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SPECIAL ISSUE:  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON  
CELTIC AND SCANDINAVIAN MYTHOLOGY

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## Editorial Note

For several years the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh has hosted an annual colloquium on 'Thinking about Mythology in the 21st Century'. The event owes its origin to the enthusiasm of Dr Emily Lyle, whose aim from the beginning has been to bring together scholars interested in critically examining the mythologies of the Indo-European cultural world from different perspectives. In 2017 an initiative was taken to focus the scope of the colloquium on Celtic and Scandinavian mythology, and with the active input of the Department of Scandinavian Studies the first gathering with over thirty speakers was held in November.

This special issue of *Temenos* includes a selection of papers from that successful event, representing a range of theoretical and critical perspectives that are current in the study of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology today. The comparisons drawn between the two traditions by the individual authors elucidate both the thematic similarities in the materials under investigation and the broader methodological issues pertinent to the interpretation and analysis of data relating to pre-Christian belief systems.

In the opening article Jonathan Wooding considers the relationship between archaeology and myth especially from the perspective of Celtic-speaking cultures. With a number of case studies Wooding illustrates how the various appropriations of 'myth' in archaeological research have shaped perceptions of history and ethnic identity in both academic and public discourse. His critical examination adds nuance to the view that the study of myth and material culture represents two mutually exclusive forms of knowledge, and highlights several points of convergence where the two subjects can be brought into dialogue by moving beyond the problematic presuppositions of previous scholarship.

The relationship between myth and materiality is also addressed in the contribution by Sara Ann Knutson, who offers an innovative reading of Old Norse myths from the perspective of contemporary material culture studies. Knutson's theoretical approach draws on the recent 'material turn' in historical and literary disciplines, which has explored the 'social lives' of objects and their role in mediating and negotiating cultural interactions. She argues that in Old Norse mythology, too, particular physical objects can be viewed as having active agency that defines their special status. The themes of manufacture, ownership, exchange, and utility that feature in the depiction of these objects in the mythical narratives also provide an insight

into the lived reality of Iron Age peoples, reflecting the ways in which this 'mythical materiality' is rooted in the mundane world.

Jonas Wellendorf's article explores the medieval Christian authors' attitudes towards the pre-Christian past by offering an insightful comparative analysis of Oddr munkr's late-twelfth century *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* and the contemporary Middle Irish tale *Acallam na Senórach*. While the comparison reveals certain shared features in the two stories, it even more importantly underscores the different narrative strategies that the authors and compilers of these works have employed in reframing the pagan traditions. From this perspective his discussion accentuates the importance of reading the medieval literary sources as products of particular historical and cultural circumstances, in which the earlier traditions were continuously re-shaped by specific agendas of harmonising, demonising, or historicising the pagan past.

The thematic similarities between Scandinavian and Irish materials also serve as a starting point for Felix Lummer's contribution, which re-evaluates the question of the possible Irish origin of an Old Norse literary character Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum. Lummer presents an overview of the relevant literary and folklore sources to argue that many of the parallels that have been used to support this hypothesis are more tenuous than has previously been acknowledged. Since many of the central mythological motifs relating to the Guðmundr narrative complex are ubiquitous in Scandinavian folklore and in folk tales more broadly, he suggests that their occurrence in the sagas can be explained without positing a direct borrowing or influence between Irish and Norse traditions.

John Shaw brings the approach of Indo-European comparative mythology to bear on two divine figures, the ruler of the Irish mythical race Tuatha Dé, the Dagda, and the Scandinavian god Thor. Shaw examines the shared qualities of these deities by relating their stories to the international tale type ATU1148B 'The Thunder Instrument', with particular emphasis on the role of both gods as defenders of the cosmic order against monstrous adversaries. With the help of the wider mythological framework Shaw proposes a sequence for the evolution and development of these traditions, tracing their origins to a celestial god whose traits and attributes are widely attested across the Indo-European cultural area.

The figure of Thor is also the focus of Emily Lyle, who similarly employs a comparative perspective in her analysis of Old Norse mythology. Lyle's interpretation of this body of material is based on a cosmological approach to the study of Indo-European myth, which she has developed in a number

of publications in recent decades. This schematic model views myths and cosmology as a system in which social organisation correlates with elements of space and time in a more complex manner than the Dumézilian functional theory assumed. Her analysis illustrates how such an approach can shed light on the cosmic ideas that may have been retained in the Old Norse stories, even if they are no longer discernible on the surface.

The concluding article by Adam Dahmer discusses the use of Germanic runic symbolism in the celebrations of modern Beltane festivals. His primary interest is to investigate how and why the runes have gained such a prominent position in the ritual and artistic setting of the festival, and whether, given the use of the same symbols in the ethnonationalistic iconography of the far right, their adoption by the Beltaners should be seen as socio-politically problematic. Dahmer's contribution raises a number of important questions relating to issues of cultural appropriation, historical accuracy, and ideological meaning-making that demonstrate why the study of mythology remains topical today.

I wish to thank all the authors for their contributions to this issue, and Dr Triin Laidoner and the editor-in-chief Måns Broo for their help in seeing it through to publication. I would also like to extend my personal thanks to all the anonymous reviewers of the individual articles, whose role in this process has been invaluable.

Alexandra Bergholm  
Guest Editor





# Archaeology and Celtic Myth: Some Points of Comparison and Convergence<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article arises from a plenary invitation to compare myth and archaeology in the context of Celtic-speaking cultures. Approaches to myth in this context have undergone significant reassessment in the light of revisionist approaches to definitions of ‘native’ culture and ‘Celtic’ identity. These reassessments have implications for comparisons that are made between archaeological evidence and narratives, or elements thereof, that are arguably identifiable as mythic. New approaches to data in both subject areas affect roles that have long been played by myth in public reception of archaeological discoveries and in supporting cultural identities. Past approaches to such comparisons inspire caution, even scepticism, but some critical use of myth as an idea can be seen as productive – for example, in questioning conservative interpretations of textual or material data.

Keywords: *Celtic identity, archaeological thought, narratives, nativism*

At first glance there can appear to be little in common between archaeology and myth. Archaeology is a discipline increasingly concerned with its scientific dimension. Myth, by contrast, can give the impression of something elusive in quality or opposed to science. Are these elements that are even safely brought together? I am mindful that two distinguished archaeologists who recently published studies on this particular topic did so only *after* they had retired (Waddell 2014; Mallory 2016). Perhaps they are wiser than I am. But I also think back to an encounter right at the very beginning of my career when, browsing in a bookshop in Cornwall, I came across a shelf labelled ‘Occult and Celtic Archaeology’. This glimpse of how some others see us, despite our best efforts, is an enduring reminder that anyone who works on ‘Celtic’ matters lives continuously with the burden, as well

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1 This article is based on a keynote address to the conference ‘Thinking about Myth in the 21st Century’ in Edinburgh, November 2017. I would like to thank Emily Lyle and Alex Bergholm for the choice of theme, and for encouragement over a number of years. I also thank Karen Jankulak, Kristján Ahronson, and the anonymous reader for helpful suggestions – though all opinions expressed here are my own responsibility.

as the opportunity, of engaging with a spectrum of complex ideas and entrenched perceptions!

In accepting this invitation to compare studies of myth and archaeology, I am encouraged by some archaeologists who have recently questioned the tendency, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century (see Trigger 1989, 312–19), to present archaeological knowledge as discrete from the types of knowledge found in texts. Recent trends towards studying the ‘cultural biography’ of objects (Van der Noort 2011; Hingley 2011, 621f.; Andrén 2005, 107), or to contemplate religious motives for events in prehistoric travel (Samson 2006), allow new spaces for the narrative and the sacred to feature in explanation of material patterns. Whilst I do not wish to make claims of a now strong interest in myth on the part of the archaeological community – of which I am at best a peripheral member – there is at least potential here for dialogue between the two subjects. In what follows we will identify some examples of convergence of interest between archaeologists and scholars of myth. We will also reflect on whether treating some stories as ‘myths’, rather than more generally as ‘texts’, is productive in making comparisons.

### Definitions

Convergence is one thing, and should cause practitioners of the two subjects to take an interest in each other’s work, but clear definitions as well as case studies are needed if any comparison is to be more than just a glance in either direction. The term ‘myth’ is used variously in Celtic Studies to refer to extant literary narratives, putative lost myths of gods or demi-gods, and structures inherent in a shared linguistic inheritance from the distant past. The term ‘mythological’ is also used to identify a school of literary criticism in which theories of myth are applied to medieval literature.

So, how do we make a definition suitable for our comparison? Robert Segal, in his recent short study of myth, defines it as:

A story. That myth, whatever else it is, is a story may seem self-evident. After all, when asked to name myths, most of us think first of *stories* about Greek and Roman gods and heroes [...] Lévi-Strauss ventures beyond the story into the ‘structure’ of myth, but again the structure is conveyed by the story (Segal 2004, 4–5).

For Segal myths are stories ‘about something significant’ (Segal 2004, 5). The Celtic scholar Joseph F. Nagy (2018) also defines myths as significant stories,

[...] told, performed and transmitted in a special and stylised way [...] feature a shared repertoire of themes, motifs, characters and narrative procedures [...] are the stories that a society unmistakably marks as important for its members to know.

These two recent definitions broadly agree on the criteria of form and significance. We will follow them in defining myths as a type of story about something important that is often told to explain the origin or meaning of things. I would be inclined to add that myths are often *mutable* stories which can be adapted to new settings. We will put aside some older, narrower and now dated, perceptions of myth. One is that myths are stories that are generally falsified by science (see Segal 2004, 3f.), which gives rise to the popular – and incorrect – perception that ‘myths’ are by definition false explanations. Recent approaches have tended to empower myth as a tool in criticism, rather than something only opposed to, or demystified by, knowledge (Lincoln 2014, 3ff.; also Hingley 2011, 621). We will also put aside the older presumption that the sacred or supernatural element in myths necessarily derives from their having been originally stories of gods or demi-gods (Segal 2004, 5; Mallory 2016, 73f.).

Some of our criteria for myth are potentially measurable in the material record. We should be able to discern how important things were to past people from archaeology – though we should keep in mind Sir Mortimer Wheeler’s famous caveat on assessing the historical significance of Jesus from the scale of his materiality (Wheeler 1954, 213f.). Origin legends are also a type of myth that may be susceptible to archaeological assessment. Bruce Lincoln, in a northern European case study, argues that stories of origins/migrations are narratives that subsist between myth and history (Lincoln 2014, 1–6). Archaeology offers tangible data of settlement change or continuity to which legends of migration from Celtic-speaking nations can be compared and contrasted, as we will see below. It is further arguable that the presence of mythic narratives may at least be inferred from the use or placement of material things, even if we cannot recover the narratives themselves. Miranda Green suggests that narrative myths might be inferred from religious artworks with sufficiently complex iconography (Green 2015, 24). The methodology of ‘social maritime archaeology’ includes attempts to theorise the enterprise of sea travel in terms of archaeological evidence for rituals and the cosmological ideas that sup-

ported long-distance contacts – for example, the ‘otherworldly’ qualities of exotic goods (Van Der Noort 2006, 268–73, 278f.; Van Der Noort 2011, 528f.). Studies of material culture in texts also provide some useful models for inferring myths in material patterns or rituals (Clunies-Ross 1998).

We should observe that for some medieval literatures, including those in Irish and Welsh, there is a perception that the terms ‘literature’, ‘mythology’, and even ‘folklore’ are interchangeable. This assumption is certainly found in the publishing industry, but even obtains in some fields of literary criticism – for example, studies of the *Mabinogi* (see Rodway 2018; Hutton 2011). Such treatment often begs finer questions of context and chronology that are essential for any comparisons of literature with archaeology.

### **‘An indubitable “Arthur” or his ilk’**

We will begin with a case study, the ‘historical Arthur’, in which archaeology and myth have long been partnered for purposes of archaeological interpretation or public reception. The main causes here are clear enough. Myths are relatable narratives of explanation that often appeal to the layperson ahead of the social or economic theories that are characteristically applied to material data. The currency of Arthur as a figure in popular culture is also an aid to publicity. Archaeology is a comparatively expensive activity and public interest in excavations is important.

Arthur’s floruit is in a period we might describe as ‘proto-historical’ – that is, an era that is on the boundary of prehistory, or where we have written records only from some parties to an encounter. His setting, the period of Saxon expansion into the west and north, is plausible in historical terms, but he is not himself reported in contemporary sources – while today having far greater public recognition than those, such as Ambrosius or Gildas, who are. We might ask whether Arthur is a mythic rather than merely a legendary figure. Although claimed as a figure of the migration era, Arthur tends to derive his most familiar materiality from legends of later, high medieval, date – knights in ‘stove-pipe’ armour, living a courtly existence in castles of high medieval type. The Arthurian story in this way is a mutable one, adapted by the English and the Normans to symbolise their own difference, real or imagined, from other peoples. The story of Arthur is also more than just a political narrative, as Arthur is given a myth of future return. Arthur’s story in these ways fits more than one of our above criteria for a myth. This, I will note, is a separate question to older attempts to find underlying myths in Arthurian narratives (cf. Loomis 1927).

A narrative of what is known as the 'historical' Arthur as a resistance leader converges with a pattern of refortification of hilltop forts in the fifth and sixth centuries, making him a figure epitomising British resistance to Saxon settlement. Myth and archaeology long coexisted here in garnering public appeal and impact for excavations. As long ago as 1926 Sir Mortimer Wheeler, whose excavation methods are held to be foundational for the discipline of archaeology (Piggott 1977, 641), attracted controversy during excavations at Caerleon in Wales for regularly briefing reporters on 'Arthur's Round Table' (Hawkes 1982, 96ff.). Forty years later Leslie Alcock's excavations at South Cadbury (Somerset) were sponsored by a 'Camelot Research Committee' that was chaired by Wheeler, with the mythologist Geoffrey Ashe as secretary. They again attracted criticism for throwing out the name of Arthur to engage the public (Thomas 1969, 27–30; 138ff.). This certainly helped with funding. Alcock himself had begun his research campaign by accepting the historicity of Arthur – only subsequently being persuaded to accept Arthur's contingency (Alcock 1987, 173, 181, 185f.). He nevertheless came to interpret the occupation of South Cadbury in terms of what Wheeler rather paradoxically termed 'an indubitable "Arthur" or his ilk' and whom the media termed 'an Arthur-type figure' (Alcock 1972, 8).

Looking back, it is hard not to see Arthur as having been a useful – albeit a somewhat exploitative – instrument for explaining the story revealed by the excavation. South Cadbury was a pre-Roman hill fort, refortified with culturally 'Roman' features in the context of Saxon advances in the fifth/sixth century. The diagnostic dating evidence for this event was pottery of a late-Roman type imported from the Mediterranean, much of it containers for wine and oil. This fits one iteration of the 'historical' Arthur as a leader working in a decolonised environment in which warlords maintained some of the material trappings of the departed empire. An 'Arthur-type' figure nonetheless has self-evident limitations as an instrument for interpretation. What if the rebuilding of Cadbury had actually been led by a woman? Or was it a cooperative effort (Monty Python's 'anarcho-syndicalist commune' perhaps)? Thinking about the legend of Arthur might also lead us to overvalue culturally 'Roman' elements found in a post-Roman context (Faulkner 2005, 6). What if the wine was less about a thirst to stay Roman than just a thirst for wine?

Some objections raised by Alcock's contemporaries need to be understood in the context of the intellectual environment of the time. In 1966, when Alcock commenced his excavation, some archaeologists aspired to an archaeological mode of discourse which would be immune from pressure

to explain archaeology in historical – which back then was equated with textual – terms (Rahtz 1985, 3–7). In the same year that Alcock commenced work at South Cadbury Graham Clark published his famous critique of the ‘invasion hypothesis’ (Clark 1966). This highly influential article was mainly concerned with refuting a clichéd model of interpretation of material data, but in the background was a desire to throw off the influence of Classical histories over the interpretation of the European Iron Age and to think beyond the ‘migrationist’ paradigm of cultural development that their narratives inspired (see below). Another contemporary, Charles Thomas, was concerned about expectations that such quasi-historical associations raised in the public mind:

Lest the very real progress made in the last few decades in the archaeology and history of Early Christian Britain should be vitiated or discounted by any failure to produce clear-cut ‘Arthurian’ results (Thomas 1969, 30).

Interpretation in terms of literary narratives was here perceived as a serious issue for an industry that was trying to develop its own criteria for knowledge – in the face of historians who saw archaeology only as a ‘very expensive demonstration of the obvious’ (Sawyer 1983). It became axiomatic for a time that a distinct role of archaeology was as a source for people other than kings – real or legendary. This cast archaeology in something of an artificial class conflict with history. The 2012 discovery of the body of Richard III at Leicester reminds us that archaeology *can* recover famous people and even verify aspects of their appearance that one might have suspected were exaggerated by propaganda (Buckley et al. 2013, 536f.; cf. Tey 1951).

It is arguable that our ideas have changed substantially since these polemics of the 1960s, and that we are now less concerned that reference to Arthur by archaeologists will simply reify a myth – or that some existential danger would ensue if it happened to do so. In the present era the contingency of *all* information is perhaps more generally accepted than it was in 1966; reflection on myth indeed is a dimension of modern critical theory (e.g. Barthes 1972). A 2012–13 project by University of Wales Trinity Saint David on ‘The Archaeology of the Mabinogion’ appears to have passed largely without comment, as did a recent BBC documentary (2018) on ‘Arthur’s Britain’ hosted by Alice Roberts. The cinematic depiction of a late-Antique Arthur – the Arthur of archaeology – has more recently (2004) displaced the later medieval literary materialities of older films such as *Camelot* (1967) or *Excalibur* (1981), showing indeed that archaeological models can be seen to

contribute an ongoing dimension to the myth of Arthur and so do not just serve to affirm or deny its historicity. None of the above comment is to be taken as an endorsement of romantic invocations of Arthur in studies of history or archaeology, but only to reflect on a use that is already made of the story of Arthur by archaeologists.

### **Geopolitical myths**

Another proto-historic context in which the archaeology of Celtic-speaking peoples regularly comes into contact with what could be seen as 'mythic' narratives is at the beginning of the Roman era in Gaul and Germany. Passages in works by Classical writers of the first centuries BCE/CE such as Caesar, Valerius Maximus, or Ammianus Marcellinus – and, through these, lost works of Timagenes, Posidonius, Polybius, and others – explain distributions of populations, their religious practices, and social structures. The detail derives from a mixture of personal observation by Classical authors, accounts inherited from older works, and information passed by the Gauls themselves to Classical authors. Some of these accounts have qualities of myth, being stories that explain national origins through migrations that occurred in later prehistory. The archaeologist Richard Hingley, in a stimulating critique to which I will give close attention in this section, also finds qualities of myth in the complex ways in the narratives of explanation made by historians and archaeologists themselves, who

usually aim to base their myths of origin on an explicitly reasoned and critical assessment of materials from the past, whether text or object, but we all need stories to articulate the available archaeological materials (Hingley 2011, 621).

As in the 'Arthurian' era above, there is an extent to which 'myth' is possibly an inherent factor in interpretations of proto-historic migration by both ancient writers and modern scholars.

Since, in particular, the work of Colin Wells there has been a strong trend in scholarship to compare archaeology and these texts dialectically to suggest that Celtic identities in Gaul were substantially invented, or reinvented, to serve the requirements of Roman propaganda (Wells 1972, 23–30; Wells 1995, 603–20; Green 1990, 13). This interpretive model respects the disjunctions that are often evident between claims of recent migration in Classical histories and the evidence of archaeological cultures, which often shows longer patterns of continuity. Ewan Campbell (2001) has

asked similar questions about the origin story of the Scots as late-Antique migrants to north Britain.

Hingley's critique, however, proceeds from a perception that research into the late Iron Age in northern Europe was not only central to the development of modern archaeology but contributed in an ongoing way to geopolitical myths of modern identity. As we increasingly question older conceptions of 'ethnic' identity, we should acknowledge that modern identities too have deep roots in both archaeology and Classical sources, which may present us with a matrix of narratives so intertwined as to obviate the simple use of archaeology as an objective control on history (see also Webster 2015, 123). Indeed, one approach from the archaeological side has been to try to shake off labels such as 'Celt' or 'German' in developing models that are separate from the terms of dominant Classical narrative and 'culture-history' conceptions (see Trigger 1989, 148–207). Archaeological data, once used to affirm identities, are used to question or subvert such identities. Hingley, however, suggests it may not be the role of the archaeologist

to educate people to abandon their fundamental myths of origin, especially when these popular ideas are based, at least in the past, on the writings of archaeologist [*sic*] [...] the idea we should correct people's assumptions appears to be based on a pseudo-scientific idea that we, as archaeologists, have an authoritatively accurate understanding of the past (Hingley 2011, 631).

The question of 'Celtic' identity is a case in point, and one is struck by the paradoxical offering of books (James 1998; Collis 2003; cf. Sims-Williams 1998, 1–2) and exhibitions on 'Celts' which seem to question the validity of the very conception they are promoting (British Museum and Royal Museums of Scotland 2015). The selling power of the supposed myth of 'Celtic' identity subverts its supposed deconstruction. Hingley's critique appeals here for the use he makes of the concept of myth in developing a nuanced approach to the differing perspectives of prehistorians, and of Classical archaeologists and Classical historians.

I am further minded by these comparisons of archaeology and myth to reflect on whether (*pace* Hingley 2011, 319) the stories of origins conveyed by Classical writers might themselves be iterations of *native* myths that were gathered through contact with the Celtic-speaking peoples themselves (see Ó Riain 1986, 243f.). The stories of the migrations of the Belgae and Veneti (e.g. Caesar *Gallic War* II.4) are, as John Carey (1994, 2f.) cautiously observes, 'tantalisingly reminiscent of the basic framework of Irish legendary history



we find crystallised in the *Lebar Gabála*, the body of Irish origin/migration legends that can be traced from sources from around 830 CE onwards. We might see Caesar as a propagandist who invented identities for his own purposes, but might we also envisage him reifying and adapting native myths to his own ends? Recent studies by Clifford Ando (2005) and Ralph Häussler (2012) invite us to consider that later provincial encounters of Roman and native knowledge were often two-sided, not one-sided, conversations – evinced, amongst other evidence, by the fact that equations between Roman and Celtic deities are diverse rather than normative.

It has proved easy for some archaeologists to argue that conceptions such as ‘Celt’ are a myth in the sense of something false or invented, sometimes only because historic identities are not simply coterminous with archaeological cultures. Hingley’s nuanced critique respects the complexity of narratives here when we interpret origin stories against the evidence of archaeology. The origin stories from Classical and medieval histories are themselves myths with which archaeology has interacted since its inception. There is food for thought here for scholars of myth.

### **Sacred and profane seafaring**

Older paradigms of social archaeology and ‘economic’ prehistory were often reluctant to study or explain their evidence outside sublunary ideas of production and demand, except where the unexplained was sometimes deemed, often tongue-in-cheek, as ‘ritual activity’ (code for ‘I can’t think of another explanation’!). Those who knew and worked with archaeologists who were formed in the culture of the 1960s will also know that more than a few were, in the spirit of the time, rather dismissive of religion as an idea. Some recent studies of prehistory have sought to reflect on the boundary between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ behaviour in ways that appear to subvert the traditional materialist causes adduced to archaeological events. These attempts seem to be worth a brief comment as another example of where there may be possible convergences with studies of myth.

Alice Samson (2006) proposes that we might interpret offshore finds of scrap metal in the Bronze Age English Channel as deliberate votive offerings rather than ‘trade interrupted’. Her analysis considers a dataset of 18 shipwrecks from the Channel coasts of Britain, France, and Holland: eleven from the Late Bronze Age (c. 1000–700 BCE) and the others from the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1500–1000 BCE). Samson suggests that patterns of intentional damage to items as well as their proportions converge with characteristics

of inland votive deposit and speaks against their being collections of scrap metal (Samson 2006, 378ff.). This logically extends a mainland paradigm of water as a place of access to the supernatural (Bradley 2017).

