the longer relationship in literature and culture specifically between women and bears. Stories of love relationships between women and bears can be found in different texts, from medieval ballads to modern-day feminist novels and short stories, as well as in art and fashion photography. Especially in Swedish literature, where many women have used the bear motif, there are several such stories about marriages or love relations between bear shapeshifters and even actual real bears. In some stories, the bear-husband is frightening, but in most of these stories, the bear seems to represent a way of escaping the traditional heteronormative relations.

### **5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community**

#### **Book edited:**

Lindén, Claudia, Björck, Amelie & Lönngren, Ann-Sofie (red.), *Squirrelling: human–*



*animal studies in the Northern-European region*, Södertörn University, Library, Stockholm, 2022 OA <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1624077/FULLTEXT05.pdf>

### Peer Review articles

“From monster to endangered animal: three bear stories by Selma Lagerlöf”, *Bear and*

*Human. Facets of a Multi-layered Relationship from Past to Recent Times with an Emphasis on Northern Europe*, red. Oliver Grimm, Oliver (red.), Brepols, Turnhout, 2023, vol. 3, p. 875-886 OA <https://www.brepolsonline.net/doi/10.1484/M.TANE-EB.5.134368>

'The Bear as Ursus Sacer in 19th Century Swedish Literature, *Squirrelling: human–animal studies in the Northern-European region*, Södertörn University, Stockholm, 2022. s. 87-113, OA <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1624077/FULLTEXT05.pdf>

“Ursus sacer: the bear as man’s neighbour in Swedish nineteenth-century Fiction”,

*Aesthetics of Protestantism in Northern Europe.*, red. Jochim Grage, Thomas Mohnike and Lena Rorbach, Brepols, Turnhout 2022, s. 177-198

### Conferences arranged:

Lindén co-arranged the conference together with Amelie Björck and Ann-Sofie Lönngren.

The inaugural symposium for the *Ratatöskr Research Group for Literary Animal Studies* Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden, December 5–6, 2019

### Paper at conferences:

2020 ”Björnen som ursus sacer hos Selma Lagerlöf och Pelle Molin” på konferensen EKO, Litteraturvetenskap, miljö och hållbarhet 3-4 dec. 2020, Göteborg U, (zoom)

2019 “Ursus sacer. *The Bear as Man’s Neighbour in Selma Lagerlöf’s “The God’s Peace”* The

inaugural symposium for the *Ratatöskr Research Group for Literary Animal Studies* Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden, December 5–6, 2019



2019 “Ursus sacer. *The Bear as Man’s Neighbour in Selma Lagerlöf’s “The God’s Peace”*”

International Conference Bear and Human. Facets of a Multi-Layered Relationship

Orsa Predator Park, Orsa Sweden Oct. 16-19 2019.

2018 ”Björnen och det heliga. En läsning av Selma Lagerlöfs ’Gudsfreden’”

*Religiösa förhandlingar: Hur äldre religion inkorporeras i ny religiös kontext*, etnologi och genusvetenskap Stockholms universitet 14/5.

### **Academic lectures**

2023 ”Björnen i myt och litteratur i Östersjöregionen” Art forest symposium 27/9

Södertörns högskola

2019 Lecture “Bear Traces”at Comparative Literature’s Higher Seminar March 2019

### **Invited Lectures:**

2023 31/8 ”Den mytomspunna björnen – följ med på en resa i böckernas värld”, Föredrag 1 timme på Östersjöfestivalen, Berwaldhallen.

### **Radio performances:**

2023 30/8 Sveriges radio, A part of the program ”Talkshow” P1 about my bear project.