Samson's thesis suggests a changing perception of the role of ideas in archaeology – a sympathy to the possibility that sacred and/or mythic conceptions may have been causes of deposition. Admittedly, some recent arguments move in the opposite direction. In the case of Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey a similar (but reverse) case has been argued by Owain Roberts (2007, 30–37), who suggested that deposits of metalwork were chance deposits by a shipwreck, contradicting an interpretation, predicated on Tacitus's historical account of Anglesey as a centre of druidic sacrifice, that they were votive deposits. These debates might be seen as at least venturing onto the same ground as studies of myth in considering sacred conceptions as a cause for action. It remains to be argued whether putative ritual deposits presuppose *myths* rather than a sea perceived as animate and requiring sacrifices. In the mid-first century BCE Greek writers such as Homer, Hesiod, and Heraclitus, whose floruit was proximate to the Late Bronze Age, invested the sea with supernatural qualities and some qualities of myth (Lindenlauf 2006). It also remains to be argued whether a comparable, or related, mythology can be inferred for early Celtic-speaking cultures in the same period.

### **Medieval Literature, Myth, and Archaeology**

In Celtic-speaking Britain and Ireland, from the period after c. 400 CE, we find another point on the proto-historic horizon at which myth potentially converges with archaeology. In Ireland and Wales, where prehistory runs to the beginning of the Middle Ages, medieval literary cycles such as the (Irish) Ulster and Mythological Cycles as well as the (Welsh) Mabinogi have frequently been used to interpret aspects of local pre- and proto-history. There is, as we have already noted, a tendency on the part of publishers and literary critics to alternate between 'myth' and 'literature' in defining these literatures. Many of the tales are explicitly situated in a prehistoric context, though this is, of course, no proof of antiquity. Archaeologists share in the tendency to see literature as myth, where such stories might appear to offer insight into monuments and patterns from Insular prehistory. The medieval British and Irish literatures are also often questionably used to interpret Classical-era religious iconography from the Continent, for which we lack any contemporary narrative exegesis (Wooding 2017).

We will not rehearse here the whole fraught debate about ‘nativism’ and ‘pagan survivals’ in medieval Celtic Studies (McCone 1990; Warmind 1992; Williams 2016; Wooding 2009). The tendency to refer to ‘myth’ in this context is, or was originally, based on the assumption that extant literature stands at the near end of a receding continuum of oral tradition. It is the present consensus of literary scholars that these literatures are in fact to be regarded – at least by default – as wholly medieval in context, and their ‘archaic’ qualities more likely to be the product of authorial art than genuine survivals from a distant past. Recent criticism has indeed progressively drawn the dating of many tales further away from the prehistoric context. On this basis many literary scholars would be minded to discourage any approach to these texts by archaeologists. The habitual use of models of myth in literary criticism also fuels scepticism. In the latter case structural theories of myth – for example, the works of Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss – often came to be used without specific reference to the ‘deep’ chronologies mythologists envisage for them. Tom Sjöblom (2004, 63f.) has suggested that such use of structural theories amounts to a ‘weak’ form of mythological criticism, used primarily because it is productive of ideas (cf. Ó Cathasaigh 2014, 42f.); mythologists themselves would argue that their ideas need to be understood holistically rather than selectively (Schjødtd 1996, 184–96; Lyle 2018). In all this one can only say that definitions of myth *and* the way in which critical theory of any type are applied in Celtic Studies could both bear more reflection.

Within this rather fraught retreat from orality and nativism there remains a need to address the extent to which our earliest extant texts may have been preceded by earlier tales, oral or written (see Padel 2013, 131), whether or not these putative earlier tales are explicitly treated as myths. These questions need to be unpacked and not treated as synonymous, even if the net outcome is that there is effectively nothing that can be said. Archaeology may have some part to play here, as it does in the comparable problems of the ‘Homeric question’ of early Greek studies.

James Mallory, in a recent monograph, takes a detailed approach to chronologies and the problem of transmission (Mallory 2016, 60–74). He is inclined to favour the definition of the medieval tales as literature rather than myth in the first instance, but reflects in detail on comparisons with myth and Homeric proto-history. As a basis for testing whether the contents are likely to contain archaic survivals, Mallory’s main instrument is to assess whether the *mise en scène* of extant texts is contemporary or in some way atavistic. This he achieves through a detailed comparison of material descrip-

tions in texts with archaeological finds. Deliberate anachronism in creating material settings is, of course, not uncommon in literature and is part of the creative element of writing (Mallory 2016, 74f.; cf. Orwell 1946, 165). Mallory provides a robust hermeneutic to test the contemporaneity of settings (Mallory 2016, 130f., 229–53). His work in this context is distinguished by its use of chronological frameworks and benchmarks, tracking ‘start and end date to fix an object in time’ (Mallory 2016, 77). Mallory mostly fights against claims of long survival of descriptions of earlier events or artefacts in the medieval narratives – such as Kenneth Jackson’s famous thesis of a ‘window on the Iron Age’ (1963) to explain apparent archaisms in the Ulster Cycle (see also Mallory 1986). For example, he finds the material culture of the *Táin bó Cuailnge* consistent with the broadly late first millennium CE context envisaged for its composition; earlier than the extant versions, but later than the prehistoric era to which it is self-ascribed. Mallory still allows that a case such as the Corlea trackway (second century BCE) gives pause. Here the dates – presumably medieval conjectures – assigned in the ‘prehistoric’ Irish annals to King Eochaid Airem converge disarmingly with dendro-chronological dates from the excavated timbers. Eochaid, in the medieval Irish tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (‘ Wooing of Étaín’), is said to have built a trackway across the same bogland (Mallory 2016, 275; Green 2015, 16f.). Mallory’s approach thus appeals for its robust empirical model as well as his explicit reflections on myth as a genre.

John Waddell (2014) makes use of the concept of ‘Celtic myth’ in an adventurous monograph based on his Rhind Lectures for 2014. Here he makes broad comparisons between prehistory and tales from medieval literature, proceeding from the premise that in some of these tales ‘survival of archaic mythic themes and pagan concepts is not in doubt’ (Waddell 2014, 5). Waddell has made major contributions to the study of ‘royal’ and/or ritual sites in early Ireland. As these major prehistoric centres feature in the medieval literary tradition, it might at least seem reasonable that he should make approaches to this tradition, but for it to convey valid information of the prehistoric use of these sites would require transmission of ideas across a long distance in time. Waddell begins by admitting the virtual impossibility of dissecting the putative myths from the medieval context of their transmission, thus rather casting doubt on his whole approach at the outset (Waddell 2014, 5f.). His monograph has, accordingly, received mixed reviews, which in some cases identify him as taking a dated ‘nativist’ perspective (e.g. Casey 2015; Karl 2016; Williams 2017). I will not attempt to unravel the many issues with Waddell’s approach that the reviews reasonably raise, but it may be

pertinent here to reflect on the disciplines' different priorities. Prehistorians deal in much longer sweeps of time than the increasingly narrow chronologies allowed for the floruit of the medieval narratives. Waddell's study, for me at least, despite its rather brief reflection on myth, is useful in showing the contrast between the sorts of continuities of culture that on the one hand prehistorians envisage across long phases of prehistory, and on the other the discontinuity that many medievalists perceive in the transition to Christianity (Bradley 1995; Bradley 2017, 180–98).

Miranda Green is another distinguished archaeologist who has approached medieval sources on the premise that they preserve fragments of older religious ideas (Green 1990; 1994). Green, like Mallory, takes a cautious approach to the survival of data from past contexts. From the outset she notes the limits of potential data of Celtic religion from medieval texts, which describe beings who are plausibly seen as euhemerised gods, but present little detail that could possibly be construed as an inheritance of pre-Christian ritual – something Anders Andrén also observes concerning medieval Icelandic literature (Green 1986, 17; Andrén 2005, 106). Green does find evidence for continuity between prehistoric archaeology and medieval literature at the level of iconography in such imagery as horses, human heads, cauldrons, and triplism. Her model for survival might be described as atomised, as any symbolism coming through into the medieval literature is presumed to be in a stripped-down state, in some ways comparable to the Indo-European model of transmission of structures (Schjødt 1996). Where does this leave myth? We should note that Green's model does not really presume a narrative dimension to early Celtic religion, as she presents it as broadly animistic (Green 1989, 2f.), hence not requiring the presence of myths, as we have defined them above, as stories. Green does define the extant medieval literature as a 'mythic literature', explicitly 'post-pagan' in context (Green 1992, 14; 2015, 25). She dates the creation of this literature to the late first millennium CE (Green 2015, 17), though she allows that there may have been older, oral, forms of medieval stories (Green 2015, 24). The medieval literature is undeniably a narrative context, though one wonders if it is necessary to define it as a 'mythic' context at all – in contrast, say, to the more traditional nativist model in which extant tales are held to be derived from older versions that would have more obviously evinced the characteristics of myths (Mac Cana 1977, 24–31).

The approaches of Mallory, Waddell, and Green, whatever shortcomings critics may find in them, are attempts at assessing a scholarly model that has persistently connected prehistoric centuries with medieval narratives – with an attendant use of the term 'myth'. Whether thinking in terms of myth is

productive in any of these cases is arguable, but some reflection on the use of the term is inevitable, given its ubiquity in past debates. There may also be a heuristic value in thinking in terms of myth here. Mallory, in a review of Green's book *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, contrasts Dumézil's mythic interpretation of the image of Esus on the Paris Altar with Green's (1989, 103–104) animistic one. Mallory observes in this case that

While the Dumézilian interpretation may hardly convince, it does remind us that religious iconography may also be mythic, that is, narrative in origin and I wonder if a survey of Germanic religious art would be content to abstract Thor's hammer or the Midgard serpent into symbols of protection or fertility (Mallory 1991, 249; also cf. Puhvel 1987, 170ff.; cf. Tolkien 1964, 26f.).

The mythologist's model, as Mallory demonstrates, has the virtue at least of helping us to imagine that there may have been narratives surrounding these motifs. The latter point becomes important when we reflect on treatments of Gaulish/Celtic religion that were made across the twentieth century. The archaeologist Terence Powell, for example, assessed the character of pre-Christian Celtic religion as something short of a 'clear-cut body of belief' and characteristic of a 'primitive' culture, echoing historical assessments by Anton van Hamel (Bacon 1913; van Hamel 1934; Powell 1958, 115; critical responses by Rees 1966, 37f.; Mackey 1992). There is a danger of positivism in studies confined to single categories of data. If it is difficult to recover stories from artefacts and if artefacts are the only expression surviving from a culture, we need to be cautious that we do not find absence of evidence to be evidence of absence. Green herself makes this point concerning the temptation to see some innovations in Celtic religion as coterminous with the Graeco-Roman context in which they are first expressed (Green 1989, 1, 224; Green 1995, 140). Considering myth, whether or not on the basis of much evidence, is again a counterbalance to reconstructing prehistoric cultures on purely materialist models (see also Hingley 2011, 626).

### **Concluding thoughts**

The foregoing has presented some brief comparisons of Celtic myth and archaeology, taking account of the evolving histories of the two subjects, as well as where archaeologists have approached the topic of myth in the context of Celtic-speaking peoples. Studies of Celtic myths bear a weight of justifiable scepticism arising from past scholarship, as does the mixing of

legend and archaeology in contemporary media (Anderson 2018). In such an environment no one should venture a comparison lightly. Reflection on myth, however, taking a broad definition of the term, has contributed productively to deconstructions of positivistic thinking and claims of objectivity for one category of evidence over another. Myths are also found to be potent triggers for engaging the public in a discipline, archaeology, that is public facing. We need to be sympathetic to the different perspectives of each subject. The pre-/proto-historic centuries are legitimately the territory of the archaeologist, whose perspective, in contrast with that of the medievalist, begins with evidence from those periods (cf. Williams 2016, 48). The thinking of some archaeologists now exhibits points of convergence with the territory of mythologists. There is certainly food for thought here for those who have interests in both subjects.

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# The Materiality of Myth: Divine Objects in Norse Mythology

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## Abstract

The vivid presence of material objects in Scandinavian cosmology, as preserved in the Old Norse myths, carries underexplored traces of belief systems and the material experience of Iron Age Scandinavia (400–1000 CE). This paper proposes an archaeological reading of Norse mythology to help explain how ancient Scandinavians understood the presence and role of deities, magic, and the supernatural in everyday life. The Norse myths retain records of material objects that reinforced Scandinavian oral traditions and gave their stories power, memory, and influence. From Thor’s hammer and Freyja’s feathered cloak to Sigyn’s bowl and Ran’s net, such materials and the stories they colour are informed by everyday objects of Iron Age life – spun with the magic, belief, and narrative traditions that made them icons. The mythic objects promoted a belief system that expected and embraced the imperfections of objects, much like deities. These imperfections in the divine Norse objects and the ways in which the gods interact with their materials are part and parcel of the Scandinavian religious mentality and collective social reality. This work ultimately questions the relationship between materiality and myth, and seeks to nuance our current understandings of the ancient Scandinavian worldview based on the available textual evidence.

*Keywords: materiality, mythological objects, Roland Barthes, religion, Iron Age Scandinavia, Norse mythology, pre-Christian belief*

For this paper I am interested in how a study of the Norse myths that focuses on the material objects mentioned in these texts might nuance our understandings of Scandinavian belief during the Iron Age (400–1000 CE). Scandinavian cosmology, beliefs, and religious attitudes remain both an intriguing and elusive topic for specialists of Old Norse language and culture. To the ancient Scandinavian mind the spatial and temporal realms of the gods and supernatural entities and those of humans often coexisted and overlapped. Largely over the last decade scholars have explored how ancient Scandinavians would have understood the presence and role of deities, magic, and the supernatural in daily life (see e.g. DuBois 1999;

Sanmark 2002; Steinsland 2005; Dobat 2006; Price 2007; Andrén 2014). The Norse myths in particular offer opportunities for an insight into the Scandinavians' interaction with their mythology in everyday life, such as their engagement with mortuary performance and ritual (Price 2010), the slaughter practices for cattle in Scandinavian dairy economies – possibly with reference to the mythical cow Auðhumla whose milk sustains the giant Ymir (Dubois 2012), the participation of the warring berserkers and *úlfheðnar* in the cult of Odin (Schjødt 2011), and the eating of horsemeat in dedication to the gods (Þorgilsson and Benediktsson 1968, ch. 7; McKinnell et al. 2004, 54–56; O'Donoghue 2007, 62).

The Norse myths are 'sacred tales' (Kirk 1984, 57) that can shed light on the religious beliefs and embedded mentalities of the ancient Scandinavians. Scholarship has often applied a palimpsest metaphor to critique the surviving textual sources of these Scandinavian myths, namely because many of these texts were authored by later medieval Christian writers centuries after the period they claim to depict. Within this framework scholars perceive the agenda and aesthetics of the Christian writers as a problem and argue that only after scraping away the thirteenth-century Christian layer can we pursue the true 'essence' of Iron Age pagan belief (cf. DuBois 1999, 174). Indeed, it is productive to properly distinguish the mythological tales from the media – iconographic, textual, material, or oral – through which they are preserved. However, the literary corpus containing Scandinavian mythological information reveals a much more complicated and diverse array of texts than the palimpsest metaphor suggests, requiring different evaluations and considerations from the historian: (1) The early non-Norse texts (including Tacitus, Ibn Fadlan, and Adam of Bremen) feature foreign authors who were contemporaries of the pagan Scandinavians but, as outsiders, were probably prone to misunderstanding pagan belief or to be misinformed. (2) A small number of runic inscriptions also offer contemporary sources for Iron Age pagan belief and were written by the Scandinavians themselves, making them ideal sources from a source-critical perspective. However, their (sometimes fragmented) content is often difficult to interpret with any certainty, and in cases where the inscriptions also involve images they require multidisciplinary interpretations. (3) Early skaldic poetry attributed to pre-Christian Scandinavian poets similarly provides contemporary source material, with the caveat that certain passages or stanzas may have been subject to later medieval emendations and redactions (Whaley 2009–2017). (4) Eddic poetry contains obvious mythological material, but the dating and origin of most Eddic poems remain uncertain. (5) The texts of the thirteenth-

century Icelander Snorri Sturluson, *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*, remain a valuable source for much of our knowledge of Norse mythology. These texts, authored by a single expert with his own motivations and biases, are coloured by Snorri's Christian outlook, and he mischaracterises Scandinavian pagan belief as a single coherent religion, whereas Iron Age belief was more likely a diverse aggregation of regional and local religious practices, beliefs, and traditions (cf. Sanmark 2002).

This brief survey of textual sources containing mythological content or information thus reminds us that these sources cannot be evaluated with a one-size-fits-all methodology or theoretical approach. Rather, they must be weighed against their individual historical contexts, authorship, and intended purposes. Frustrated by these complications outlined above, scholars until recently have rejected the textual material as a valid source for Scandinavian pagan belief, because from a source-critical perspective the source material should be contemporaneous with the time and society it claims to represent. However, given the constraints and complexities of the Scandinavian and foreign texts, scholars can benefit from *Annales* methodologies and interpretations of the *longue durée*, including structures of religious belief and mentalities, which require different analytical tools, pose different questions, and, most importantly, suggest alternative and innovative uses of the sources (cf. Braudel 1966; Hedeager 2011).

Historians of religion, of course, contend with persistent and very slow-changing structures of worldviews over a timespan of several centuries. For the purpose of investigating Scandinavian systems of belief, the Old Norse myths, compiled a few centuries after the Iron Age as a synthesis of diverse oral traditions, still contain the deep mentalities and structures of the older Scandinavian culture. Margaret Clunies Ross (1998, 12–13) has termed these long-lasting mentalities 'mythic schemas', arguing that even after their conversion to Christianity the medieval Icelanders retained their pre-Christian beliefs as a frame of reference by which to understand and represent human life and behaviour. Such 'mythic schemas' are similarly preserved in the mythological material, reflecting the transmission of Nordic poetic traditions over many generations. The textual corpus of Norse mythology therefore presents certain records of past oral performances (Gunnell 1995, 182–85; Mitchell 2001; Gunnell 2011, 17).

The oral transmission of Norse mythology prior to its textual composition constitutes just one layer through which information about ancient Scandinavian beliefs is remembered, negotiated, and transmitted across centuries. The Norse myths similarly retain records of materials in the past

that reinforced Scandinavian oral traditions and gave the stories power, memory, and influence: Thor's hammer; Freyja's feathered cloak; Odin's spear; Loki's magic shoes.<sup>1</sup> These materials and the stories they colour are informed by everyday objects of Iron Age life, spun with magic, belief, religion, and narrative tradition that ultimately make them icons. After all, 'pots and poetry' were created and used by the same societies and thus belong to the same cultural context of ancient Scandinavia (Morris 2000, 27; Hedeager 2011, 3).

An archaeological reading of the Norse myths would therefore complement the interdisciplinary work required for exposing the 'mythic schemas' of the Norse world. It is my departure to claim that the vivid presence of *materials* in the Norse cosmology, preserved in literary form, carry hitherto underexplored representations of collective belief systems and the material experience of pagan Scandinavia. After an overview of material perspectives on mythology I will present a material reading of Norse mythology and will show how mythic objects promote a belief system that not only relies on materials but fully expects them to be imperfect tools. Indeed, the imperfections evident in divine objects and the ways in which the gods interact with materials are part and parcel of the Norse religious mentality as well as collective social reality.

### **The material turn in mythology studies**

Over the last few decades scholarship has witnessed a 'material turn' in the literary and historical disciplines. The correlation between mythology and its impact on ritual have long been discussed in case-specific anthropological studies (cf. Rivière 1969), but more general theoretical discourse on the topic remains rather limited. Nevertheless, many of the theoretical treatments of the objects central to mythology studies have been anticipated by anthropology and materiality studies. This paper will not attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of the development of perspectives in these fields but will instead briefly explore some areas in which these approaches are especially relevant for mythologists.

Scholarly interest in materiality and materials largely stems from a body of sociological work on the consumption of objects and consumerist culture. Such scholarship dates at least to the writings of Karl Marx, who understood objects as 'commodities', generated within a system of capitalist

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1 I have chosen to anglicise Old Norse spellings of proper names unless otherwise noted for greater ease of access for both Old Norse specialists and a more general audience.



social relations (Marx 1988 [1844]). Marx's nineteenth-century contemporaries at academic institutions and museums similarly saw objects as direct representations of knowledge. They believed that such knowledge plainly resided in the objects themselves, and the mere collection and organisation of objects could therefore display the sum of the world's knowledge, a phenomenon known as 'object-based epistemology' (Conn 2000). After the late nineteenth century, anthropologists, archaeologists, and museum practitioners began to direct their attention away from typologically oriented studies of objects and instead pursued questions concerning the nature of the *relations* between people and objects as the source of cultural knowledge.

To theorise the relationship between people and objects, especially in the context of myth, scholars looked to the role of language. The mid-twentieth-century semioticians Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, applied language as a metaphor for culture and extended the analogy to cultural objects. They argued that a structuralist approach could decode objects in much the same process as if they were a language of signs and symbols (Lévi-Strauss 1978; Barthes 1957). This perspective rejected the Marxist view of objects as obscure representations of consumerism in favour of objects' symbolic value. Barthes, to whom I will return later, applied the structuralist approach directly to myth in his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957), emphasising the mythic meanings of objects and their ability to propagate certain mythologies within mass consumerist culture.

Structuralism was met with criticism for its limitations in distinguishing just two aspects of material objects, namely their 'double lives' as both functions and signs (Baudrillard 1998), and the reduction of social relations between humans and objects to the exchange of objects as signs and commodities (Dant 1999, 28–29). The subsequent poststructuralist movement paid more attention to the ability of objects, within their specific cultural and historical contexts, to reinforce cultural values and social attitudes. Bourdieu's early study of taste (1984) examined the role of objects as markers of aesthetic and cultural value. He claimed that aesthetic choice played a significant role in reproducing social inequality, for taste was thoroughly engrained and socially learned. For mythology and religious studies this perspective suggests that social hierarchies play a role in the negotiation and display of belief, particularly as objects themselves inform and reinforce multiple layers of aesthetic choice, belief, and status in a society.

Contemporary approaches to the study of materials have led to a debate about agency. Foucauldian notions of power have generated discussion of the role of objects in discourses and networks of power, as well as how

objects can influence human action. Such work has contributed to the development of actor-network theory (ANT), which claims that objects define and mediate the cultural networks of humans and materials in which they are situated. Objects in turn influence network interactions, affording them purpose and meaning within a system of social relations (Law 2009). Materiality studies continues to refine discussion on the nature of objects within networks of humans and other objects, as well as their social meaning in everyday life. These perspectives rely on the conviction that objects indeed *matter* in theorising culture (Woodward 2007, 28) and that understanding the 'social lives' of objects is key to its study (Kopytoff 1986). Recent trends such as Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory' in literary studies and Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter' have promoted the interdisciplinary study of human-material relations, with added emphasis on avoiding the human-subject, material-object dichotomy (Brown 2001; Brown 2003; Bennett 2010; cf. Miller 2005).

Exactly how we can recover cultural information from objects (Miller 1987; Riggins 1994), and how objects reinforce and negotiate the societies that depend on these materials (Hodder 2012, 16) still generates much debate. For the present purpose it is worth noting that if belief systems are bound with these interconnected cultural networks consisting of humans and objects, we may assume that myth, religion, and thought are similarly influenced by the social nature and influence of objects in these networks. Mythic and conceptual schemas, as discussed earlier, organise human knowledge because they structure human comprehension, interpretation, and the representation of experience (Clunies Ross 1998). Furthermore, material objects figure prominently in a society's embedded schemas, generated and negotiated over generations.

### **Objects, mass culture, and mythic structure**

The theoretical underpinnings of material culture studies find relevance in work on materials in mythology and belief. Materials, as the previous section has shown, can offer key insights into individual human actors through an examination of the relations between objects and humans. But what about the relations between objects and *gods*? I will now explore mythological narratives and the literary 'divine objects' that reflect not only the cultural context of their creators and owners, but their connection with and reinforcement of sacred practice and belief.

The archaeological and anthropological disciplines have long established the study of materials as a crucial point of entry into understanding

cultures and ideologies, not least religion (cf. DeMarrais et al. 2004). This gap in interdisciplinary approaches to religion, however, has hindered understandings of belief systems, especially in historical contexts where the source material, as is the case for ancient Scandinavia, is already quite limited. It has been established that 'material culture is active', that objects can act and influence humans, and that the exchange of objects themselves promotes the construction of social relationships (Hodder 1994, 395). The study of objects is therefore not merely informative but also vital to any study of the mythic structures that mediate and influence human behaviour. The relationship between myth and materiality in ancient Scandinavia has been highlighted in Hedeager's book *Iron Age Myth and Materiality* (2011), in which she argues for the interdisciplinary interpretation of textual and material culture as two modes of expression that in the case of Old Norse culture represent two different temporalities, but nevertheless reproduce much the same cosmological structures in action (Hedeager 2011, 1). In addition to text, materials provide another layer with which audiences have interacted throughout the transmission of the mythic tales.

Roland Barthes was one of the most prominent theorists to discuss the connection between materiality and mythology. His book *Mythologies* exposed the mythic meanings inherent in the material culture of consumer societies. Barthes understood myth as a semiological system consisting of pure matter and its social usage. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's position that humans use objects to construct and assign meanings, Barthes argued that commodities, even those with seemingly little personal or cultural value, were loaded with symbolic essence. More specifically, objects contained information about the prevalent ideological myths of the bourgeois culture that created and exchanged them, and were therefore fundamental for an insight into these bourgeois 'mythologies'. In other words materials allow us to uncover the 'language' inherent in the ideological system of capitalism. For instance, toys are common objects that contain encoded myths and ideologies of the modern adult world that are imparted to children, who will later replicate these beliefs and ways of engaging with the world (Barthes 1957, 71). Objects, therefore, act as containers of the mythologies of mass culture.

Barthes' thesis establishes the mythic meanings latent in objects, which has clear implications for mythology studies: material objects are essential to theorising the very nature of myth and ideological structures. The role of materials is supposedly immaterial, provided that myth, according to Barthes, 'economizes intelligence, it understands reality more cheaply:

“mythology” does not hesitate to apply to aesthetic realities which it deems, on the other hand, to partake of an immaterial essence’ (Barthes 1957, 268). Through use of structuralist tools the mythologist can identify how materials conceal the exploitation involved in their production under the guise of mythologies. Myth consequentially rejects all complexity and dialectics, and instead fashions a world without contradictions to establish ‘a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves’ (Barthes 1957, 143). Barthes’ assertion challenged his contemporary Claude Lévi-Strauss’s argument that myth’s purpose was rather to reconcile contradictory ideas (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 443; cf. Segal 2017, 22). Even more provocatively, Barthes insists that certain objects are capable of transcending human complexities and imperfections. He takes the Citroën DS as his example, suggesting that the car is ‘almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic Cathedrals’, a divine-like object that presents itself as a great creation of its time and with a striking absence of human input (1957, 88). For Barthes, the immaculate Citroën marks an important deviation from other industrial objects that betray their human-influenced creation. As Barthes concludes of his automobile mythology, ‘the object is the supernatural’s best messenger: there is easily a perfection and an absence of origin [...] [A]s for the material itself, there is no question that it promotes a taste for lightness in a magical sense’ (Barthes 1957, 170).

I would like to further probe Barthes’ claims here regarding the perfection of material objects and the mythologies that propagate this illusion, and to question whether any object – physical or literary – is truly capable of embodying such perfection. It is also the intention of this paper to complicate Barthes’ argument by reflecting on the ways in which the representation of objects in literature and mythology is just as much entangled in mythical structures and narratives as physical materials – indeed, the physical cultural object and its literary counterpart are inevitably related. Barthes’ theory would suggest that objects depicted in texts are also intentionally made to be refined and perfected, and are origin-less renditions of their crude physical manifestations. This idea of the flawless literary object is taken up in structuralist approaches that explore the ways in which the material properties of objects operate in their surroundings as signs (Manning and Meneley 2008, 286). The literary object can only *resemble* or *represent* a physical one, and the subjectivity of language enables textual representations of material things to signify abstract meanings as the ‘perfect’ version of the object. This assumption foregrounds the function of objects in cosmological narratives and requires further examination. To do this, I will apply Barthes’ theory

to mythical objects present in Norse mythology. Christopher Abram (2011, 80) has suggested that the Norse myths are 'just stories', not unmediated expressions of religious belief. By applying a material focus to the Norse mythological corpus, I intend to nuance this interpretation. Mythical objects, like their divine creators and owners, are deeply rooted in the minds and daily experience of the ancient Scandinavians. While the myths are certainly not unmediated sources of belief, they are not simply stories that lack the complexities of the ancient belief system. We may still find fundamental truth in the myth-making process that unfolded within the framework of centuries-old traditions in a situated cultural context (Price 2012, 14). The materials and objects of the Norse gods we will encounter demonstrate the depth and extent of the Scandinavian worldview underpinning the mythic narratives.

### **Material objects in Norse myths**

Norse studies have considered material objects predominantly in the context of gift giving in Iron Age and medieval Scandinavian societies (Miller 1986; Sheehan 2013). Mauss's (1954 [1923]) classic sociological study of gift exchange argued that the exchange of objects in ancient societies built social relationships through reciprocity and the maintenance of social capital. *Hávamál* (stanza 42) famously reinforces the importance of reciprocity in ancient Scandinavia, dictating that 'with his friend a man should be friends and give gift for gift' (*Vin sínum / skal maðr vinr vera / ok gjalda gjöf við gjöf*). Less commonly, others have examined particular objects in the mythological corpus, such as *Mjölnir*, Thor's hammer (Lindow 1994), and the mythic significance of the whetstone, which highlighted the social meanings of objects underlying their utilitarian functions (Mitchell 1985). In a few exceptional studies scholars approach such mythic materials not as objects per se but as linguistic techniques that colour the narratives. Early Old Norse scholar Rasmus Bjørn Anderson noted the metaphorical language that prevails throughout the Old Norse texts. The Norse poet, he observed, identified objects not by their name but through the construction of complex metaphors, borrowed from mythological figures:

Thus he would call the sky the skull of the giant Ymer; the rainbow he called the bridge of the gods; gold was the tears of Freya; poetry, the present or drink of Odin. The earth was called indifferently the wife of Odin, the flesh of Ymer, the daughter of night, the vessel that floats on the ages, or the founda-

tion of the air; herbs and plants were called the hair or the fleece of the earth. A battle was called a bath of blood, the hail of Odin (Anderson 1875, 123).

Scholars have long since analysed the poetics of Old Norse texts, especially skaldic poetry, for their linguistic complexities, and the mythic corpus is certainly no exception. However, Anderson's reduction of the mythic materials to simply 'metaphorical language' obscures an otherwise apparent Scandinavian interest in the materials themselves. The Scandinavians chose objects specifically to describe their world as they experienced it. An examination of these objects thereby offers an important opening into the worldview of Iron Age Scandinavia.

I will thus explore material objects as the Norse mythological texts present them, while remaining conscious of the considerations and limitations that each textual source presents. Structures such as buildings or even landscapes, which are sometimes treated in anthropological discussions, are not considered in the scope of this study but remain a fruitful area for future research. This work does not claim to present a universal reading of Norse mythic material culture; rather, it recognises the diversity of Scandinavian religious belief. It is worth underscoring that certain objects would have found varying degrees of resonance across regional and local Scandinavian societies at different points in space and time. In contrast, this work relies on a synthesis of cultural and religious traditions surrounding materials across nearly a millennium. I will examine how material objects are created, move, and exchange owners in the mythic narratives and thus reflect the ever-changing worldview of the Iron Age Scandinavians who negotiated and transmitted these stories.

A discussion of materiality in Norse mythology could not find a more fitting introduction than the infamous trickster deity, Loki, who procures the treasured gifts of the gods in connection with replacing the golden hair of the goddess Sif. The sons of the dwarf Ivaldi fashion six items for the Aesir in a contest for the recognition of the most precious object: Sif's golden headpiece; Odin's spear *Gungnir* and his ring *Draupnir*; Thor's hammer *Mjölhnir*; and Frey's boar Gullinborsti and ship *Skidbladnir*. Loki presents the objects to the gods and explains their virtues:

The spear would never stop its thrust; and the hair would grow to the flesh as soon as it came upon Sif's head, and *Skíðblaðnir* would have a favoring breeze as soon as the sail was raised, in whatever direction it might go, but could be folded together, like a cloth and be kept in one's pouch if that was

desired. Then Brokkr brought forward his precious things. He gave to Odin the ring and said that every ninth night eight rings of the same weight would drop from it...Then he gave Thor the hammer, and said that Thor might strike as hard as he desired, whatever might be before him, and the hammer would not fail; and if he threw it at anything, it would never miss, and never fly so far as not to return to his hand (*Skáldskaparmál* I, 42, lines 20–34).

*Geirrinn nam aldri staðar í lagi, en haddrinn var holdgróinn þegar er hann kom á höfuð Sif, en Skíðbládnir hafði byr þegar er segl kom á lopt, hvert er fara skyldi, en mátti vefja saman sem dúk ok hafa í pung sér ef þat vildi. Þá bar fram Brokkr sína gripi. Hann gaf Óðni hringinn ok sagði at ina niundu hverja nótt mundi drjúpa af honum átta hringar jafnhöfgir sem hann...Þá gaf hann Þór hamarrinn ok sagði at hann mundi mega ljósta svá stórt sem hann vildi, hvat sem fyrir væri, ok eigi mundi hamarrinn bila, ok ef hann vyrpi honum til þá mundi hann aldri missa, ok aldri fljúgja svá langt at eigi mundi hann sækja heim hönd.*

The *Skáldskaparmál* passage identifies four material objects (*Gungnir*, *Draupnir*, *Mjöltnir*, and *Skíðbládnir*) and provides a provenance of their creation in both space and time. The text attests to the magical qualities of each material, from the spear and hammer that never fail to miss their target to the replicating ring and the grand ship, constructed with such skill of the dwarfs that it can fold up into a cloth (*Gylfaginning* 36, lines 15–22). However, most of the material objects with which the Norse gods interact find no such explanation of their creation or origin anywhere in the myths. *Sórla þáttr* refers to a euphemised version of Freyja, whose necklace, named Necklace of the Brisings in other texts, was made by the dwarfs Dvalinn, Alfrik, Berling, and Grer (Nordal 1944–45). The necklace's provenance remains the only known exception to the plethora of mythic objects lacking any textual reference to their origin. Based on the surviving texts, most materials simply already exist in mythic time. *Gylfaginning* describes the Gjallarhorn, for instance, as an instrument belonging to the god Heimdall, though it also maintains some associations with Mimir. Heimdall drinks from Mimir's well with Gjallarhorn and, as the owner of the object, will one day blow Gjallarhorn to signal Ragnarok, the end of the world (*Gylfaginning* 50, lines 22–24). Despite the object's importance at a pivotal moment in the Norse cosmological cycle, the texts remain silent on Gjallarhorn's origin. This observation anticipates Barthes' theory on objects and suggests that the Norse myths mediate mainly timeless materials that strive to retain their mythical, decidedly inhuman-like, qualities. Interestingly, while Gjallarhorn does not occupy any definitive

time until Ragnarok, the instrument maintains special spatial connotations. In *Völuspá* stanza 46 the narrator describes the time of Ragnarok, when the god Heimdall loudly blows the old Gjallarhorn (*miotuðr kyndiz / att ino gamla Giallarhorni; / hátt blæss Heimdallr, horn er á lopti*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 11). John Lindow (2001, 143–44) similarly suggests that the Gjallarhorn, like the Gjallarbru, may be associated with the river Gjoll, which flowed from the Hvergelmir, like Mimir’s well, a spring near the centre of the cosmos. The Gjallarhorn’s spatial association with the mythic landscape, indeed the heart of the Norse universe, imparts a palpable infinite and sacred quality that situates the object outside the ebb and flow and time, and therefore distinct from the temporal materials of humankind. Unsurprisingly, the Norse myths appear to characterise most objects handled by the gods in a similar manner. Further analysis of the movement, function, and characteristics of mythic objects (see Table 1 in appendix) sheds new light on their role in the Norse cosmological narratives.

In the Old Norse myths materials achieve mobility either through formalised gift exchange or from the illicit breaking of the bond between owner and object in relation to theft. The only exceptions to this rule appear to be Freyja’s cloak and necklace, objects that temporarily move from owner to an alternative user when the goddess lends them to Loki and Thor respectively. The nature of gift exchange in the myths is illustrated, for instance, by Frey’s sword. The story of Frey’s wooing of the giantess Gerdr survives in a number of attestations in the texts. Frey dispatches his servant Skirnir to pursue her and in exchange for this errand bequeaths his magic sword to the boy (*Gylfaginning* 31, lines 21–22). In *Skirnismál* stanza 9 Frey explains to Skirnir that the sword magically fights on its own ‘if wise be he who wields it’ (*ef sá er horscr, er hefir*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 71). *Völuspá* stanza 52, meanwhile, is more interested in the repercussions of this object exchange, warning that ‘Surt comes from the south with branches-ruin, / the slaughter-gods’ sun glances from his sword’ (*Surtr ferr sunnan með sviga lævi, scínn af sverði sól valtíva*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 12). The subject of ‘sword’ in this passage remains notably ambiguous, and could also translate as ‘from the sword of the gods’. Sigurður Nordal (1923) interpreted this passage as an indication that Surtr slays Frey with the same sword he once exchanged for Gerdr. In either case the trade of the magic sword leaves Frey weaponless at Ragnarok, as is also implied in *Lokasenna* stanza 42, and the myths unequivocally consider its transfer of owners a tragic exchange. Frey’s sword thus exemplifies the importance the Scandinavians placed on the status of ownership in their mythology.



Freyja's magical necklace of the Brisings provides further insight into the significance of material ownership. It is unclear who the 'Brisings' were, but *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* unambiguously associate the ownership of the men and the necklace bearing their name with Freyja. In *Þrymskviða* stanza 13 the necklace assumes Freyja's very emotions: the object jerks when Freyja is angered at the prospect of travelling to Jötunheim. The necklace is clearly associated with Freyja's ownership, for Thor borrows the necklace to assume Freyja's disguise (*Þrymskviða*, stanza 19). Loki's theft of the necklace is therefore starkly noted in *Skáldskaparmál*, where he is introduced as the 'thief of the giants, of the goat, of the Brisings' (*þjófr jötna, hafrs ok Brisingamens*) (Faulkes 1998, 20, lines 3–4), as well as in stanza 9 of the early skaldic poem *Haustlög* by Thjóðólf of Hvin, which refers to Loki as the 'hoop-thief of Brising's people', an apparent reference to his theft of the necklace (Lindow 2001, 89). Owners of objects are often explicitly noted in the myths. The narrators are therefore highly attentive to the strict disregard for ownership, as is evidenced by the identification of Loki as a thief.

The exchange of objects between owners as a formal transaction frequently occurs in the Norse myths and perhaps exposes a thread of Iron Age Scandinavian attitudes towards objects. After all, the myths mention only three objects in which the user is *never* the object's owner: Freyja's cloak; Frey's sword; and Draupnir (see Table 1). The rarity of an owner not explicitly using his or her own object cannot be overlooked and indicates the close association of an object with its owner and vice versa. The naming of objects further accentuates this claim. Objects are seldom referred to by their standard, generalised name. Instead, they bear distinct personal names of their own – Draupnir, Odrerir, Rati, and Skidbladnir, to cite a few. Scholars have examined the poetic discourse surrounding weapons in Norse culture, devoting most attention to the names of swords (Drachmann 1967), but much less research has attended more broadly to the ancient Scandinavian practice of naming objects. Yet in Norse cosmology a hammer is rarely just a hammer or a ring just a ring. Even Odin's auger, the tool he uses to drill for Suttung into the deepest mountain to claim the mead of poetry features its own name, Rati. The evidence suggests that Scandinavians recognised and attributed enough great meaning to objects in cosmic and mundane realities to warrant the act of supplying personal names.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Objects did not need always to be associated with mythology to be given names. For example, certain weapons in the saga literature bore personal names, such as Fótbitr in the *Laxdæla saga* and the spear Grásíða in the *Gísla saga*.

In examining how mythical objects mediate belief structures, it is noteworthy that nearly all objects in the Norse myths contain magical properties. At the same time the objects of the gods are not perfect, ethereal renditions of their manmade counterparts. As previously discussed, *Skáldskaparmál* details the presentation of the six treasures of the gods. However, more interestingly and far less commented on is the scene that immediately follows. In a wager that risked Loki's head the dwarfs win and attempt to capture him. The text indicates that Loki was by this point already far away, for he had shoes with which he ran through air and over water (*þá var hann víðs fjarri. Loki átti skúa er hann rann á lopt ok lög*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 43, lines 2–3). For all the popular attention paid to Odin's spear and Thor's hammer, Loki too wields his own magical object – if less iconically. Freyja similarly features her own object of transport. *Gylfaginning* introduces Freyja as the most renowned of the goddesses, who travels in a chariot driven by two cats (*En er hon ferr, þá ekr hon köttum tveim ok sitr í reid*) (*Gylfaginning* 25, lines 1–2). However, both *Skáldskaparmál* and *Þrymskviða* mention another of Freyja's possessions: a feathered cloak. *Þrymskviða* recounts the theft of Thor's hammer by the giant Thrym, in which Thor requests Freyja's feathered cloak (*fjaðrhams ljá*) to retrieve the weapon in Jotunheim, realm of the giants. Freyja responds, 'I would give it to you even if it were made of gold, / I'd lend it to you even if it were made of silver' (*Þó mynda ec gefa þér, þótt ór gulli væri, / oc þó selia, at væri ór silfri*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, stanza 4, 111). Loki wears the feather cloak and flies from Asgard to Jotunheim and back. In showcasing Freyja's generosity, the myths expose the extraordinary value of the cloak in comparison to gold and silver. *Skáldskaparmál* contributes further detail to the object's description, claiming that the cloak consists specifically of hawk feathers. In this myth Loki borrows the same item from Freyja when Idunn is kidnapped. Threatened by the Aesir, Loki intends to retrieve Idunn in Jotunheim on the condition that 'Freyja [will] lend him the hawk's plumage, which she owned' (*En er hann varð hræddr þá kvazk hann mundu sækja eptir Iðunn í Jötunheima ef Freyja vill ljá honum valshams er hon á*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 2, lines 10–12). Loki finds Idunn, and they fly back to Asgard pursued by the giant Thjazi, who owns an eagle's plumage (*arnarhaminn*), similar to Freyja's possession (*Skáldskaparmál* 2, line 15).

In both textual attestations of Freyja's cloak the object is loaned to Loki and affords him the ability to journey between the realms of the gods and the giants. We do not hear of a myth in which Freyja uses the cloak for her own purposes: the object always features in connection with Loki when the necessity arises for him to travel to Jotunheim. Assuming that Loki's shoes

are not an invention of Snorri, it seems possible that Loki's shoes, with their ability to traverse air and water, nevertheless have their limitations. Whenever the need arises for Loki to travel between realms, Freyja's cloak appears the obvious choice of transport, perhaps suggesting that the magic shoes are somehow unsuitable for long journeys between realms. Contrary to Barthes' appraisal that objects seek to promote a 'blissful clarity', no such simplicity exists in the Norse material. Loki's association with Freyja's cloak suggests that, at least in this case, the texts do not display much interest in the relationship between the object and its owner. For it is Loki whom the myths associate with the flying cloak.<sup>3</sup> This reading thus reveals the contradictions and complicated reality of the Norse mythic traditions that respect ownership of objects but in some cases operate on a more fluid definition of ownership.

Skidbladnir, the cloth that unfolds into Frey's magic ship, offers additional insight into the limitations of the mythic objects. *Grímnismál* introduces Skidbladnir as the best of ships for shining Frey (*scipa beztr, scírom Freyr*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, stanza 43, 66). The ship is also praised as one of the 'best of things' in *Grímnismál*, stanza 44: 'The ash Yggdrasil, it is the best of trees / and Skíðblaðnir, of ships' (*Askr Yggdrasils hann es æztr víða, / enn Skíðblaðnir skipa*). Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning*, in which Gangleri inquires how Skidbladnir is considered the best of ships. Hár replies that 'Skíðbladnir is the best of ships and made with the greatest skill, but Naglfar is the largest ship' (*Skíðblaðnir er beztr skipanna ok með mestum hagleik gerr, en Naglfari er mest skip*) (Faulkes 1998, 36). The passage qualifies Skidbladnir as an object that is not the largest of its kind but nevertheless possesses unique characteristics, namely the skill of the dwarfs in its manufacture, that all the Aesir may be aboard and when it is not at sea, it is made of so many pieces with such skill that it can magically fold into a cloth. Beyond the greatest of all ships, the gods deem *Mjöllnir* the best of all objects created by the sons of Ivaldi (*hamarrinn var beztr af öllum gripum*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 42, lines 36–37). It is striking that even the most treasured and iconic of the gods' things, Thor's hammer, is also the most clearly flawed. While the lightning maker will never miss its target when thrown, the dwarf Eitri makes the hammer shaft too short, so that it may only be held with one hand. Although Thor's

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3 In *Gylfaginning* Snorri refers to Loki alternatively as 'Lopt', a masculine form of the feminine term for 'sky'. Lindow (2001, 220) has suggested that this alternative personal name refers to Loki's use of Freyja's flying cloak. The name may also similarly acknowledge Loki's shoes as one of his chosen means of travel and more generally highlight his apparent connection with the act of flying.

hammer is associated with a weapon for giant slaying, the giant Skrymir manages to magically redirect the object's blows (Faulkes 1998: 38). *Meg-ingjörd*, Thor's belt,<sup>4</sup> with its magical ability to double his strength, fails to save him at Ragnarok, where he is ultimately killed by the midgard serpent's poison (Simek 1984, 272).

The myths impart a clear message to their audiences: even the most powerful of magical objects, wielded by the greatest of the Norse deities, have their limitations. Anderson (1875, 374) blamed the imperfections of the gods' objects on Loki, suggesting that the trickster was responsible for the defect in Thor's hammer and 'makes the best things defective'. Scholarship has since revisited the narrative of Loki as an evil figure as one in which Loki operates as a mediator, presenting problems and then using his cunning to solve them. Indeed, the myths provide little indication that Loki tampers with the production of the gods' treasures or has any reason to do so. More persuasively, objects in the Norse worldview appear necessarily flawed because nearly everything in the Norse cosmos is – including humans and the gods themselves. Here too, an application of Barthes disintegrates against the Norse myths. Rather than seeking to obscure the defects in their production, the myths embrace the imperfections of objects. And at the same time the gods in the myths hardly appear troubled by these flawed, suspiciously human-like materials but treat them as an inherent and complex part of their reality.

### Concluding remarks

My research shows that objects hold an appreciable influence within the Norse mythological narratives. The myths suggest that the Scandinavians understood objects as active agents in their own right, evidenced in their assignment of personal names to designate their divine status. This examination has revealed some of the ways in which the objects maintain social lives in the mythology and do indeed matter in the divine networks between other materials, gods, and supernatural beings. Taken as a whole, the Norse myths more often rupture Barthes' theories on the relationship between materiality and myth than they find common parallels. Mythic objects seem to signify abstract 'mythologies'; they operate as materials in their own right and they embrace, rather than obscure, the defects of their creators. Barthes' understanding may operate for a twentieth century

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4 For iconographic evidence for Thor's hammer and his struggles with the midgard serpent, especially in Anglo-Norse sculpture, see Kopar 2012.

consumer culture but seems less readily applicable to Norse mythology, revealing opportunities for further analysis and unpacking of Scandinavian Iron Age oral culture and traditions.

To provide a final lesson on mythic materiality in Norse culture, I would like to examine *Gleipnir*, the chains of the monster Fenrir-wolf with which the gods bound the monster. According to *Gylfaginning*, after Fenrir broke out of two previous fetters, Odin sent Skirnir

Down into the world of the dark-elves to some dwarfs and had that fetter made, which is called Gleipnir. It was made of six things: the sound (of the footsteps) of the cat, the beard of the woman, the roots of the mountain, the sinews of the bear, the breath of the fish, and the spittle of a bird [...] The fetter was smooth and soft as silk ribbon.

*Ofan í Svartálfaheim til dverga nokkura ok lét gera fjötur þann er Gleipnir heitir. Hann var gjörr af sex hlutum: af dyn kattarins ok af skeggi konunnar ok af rótum bjargsins ok af sinum bjarnarins ok af anda fisksins ok af fogls hráka...Fjöturrinn varð sléttir ok blautr sem silkiræma* (Faulkes 1998, 28).

The chains of Gleipnir are made with materials of the impossible: the silent steps of a cat; a woman who grows a beard; a mountain that contains roots; the breath of a fish. Gleipnir ultimately originates from truly divine, ethereal materiality. Made with materials inconceivable to humankind, Gleipnir paradoxically exemplifies that the Norse world is inherently a material one. *Naglfar*, the ship at the end of the world, is constructed from the toenails and fingernails of the dead. Kvasir's blood provided the mead of poetry, the liquid of Odrerir. Mythic landscapes, too, find connections to objects. The end of Utgardaloki's drinking horn stretches into the deepest part of the sea. Sigyn's bowl catches the poison before it drips onto Loki – when it fills to the brim, Loki's convulsions cause earthquakes. And those who drown at sea are gathered into Ran's net. Both humans and landscapes are material. Even the ingredients for Gleipnir, the immaterial, contain their own materiality. The myths suggest that the Scandinavians understood their world in this way, with a fundamentally material outlook, and one therefore rooted in the mundane world.

I have examined the ways in which the Norse myths reveal the mentalities and lived experiences of the ancient Scandinavians. A material focus reminds us that mythology is more than the mere literary representation of the gods (cf. O'Donoghue 2007, 67). Myths function socially, and the Scandinavians

recreated and reinforced their mythic traditions, all the while reconceiving earthly objects as mythic materials: hammers, rings, spears, and so forth are transformed into mythic objects via magic and divine interaction. The creation of objects throughout Iron Age Scandinavia provided tangible links to the intangible oral retellings of the stories and generated cognitive associations for the Scandinavians between their physical objects found in everyday life and the mythic objects that resided in the traditions of the Norse imagination. This relationship has often been explored in the archaeological record. Thor's hammer amulets are the most obvious talismans with specific accoutrements of the gods (Lindow 2001, 288–90), but studies have similarly investigated parallels, for example, between Skidbladnir and solar mythology ritual (Simek 1977) and material representations of Freyja's necklace (Arrhenius 1962). The archaeological record provides no evidence for a cult of Loki in ancient Scandinavia, yet his role in the mythology as it currently survives is clear. Perhaps the relative obscurity of Loki and physical representations of his magical shoes are heightened by the marked lack of religious practice centred on Loki in Iron Age Scandinavia.

The reconstruction of a reality of the past always includes some sort of reductionism in an attempt to isolate certain structures for study (Schjødt 2012, 270). In doing so, I have attempted to recognise the diversity of belief in Iron Age Scandinavia by exploring examples of ways in which the Scandinavians might have approached and thought about objects, rather than providing an exhaustive treatment of objects found in the myths. The mythologist Karl Luckert defined religion as 'man's response to so-conceived greater-than-human configurations of reality' (as cited in DuBois 1999, 30–31). The Scandinavians mapped mythic objects onto the profane world of daily experience and vice versa, creating a dynamic process of religious change and negotiation. The ancient Scandinavian reality included configurations of mythic space that, at least in the presentation of materials, looked more like profane, human spaces than we may have previously believed.

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**Appendix. Table 1.** Mythic objects in Norse mythology

Object	Provenance	Owner	Users	Mode of Exchange	Magical	Object Type
Loki's shoes	?	Loki	Loki	----	X	Transport
Freyja's cloak	?	Freyja	Loki	Loan	----	Transport
Skiðblaðnir	Dwarfs	Frey/ Odin	?	----	X	Transport
Mjölfnir	Dwarfs	Thor	Thor	----	X	Weapon
Gungnir	Dwarfs	Odin	Odin	----	X	Weapon
Frey's sword	?	Frey	Skírnir	Gift	X	Weapon
Draupnir	Dwarfs	Odin/ Baldr	Baldr/ Skírnir	Gift/ ? *	X	Ornament
Necklace of the Brísings	Dwarfs	Freyja	Freyja/ Thor/ Loki	Gift/ Loan/ Theft	X	Ornament
Megingjörð	?	Thor	Thor	----	X	Ornament/ Weapon
Oðrerir	?	Kvasir (?)	Fjalar & Galar/ Odin	Theft (?)	X	Tool
Gjallarhorn	?	Heimdall	Mímir/ Heimdall	----	----	Tool
Rati	?	Odin	Odin	----	X	Tool

\* *Skirnismál* stanza 21 mentions that Skírnir offers Gerd a ring that was burned with Odin's son, an apparent reference to Draupnir. It is unclear between the stories in which Draupnir is mentioned how Skírnir acquires the ring. See Lindow 2001, 97f.



# Honey and Poison: Reframing the Pagan Past at Øgvaldsnes and Elsewhere

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## Abstract

The Øgvaldsnes episode from Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Acallam na Senórach*, two roughly contemporary and somewhat similar texts, show how different strategies have been employed to reframe the pagan past and neutralise the poison of this material that worried early doctors of the church such as St Basil. The two texts propose different answers to Alcuin's oft-cited question about the relationship between Christianity and pagan traditions. Both solutions entail depriving the former divinities of their numinous powers, but each strategy also comes at a price. The Old Norse text opts for demonisation and exclusion while the Irish text strives for domestication and subordination. It is not claimed that these two texts are representative of the ways in which the Old Norse and Irish traditions at large handled this question. Rather, the choices of these strategies are probably dictated by the particular historical circumstances of each author, their respective aims, and the literary circuit to which they belonged. Some parallels with the two main texts and alternative ways of reframing the pagan past are also briefly discussed.

Keywords: *Oddr munkr*, *Acallam na Senórach*, *Óláfr Tryggvason*, *St Patrick*, *post-conversion handling of pre-Christian tradition*

In 797 Alcuin, resident scholar at the court of Charlemagne, wrote a letter to a certain bishop whom he addressed as Speratus (Ep. 124).<sup>1</sup> In the letter Alcuin admonished the bishop about proper episcopal conduct and activities, in particular as these related to the giving of alms and feasting. At one point Alcuin poses the question, '*Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?*' 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' (Dümmmler 1895, 183). This well-known and oft-cited question was rhetorical, but the answer Alcuin must have had in mind was probably 'not a lot' or 'nothing, really'.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have nevertheless

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1 The identity of Speratus is uncertain, but he may well be identified with Bishop Unnuona of Leicester, as argued by Bullough (1993).

2 For a collection of authorities expressing similar points of view, see Wormald 1978, 42–49.

attempted to answer the question more constructively, and their answers have typically taken a moral dimension or some elements of the northern tradition, which, Ingeld represents metonymically, have been traced to Christian sources. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe provides an example of a moral interpretation when, in an article from 2006 entitled 'Quid Sigvardus cum Christo?' or 'What has Sigurd to do with Christ?', she discusses medieval moral interpretations of the story of the dragon-slayer Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Heather O'Donoghue, on the other hand, represents the source-tracing approach when, in an article from 2003 entitled 'What has Baldr to do with Lamech?', she argues that the story of Baldr's death as it is known from the *Prose Edda* is influenced by Christian and ultimately Jewish tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Alcuin's formulation is striking, but if scholars have imitated him, he himself imitated earlier writers. The *quid X cum Y* formula, as it has been called, is so widespread that it is impossible to identify Alcuin's direct source.<sup>4</sup> A possible source is a well-known passage in Paul the Apostle's Second Letter to the Corinthians, in which he writes:

Do not bear the yoke with the infidels, for what does justice share with injustice or what is the company of light with darkness? How does Christ agree with Belial or what is the share of the faithful with the unfaithful? What is the connection of the temple of God with idols?<sup>5</sup>

The church father Tertullian had a special fondness for this rhetorical device and employs it no less than twenty-six times in his writings, most famously when he wrote: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, what has the academy to do with the church, what have the heretics to do with the Christians?'<sup>6</sup> The examples given all contrast pagan and Christian traditions, and the common stance of Paul, Tertullian, and Alcuin is clearly that the two are mutually exclusive and that pagan tradition is no match for Christianity. This uncompromising point of view was not uncommon

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<sup>3</sup> See also Johansson 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Garrison (2005), on whose article on this topic I rely for the following paragraph.

<sup>5</sup>  *nolite iugum ducere cum infidelibus | quae enim participatio iustitiae cum iniquitate aut quae societas luci ad tenebras | quae autem conventio Christi ad Belial | aut quae pars fideli cum infidele | qui autem consensus templo Dei cum idolis? (II Cor. 6, 14–16). Antonius saga renders a part of this passage in Old Norse: Variz við með avllu kostgiæfvi at samteingiaz þeim, er i Arrivs villu eru vafðir, því at lios hefvir ecki samfelag með myrkrum (Unger 1877, I, 99) 'take care with all diligence not to keep company with those who are entangled in the heresy of Arrius for light has no company with darkness'.*

<sup>6</sup>  *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesiae? Quid haereticis et christianis? (De praescriptionibus 7.9; Refoulé 1954, 193).*



and could also be expressed in many other ways. An example can be found in the life of St Jerome. The Old Norse version of this text tells how young Jerome voraciously read every book he came across, Christian as well as pagan. He especially strove to learn the writings of the pagan masters Plato and Cicero. At one point he is struck by a deadly fever and, in his delirium, he has a vision in which he sees his soul lifted up to heaven and brought before the heavenly judge, who commands that he be lashed as punishment for his choice of reading material. Some saints eventually intercede on his behalf, and 'Jerome promised that he would never henceforth read books by heathen authors. After that he regained consciousness and for the rest of his life he bore the scars of the whipping on his body as if it had been there.'<sup>7</sup> This story, here summarised on the basis of the late medieval *Jeronimus saga*, is ultimately derived from one of Jerome's own letters, and in this letter he also uses a series of now familiar rhetorical questions: 'What does light share with darkness? How does Christ agree with Belial? What has Horace to do with the Psalter? Virgil with the gospels? Cicero with the apostle?'<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, Jerome's nightly ordeal also became something of a standard topos, and a somewhat similar experience is attributed to young Alcuin in *Vita Alcuini* (see Wieland 1992, 84).

However, in spite of this obstinate stance to the classics, Christians, since the days of the early church, have had an ambivalent attitude towards the pagan traditions. On the one hand pagan traditions were explained as demonic deceptions, but on the other they had left a magnificent cultural heritage that could not simply be discarded. Although the ecclesiastical authorities mentioned above deemed it necessary to choose between two irreconcilable things, other authorities did not always feel the need to do so and held that one could in fact, if one exhibited due caution, have one's cake and eat it. Among the more famous testimonies to this attitude one may mention allegorical interpretations of the spoils of Egypt, perhaps best known in the West through Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (II.40). Just as the Israelites brought gold and other treasures out of Egypt and used them in the construction of the Tabernacle, so, Augustine argues, Christians can use the best elements of the Classical tradition for spiritual purposes.<sup>9</sup>

7 [O]g Jeronimus lofade at hann skyllde alldreige optar lesa heidanna manna bækur þadan j fraa. og efter þetta komzt Jeronimus aptor til sialfs sins. og symndizt aa likamanvm aorenn efter aa jafnith og hann hafde þar verith (Loth 1969–70, II, 212).

8 *Quae enim communicatio luci ad tenebras? Qui consensus Christo et Belial? Quid facit cum psalterio Horatii? Cum evangelii Maro? Cum apostolo Cicero?* (Ep. 22.29; Hilberg 1996, 189).

9 For a discussion of this line of interpretation see Allen 2015.

Another example of this more pragmatic attitude can be found in St Basil the Great's letter 'To young men, on how they might derive profit from pagan literature' from the second half of the fourth century. In this text, which is also known as *On Greek Literature*, St Basil argues that the reading of pagan classics stimulates the intellect of the young, who are still unable to understand the full depth of meaning of Scripture, and that it thus better prepares them for their later readings of it.<sup>10</sup> Any similarities between the two will be profitable to readers, he argues in the third section of the letter, while dissimilarities will make the light of Scripture shine even brighter. However, pagan literature should not be read indiscriminately. One should listen attentively whenever the deeds and words of good men are recounted, but not when the texts recount the deeds and words of evil men or stories about the pagan gods, 'for', he continues, 'familiarity with evil words is, as it were, a road leading to evil deeds. On this account, then, the soul must be watched over with all vigilance, lest through the pleasure the poets' words give we may unwittingly accept something of the more evil sort, like those who take poisons along with honey (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 389)'.<sup>11</sup> With this simile of poison and honey in mind we can turn to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia, where many authors were grappling with similar questions.

## II

A handful of Old Norse stories illustrate the dangerous allure of the pagan past and show how honeyed versions of this past may literally poison even

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10 ἕως γε μὴν ὑπὸ τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπακούειν τοῦ βάθους τῆς διανοίας αὐτῶν οὐχ οἶόν τε, ἐν ἑτέροις οὐ πάντῃ διεστηκόσιν, ὥσπερ ἐν σκiais τισι καὶ κατόπτροις, τῷ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμματι τέως προγυμναζόμεθα, τοὺς ἐν τοῖς τακτικοῖς τὰς μελέτας ποιουμένους μιμούμενοι, οἳ γε ἐν χειρονομίαις καὶ ὀρχήσεσι τὴν ἐμπειρίαν κτησάμενοι, ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγώνων τοῦ ἐκ τῆς παιδιᾶς ἀπολαύουσι κέρδους 'Yet so long as, by reason of your age, it is impossible for you to understand the depth of the meaning of these [Holy Scriptures], in the meantime, by means of other analogies which are not entirely different, we give, as it were in shadows and reflections, a preliminary training to the eye of the soul, imitating those who perform their drills in military tactics, who, after they have gained experience by means of gymnastic exercises for the arms and dance-steps for the feet, enjoy when it comes to the combat the profit derived from what was done in sport' (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 382–85).

11 ἡ γὰρ πρὸς τοὺς φαύλους τῶν λόγων συνήθεια, ὁδὸς τίς ἐστιν ἐπὶ τὰ πράγματα. διὸ δὴ πάσῃ φυλακῇ τὴν ψυχὴν τηρητέον, μὴ διὰ τῆς τῶν λόγων ἡδονῆς παραδεξάμενοι τι λάθωμεν τῶν χειρόνων, ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ δηλητήρια μετὰ τοῦ μέλιτος προσιέμενοι (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 388).

those most intent on propagating the gospel in the north.<sup>12</sup> In one well-known episode from the late twelfth-century saga of the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr munkr, Óláfr is celebrating Christmas at Qgvaldsnes, ‘The headland of Qgvaldr,’ in Western Norway. At night, when everyone is sitting at the table, an old one-eyed stranger wearing a big hat enters the hall. He turns out to be a first-rate storyteller possessing immense knowledge, and the king asks him after whom Qgvaldsnes was named. The stranger happens to know this story, and the king learns that Qgvaldr was the king of the headland many years ago and that he fell in battle against another king. The most striking aspect of the story is that this Qgvaldr had a cow that he loved so much that he would bring her wherever he went, and her milk was the only liquid he would drink. When Qgvaldr died, his cow was buried in a gravemound adjacent to his. This story raises a number of intriguing questions about Qgvaldr and the importance of the site of Qgvaldsnes, not to mention the role of cows in Scandinavian prehistory that other scholars have studied in other contexts,<sup>13</sup> but the crucial point here is Óláfr’s reaction to the story: he is intrigued – and when the time comes to go to sleep, he invites the stranger to accompany him as he retires. The stranger sits at the king’s bedside and tells one story after another, and the king becomes more and more engrossed in them. At one point the bishop of the retinue

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12 Basil’s image of poison sweetened by honey was widely used in the patristic tradition and elsewhere, but I am only aware of two instances in which it is explicitly used in Old Norse literary tradition. Both draw on the biblical Proverbs 5.3–8, which warns against prostitutes. One of these instances, incidentally, is from the Old Norse translation of Alcuin’s treatise *De virtutibus et vitiis*: *Sva sem driupanda hunang ero varrar portkono. ok biartari [< biartara] viðsmiorvi háls hænnar. en hinir æfsto lutir hænnar ero bitrir sem æitr. ok olyfian. ok hvasser sem túæggiat sværð* (Indrebø, 1931, 17) ‘The lips of a prostitute are like dripping honey and her neck is brighter than [olive] oil, but her nether parts are biting as venom and poison and sharp as a double-edged sword’. The other example is from the saga of Martha and Mary Magdalen (Unger 1877, I, 519).

13 For the site of Qgvaldsnes, Avaldnes in modern Norwegian, and the recent archaeological excavations there see the articles in Skre 2017. Nordland (1950) makes many interesting (if somewhat speculative) observations on the site, its importance, and Qgvaldr himself. For the cow see Ólafur Halldórsson 1990 and Uspenskij 2000. The most obvious parallel with the basic motif of a person living on the milk of a certain cow is found in the *Prose Edda*, where the primordial Norse giant Ymir lives on the milk that flows from the udders of the primordial cow Auðhumbla. An Irish parallel may be found in *Altram tigi dá medar*, ‘The fosterage of the house of two pails’, which tells of the fairy maiden Eithne, in whom an angel takes up residence. After this transformative event she is unable to consume the food of the fairy world and can only drink the milk of two cows which have been brought from the righteous land of India. Eithne eventually transitions into the world of humans, where she appears to be able to eat any kind of food. Eithne seems as out of place in the fairy world as in the human world. She dies shortly after her baptism by St Patrick and, the text assures us, finds a home in heaven when Patrick commends her soul to God. For this tale see Williams (2016, 234–46).

reminds the king that it is time to go to sleep, but the king pays no heed to this admonition and demands that the stranger continue his narrations. Eventually, the king falls asleep, but he wakes up shortly afterwards and immediately asks the stranger whether he is awake. However, the stranger has vanished and, although the king's retainers search high and low, he is nowhere to be found. Óláfr even asks his cook whether he has seen the stranger, and the cook responds that a stranger approached him as he was preparing meat for the royal table and denounced its poor quality. The cook told the stranger to provide him with better meat if he had any. The stranger then gave the cook two flanks of fat beef and the cook says that he is now ready to serve this meat to the king. As the king hears this, he realises the grave danger in which he has been and that the one-eyed man was in fact the devil, who had come to him in the shape of Óðinn. Óláfr then commands that the meat be thrown into the sea so that no one will eat it.

This story comes to us through Oddr munkr's late twelfth-century *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. It is generally assumed that Oddr munkr wrote his text in Latin, and that this Latin original was lost following the translation of the text into the vernacular. The manuscripts which preserve Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* diverge somewhat from each other in phrasing and narrative detail, and the version summarised here is from the manuscript AM 310 4to, which has been dated to the second half of the thirteenth century and localised to the Icelandic monastery of Þingeyrar.<sup>14</sup> In another version the meat is thrown to a dog which dies after taking a single bite; the rest of the meat is burned.<sup>15</sup> The author of the saga in which this story is embedded has more to say about the ancient king and his cow, but he first briefly relates the story of how a group of wizards, led by a certain Eyvindr kelda, lands at Ögvaldsnes intent on killing King Óláfr and his men as they attend Christmas mass. However, the attackers lose their sight as soon as they see the church, and Óláfr captures them without difficulty as they stumble around aimlessly and has them put to death at a site which has been known as Skrattasker or 'Wizard Skerry' ever since. At this point in AM 310 4to the saga returns to King Ögvaldr and his cow. Óláfr breaks open the two mounds. He finds the bones of a man in the first and in the second those of a cow, and he is startled to realise that 'this old man had told the truth in some matters'. King Óláfr now also understands that the devil's scheme not

<sup>14</sup> For the manuscript and differences between the versions see Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, CXLVI–CLI and CLXXI–CLXXXIII.

<sup>15</sup> See Kaplan (2011, 164–7), who presents differences and similarities between the three versions in the form of a chart.

only included poisoning his mind and body with the stories and the meat of old, but that he had also cleverly attempted to keep the king awake long into the night so that he would oversleep and not attend Christmas mass.<sup>16</sup>

This tale from Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* can be read as a cautionary tale about the strange attraction the pagan past may exert on its audiences. If even a most staunch and uncompromising promoter of Christianity such as Óláfr Tryggvason could fall prey to the devil by allowing his mind to be poisoned by stories of pagan kings of an age long gone, what then of members of the audience who were more easily tempted? If even the most discerning only realised at the eleventh hour that the stories to which he had been listening were poison sweetened with honey, should the less discerning – the majority – even take the chance of listening to such stories? Would it not be preferable if, to use another metaphor from St Basil's letter to the young, one avoided the roses altogether out of fear of the thorns (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 390)? This seems to have been the position taken by Oddr munkr in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

Had this cautionary attitude been dominant in the northern Middle Ages, our materials for the study of pre-Christian myth and legend would have been very different. Luckily, other writers spurned the beaten path of rejection and demonisation, and instead sought to redeem and integrate the pagan past into a Christian present or at least to neutralise its poison by reframing it in a way that would make it digestible to medieval audiences concerned with their prospects of future salvation.

### III

One could give a number of Old Norse examples illustrating different ways in which this goal of neutralising the pagan past could be achieved.

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16 [O]k sýndisk nú opinberliga öllum at þessi hinn gamli maðr hafði suma hluti satt sagt, ok af því skildu menn at hann vildi blekkja bæði konunginn ok aðra með djöfuligri slægð, er hann tók svefnin frá konunginum ǫndverða nóttina. Ok á þeirri tíð er fram fór Guðs embætti þeir þá síðr vaka er þeir höfðu áðr misst svefnsins. Hafði hann svá sett bragðit at byskup skylði eigi svá fagrliga halda sem síðr er til þá hina dýru hátíð. Ok hafði óvinr alls mannkyns svá fyrir búit tálsamligar snörur vélarinnar, at fyrst færi hann ǫndunum, en síðan líkmunum (Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, 253f.) 'and it now seemed apparent to all that this old man had told the truth in some matters, and from this people understood that he wishes to deceive both the king and the others with devilish cunning when he kept the king awake in the beginning of the night. And when mass was being celebrated they would be less inclined to wake up who had been kept awake before. He had planned his scheme so that the bishop should not celebrate that glorious feast as beautifully as one was accustomed to. And the enemy of all humankind had planned the treacherous snares of the deceit so that he would first destroy the souls and after that the bodies.'

However, in the spirit of the interdisciplinary Norse-Celtic conference in Edinburgh at which this paper was first presented<sup>17</sup> I provide an example from Irish tradition, namely *Acallam na Senórach* or 'The Tales of the Elders of Ireland', as it is called in the translation by Dooley and Roe (1999). Stokes (1900, x–xii) and Dooley and Roe (1999, xxx–xxxii) list four manuscripts of the text, none of which is older than the fifteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The text's conclusion is missing in all manuscripts.

It is with humility that I offer the *Acallam* as an example, and I acknowledge that my familiarity with Irish materials, in spite of a longstanding interest, is limited. I have opted to present this example because it not only completely inverts the message of *Oddr munkr* – opting for integration and redemption rather than exclusion and damnation – but also forms a fairly close parallel with *Oddr munkr*'s tale.<sup>19</sup> Although the two works are roughly contemporary and share certain narrative and thematic similarities, it should be stressed that their ideologies and attitudes towards the pagan past differ greatly, and that my intention is not to add to the longstanding debate concerning Irish-Norse literary connections<sup>20</sup> or to argue for the direct (or for that matter indirect) influence of one text on the other. Indeed, they are each part of their own literary circuits, and parallels with the two texts can be found in their respective traditions and elsewhere in medieval literature.<sup>21</sup>

The *Acallam* is an incredibly rich and fascinating, but also somewhat bewildering, literary work set in the period of conversion in Ireland, i.e. more than half a millennium earlier than the text's composition. It tells how St Patrick, as he is travelling around Ireland with a group of followers, is approached by a troop of ancient warriors led by a certain *Caílte*. *Caílte* had been a member of the *Fían*, the legendary war band of Finn mac Cu-

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17 'Thinking about Mythology in the 21st Century', The University of Edinburgh, November 2017.

18 The text is also preserved in later recensions, referred to as *Acallam bec* and the Reeves *Agallamh*.

19 Harris and Hill (1989) mention the *Acallam* in passing in their discussion of *Norna-Gests þátr* – a narrative to which *Oddr munkr*'s tale is related – but I have not otherwise been able to locate scholarship that discusses these two texts in tandem. One article that discusses the *Acallam* in relation to an Old Norse text is McTurk 2001. Schlauch (1931) discusses *Oddr munkr*'s account in the context of Celtic material; her treatment follows a different path and does not mention the *Acallam*.

20 Surveyed by Gísli Sigurðsson 2000. See more recent contributions by Power (2013) and, concerning religion, Egeler (2013).

21 Parallels with *Oddr munkr*'s tale will be mentioned briefly in fn. 35 below. On the Irish side tales in some ways analogous to the *Acallam* have in particular been discussed by Nagy; see e.g. Nagy 1983 and 1997. Two additional parallels from other traditions are mentioned in section IV below.

maill, and had miraculously lived for hundreds of years. The text is vague in explaining exactly how and for how long Caílte has lived.<sup>22</sup> Caílte joins Patrick's group, and as they continue their travels, Caílte tells Patrick stories and recites poems about past events that have played out in the landscape they traverse. More than one hundred such stories are told in the course of the work,<sup>23</sup> in greater or lesser detail, and, as in Oddr munkr's account, the stories often deal with sites of memory in the landscape and give the *raison d'être* for place names. Thus far, the Old Norse and Irish texts align nicely with one another but, as noted above, the attitude of the Irish text to these conceivably pre-Christian traditions is at odds with Oddr munkr's text. The absorbing appeal of the legendary tradition initially concerns the *Acallam's* Patrick and, as in Oddr munkr's account, there is a sense that the tales have the potential to interrupt religious life. On the first night he listens to Caílte's tales, Patrick is concerned that they will lead him to neglect his prayers.<sup>24</sup> The following morning, however, two angels descend from on high and Patrick asks them worriedly 'if it were the will of the king of heaven and earth that he be listening to the tales of the Fenians'. His concerns are alleviated when the angels in unison command him to commit the tales to writing: 'Have the tales written down,' they say, 'on poets' tablets in refined language, so that the hearing of them will provide entertainment for the lords and commons of later times' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 12).<sup>25</sup> To this explicit angelic imprimatur it can be added that Patrick not only baptises Caílte and his men, receiving a massive block of gold in return (Dooley and Roe 1999, 12; Stokes 1900, 10), but he also promises Caílte heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 46; Stokes 1900, 42). Later in the work he extends his blessings to Caílte's long dead parents and his lord Finn Mac Cumail, so that they, God willing, may be released from torment and enter heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 122; Stokes 1900, 117). Elsewhere in the work the reader learns that in a time long past the Fenians had actually come to realise of their

22 For time in the *Acallam* see Carey 2014.

23 A sense of the range of the text is provided by Ó Cadhla (2014, 139–43), who lists the questions to which the *Acallam* provides answers.

24 "*Adrae buaid 7 benmacht, a Cháilti!*", ar Pátraic: "*as gairdiugud menman 7 aicenta dúin sin acht min bhudh coll crábaid, 7 min bhudh maidnechtnaighi urnaighthi*" (Stokes 1900, 9); "*May victory be yours, Caílte, with my blessing,*" said Patrick. "*You have enlightened our spirits and our mind, even though our religious life is interrupted and our prayers neglected*" (Dooley and Roe 1999, 11).

25 *in budh móid le rígh nime 7 talman beith dosom ag éisdecht re scéla na Féinne [ . . . ] 'Ocus scríbhthar letsa i támlorguibh filed 7 i mbriat[h]raibh ollaman, ór budh gairdiugudh do dronguibh 7 do degdáinibh deridh aimsire éisdecht frisna scéluib sin'* (Stokes 1900, 9).

own accord ‘that there was indeed a True God’ (Dooley and Roe 1999, 45)<sup>26</sup> and that Finn, their leader, had a revelation in which ‘the truth came to him and lie was concealed from him’ (Dooley and Roe 1999, 56).<sup>27</sup> This leads to a divinely inspired poem in which Finn not only prophesies the future birth of St Ciarán, the first abbot of Clonmacnoise, but also declares his faith in the Trinity (Dooley and Roe 1999, 56–57; Stokes 1900, 52). In the *Acallam*, therefore, Cailte plays the part that the devil in his Odinnic disguise plays in Oddr munkr’s tale. Cailte is a concretised representation of the past, whose denizen he was. However, he is also brought into the Christian narrative present. As one cleric by the name of Colmán says on seeing Cailte: ‘Cailte is here, he is of the retinue of Finn Mac Cumail [...] he is now one of the household of holy Patrick (transl. Dooley and Roe 1999, 88).’<sup>28</sup> While Cailte is brought into the Christian present, the Christian present, in turn, is projected into the pre-Christian past in Finn’s recognition of the Christian God. The gap between the pre-Christian and the Christian age is maintained in the *Acallam*, but it is also bridged by Patrick and Cailte. Patrick is Óláfr in reverse and co-opts where Óláfr rejects.

The stories of the not-so-pre-Christian past in the *Acallam* may draw on tradition, but they are far from being its unmediated reflections. It has been argued that ‘more than most, the compilers of the *Acallam* are bending tradition to suit their specific agenda’ (Dooley 2014, 252). Many of Cailte’s stories deal with the dead in the mounds that adorn the Irish landscape, and again a stark contrast to the Norse tale is readily apparent. After Óláfr Tryggvason realises that he has been the victim of diabolical deceit, he goes to the mounds of Ógvaldr and his cow, and has the mounds desecrated by exposing the bones buried in them. We do not learn what he does with the bones, but in other tales in which mounds are opened, the bones of the dead are generally burned (cf. Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*). Patrick’s interaction with the dead in the *Acallam* is often much more benevolent. At one point Patrick learns from Cailte’s narration that the king who lies buried in the mound on which he is sitting died of shame because he was unable to reward a visiting poet in a timely manner for a poem the poet had composed in his honour. Patrick intercedes for the soul of this unfortunate king and prays that he may enter heaven. And in that very moment, we read, ‘his soul was released from suffering [...] and he appeared as a white dove on

26 *go raibi in firDhia* (Stokes 1900, 41).

27 *do faillsiged fir dhó 7 do ceiledh gáí fair* (Stokes 1900, 52).

28 ‘[i]s é Cailti siut, 7 do muintir Fínd hé [...] 7 is do muintir nóem Patraic fos dó (ed. Stokes 1900, 82).’



the stone column above Patrick's head' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 35).<sup>29</sup> Another king had been buried with great treasures in the same mound. Caílte opens his mound so that Patrick and his men may take the treasures. In return for this treasure Patrick grants the dead king heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 35; Stokes 1900, 31). Later in the text, after Caílte has left Patrick's company to travel on his own for a while, we hear how another gravemound is opened. As in the previous example the goal is not to desecrate but to marvel at the dead man's magnificent size and the splendour of his martial equipment. The dead person in this case was a certain Garb Daire, one of Finn's men, who had been buried with his weapons and an especially prized possession, namely a certain chain that had belonged to the deity Lug. The king who now lives at the site, Conall, son of Níall, receives the weapons, while Caílte intends to bring the chain to Patrick (Dooley and Roe 1999, 63f.; Stokes 1900, 58f.).<sup>30</sup>

The dead in their mounds share the subterranean world with the *Túatha Dé Danann*, usually rendered as 'the People of the goddess Danu'. The *Túatha Dé Danann* is an otherworldly, subterranean people that is generally held to reflect the pre-Christian divinities of Ireland. Irish texts differ considerably concerning their exact ontological status, and the *Acallam* leaves this question open.<sup>31</sup> They interact with humans in numerous ways, and have some supernatural and superhuman powers. One gets the impression that they were more powerful in the past, but that their powers have gradually decayed and that they are in need of human assistance. Late in the text the king of the *Túatha Dé Danann*, Donn son of Midir, even surrenders voluntarily to Patrick and entrusts the power over the subterranean inhabitants to the saint (Dooley and Roe 1999, 150; Stokes 1900, 147). Towards the end of the text it is hinted that Patrick will eventually close the passages between the two worlds so that the supernatural beings will be confined inside the hills and rocks of Ireland (Dooley and Roe 1999, 210; Stokes 1900, 210).<sup>32</sup> In this way the *Acallam* brings the perilous fascination with the pagan past under ecclesiastical control. The past itself is sanctioned by the church, represented by Patrick, but also domesticated, rendered innocuous, and finally walled up underground.

29 *Ocus táinic a anum a péin [...] sin gu raibhe 'na cholom ghel arin cairthi cloichi ós cinn Pátraic* (Stokes 1900, 31).

30 This chain does not appear to be mentioned elsewhere in Irish tradition (Williams 2016, 219).

31 For the representation of the *Túatha Dé Danann* through time and across a wide range of texts see Williams 2016. The name *Túatha Dé Danann* and its history are discussed on pp. 186–93.

32 The conclusion of the text is missing, so we do not actually discover if this is carried out.

In this way it becomes unnecessary to sweeten the poison about which St Basil was worried, for it has been neutralised. Rather than hiding the poison, the honey now serves to supply the mellifluous eloquence that will entertain 'lords and commons of later times', as was the charge of the angels (see fn. 25 above).

At the level of the framing narrative of the *Acallam* music is treated similarly to stories. At one point Patrick's group is joined by a certain Cas Corach, a musician of otherworldly origin. When Patrick realises the power and beauty of his music, he baptises him and promises him heaven. He also allows him to continue and improve his art. Interestingly, Patrick even has a discussion with the musician about the value of music. Their deliberations conclude with Patrick's verdict that it is improper to banish music completely, although 'one should not put too much stock in it' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 106) either.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in the narrative present of the text, music is treated similarly to tales as Patrick co-opts and neutralises the musical traditions of the Túatha Dé Danann. However, although the music Patrick thus sanctions is rendered mostly harmless, it has another, more perilous, face, which is highlighted in one of the stories told by Caílte. In this narrative we hear that Finn himself vanquishes Aillén, a mythological character of the Túatha Dé Danann. For twenty-three years, Aillén had come to Tara every year at the festival of Samain, bringing his dulcimer. Everyone who had gathered there would fall asleep when he played his sweet music on the dulcimer, and he would burn the place to the ground. With the help of a magic spear Finn is able to withstand the enchanting and sleep-inducing music. He kills the musician and thus prevents future visits to Tara from this menace. Like Oddr munkr's tale, this example shows the dangerous aspects of the pre-Christian tradition, but in contrast to Oddr's tale the conflict is pushed safely into a pre-Christian past where it can be dealt with by a confident hero who, although he may be of the pagan past, already believes in the True God.

#### IV

The *Acallam* and the Ogvaldsnes episode deal, as has been shown, with the same problem of what one should do with the traditions of the pre-Christian past. They both reframe this past, but they do so in radically different ways, choosing respectively integration and rejection. It is not

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33 *acht gan rochreidim dó* (Stokes 1900, 99).

claimed that these texts are representative of the ways in which the Old Norse and Irish traditions at large handled this question. Rather, the choices of these strategies are probably dictated by the particular historical circumstances of each author, their respective aims and the literary circuit to which they belonged. Oddr munkr's hostile attitude towards traditions from the pre-Christian past is apparent throughout his text and is fairly typical both of Old Norse texts of the period and of texts describing the missionary efforts of the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson. On the Irish side it has been suggested that the general aim of the author of the *Acallam* was to harmonise traditional and Christian learning in the face of the arrival in Ireland of foreign religious orders (Carey 2015, 59).<sup>34</sup>

Oddr munkr's tale belongs to a group of four tales in which a character of the past visits a King Óláfr of Norway. This Óláfr may be either Óláfr Tryggvason or Óláfr Haraldsson, but in all cases the visitor engages in conversation with him and tells of the past. This group of tales, which are all preserved in the late fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, has been studied by Merrill Kaplan in a monograph from 2011, and they will not be discussed in any detail here.<sup>35</sup> It should however be mentioned that they have two different outcomes. The character might be deemed evil, identified with Óðinn and, by extension, the devil, and rejected as in Oddr munkr's tale. Alternatively, the visitor may be a human who, for whatever reason, has had an unusually long lifespan, the prime example being *Norna-Gests þátr*, in which the eponymous Norna-Gestr, who has lived three hundred years and has been an eyewitness to major events of legendary history, relates some of these events to King Óláfr Tryggvason. In these cases the king accepts the visitor at his court, enjoys his tales, and baptises him. But even if these visitors from the past are accepted in the present, we get a clear sense that they are out of place and out of time. They do not belong in this new Christian world and die shortly after their baptism.

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34 Identifying more specifically ideological and genealogical concerns in the text, Dooley (2004) has argued for a western origin for the text (i.e. Connacht) and associated it with the Mac Oireachtaigh/Ua Raduibh family.

35 The four *Flateyjarbók* tales are *Norna-Gests þátr* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, I, 346–59), the *Qgvaldsnes* episode (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, I, 374–78), a tale rubricated *Odinn kom til Olafs konungs með dul ok prettum* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, II, 134–35), and *Tóka þátr Tókasonar* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, II, 135–38). Some of these tales are also preserved outside *Flateyjarbók*. See also Harris and Hill 1989, 105–12 *et passim*.

Discussing the possible origin and evolution of this group of tales, Harris and Hill (1989, 117ff.), following an older study by Panzer (1925), have pointed to an anecdote recounted by the Franciscan friar Thomas of Pavia in his late thirteenth-century *Gesta imperatorum et pontificum* (Ehrenfuechter 1872, 511–12). This tale contains remarkable similarities with *Norna-Gests þátr*, Oddr munkr's account of the meeting at Ögvaldsnes, and the *Acallam*, although the anxiety regarding the appropriateness of telling pre-Christian narratives in a Christian present, highlighted in the present article, is irrelevant in Thomas's account. One day in late 1231, Thomas recounts, as Emperor Frederick II is holding a council in Ravenna, a certain Ricardus shows up at court. Ricardus claims that he had been the squire of Oliver, closest companion of Roland (of *Chanson de Roland* fame). If this were true, Ricardus would have been more than four hundred years old when he presented himself before Frederick II. Ricardus can tell stories of the time when Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver visited Ravenna. The text gives a brief summary of a story about a gigantic but simpleminded knight in Charlemagne's retinue who makes quite a spectacle when setting off on a horse without his stirrups. The emperor is understandably sceptical of Ricardus's claims and asks if Ricardus was ever in Ravenna with Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver. Ricardus reveals that he was, and to give substance to his claims, he directs the emperor to an old chapel in the vicinity of which the emperor will find the graves of Theodosius I, his wife, two daughters, and the prophet Elisha.<sup>36</sup> Frederick is led to the chapel, which because of flooding has been covered with earth, and orders it dug out. He opens the sarcophagus of Theodosius. This suffices to convince him of the truth of Ricardus's claims, and he leaves the other graves untouched.<sup>37</sup>

The brief summary of Thomas of Pavia's account shows that it shares some features with *Norna-Gests þátr*, Oddr munkr's account, and passages of the *Acallam*, the most prominent being that a figure of unusual longevity entertains a leader figure with tales of his own experiences in the far past, and that the accounts are corroborated by a subsequent 'archaeological' endeavour in which a grave is opened. There are naturally differences as well (as already pointed out, Ricardus the squire is not a survivor of the pagan

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36 Theodosius and his family were long dead in the days of Charlemagne, but relics/remains of Elisha had been brought to Ravenna in 718, and the idea is probably that Ricardus had witnessed an event related to the entombment of Elisha's relics.

37 Thomas says that the sarcophagus of Elisha was opened on a later occasion at the request of Bonaventura.

past), but the similarities suffice to allow the assumption that this basic kind of account is likely to have been fairly widespread in the Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup>

While Thomas of Pavia does not tell us what happens to Ricardus after his interview with Frederick II, the Old Norse tales all have the definite outcome that the visitor dies or simply vanishes. In the *Acallam*, on the other hand, the outcome is ambiguous, and we do not learn what happens to Cailte in the Irish text – this may be explained by the fact that the conclusion is missing in all manuscripts – but towards the end of the preserved text all Cailte’s followers die, and he is left with his companion Oisín. We have a distinct sense that they are old and feeble at this point and will soon die as well (although this is not spelled out in the preserved text). Now that their tales have been recorded, they have fulfilled their purpose and there is no longer any role for them to play – and indeed no room for them in these new times, and they will perish, like their counterparts in the Norse tales mentioned a moment ago.

Neither of the two approaches to answering Alcuin’s question illustrated here is characteristic of the Scandinavian texts dealing with the pagan gods most read today. In the mythological Eddic poems of the *Codex Regius* manuscript no overt attempt has been made to reframe the stories of the old gods beyond the fact that the compiler has put a great deal of thought and care into the organisation of poems in the manuscript. The result is that the poems are generally allowed to speak for themselves. Other texts, most notably *Ynglinga saga* and Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, opt for historicisation fairly straightforwardly, without explicit demonisation. In the *Prose Edda*, on the other hand, we observe the more complex auto-euhemerisation of the future gods of the Scandinavians as they tell tall tales about their ancestors, claiming their deeds as their own.<sup>39</sup>

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38 Panzer (1925) and Harris and Hill (1989), who focus on *Norna-Gests þáttur* and see the account of the long-lived Ricardus in the light of the tradition concerning Johannes de Temporibus (another long-lived character), are inclined to see a more direct influence from the continental tradition on *Norna-Gests þáttur*. To the parallels adduced by these scholars one might add *Akhbār al-Yaman* ‘The history of Yemen’, which records a series of nightly conversations between the Khalif Mu’āwiya I (r. 661–680) and a certain Yemeni sheik named ‘Abīd (or ‘Ubayd) b. Sharya, who was ‘one of the men of the past who is still living, because he had been alive at the time of the kings of the *Jāhiliyya* [pre-Islamic Arabs] [. . .] [‘Abīd] used to shorten the night for him [i.e. Khalif Mu’āwiya], drive away his cares, and cause him to forget about every earlier conversation partner [. . .] thus he used to recount to him the events, poetry, and history of the Arabs, and Mu’āwiya ordered his officials and secretaries to record it all and write it down’ (Crosby 2007, 70–71). For this text see, in addition to Crosby’s introduction to her translation, Heinrichs 1997, 250–61.

39 For a study of these texts see Wellendorf 2018.

The texts we have discussed show that different strategies have been employed to reframe the pagan past and neutralise the poison that worried St Basil, and propose different answers to Alcuin's question about the relationship between Christianity and pagan traditions. All solutions entail depriving the former divinities of their numinous powers, but in addition to this each strategy comes at a price. Many apparently thought the price of consistent demonisation and rejection too high, and so in the case of the *Acallam* integration and domestication seemed preferable. In Scandinavia the preferred strategy was historicisation, the price of which is that one has to admit to the credulity of those duped by the false gods. But as Saxo Grammaticus remarks: 'It is no wonder that the ancient Danes were misled into venerating false gods when even the Romans, sophisticated though they were, fell into the same trap.'<sup>40</sup> Were we to formulate an answer to the question of Alcuin with which we began, on the basis of these Scandinavian texts the answer might be to admit that such tales may not have much to do with Christ, but also that this need not prevent the medieval audience from listening to this material since it is also part of the past. They are wiser now than their ancestors and will not allow themselves to be fooled as they were.

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40 'Nec mirandum, si prodigialibus eorum portentis adducta barbaries in adulterine religionis cultum concesserit, cum Latinorum quoque prudentiam perlexerit talium quorundam diuinis honoribus celebrata mortalitas' (*Gesta danorum* 1.5.6; Friis-Jensen 2015, I, 42).

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# Was Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum Irish?

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## Abstract

This article tackles the question of a possible Irish origin for the Old Norse literary figure Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum. The images of Guðmundr, his realm Glasisvellir, and the sometimes associated territory of Ódáinsakr fluctuate in various ways in the different saga narratives in which they occur. The variability of the Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum narrative has caused scholars to debate its possible origin for over a century. The more widely supported notion is that a mythological compound around Guðmundr must have originated in Irish mythology and folklore rather than being an indigenous, Nordic construct. The present article aims to follow up on this discussion, comparing the original Old Norse source material and that found in *Gesta Danorum* to Irish accounts that might have influenced them. By highlighting the differences between the Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum complex and the suggested Irish sources, the degree to which it seems likely the motif could actually have originated in Irish thought will be assessed. Norwegian folk tales about the magical island Utrøst will then be considered to highlight the possibility of a more local background for Guðmundr and his realm.

*Keywords: Old Nordic religion, comparative studies, folklore, Celtic studies, Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum*

The narrative complex of Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum found in Old Nordic saga literature consists of three main parts: Guðmundr; his realm Glasisvellir; and, albeit to a lesser degree, another place called Ódáinsakr. Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum is a literary figure in saga literature, where he is said to be the heathen ruler of a realm in the northern parts of Fennoscandia called Glasisvellir ('Shining Fields'). As will be shown below, Guðmundr is often described with a recurring set of attributes such as longevity, wisdom, and a supernatural body size. The composition of his character traits varies from narrative to narrative, with some attributes more prominent than others. At a narrative level Guðmundr appears as a 'Helper' figure in Proppian terms, someone encountered by the narratives' respective protagonists who helps

to further the plot by providing adventures (Propp 1979, 79). The image of the realm which Guðmundr governs, Glasisvellir, also changes, though to a lesser degree. It is usually described as a rough realm on the northern edge of Norway. The main discrepancies in its description are the names and nature of the otherworldly countries that are said to adjoin it. Thus, Glasisvellir occupies a liminal space between the world of humans and that of supernatural powers. Only a few sources mention Ódáinsakr, and only one narrative connects it directly to Glasisvellir. Ódáinsakr is nonetheless depicted as having life-prolonging properties and is therefore understood as providing the explanation for Guðmundr's longevity.

It has long been established that Irish culture profoundly influenced that of Scandinavia. This influence takes many forms: cultural (cf. toponymical evidence); linguistic (cf. the Manx rune stones); literal (cf. Cú Chúlainn and Starkaðr); and religious (Holm 1996, 86–172; Gísli Sigurðsson 2000, 48–85; Ó Corráin 2002, 61–72; Egeler 2013, 123–29). However, can such an influence also be supposed to have affected the Guðmundr complex? Based on the assessment that certain features of Ódáinsakr found in the early Irish accounts formed an integral part of the Guðmundr complex, scholars have argued that the Guðmundr subject matter was crafted into the Norwegian and/or Icelandic oral tradition drawing on Irish sources (see, for example, Einar Pálsson 1985, 255–77; Power 1985, 166–67; Heizmann 1998, 72–99; Gísli Sigurðsson 2000, 57–63 and 118; and Egeler 2015; 2017). Specifically, the potential link has been demonstrated by pointing to Irish stories revolving around otherworldly, magical islands to the west of Ireland, by highlighting the similarities between these islands and Ódáinsakr and, therefore, (because the two are once connected) Glasisvellir. However, in addition to the fact that Glasisvellir is only mentioned once there is another key problem with the suggested Irish-Icelandic connection: namely, what is *missing* in these comparisons.

Before we explore the investigation, we need to introduce both the Old Norse sources and the Irish narratives to which they are compared. Norwegian folk tales revolving around the magical island Utrøst will be considered in addition to these to highlight the possibility that if Glasisvellir is interpreted as an insular otherworld (which seems somewhat tenuous), there is actually a more solid reason to consider the idea that Nordic folk legends may reflect its local background.

The Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum complex is found in eight Old Norse sources,<sup>1</sup> with the early twelfth-century *Gesta Danorum* (*GD*)<sup>2</sup> by Saxo Gram-

1 Throughout the article the abbreviations given for the Old Norse sources will be used to avoid the repetition of long saga titles. For further clarity, the abbreviations are given again in the bibliography in square brackets after the respective edition used as a source in the present investigation.

2 In *GD* Guðmundr is Latinised as Guthmundus.

maticus being the only Latin account (Friis-Jensen & Zeeberg 2005, I, 59). Other narratives, given in chronological order of the extant manuscripts, range from the early thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries and include *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (*HsH*), which includes Ódáinsakr (Turville-Petre & Tolkien 1976, xvii), *Norna-Gests þátr* (*NGþ*) and *Helga þátr Þórissonar* (*HþÞ*) (Ashman Rowe 2004, 459), both the older and younger variants of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (*eBsH* and *yBsH*) (Jiriczek 1893, X–XII and XXXVIII–VIII), followed by *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns* (*Þþb*) (Martin 1990, 69), and, ultimately, *Samsóns saga fagra* (*Ssf*) (Wilson 1953, 1). The account in *Eiríks saga víðförla* (*Esö*), dated to the late fourteenth century, is of somewhat limited use, because it mentions Ódáinsakr as being detached from Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum (Jensen 1983, XIII–XIV, LVI, CLXXXVII and CCXXXIV). Five of the eight investigated sources can be classified as belonging to the *Fornaldarsögur* (namely, *HsH*, *HþÞ*, *NGþ*, *BsH* and *Þþb*), a type of saga literature that favours non-naturalistic adventures outside Scandinavia, including partly mythological realms such as Risaland or Bjarmaland (see further below).

There is a total of four Old Irish texts that scholars suppose have exerted influence on the Old Norse accounts regarding the mythological Guðmundr complex. These Irish stories all contain the idea of otherworldly islands to the west of Ireland, as well as the journey to reach them (Hillers 1993, 66–81; Carey 2000, 113–19). The most prominent of these narratives with regard to possible influences on the Guðmundr matter is the late tenth-/early eleventh-century Hiberno-Latin account *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* (*Navigatio*), a pilgrimage story in which the narrative's protagonist Brendan seeks propinquity to God (MacMathúna 1985, 282; Wooding 2000, 227, 245; Thrall 2002, 18; Burgess 2002, 6). Over the course of his seven-year maritime quest Brendan encounters numerous islands before he finally manages to return home to Ireland. Another story, called *Immram curaig Máile Dúin* (*ICMD*), follows an analogous narrative progression to that of the *Navigatio* and can be dated to the tenth century at the earliest (Selmer 1989, xxxiii–xlix).<sup>3</sup> The focus of the plot, however, is on a quest for retaliation by the hero Máel Dúin, who wants to avenge the death of his father during a raid by marauders, rather than a quest for proximity to God. During his hunt for revenge Máel Dúin and his men once again encounter various islands off the western coast of Ireland.

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3 The similarities between *Navigatio* and the latter part of another frequently investigated narrative, *ICMD*, have been explained by scholars as going back to a shared archetype, the 'proto-Máile Dúin', from which the *Navigatio* and *ICMD* branched off later (Oskamp 1970, 43 and 47; Strijbosch 2000, 19–142 and 163–65).

Another source referred to, the well-known eleventh-century tale *Immram Brain mac Febail* (*IB*), follows the protagonist Bran, who is lured to an otherworldly insular dominion by a female figure (MacMathúna 1985, 1, 11). He gathers a party to accompany him and sets sail. During their journey they encounter the sea deity Manannán mac Lir. After sojourning there for a year the men return home only to discover that centuries have passed in Ireland, and no one remembers them. The fourth and final potentially influential story, *Echtra Chonnlai* (*EC*), is thought to date as far back as the ninth century (McCone 2000, 26 and 29–41). The plot is not dissimilar to that of *IB* and tells of how Connla *ráad* ('the Ruddy') is also summoned to an otherworldly isle by a lady who has fallen in love with him.

The varied Norwegian folklore material that will be considered focuses on the magical island of Utrøst, which is but one example of a number of magical isles that appear in Nordic folk tradition. The earliest recorded tale can be traced to 1591 (Strömbäck 1970, 146; Daae 1888, 129–30). As will be shown, these stories, which seem to reflect a shared, deep-rooted tradition, highlight the possibility that many varying perceptions of magical islands were extant in earlier Scandinavian tradition which are more likely to have served as sources for Glasisvellir.

### Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum

As noted above, Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum is a very erratic figure in the various narratives in which he features. However, there is a recurring set of qualities and attributes which underline the idea that he was part of a recognised oral tradition (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

Although Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum is a complex narrative construct, he almost always occupies a marginal role in the narratives, all of which nonetheless agree that his name is 'Guðmundr á/af Glasisvøllum/Glæsisvøllum'. With the exception of *GD* all narratives also refer to Guðmundr as a king. In his role as monarch Guðmundr is described both as a passive, Arthurian-like sovereign who is encountered within the confines of his own realm (*HsH*; *Hþþ*;) and as actively undertaking military expeditions or travels (*eBsH*; *yBsH*; *Ssf*; *þþb*). Furthermore, Guðmundr is frequently depicted as a heathen character, often in contrast with the Christian protagonists (*Hþþ*; *NGþ*; *þþb*). The Old Norse sources are also very uniform in their information regarding Guðmundr's physiognomy. Guðmundr is repeatedly said to be of supernatural height, a feature that is woven into the narrative of both *GD* and especially *þþb*. The possible exception is *Ssf*, in which the narrative

remains silent about Guðmundr's height. However, some difference in size may be supposed from the close vicinity his realm is said to have to Rísaland and Bjarmaland in the story. In four of the eight investigated narratives he is described as humanoid (even being knocked unconscious in *eBsH*) and explicitly not a *jötunn* (or 'giant'), and while *HsH* and *HþÞ* do not state this directly, they do not contradict it either.

Another interesting quality the sources highlight is Guðmundr's longevity. While his long lifespan is closely connected to Ódáinsakr being located within Glasisvellir in *HsH*, in *Ssf* it can also be inferred from his son Sigurður's age. Sigurður is said to have been around one hundred and fifty when he was killed; but his long lifespan cannot have been inherited from his mother's side, because she is said to have died at fifteen. If one also considers the possibility that Guðmundr is the same person throughout all the narratives, he must be of a similar age to Norna-Gestr or Ǫrvar-Oddr. Both characters were around three hundred years old when they perished, and both encountered figures from the corpus of *Fornaldarsögur*. Guðmundr, who takes part in *Fornaldarsögur*, still appears to be alive during the reign of Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000) (*NGþ*; *HþÞ*; *Þþb*).

Another feature of Guðmundr is that he is often portrayed as a father of a varying number of children, ranging from a sole child to twelve and even twenty-four offspring. It is noteworthy that his offspring are always described with the same set of features as their father: his sons are promising, either strong or wise, and some are magically skilled; his daughters are all said to be of tremendous beauty.

If we compare this character to those appearing in the Irish sources mentioned above, two otherworldly male rulers are mentioned who could constitute a possible source or model for Guðmundr (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

The more prominent of the two characters appears in *IB* and is the well-known sea deity Manannán mac Lir. In the narrative Manannán is described as a beautiful, luminescent male figure. Bran encounters him when Manannán rides his chariot across the waves, and in a brief monologue he unveils certain mysteries of the ocean to Bran, simultaneously highlighting both his different perception of the world and his supernatural knowledge. The latter is further stressed when Manannán explains that the purpose of his journey is to beget his son Mongán mac Fiachna in Ireland. In her 1991 article about Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum, Ellis Davidson speculated on whether Manannán could have served as a template for Guðmundr (Ellis Davidson 1991, 177f.). Her idea was that the Norwegian reception of the Irish narrative spawned

the creation of an indigenous character (that of Guðmundr). As tempting as this notion may be, there appears to be little support for this idea, despite various shared qualities. Both Guðmundr and Manannán govern a liminal or supernatural realm, are male ruling figures, fathers, and wise. However, the correlation is hampered by numerous differences. Unlike Manannán, Guðmundr is no deity and is somewhat faintly associated with water, an element that is inherent to the Irish god. Additionally, the realm that Manannán is said to govern is subaquatic and thus of a different quality to both Guðmundr's country realm Glasisvellir and the westward islands of the Irish narratives, which are thought to have served as a template for Glasisvellir.

Another figure in the Irish accounts worth mentioning is King Bóadag, who rules over the supernatural island Mag Mell ('The Plain of Delight') and is featured in *EC*. The name Bóadag translates to 'victorious' or 'victory', and his epithet *rí bithsuthain* ('Everlasting King') certainly suggests a prolonged lifespan. Furthermore, Bóadag is said to have established lasting peace, known as 'the peace of Bóadag', on his accession, granting stability to his people. However, hardly any connections can be made to Guðmundr, since he is never directly linked to either peace or victory, though he seems ageless. McCone (2000, 94–95) has considered the possibility of a Christian origin for Bóadag, who is presented in the story as 'the righteous one' who will destroy druidry, evoking imagery of St Patrick. Be that as it may, there appears little basis to assume any connection between Bóadag and Guðmundr, since a supernatural lifespan and authority over an otherworldly realm are too unspecific to establish a fruitful comparison. Indeed, these features could apply to a broad variety of literary figures and thus do not allow us to establish any line of influence. The idea that the possibly Christian Bóadag could have served as a template for the heathen Guðmundr weakens the argument still further.

The investigated folkloristic material features various supernatural species and people, but has only one prominent male ruling figure, namely, the 'Utrøst mannen' in northern Norway (see further below). In many of the Norwegian stories revolving around the disappearing and reappearing island of Utrøst the 'Utrøst mannen' is described as acting as a provost of Utrøst, where he resides. The 'Skarverne fra Utrøst' narrative describes him as a father of three sons who tills wheat fields and tends supernatural cows. In the narratives in which he appears the 'Utrøst mannen' is a humanoid who is usually clad in blue clothing and is sometimes said to have a beard. At a narrative level he is shown to be a liminal figure, and the 'Skarverne fra Utrøst' narrative hints at him being a revenant who lost his life at sea and



therefore tries to save sailors by granting them refuge on his island in the afterlife. However, as with Bóadag above, the few overlapping qualities of the ‘Utrøst mannen’ and Guðmundr – father, male ruler, and supernatural figure – are again too broad and thus can hardly serve as the bedrock for a comparison.

### **Glasisvellir and the Irish islands**

As has been outlined above, the description of Glasisvellir changes throughout the narratives, albeit to a lesser degree than that of Guðmundr himself. An outstanding trait of Glasisvellir is the ‘shining’ aspect of its name, which can be translated as ‘Shining Fields’. Although this attribute is never explained in the Old Norse narratives, it is worth bearing in mind in the comparison with the Irish islands (see Table 3 in the Appendix). It is noteworthy that, besides having a rugged, snowy, or very sylvan terrain Glasisvellir is nowhere described as being insular. Indeed, in *Ppb* it is depicted as a landlocked country. Additionally, as noted above, only the *HsH* versions posit a connection between Glasisvellir and Ódáinsakr.

As can be seen from the descriptions of both Guðmundr and his subjects, Glasisvellir is said to be inhabited by humanoid figures, an interesting fact when one considers its supposed spatial proximity to various supernatural realms. Glasisvellir’s most frequent associations are with other countries thought to be physically located in Fennoscandia in terms of both real topography and geography. These countries are collectively called ‘Norðrlönd’, a descriptive term used in *HsH*. The ‘Norðrlönd’ construct consists of numerous realms and territories, the exact composition of which varies from story to story. There are, however, some that appear more frequently than others: for example, Bjarmaland, Rísaland, and Jötunheimar (*GD*; *eBsH*; *yBsH*; *Ssf*; *Ppb*), although Jötunheimar seems to have rather erratic relations with Glasisvellir. They are described as having difficult relationships not least because Guðmundr is said to have a distaste for *jötnar* (*Ppb*) and to wage war upon them (*Ssf*). *HsH* describes Glasisvellir as actually being a state of Jötunheimar, whereas *yBsH* describes a friendly relationship between the two countries and their leaders. All this underlines the aforementioned liminality of Guðmundr, reigning over a realm which is shown to be located on the threshold between the human world and supernatural territories.

In the following evaluation only the Irish islands which appear to offer the most promising comparison with the markedly non-insular Glasisvellir are considered. Since more than one island tends to be mentioned in the

Irish stories, only one isle per story will be reflected on here (see Table 4 in the Appendix).

As has been outlined above, the *Navigatio* is a pilgrimage story in which its protagonist St Brendan is searching propinquity to God. While the narrative features a variety of islands, Brendan is successful in finding the proximity he wants on an island called Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum. Although labelled as earth or land (cf. Lat. 'terra'), it becomes quickly apparent from the description in the narrative itself that it is thought to be insular. Surrounding the island is a vast and thick fog bank. Finding it is made easier by a guiding light that appears after some time, which, it emerges, is Jesus Christ. His light brings warmth to the island and negates nightfall, and people wandering about the island therefore have no need of garments or sleep. The island itself is described as a grassy, flat, and spacious land with various exotic fruits and gemstones where there is no need for any food or drink. The important aspect of timelessness or the reduced flow of time that is very characteristic of magical Irish otherworlds is also present on Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum: Jesus explains to Brendan that the island is both primordial, since it was fashioned during the creation of the earth, and eternal, because it will exist until Judgement Day.

It is worth weighing various attributes of the Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum against the attributes of Glasisvellir. First and foremost, Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum is a bright otherworld, both in a literal sense, since Jesus himself provides light for the realm, and at a figurative level, for the island is beautiful, pleasant, and without sin. As noted above, it is worth bearing in mind that in spite of its name Glasisvellir is not presented as a bright otherworld. Furthermore, the clear Christian overtones Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum is said to have are omitted from any portrayal of Glasisvellir. The specific timelessness apparent from Jesus's description is also lacking in any account given of Glasisvellir. The only exception is the account in *HsH*, where these features are presented as being inherent in Ódáinsakr specifically and not in Glasisvellir.

The story of *ICMD* is, as has been stated above, quite similar to the *Navigatio*, and it is thus unsurprising that the various islands mentioned in *ICMD* are also akin to those of the *Navigatio*. Both stories feature a total of over forty islands, the most interesting for the current examination being the 'Island of Women'. It is the most prominent in *ICMD* because it is the dwelling place of the travellers for over three years. The island is inhabited by a female ruler and her seventeen daughters. This lady assures peace and stability by judging her people daily. In exchange for their acceptance of

offered hospitality the men are promised everlasting youth. However, the island's paradisiacal veneer begins to crumble when the men's departure is twice prevented by the lady's magic.

At the heart of both the accounts of *IB* and *EC* the respective male protagonist is lured or summoned to an otherworldly insular realm by a supernatural female figure. The focus of the narratives, however, is not on the description of this island, meaning that the descriptive information given is somewhat scarce. The two stories also feature another island, concerning which even less information is provided. Of the one hundred and fifty islands said to lie to the west of Ireland in *IB*, *Tír na mBan* ('The Island of the Women') is the focal point of the narrative. Here, it is the queen of this isle who lures Bran, the tale's protagonist, there in the first place. *Tír na mBan* is described as a joyful place with plentiful food and drink, and its residents, like those in *EC*, are free of grief, sickness, and death. Its colourful quality is repeatedly emphasised by the highlighting of its bright silver, golden, and crystalline appearance. The suggestion that *Tír na mBan* is a bright otherworld is further marked by the decelerated flow of time to which the people who dwell on the island are subject: Bran and his crew are said to sojourn on the island for what they experience as a year, but when they finally part, they discover that they have been gone for centuries, and the people they encounter only remember their names from 'ancient history' (MacMathúna 1985, 44, 57). All *Tír na mBan* and *Glasisvellir* share is their supernatural quality and this, again, is insufficient evidence to establish any fruitful comparison.

The focal island of *EC* to which Connla is lured by a female lover is given two names in the story: *Mag Mell* and *Tír na mBéo* ('The Land of the Living'). It is said to be home to the 'people of peace', who are also referred to as 'people of the sea'. The former phrase underlines the peace instituted by King *Bóadag*, who rules over this island, whereas the latter highlights *Mag Mell*'s maritime qualities. *Mag Mell* is no exception where the characteristics popular with Irish otherworldly islands are concerned: people living on the isle are said to experience neither age nor death, and remain young until Judgement Day. There is also neither sin nor transgression and, as a result, the populace needs not fear any hardship or bereavement. Ultimately, however, there appear to be no obvious parallels with *Guðmundr's* realm *Glasisvellir*. It seems that *Mag Mell's* qualities, like many of the otherworldly islands previously discussed, correlate instead with the characteristics and description of *Ódáinsakr* discussed below, a place which cannot be regarded assynonymous with *Glasisvellir*.

We can now continue with a consideration of the Nordic material.<sup>4</sup> The corpus of the 'Utrøst legend' consists of a total of eleven folk legends that have been recorded and collected in Norway (Christiansen 1992, 75). These folk tales can be roughly categorised into four groups:<sup>5</sup> the first group, comprising the narratives SIN 290 and SIN 301,<sup>6</sup> revolves around the provost of Utrøst, the 'Utrøst mannen', leaving his isle to interact with a human and offering him the choice between various items or events (Hveding 1935, 86; Strompdal 1929, 6f.). The four narratives that constitute the second group (SIN 291–94) describe how a merchant vessel, usually said to sail from Bergen to the Lofoten, is caught in a fierce tempest. When all hope of survival has faded, the crew happens upon the island of Utrøst. The 'Utrøst mannen' offers the men a key to the island, which they vehemently refuse. The sailors then anchor and wait for the storm to abate, and then continue their journey (Hveding 1935, 86–88). The third group is comprised of some of the lengthiest and most detailed narratives of Utrøst, namely 'Skarverne fra Utrøst' (corresponding to SIN 289), as well as SIN 288 and SIN 295. The flagship narrative 'Skraerverne fra Utrøst' tells the story of a poor fisherman who is forced to go fishing in bad weather and is overcome by a storm. After the storm has ceased, he is guided to the island of Utrøst, which is described as having fields and plentiful cattle. There the man is welcomed by the 'Utrøst mannen', who lives in a huge house (Aasen 1923, 58ff.; Strompdal 1929, 143f.; Mo 1935, 158f.; Asbjørnsen 1870, 53–59). After a successful fishing journey the fisherman manages to find his way home.

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4 Other folk legends not covered in this article are those preserved in Swedish, Orcadian, and Faroese folk tales involving magical islands. The most abundant folk tales of magical islands are those found in Orcadian folklore, which revolve around such magical islands as Eynhallow and Hildaland. These stories recount similar events to those concerning Utrøst (Nicolson 1981, 85; Muir 2001, 36–44, 70–3, 136–40; Muir 2014, 79–90). The earliest folk tales in Sweden and on the Faroese islands probably date to the sixteenth century (af Klintberg 1987, 307; af Klintberg 2010, 161). The most prominent group of Swedish folk legends regarding islands are those of af Klintberg's type J63ADE ('Sjömännen och jätten' ['The Sailor and the giant']), but any comparison is hindered by the fact that Guðmundr is no 'giant' and Glasisvellir is no island (af Klintberg 2010, 161–63). Faroese legends tell the story of Svínoy, another magical disappearing island that lies off the coast of Viðoy. The island only appears when a sow from a nearby village goes there to find a mate (Byberg 1970, 154f.; Jakobsen 1984, 172). All things considered, along with the Utrøst accounts these tales highlight the deeply rooted nature of magical isles in the north should it be needed to offer a background to the Glasisvellir concept.

5 For more information regarding this classification see Lummer 2017, 154ff..

6 The SIN number which refers to the various narratives listed in the following is the reference number used by the *Norsk folkeminnesamling*, which offers an online archive containing collected Norwegian folk legends: see <[https://www2.hf.uio.no/eventyr\\_og\\_sagn/index.php](https://www2.hf.uio.no/eventyr_og_sagn/index.php)>, last accessed December 19 2018.

Last but not least, we have the two narratives of the fourth group, SIN 300 and SIN 805, which explain how sailors discover blades of grass or barley attached to the keels of their ships by stating that they have sailed over the fields of Utrøst. This category is particularly interesting, since the legends highlight the submerged quality of Utrøst.<sup>7</sup>

These descriptions suggest that if one is looking for stories of magical island realms that might offer a template for the accounts of Glasisvellir, one does not need to look to Ireland. Ultimately, however, Glasisvellir seems to share only a few and isolated attributes with both the Irish magical islands to the west of Ireland and the Norwegian folk legends regarding Utrøst, which at least has a male ruler. It thus appears that Glasisvellir was from the outset conceptualised as a mainland country to the north, rather than crafted according to an Irish or indigenous pattern.

### Ódáinsakr

Regarding the potential parallels with Ódáinsakr, the only connection made in the Old Norse source material between the Guðmundr subject matter and Ódáinsakr is in *HsH*. Admittedly, two of the three redactions of *HsH* state that Ódáinsakr is within the realm of Glasisvellir, and that it is the source for Guðmundr's prolonged life, protecting him from suffering any disease. In *GD* Saxo certainly mentions a place of refuge called 'Udensakre'. However, Saxo establishes no connection between the 'Udensakre' episode and the story of Guthmundus which he recounts later, something he could easily have done if he deemed it necessary. Meanwhile, *EsV* is an exception in the corpus of Old Norse source material that has been connected to the Guðmundr complex. This saga does not mention either Guðmundr or Glasisvellir, focusing instead on the story of Eiríkr, who seeks Ódáinsakr, which is depicted as a *paradisum terrestris*: a bright, flat country with sweet, fragrant odours (*EsV*). It is described as an Earthly Paradise in *EsV* and as a place of refuge in *GD*, clearly reflecting the various Irish otherworldly islands mentioned above. Indeed, Ódáinsakr seems to resemble the Irish magical islands much more than it does Glasisvellir, as Ódáinsakr's Christian tones starkly contradict Guðmundr's intrinsic paganism. It is possible that Ódáinsakr, like the Irish islands, has a backdrop in Christian learning (Hamer 2002, 265). It cannot be stressed enough that a connection between Ódáinsakr and the Guðmundr complex is only made in *HsH*, and not in *GD*

7 <[https://www2.hf.uio.no/eventyr\\_og\\_sagn/index.php?asok=1&hkat=0&kat=358&oid=0&sted=0&sperson=0&iperson=0&tid=10379](https://www2.hf.uio.no/eventyr_og_sagn/index.php?asok=1&hkat=0&kat=358&oid=0&sted=0&sperson=0&iperson=0&tid=10379)>, last accessed December 19 2018.

or any of the other seven narratives that mention Guðmundr. This alone makes the assumption that Ódáinsakr might have been an integral part of the Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum subject matter highly tenuous.

Like most accounts of Guðmundr, the Norwegian folk tales of Utrøst provide no image comparable to Ódáinsakr, because Utrøst is never described as granting immunity from death and ailments. Furthermore, the aspect of timelessness cannot be seen here in the sense that it appears for Ódáinsakr or the Irish islands: special conditions are needed for Utrøst to appear, and if these conditions cease, so does Utrøst. Additionally, the time on Utrøst seems to pass at the same pace as it does on mainland Norway. Thus, there appears no good reason to compare Ódáinsakr and the Utrøst legends.

### Conclusion

To briefly recapitulate, it has been stressed here that in the sagas Guðmundr is depicted as an old, pagan, humanoid monarch whose liminal position on the verge of the supernatural is apparent. Although he is occasionally said to possess magical skills, Guðmundr occupies a very specific narrative role: unlike the otherworldly rulers of the Irish narratives who seek out the protagonist, Guðmundr is presented as a helper, usually providing the protagonist with information, items, or aids in the course of the protagonist's quest. While Guðmundr is described as having numerous key qualities, the variety and composition of these attributes suggest that these traits could be modified if the narrative required it. The alleged connections to the ruling Irish figures of the narratives supposed to have influenced the Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum complex, Manannán mac Lir and Bóadag, are clearly difficult to entertain. Apart from being liminal, supernatural figures, there are hardly any other aspects that would lead to a fruitful comparison, and with regard to the female Irish figures the contrast between their different narrative purposes is even greater. The 'Utrøst mannen' has been introduced here to highlight how Norwegian folk legends commonly talk of a supernatural ruler of a magical island, but even Guðmundr and the 'Utrøst mannen' share few overlapping attributes, Guðmundr never being imagined as an insular, maritime sovereign.

That the Guðmundr complex is thought to have its roots in Irish narrative tradition seems largely based on the perception that Ódáinsakr is inherent to this narrative complex, thereby giving Glasisvellir attributes of immortality and timelessness. As noted, this reasoning cannot be supported, because only *HsH* makes this connection, while all the other narratives that feature

either Guðmundr or Glasisvellir remain silent about it. If it were such a paramount part of the Guðmundr subject matter, one would naturally expect more frequent mention of this correlation. Another conflict is seen in the fact that Glasisvellir is never described as an island. Furthermore, unlike in the case of some of the insular Irish counterparts, seeking or reaching Glasisvellir is never the ultimate goal of the protagonists in the Nordic sagas; they happen upon it.

Glasisvellir is an integral part of the Guðmundr subject matter, being regularly represented in Guðmundr's epithet, but it lacks the Christian aura that is so prominent in the Irish isles. This is partly because of its liminal position at the threshold of northern Norway, close to pagan, mythical realms, but also because it is governed by Guðmundr, who is described as a pagan on numerous occasions. The 'shining' feature that appears within Glasisvellir's name cannot be explained by its description as a rugged, sylvan, or mountainous realm, and, indeed, it is never said to be a bright otherworld. Thus, the liminal aspect and the potential 'shining' feature of Glasisvellir alone are ultimately not enough to establish any obvious correlation with the Irish motif of myriads of supernatural islands to the west of Ireland.

The Scandinavian folkloristic material supports the view that the notion of supernatural maritime worlds was not unknown to Norwegian folk belief and did not need to come from abroad. That this idea existed from an early point and was possibly even contemporary with the earliest preserved narratives of Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum can be seen, for example, in the description of Gotland in the Old Swedish account of *Guta saga* (dated to the thirteenth century) or in stanza 59 of the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, which can be interpreted as describing a landscape that rises and sinks back into the sea (Pipping 1905–1907, Neckel & Kuhn 1983, 14).

Regarding Ódáinsakr, there is little question that it shares the most plausible similarities with the examined Irish material. However, within the setting of Christian learning in both Ireland and the Nordic countries the incorporation of the Ódáinsakr motif into narratives with 'pagan' elements would have caused some degree of unease for authors. Whether Ódáinsakr in the Nordic narratives is a motif based on an Irish Christian understanding of the *paradisum terrestris* or on general Christian ideas is a question that is best discussed elsewhere. It nonetheless appears that Ódáinsakr must be regarded as a largely solitary notion, which, outside *HsH*, is disconnected from the Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum complex.

It could be argued that Glasisvellir was just one of the many magical otherworlds that are common to European literature and not least folk leg-

ends, like the wonderful outlaw valleys encountered in Icelandic folk tales or the fairy worlds in both Nordic and Irish tales. It is natural that narratives involving a maritime journey to an otherworld would describe this otherworld as insular. Likewise, stories about overland journeys to supernatural realms would portray them as being inland countries. On the basis of the present discussion there appears little reason to pursue foreign cultures as possible sources for Glasisvellir. If such an investigation is attempted, however, the above comparison of supposed Irish templates suggests that both Guðmundr and Glasisvellir were more Norse than Irish.

\* \* \*

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**Appendix**

In the tables the sections marked with an ‘x’ refer to attributes directly ascribed to Guðmundr in the respective narrative. Fields marked with ‘~’ highlight an attribute that is not directly ascribed to Guðmundr but can be inferred from the text.

**Table 1.** Key qualities of Guðmundr á Glasisvöllum

	Gd	Hsh	Ngþ	Hþþ	Ebsh	Ybsh	Pþþ	Ssf
<i>Ruler</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Humanoid</i>	x	~			x	x	x	~
<i>Rich</i>	~	x		x	x	x	x	~
<i>Wise</i>	~	x		<i>magical know-ledge</i>				
<i>Pagan</i>	~	~		x	x	~	x	~
<i>Offspring</i>	<i>twelve sons and twelve daughters</i>	Hofundr (son)		Ingibjörg (daughter)			Heiðrekr úlfhamr (son)	Sigurður (son)
<i>Supernatural body height</i>	x	~		~	~	~	x	~
<i>Active monarch</i>	~				x	x	x	x
<i>Passive monarch</i>	~	x		x				

**Table 2.** Attributes of male Irish otherworldly rulers

	Ruler or King	Supernatural	Humanoid	Connected with peace	Long Life	Beautiful	Wise	Christian connotations
<i>Manannán mac Lir</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x	
<i>Bóadag, the Everlasting King</i>	x	x	x	x	x			x

**Table 3.** Key Attributes of Glasísvellir

	GD	HsH	NGp	HpP	eBsH	yBsH	PpB	SsF
<i>Forest</i>	x			x	x	x	x	x
<i>Humanoid Denizens</i>	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
<i>Incorporating Ódáinsakr</i>		x						
<i>Connection to mainland Scandinavia</i>	x	x		x		x	x	x

**Table 4.** Attributes of magical Irish islands

	Terra Reipromissionis Sanctorum ( <i>Navigatio</i> )	Island of Women (ICMD)	Tír na mBam (IB)	Mag Mell (EC)
<i>Bright</i>	x	x	x	x
<i>Timelessness</i>	x	x	x	x
<i>Christian overtones</i>	x			x
<i>Male ruler</i>	x		x	x
<i>Insular</i>	x	x	x	x
<i>Paradisiacal (no sin, death, suffering, hunger etc.)</i>	x	x	x	x





# The Dagda, Thor and ATU 1148B: Analogues, Parallels, or Correspondences?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Since ancient times celestial thunder gods have been a familiar feature in mythologies throughout the Indo-European language area. Their Irish counterpart, the Dagda, is a major personage at the centre of the Mythological Cycle, and his possible connections to the Scandinavian god Thor are examined here. Following a brief section dealing with questions of methodology, points of comparison are addressed which include the two gods' common primary role as defenders of their realm; their place in the assembly of gods; their principal weapons and implements (iron club/hammer/harp, cauldron); their associations with cosmology and artisans; and their visits to the abode of their monstrous adversaries, incorporating elements of the burlesque. Both gods appear in versions of the international tale ATU 1148B 'The Thunder Instrument' (Thor in the Old Norse poem *Prymskviða*, and the Dagda's recovery of his harp from the Irish Mythological Cycle), and the nature of the parallels between the two versions is examined. The question of a borrowing during the Viking era, or of an inherited body of tradition possibly from Indo-European times, is discussed: the international tale type also leads to the myth, at a further temporal and geographical remove, of the Greek god Zeus and the theft of his thunderbolts. A proposed sequential account of the development and evolution of both gods from remote antiquity is provided.

Keywords: *Thor, The Dagda, comparative mythology, Celtic mythology*

Thunder gods, with their all-powerful thunderbolts and hammers, have featured prominently in mythological traditions from Scandinavia to India, providing parallels that have suggested a variety of ancient common origins (West 2007, 238–55). A Celtic counterpart, the Dagda, has been less accessible and therefore less well known to students of comparative mythology. He is

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1 My thanks to Mr Frog (Helsinki) and Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík) for their close reading and helpful comments. Any errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my own.

a problematic, complex, and often contradictory character, whose origins have been little investigated. Nevertheless, an examination of the available evidence provides every indication that his relationship with Scandinavian, Indic, Greek, Baltic, and other counterparts is an inherited one extending back as far as Indo-European (IE) times. Within the broader context the purpose of this article is to explore the parallels, and therefore the potential historical relationships, between the Dagda and the Scandinavian god Thor, who in the light of recent research shows signs of a more multifaceted existence and history than was previously understood.

### **Methodology and the evidence**

Whether we choose to identify the following analogues, parallels, or suggested correspondences as revealing cultural history or prehistory, the broader methodological questions underlying the present study, while still fundamental, are hardly new. What are the criteria for a solid correspondence in comparative mythology? How can we measure these against other efforts at reconstruction? What indicates a genetic inheritance in mythological traditions? Good candidates for a common origin should offer parallels so precise as to require an explanation. In terms of establishing shared origins on the level of spoken/written linguistic forms John Colarusso (1998) has provided a probability-based model applied to the phonological and morphological levels of language. Clearly, for comparative mythology things are not so simple: the structural constraints on phonological systems, which are fundamental and low in the hierarchy, may be of a different order and far stricter than the higher level of mythological symbols and ideas. And the question of common origins is further complicated by later 'adstratal' cross-borrowings into one or more mythologies from outside traditions that may or may not be genetically related. Within compared traditions it is often useful to look for corresponding but unexpected singular ('weird') details: particulars that are so incongruous outside the context of the narrative that they provide a strong indication (a 'clincher') of a shared genetic origin, or of cultural contact, in an otherwise inconclusive argument.

### **Defender of the Tuatha Dé**

Let us begin with a brief review of the Dagda as he appears in the Irish Mythological Cycle,<sup>2</sup> with a view to identifying points of comparison to be

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2 Unlike the heroes of the Ulster and Finn Cycles, the Dagda figures little if at all in modern Gaelic folklore (Ó hÓgáin 2006, 147).

revisited later in our discussion of Thor and his place among the Scandinavian gods. The Dagda is regarded by Celticists as having been at some time a principal deity, 'the most prominent of the older chthonic gods' who served for a time as ruler over the Irish gods, the Tuatha Dé (Dillon and Chadwick 1967, 144; Gray 1982, 121; Ó hÓgáin 2006, 153). His most notable appearances in the Irish Mythological Cycle are in the two cosmological battles of Mag Tuired. In the first battle his role is primarily that of a warrior who protects his fellow gods from forces of chaos appearing in the form of their giant enemies the Fir Bolg. In one battle scene he stands protectively over the wounded leader of the gods, Nuadu (Fraser 1916, 46–47). In the Second Battle<sup>3</sup> the Dagda is similarly engaged in fighting off the Fomoiré, monstrous adversaries who are likewise of gigantic size.<sup>4</sup> His weapon is his enormous club, widely likened by comparatists to Thor's hammer or Indra's *vajra*, which he enthusiastically deploys in battle (Gray 1982, 34–35; de Vries 1963, 46):

I will fight for the men of Ireland with mutual smiting and destruction and wizardry. Their bones under my club will soon be as many as hailstones under the feet of herds of horses, where the double enemy meets on the battlefield of Mag Tuired.

In addition to being mounted on a set of wheels for dragging around behind him, the club, described elsewhere as made of iron, has other interesting properties. It can not only destroy life, but restore it, as related in the story of 'How the Dagda got his Magic Staff' (Bergin 1927):

When his oldest son Cermait Milbéil was felled in combat by the god Lug, the Dagda took him on his back and went through the world in search of a cure. In the great Eastern World he encountered three men carrying three treasures with miraculous properties, among them a staff: 'This great staff that thou seest,' said he, 'has a smooth end and a rough end. One end slays the living, and the other end brings the dead to life' [...] 'Put the staff in my hand,' said the Dagda. And they lent him the staff, and he put the staff upon them thrice, and they fell by him, and he pressed (?) the smooth end upon his son, and he arose in strength and health. Cermait

<sup>3</sup> Gray 1982. The MS is sixteenth century, based on an original dated to the ninth century on linguistic grounds.

<sup>4</sup> cf. the modern Scottish Gaelic reflex of their name *famhair/fuamhaire* 'giant', often featured in wonder tales.

put his hand on his face, and rose up and looked at the three dead men that were before him.

At his son's urging the Dagda resuscitated the three brothers with the staff, and then appropriated it to slay his enemies, heal his friends, and by means of it gain the kingship of Ireland.

The distinctive property of the weapon is encountered again in the description of the god given in the Mythological Cycle tale *Mesca Ullad* 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen':<sup>5</sup>

In his hand was a terrible iron staff (*lorg...iarnaidi*), on which were a rough end and a smooth end. His play and amusement consisted in laying the rough end on the heads of the nine [companions], whom he would kill in the space of a moment. He would then lay the smooth end on them, so that he would reanimate them in the same time (Watson 1983, 28; Cross and Slover 1981, 229).

If that is not enough, the club alters the landscape as well by creating a ditch after it (Gray 1982, 46f.):

He trailed behind him a wheeled fork which was the work of eight men to move, and its track was enough for the boundary ditch of a province. It is called 'The Track of the Dagda's Club' [*Slicht Loirge in Dagdae*] for that reason.

The Dagda possessed a further remarkable asset: a cauldron (*coire*), one of the four talismans brought to Ireland by the Tuatha Dé, with the magic property that 'no company ever went away from it unsatisfied' (Gray 1982, 24–25).

### **The many talents of the Dagda**

As well as being a warrior defending the realm, the Dagda is also an artificer credited with building the abodes of the gods. In the events preceding the Second Battle of Mag Tuired the Dagda built the fortress Dún mBrese when the youthful Bres attained sovereignty over Ireland; he also constructed the earthen ramparts around the same stronghold under the oppressive rule of the Fomoiré. Elsewhere, as king of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda distributed the

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5 There are four manuscript sources: *Lebor na h-Uidre* (c. 1100); *Lebor Laigen* (c. 1160); a manuscript 'originally part of the Yellow Book of Lecan' (c. 1391–1401); Gaelic MS XL, National Library of Scotland (sixteenth century).

*sid* dwellings among them, retaining the foremost, Brug na Bóinne (Newgrange) for his own use (Gray 1982, 28f.; Carey 1990, 24). That concepts of cosmology underlie this most impressive of monuments is evident from archaeology as well as mythological accounts (Lewis-Williams, 2011, Ch. 8),<sup>6</sup> and in the Metrical *Dindsenchas* he is identified as its builder (Gwynn 1906, 18–21). Within the setting of the Brugh, the mythological tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín') reveals his magical powers, and on a cosmic scale. As a tactic in his pursuit of the goddess Bóand, the Dagda sends her husband Elcmar, in some accounts ruler of the Brugh, on an errand, ostensibly over a day and a night. The husband's absence, however, is magically extended to nine months by the Dagda, who halts the passage of the sun, providing ample time for Bóand to bear him a male child, Mac Óc (Carey 1990, 26; Bergin and Best 1938, 142).

The god's wizardry apparently extends to other activities besides the manipulation of time. As the Tuatha Dé were preparing for the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, they met to take stock of their combined resources in magic that could be brought to bear on the Fomoiré. Following an impressive list of powers that include moving mountains, denying the enemy access to water, raining down showers of fire on them, and binding their urine in their bodies, the Dagda declares that the powers described by others will be wielded by him and thus subsumed within his own magical activity. The other gods are in full agreement, conferring on him his name *in Dagdae* ('The Good God'), suspected to be secondary and replacing an older theonym (Gray 1982, 42–45; Ó hÓgáin 2006, 146).

Curiously for a god of his position in the hierarchy and in a central role in the struggles of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda's character contains elements of the burlesque, chiefly expressed by his enormous appetite, bordering on gluttony, as described in his first visit to his monstrous adversaries (Gray 1982, 46f.):

The Fomoiré made porridge for him to mock him, because his love of porridge was great. They filled for him the king's cauldron, which was five fists deep, and poured four score gallons of new milk and the same quantity of meal and fat into it. They put goats and sheep and swine into it, and boiled them all together with the porridge. Then they poured it into a hole in the ground [...] Then the Dagda took his ladle, and it was big enough for a man and a woman to lie in the middle of it [...] Then the Dagda said, 'This is good

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6 An archaeological and historical sequence for the site is provided at location 3527.

food if its broth is equal to its taste.' [...] Then at the end he scraped his bent finger over the bottom of the hole among mould and gravel. He fell asleep then after eating his porridge. His belly was as big as a house cauldron, and the Fomoire laughed at it.<sup>7</sup>

A further portrayal with its burlesque qualities incorporates another important characteristic: that of fertility (Gray 1982, 44f.):

His long penis was uncovered. He had on two shoes of horsehide with the hair outside.

Being thus depicted, it is no surprise that the Dagda had a number of dalliances, one with the goddess Morrígu and, later, one with a younger woman (Gray 1982, 44f., 46–49).

Despite his rustic exterior and coarse manner, the Dagda is no stranger to the refined arts practised by the gods. His poetic ability is displayed near the end of the First Battle of Mag Tuired, in verses composed to relate the losses to both sides incurred during the battle (Fraser 1916, 50–57). His musical skills are expressed through a second implement with magical qualities in his possession: his harp, which he alone can play. In the Second Battle of Mag Tuired he sets out, accompanied by the gods Lug and Ogma, to recover the harp, which has been taken by the Fomoire. When they arrive at the Fomoires' feasting hall (Gray 1982, 70f.), we are told:

Then Lug and the Dagda and Ogma went after the Fomoire, because they had taken the Dagda's harper, Uaithne. Eventually they reached the banqueting hall where Bres mac Elathan and Elatha mac Delbaith were. There was the harp on the wall. That is the harp in which the Dagda had bound the melodies so that they did not make a sound until he summoned them, saying,

'Come Daur Dá Bláo,  
Come Cóir Cetharchair,  
Come summer, come winter,  
Mouths of harps and bags and pipes!  
(Now that harp had two names, Daur Dá Bláo and Cóir  
Cetharchair.)

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<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that such portrayals may be connected with representations of copiousness (Ó hÓgáin 2006, 146) or may have been a later development driven by Christian doctrine (de Vries 1963, 48).

Then the harp came away from the wall, and it killed nine men and came to the Dagda; and he played for them the three things by which a harper is known: sleep music, joyful music, and sorrowful music. He played sorrowful music for them so that their tearful women wept. He played joyful music for them so that their women and boys laughed. He played sleep music for them so that the hosts slept. So the three of them escaped from them unharmed – although they wanted to kill them.

The Dagda brought with him the cattle taken by the Fomoiré through the lowing of the heifer which had been given him for his work; because when she called her calf, all the cattle of Ireland which the Fomoiré had taken as their tribute began to graze.

Thus, with the incapacitation of the Fomoiré, the escape of the three gods, and the recovery of the cattle taken as tribute the forces of order are re-established for the Tuatha Dé, in much the same way as they were by the return of the waters/cattle in Indic tradition (West 2007, 259–62).

Finally, appellatives applied to the Dagda (twenty-two in all) reveal more regarding his origins and functions (Gray 1982, 48f.; Shaw 2018, 154f.). His name, 'The Good God', may be a sobriquet, as the passage above from the Second Battle of Moytura suggests (Sayers 1985, 342; Gray 1982, 48f.). The epithet *Eochu Ollathair* is of particular interest. The personal name *Eochu* is derived from IE *\*ekwo-* 'horse' and may be reconstructed as IE *\*ekwo-poti-* 'horse lord', drawing on an old and widely extended heritage of Indo-European belief and institutions. *Ollathair* 'great father' finds its formal equivalent in Old Norse *Alfǫðr* 'all-father, progenitor of all', which is applied to Odin in pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology. *Ruad Rofhessa* is rendered by my late colleague Alan Bruford 'The red-haired<sup>8</sup> (/mighty) one of great knowledge', where *Rofhessa* signals omniscience. What is arguably the most intriguing appellative of all is found in the list from the Second Battle of Moytura: *Athgen mBethae* 'regeneration of the world', which has elicited little comment, but in the context of the Dagda's position and attributes may well refer to a central cosmological function.

From the description above the Irish god is undoubtedly many-faceted and complex, yet our summary has served to bring out the main strands in his story to keep in mind as we turn to Thor. The Dagda is described as a staunch warrior, a protector by means of his mighty club against the sinister

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8 cf. the various references to Thor as being red-haired/bearded.

and chaotic forces personified by the Fir Bolg/Fomoiré. His club or staff is of a size to alter the landscape, and among the weapons of the Irish gods has the unique quality of being able to restore life as well as terminate it. His other power implement is a musical instrument. He is closely associated with the construction as well as the defence of the gods' central dwellings, placing him in the role of a cosmic artificer; he is skilled in magic, poetry and music; he makes multiple visits to the halls of the Tuatha Dé's adversaries, where he demonstrates his gluttony, and recovers valuable objects and wealth. He has a burlesque side with associations with sexual activity. In this connection also, as his appellative *Ollathair* would indicate, he is the great progenitor with close connections to concepts of fertility.

### Thor in the Assembly of the Gods

Among the Norse gods Thor's primary and continuing mission is to defend the territory and abodes of gods and men against the constant and chaotic threat of the giants (*jǫtnar*), whom he routinely destroys, thereby maintaining the cosmic order. In this and his other deeds he has been described by Dumézil (1977, 66) as 'the rampart of divine society': a role equivalent to that of the Dagda that we have seen in the two mythological battles against monstrous adversaries. Thor, the son of Odin and Jörd ('Earth'), is a mighty warrior god, possessing great physical strength. His weapon is his hammer, Mjöllnir, which in addition to being capable of delivering a devastating blow was created with magical qualities, though he himself is no practitioner of magic. Thor is an adventurous sort who journeys frequently, sometimes in a chariot drawn by his two goats. He is not distinguished by his verbal abilities – Odin is far superior in that department – but on one occasion his knowledge of poetic terms comes to the fore in an all-night verbal contest with a dwarf who is intent on courting his daughter (Lindow 2001, 56–57; 288). In similar verbal duels, however, he does not emerge the victor.<sup>9</sup> His prodigious appetite for food and drink is dramatically portrayed when he visits the dwellings of his adversaries the giants, resulting in scenes that occasionally descend into caricature (*Drymskviða* 24; *Hymiskviða* 15; *Gylfaginning* 31). A closer look at the details suggests that Thor is an 'all-purpose god' (Gunnell 2015, 64). His character is more complex than it would initially

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<sup>9</sup> The account of the verbal exchange is preserved in a single source, *Alvíssmál* (The Words of the All-wise) within the *Codex Regius* (c. 1280) and is summarised by Lindow (2001, 56–57), who notes there that 'neither Thor nor dwarfs are ordinarily known for skill at verbal dueling'.



appear, revealing further aspects that do not seem entirely consistent with his role as a warrior. One is an implied association with the artisan activity of blacksmithing; a further association in folk belief is with fertility (Turville-Petre 1975, 81; Lindow 1994, 489–90; cf. Dumézil 1977, 72).

In Snorri Sturluson's well-known ranking of the Nordic gods in the *Prose Edda*, the primacy belongs to the *Alfǫðr* 'All-Father', Odin, the highest of the gods, who in addition to having created heaven, earth, the skies, and mankind lives through all ages, rules everything in his realm, and decides all matters great and small (Faulkes 2005, 8). It is certainly an impressive list, but since the time of the Grimms Odin's pre-eminence in the 'pantheon' has been questioned, particularly in relation to the position of Thor (Dumézil 1977, xxiii; cf. Puhvel 1987, 201). An impressive set of arguments has been assembled by Turville-Petre (1975, 75–103) to support the primacy of Thor in the hierarchy, describing him as 'the noblest and most powerful of gods, and he seems to grow in stature as the Heathen Age comes to its close' (75), and observing that the eleventh-century chronicler Adam of Bremen, describing the idols of the gods in the pagan temple at Uppsala, notes that Thor's place was the central one, flanked by Wodan and Fricco. This is a view supported more recently by John Lindow (2001, 290), who sees Thor in Scandinavia as 'probably the most important god of late paganism'. Indeed, there are traces of a tradition in Iceland, supported elsewhere in the Germanic world, of 'one Þórr and another VingeÞórr who were forefathers of Óðinn' (Gunnell 2015, 66). Terry Gunnell's survey covering a wide range of sources reveals that Odin's position in Iceland until the time of conversion was not of great importance, and that primacy was generally accorded to Thor not only in Iceland, but elsewhere in Scandinavian tradition, in the wider Germanic world, and, incidentally, in (Viking) Ireland (Gunnell 2017, 105, 113, 117, 118, 122). If, as Gunnell suggests, the 'recent' ascent of Odin was the limited product of a warrior aristocracy outside Iceland, on the popular level at least such an approach within Germanic mythology places Thor and the Dagda on a more equivalent footing within their hierarchies.

### **Thor's hammer and kettle and their properties**

With the above points to consider I would like to undertake a closer examination of what have appeared to be shared characteristics between the Irish and the Nordic gods, beginning with Thor's hammer.

Comparative mythologists within the area of Indo-European studies have often drawn attention to the parallels between Thor's hammer, the *vajra*

weapon used by Indra of the Vedas, and the thunderbolts of Zeus (West 2007, 251–55). According to Snorri, the hammer was the best of six objects created by the dwarfs as described in his *Prose Edda* (tr. Lindow 1994, 486):

Then he gave the hammer to Thor and said that he could hit as hard as he wanted with it, whatever might be before him, and the hammer would not fail; and if he threw it at something, then he would never lose it, or throw it so far that it would not come back to his hand; [...] It was the judgment of the gods that the hammer was the best of all the precious objects and the greatest defence was in it against the frost giants.

The hammer's name is Mjöllnir, whose etymology probably indicates something to do with lightning, with obvious parallels in other Indo-European traditions (West 2007, 253f.; Lindow 1994, 489; Puhvel 1987, 201).

Thor's hammer, which in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* III, 73 also appears as a club (Turville-Petre 1975, 81), has distinctive properties shared with the Dagda's weapon. The first is the ability to alter the landscape. On his visit accompanied by three companions to the outlandish domain of Útgarda-Loki, as recounted in the *Gylfaginning* 45–47 of Snorri's *Edda*, Thor is magically tricked in a series of shows of strength by the giant Skrímir. In his first attempt, Thor delivers three mighty blows with his hammer to Skrímir's head while he sleeps, which the giant casually ignores. Once in Útgard, Thor and his companions fail in all the assigned tasks of strength and prowess. Later, in the course of the dénouement, the giant explains that the blows were deflected onto the landscape. The tracks of the hammer (*hamarspor*) from each blow created three valleys, similar in their layout and origins to the ditch (*Slicht Loirge in Dagdae*) left in the wake of the Dagda's club.

A still more striking comparison is Thor's and the Dagda's chief weapon's capacity to restore life as well as destroy it (cf. Gunnell 2015, 65). According to the standard reference sources it is a rare motif: Stith Thompson's *Motif Index* (1955–1958) – admittedly by no means exhaustive – gives only Irish sources for the motif (D1663.1.1 'Magic club kills and revives'). Earlier in the *Prose Edda* Snorri relates how Thor and the god Loki set out for Útgard on his chariot drawn by two goats. In the evening they took lodging with a farmer. Thor slaughtered, flayed, and cooked the goats, which were eaten by the gods and the farmer's family. The bones were placed on the hide, following Thor's instructions, with one of them having been broken by the farmer's son. In the morning Thor consecrated the hides and the bones

with his hammer, which had the effect of restoring them to life. The episode does not provide a perfect instance of reversibility, since the hammer is not used in the killing: the verb used for the slaughter of the goats is *skar* (<*skera* ‘to cut, slaughter’), but that used to describe the life-restoring hallowing process is the usual *vigði* < *vígja* ‘to hallow, consecrate’. *Hymiskviða* 38, where Thor’s role is central, alludes to what appears to be a variant of the same story (Turville-Petre 1975, 82). The parodic aspects of Thor’s visits to Útgard and to the abode of the giant Þrym (see below) are closely paralleled by those of the Dagda to the abode of the Fomoir. Tolley (2012), in his wide-ranging study of the motif, comes to no definite conclusion as to whether it was borrowed or if so, in which direction. He does, however, offer the useful suggestion concerning the evolution of an older version in Norse mythology that

‘[I]t seems likely that a coincidence of a guardian god, armed with a cudgel, a cauldron of plenty, a visit to some sort of otherworld, and lameness may lie behind both Norse and Irish/Welsh traditions. Yet, if such an ancient (perhaps Indo-European) motif-complex did exist, it has been drastically recast in the Norse version [...] which [...] again suggests a recasting of tradition, most probably as a result of outside influences’.

Like the Dagda, Thor also avails himself of a cauldron-like vessel (*hver*) to provide for the company. In the opening stanzas of *Hymiskviða* Thor and Týr are sent at the bidding of a giant to fetch a kettle for the brewing of beer, which they finally locate at the dwelling of Týr’s father Hymni. The kettle is enormous, and the two acquire it by guile, much to the anger of their host Hymni. Thor then goes in to consume two of his host’s oxen.

### **Thor’s hidden talents**

There are further less apparent sides to Thor worth examining. Although he is no artisan, his associations with blacksmithing, or those performing it, are often alluded to directly or indirectly. The best-known reference is to his three most prized treasures. In addition to the hammer *Mjöllnir*, ‘a tool used as a weapon’ (Lindow 1994, 491) forged by the dwarf *Sindri*, he possesses a girdle which he must wear for strength, and better yet a pair of iron gloves to be worn when he wields his hammer (‘he cannot be without when he grips the hammer shaft’), thus further affirming his ties to and dependency on the blacksmith’s art. During a visit to the abode

of the giant Geirröd, Thor, this time without his forged weapon and kit, is challenged by his host, who takes up a piece of red-hot iron in tongs and throws it at him. Thor, equipped with an iron glove and girdle lent to him by a friendly female giant, succeeds in catching the missile and returning it with such force that it passes through the giant host (*Skáldskaparmál* 4). Lindow observes that his relationship with artisans can be taken one step further to incorporate acts of creation, including that of the cosmos. The beginnings of the cosmos arose from the slaying of the first giant Ymir, and we have seen that the slaying of giants continued through time as Thor's main activity: 'Whenever, then, a giant is slain, the universe is mythologically recreated, and the portion marked off as safe from the powers of chaos is reaffirmed' (Lindow 1994, 502). Both Thor and Odin play a part in shaping the landscape (2000, 181f.). During his encounter with Skrymir his further exploits of creating low tide and altering the surrounding land with his hammer are cosmos-transforming acts along the lines of those found in neighbouring mythologies, and recall the accounts of the Dagda and other gods from Irish traditions (Sayers 1985, 41ff.).

Similarly, while Thor is not featured as the builder of any of the gods' abodes, his connection with the activity in a protective role is undeniable. The *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 42) relates that after Midgard was established and Valhalla built, the gods were approached by a smith who offered to build them a secure fortress in exchange for the goddess Freyja, the sun, and the moon. The gods agreed on condition that the work be completed in a single winter without the help of any other man; otherwise the payment would be forfeit. The smith, with his horse Svadilfari, proceeded at such a pace that the gods took counsel to prevent him, with the eventual result that the smith, in his anger at being thwarted in his designs, was exposed as a giant. Thor was called upon and swiftly resolved the situation, bringing the process of construction to a fruitful close.

### **The case of ATU 1148B: the Dagda and Thor recover their magic implements**

An important parallel in Norse mythology to the Irish episode of the Dagda's harp was briefly noted in the mid-twentieth century by Gustav Lehmann (1953, 823–24) in his study of the Dagda but has received little attention since. It is the story of Thor's recovery of his hammer, recounted in the older *Edda* poem *Þrymskviða*, itself a version of the international tale type ATU 1148B

'Thunder's Instruments', concentrated in the Scandinavian-Baltic region. Uther (2004, 49) summarises the international tale thus:

The devil (son of the devil, ogre) steals the thunder god's instruments (bagpipes, whistle, hammer, etc.). The thunder god goes to retrieve the instruments. He catches the thief and releases him in exchange for an invitation to the wedding of the devil's daughter. Many instruments are stored there in a room, but nobody is able to play the biggest one, the bagpipes. The thunder god and his son ask for permission to play, and thunder and lightning come out of the instrument. Many wedding guests die on the spot, and others disappear forever.

The Þrymskviða version featuring Thor and his hammer, recorded in a single source, can be summarised as follows. One morning Thor awakes distressed to find that his hammer is missing. He contacts Loki, who dons the goddess Freyja's feather cloak and flies off to the realm of the giants. There he approaches their leader Þrym, who admits that he has the hammer and for its return demands the goddess Freyja in marriage. Loki returns with the news, and Freyja will have no part in it, but there is a danger that the giants will immediately take Asgard unless Thor regains his hammer. So the gods hold counsel and come up with a scheme to disguise Thor as the bride with Loki as a bridesmaid. The two then journey to the giants' realm. As the feast of the giants begins, the bride eats an entire ox, eight salmon, and all the delicacies intended for the ladies, and 'she' drinks three barrels of mead (Turville-Petre 1975, 81), revealing Thor's gluttonous and burlesque aspects. Þrym is taken aback by the bride's coarse behaviour and fierce aspect behind her veil. Thor then asks that the hammer be brought to consecrate the marriage (a procedure well attested elsewhere in Scandinavian folklore and associated with fertility). Once in his grasp, Thor uses his powers to wreak carnage in the hall, killing Þrym and the entire family of giants present.

The story contains many of the features of a parody, yet the underlying mythological narrative has been a source of speculation among comparatists for well over a century. It is known nowhere else in Norse mythology, though it appears in later Scandinavian song tradition; it cannot with certainty be dated before the thirteenth century, but may be considerably older. Whatever its date, the content is 'absolutely consistent with the rest of the mythology' and may well descend from earlier Indo-European sources (Lindow 2001, 294; Puhvel 1987, 217). Comparisons with the account that we have seen of the Dagda's recovery of his harp are easily identified:

1. A defender of the gods' abode is deprived by giant adversaries of a prized object (musical instrument) and/or one essential to his function (forged hammer). It can only be played/wielded by the owner.
2. Accompanied by one or two companions, he travels to the adversaries' hall where they are entertained.
3. During the festivities the object is returned by the host (Thor), or returns of its own accord (Dagda).
4. Once regained, the object is put to proper use to kill or incapacitate the host adversaries, and the visitors return to the gods' abode.
5. Cosmic order is restored: for the Æsir by the removal of the threat to Ásgard; for the Tuatha Dé by the return of the cattle – in all its inherited symbolism – held by the Fomoiré.<sup>10</sup>

There are further points of comparison worth considering within the story that are supported in the Scandinavian and Irish traditions. During the Dagda's visit to the Fomoiré to recover his harp we are told that the music is 'bound' within the instrument and can only be summoned by incantation from him; Thor's hammer, the most powerful weapon in the cosmos, is only seen to be deployed by himself (Thompson 1955–58: D1651.7.1 Magic harp plays only for owner, and D1651. Magic object obeys master alone). In both mythologies the object of the theft was not to appropriate its special properties but only to deprive its owner of them. Thor's hammer, as described above, would return to its owner no matter how far it was thrown; similarly, the Dagda's harp comes off the wall of its own accord and on its way to him kills nine of the Fomoiré. Once in his hands, it exercises a power over the enemy more in keeping with his magic and artistic talents than with warfare.

We have seen that the Dagda's harp on its passage back to its owner behaves as a deadly weapon as well as a musical instrument, and within this context we can deal with the apparent anomaly of equating a hammer, be it a weapon or a tool, with a musical instrument. A review of the larger international context of the Þrymskviða myth reveals that the Nordic story belongs to a type whose distribution is mainly 'Circum-Baltic', comprising traditions where the valuable object is often a musical instrument. Variants of the story in that multilingual region exhibit a high degree of multiformity, featuring a source of thunder, a hammer, or a musical instrument which the adversary is unable to play. Þrymskviða, in addition to being unique

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<sup>10</sup> The myth of the confinement of cattle (/life-giving waters) by a cosmic adversary and their eventual liberation and return following the actions of a hero is an inheritance from IE times. See West 2007, 259–62.

within Norse tradition, is the only version within its wider cultural region in which the stolen item is a hammer instead of a musical instrument, raising the possibility that it was introduced into the narrative as part of a conscious parody of Thor's exploits and character. In some of the Baltic variants the owner's playing of the instrument incapacitates the devil, providing a close equivalent to the Irish story of the harp's sleep-inducing properties (Frog 2011, 78–84, 91).

The tale type is also found in Greek mythology, in the story of Zeus and Typhoeus, potentially extending its history back centuries beyond what the Balto-Germanic evidence alone provides. It is preserved in a Greek poem by Nonnos of Panopolis (fifth century CE), and the comparative context provided by the Greek materials is discussed in detail by William Hansen (2002, 305–13). Briefly, Zeus has his thunderbolts stolen by Typhoeus, who conceals them in a cave. Typhoeus begins to attempt to destroy earth and heaven but cannot get the thunderbolts to work for him. Zeus, whose position as ruler of the cosmos is now threatened by Typhoeus, travels with two companions whose task it is to distract him with music. On hearing the music, the giant proposes a friendly contest with one of the companions, Kadmos, playing the flute while he clashes the thunderbolts. Kadmos offers to play his lyre to celebrate the giant's success but needs to recover sinews for the instrument that are concealed in the cave. Typhoeus fetches the sinews and returns to the music; meanwhile Kadmos enters the cave and recovers Zeus's thunderbolts. What follows is an epic battle between the god and the giant in which Zeus eventually triumphs. Hansen (2002, 310) lists the points of correspondence between the Greek and Scandinavian-Baltic area variants. On the basis of the comparisons he does not regard the northern traditions as having arisen independently or as being derived from classical mythology. Both descend from a 'migratory story', which he cautions against reconstructing in any detail given the paucity of the sources (particularly the ancient ones) available (Hansen 2002, 313).

Encountering what appears to be a variant of ATU 1148B – and an isolate at that – in medieval Ireland is not something we would usually expect. However, a look at the accepted Nordic and Baltic variants of the type, specifically in terms of their multiformity, should lead us to exercise some caution in dismissing an Irish variant out of hand. A close examination of the contents from both traditions reveals that they agree in their larger mythological contexts; the specific roles and missions in the cosmic context assigned to each god; the nature of their power weapon; and the order of events within each episode. The points of correspondence are at least as

precise and plentiful as those between the northern (Scandinavian-Baltic) traditions and those of Greek mythology, effectively ruling out an independent ('polygenetic') origin for the variant attached to the Irish god. We may note that the Irish variant of the tale type agrees with the Zeus story – and not with the Balto-Scandinavian versions reviewed – in featuring both a weapon and a musical instrument in the god's possession. This does lead to a further set of questions. Is this a genetic inheritance shared by Germanic and Celtic traditions from an IE mythological tale? Or is it a subsequent borrowing in one direction or the other, or indeed from an outside tradition? And if borrowing did occur, when could it have happened? The opportunities for exchanges between Norse and Gaels are known to have been legion during the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by the abundant borrowings from Gaelic sources into the Icelandic sagas, explored in detail since the 1980s, and the distribution of migratory legends in the northwest Atlantic region (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988; Ó Héalaí and Almqvist 1991; Almqvist 1996; Shaw 2008).<sup>11</sup> The featuring of a musical instrument as the Dagda's recovered prize possession, however, renders it improbable that ATU 1148B was borrowed into Ireland from a Scandinavian source.

### Reconciling three gods

In our pursuit of the parallels between Thor and the Dagda in their primary role of protectors of the divine world within their two religious systems, it should be observed that several of the Dagda's attributes are attached not to Thor but to Odin. In both its components the Dagda's epithet *Eochu Ollathair* is far better suited to Odin than to Thor. The issue of Odin as progenitor of all the gods has been addressed above, but the first component with its equine associations raises a parallel issue, since it is Odin who is associated with horses in Nordic traditions. Thor's conveyance, as is well known, is a chariot drawn by goats. However, an episode involving Thor, a horse, and Odin may be revealing (*Skaldskaparsmál* 25). In his defence of Ásgard Thor is drawn into a duel with the powerful giant Hrungrnir, whom he successfully slays. He finds himself pinned, however, under Hrungrnir's immense foot, which the Æsir are unable to lift, and it remains to his own son Magni, then three nights of age, to perform the feat. Thor praises his son and rewards

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<sup>11</sup> A borrowing into Irish mythological tradition from Baltic oral sources is doubtful, though not impossible. Shaw (2007) examines a close parallel, again concerning music, between the Finnish Kalevala account of the origins of the *kantele* (a stringed instrument) and the legendary arrival of music in the Scottish Hebrides.



him with the horse Goldfax that had belonged to Hrungnir, thus being in control – for the moment at least – of the conferring of the horse (*\*ekwo-poti*), at which point Odin self-assertively opines that Thor should not have given so fine horse to the son of the giantess.<sup>12</sup>

Thor's name, descending from Proto-Germanic *\*Punaraz*, clearly means 'thunder', indicating not only the workings of his thunder instrument, but his likely celestial origins. His name in metathesised form finds its etymological equivalent in the Celtic god Taranis/Taranus, preserved in inscriptions and classical sources scattered over a wide area occupied by Celtic tribes. De Vries (1963, 71) regards Taranis, whose name likewise appears as 'thunder' in Celtic dialects, as having celestial associations (cf. Turville-Petre 1975, 102). If, as seen above, the Dagda's name is indeed secondary as stated in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray 1982, 42–45), Taranis or some variant thereof would be a plausible candidate for his original name. On the other hand, the second element of Dag-da (< Proto-Celtic *\*dago-deiwos* 'good god') is from IE *\*deiwós* 'god', originally an adjectival denominative derived from *\*Dyéus*, the name for the sky god (>Zeus, etc.) and widely attested in the mythologies of the IE world. The theonym itself, one of the few to have been retained into historical times, is based on the verbal root *\*dei-* 'give off light' whose semantic range can be best described as celestial (West 2007, 167). *\*Dyéus* is widely combined in the IE world with the noun for 'father' (e.g. Lat. Iuppiter), suggesting that the Dagda's appellative (*Eochu*) *Ollathair* 'great father' may indicate the extreme antiquity of his common name, as well as of his pedigree among the IE gods. For our purposes the characteristics of IE *\*Dyéus* as given by West (2007, 169–73) and Eliade (1958, 61f.) are instructive. Omniscience is characteristic of sky deities, as is the role of father/progenitor. Both attributes are also found in other Eurasian cultures. Eliade remarks,

The Supreme God of the sky is creator of earth and of man. He is the 'fashioner of all things', and 'Father'. He created all things visible and invisible, and it is he who makes the earth fruitful [...] As creator, knowing and seeing all, guardian of the law, the sky-god is ruler of the cosmos.

In addition to listing primary characteristics present in the actions or appellatives that have devolved wholly or in part to the Dagda and Thor, Eliade

12 At a further remove it has been noted in an earlier publication (Shaw 2018, 159) that the Dagda's Vedic counterpart, Tvaṣṭṛ, also qualifies as a 'horse lord' (*\*ekwo-poti*) in his central participation in the Vedic horse sacrifice ceremony (*aśvamedha*) with its perceived inherited counterparts in the Celtic areas, including Ireland.

(1958, 52–55; cf. West 2007, 183) observes the tendency for sky gods over a wide area to be superseded in divine hierarchies by deities representing more active and concrete religious concepts. In applying Eliade's general observations to the Germanic gods, West (2007, 173) suggests that that Wodan-Odin 'while not being a direct continuation of \*Dyeus took over certain of his features'. More specifically, as Frog (n.d., 121–23) suggests, Odin in his ascendancy had probably taken over the functions of a Proto-Germanic celestial god \**Tīwaz* (<\**deiwós*), the predecessor of a much-reduced Old Norse Týr. An appropriation by the cult of Odin, however gradual or uneven, would account for Snorri's portrayal of his patriarchal/cosmogonic role, his omniscience, command of magic, and possibly his poetic gifts.<sup>13</sup>

If an earlier Celtic god Taranis does not figure in the Dagda's background, the second '\**deiwós* element, rather than being secondary, as recounted in the Second Battle of Mag Tuired against the Fomoiré, may well be inherited from IE times, pointing ultimately to his celestial origins, as illustrated by his interrupting the course of the sun, noted earlier. This would hint at traces of an identity held in common with Thor (e.g. his cosmogonic and fashioner roles, and perhaps an association with horses suggested above) long prior to or independent of the appearance of Taranis and Thor in their respective mythologies. Within such a framework the relatively recent attribution of being 'all-knowing' and 'all-seeing' to Odin from an earlier sky god serves to reconcile Thor's lack of omniscience with the Dagda's appellative *Ruad Rofhessa* 'The red-haired (/mighty) one of great knowledge', which we may see as being inherited from an earlier supreme celestial god. A similar explanation can account for the Irish god's poetic gifts and his attachment to the arts generally, and how they can be explained when compared with the talents of Thor, which include little if any verbal dexterity and no magic. Regarding the last, in addition to his firm ties with the arts of poetry and music, the Dagda was a leading member of the Tuatha Dé, who brought with their four talismans the arts of magic in which 'they surpassed the sages of the pagan arts' (Gray 1982, 24–25), again recalling Odin and an early IE sky god.

### **Evolution, divergence, borrowing**

To establish a useful context for comparisons, I have used as points of departure the shared role of Thor and the Dagda as defenders of the gods'

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13 cf. Turville-Petre's observation with examples (1975, 62) that 'Óðinn took over the names and functions of other gods'.

realm against outside monstrous adversaries representing chaos and a violation of cosmic order, with the roles of the object or weapon that each god wields. It has long been known that a cosmic conflict of this sort has been documented across the older IE linguistic/cultural area, and that the exploits of Thor and the Battles of Mag Tuired are north-western extensions of such a widely extended body of myth. Within the larger cosmic framework the essential roles and functions of the Irish and Scandinavian divine protectors are shared. Within our mythological context, for example, the parallels between the defending gods' visits to their menacing adversaries, featuring huge appetites and the recovery of the precious object, gain in significance and are echoed across the IE realm (e.g. the exploits of Indra in the *Rig Veda*). Details on a smaller scale serve to build a coherent and more convincing picture. Traces of common activities as artificers and creators of the cosmos *inter alia* find more ancient but clear echoes in the comparisons with the cosmic fashioning activities of the Vedic god Tvaṣṭṛ (Shaw 2018).

The use of iron implements by both gods, most notably Thor's hammer and the Dagda's double-ended club, may link accounts of the two protector gods, however approximately, with Western European cultural history. In both cases the iron weapons are imbued with a magical quality, which is attached to iron in wider folk belief. Moreover, an explicit presence of the metal suggests the introduction of iron working as a *terminus post quem* with contacts that resulted in a shared tradition, or parts thereof. By placing the information gleaned from the Irish and Norse sources within the larger framework of reconstructed IE mythology, we may propose a sequence of development for the two gods in broad periods from remote prehistory to the medieval sources examined here. There is the evident difficulty of connecting such posited stages of development to an absolute chronology, yet our proposed sequence will help to clarify their shared origins and relationship over time.

An early stage of IE featured a celestial god, *\*Dyēus*, a progenitor (all-father) whose primary attributes, described earlier, include that of omniscience and fertility. *\*Deiwós*, derived from the same verbal root, came to be applied to the wider semantic domain of '(a) god'. A further deity having a 'distinctive character' was the thunder god, prominent in a variety of IE mythologies, who defends the worlds of gods and men against gigantic and hideous adversaries with his club-like weapon. IE traditions feature a complex of thunder gods distributed between Scandinavia and India, all prominent within their pantheons and wielding highly similar weapons (West 2007, Ch. 6), with the colour red often featuring in their appearance.

The characteristics of both early IE deities have been retained in the Dagda with his progenitor's epithet *Ollathair*, his commend of 'great knowledge', his ability to halt the sun's progress, and his warlike exploits. The second element of his name, *-da* < \**deiwós*, can be seen as further evidence of his ultimately celestial origins. In his principal function of protector of the Tuatha Dé with the use of his club he is well situated within an IE storm god complex that includes Thor and Indra. Thor with his hammer, also a defender of the gods and their territory, is a direct successor to the earlier storm god, as his name (< 'thunder') clearly indicates. Certain survivals indicate that his background is more complex than it would initially appear, but the sources show traces rather than strong evidence of his inheriting clear characteristics of a supreme celestial deity.

The periods of Late IE or early post-IE are marked by changes in names among the gods, and the gain or loss of attributes. Comparisons reveal this tendency to be widespread: West (2007, 239) considers it 'likely that Zeus and Jupiter have appropriated the functions of a separate storm god who has faded from sight'. In the case of the Dagda we can observe the results of a similar process – although at an undefined period – where the Dagda's thunder-god predecessor (perhaps Taranis?) in the Celtic world took over certain of the powers and functions of an earlier celestial deity. Also in prehistory, possibly as late as the Period of Migrations during the opening centuries of our era, the characteristics of a Proto-Germanic celestial god \**Tīwaz* were appropriated by Odin.

The co-occurrence of ATU 1148B in similar Irish and Norse contexts provides few consistent indications as to dates or direction of transmission. The presence of iron implements at the centre of the story in both traditions makes a persuasive case that transmission took place sometime during the Iron Age. The Dagda's harp and its Baltic and Greek parallels indicate that we are dealing with a very old 'wandering folktale' whose origins remain obscure. Since there are no further examples of a hammer appearing in the Baltic versions of the tale type, a close borrowing by the Irish from Norse sources would have to account for the possession stolen from the Dagda being a musical instrument instead of his iron club – yet I have been unable to find any further mention of his harp outside the story of its recovery. Given the surrounding 'macro-dialect of mythology' featuring the stolen musical/thunder instrument, a more likely approach would be to ask whether Thor's hammer was not substituted at some stage in the interests of promoting a parody of the god, since the weapon itself had no associa-

tions with thunder.<sup>14</sup> Turning to Thor's resuscitation of the goats and the life-restoring/death-dealing ends of the Dagda's club, Thor's hammer does not actually kill the goats – the slaughter is presumably done with a cutting instrument, although the resuscitation is performed in a way consistent with associated folklore customs. Important also is the fact that the victims in the Útgardaloki resuscitation are animals butchered for food, while the Dagda's victims are innocent men. In his study of the motif Tolley (2012) is unable to determine its origin, but does not rule out Ireland, noting that the motif does not seem to be securely fixed within the matrix of Norse religion and looks more like a late borrowing.

The shared element between the Dagda and Thor in their respective mythologies that has best persisted through time is the 'frametale' of their exploits as defenders of their fellow gods' welfare and territory. It remains to further identify and interpret shared activities and functions of defenders of the realm in Ireland, Scandinavia, and across related mythologies to better understand their internal meanings and the sequence of their development in prehistory.

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<sup>14</sup> Frog 2011, 88.

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# Thor's Return of the Giant Geirrod's Red-Hot Missile Seen in a Cosmic Context

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## Abstract

Discussion of the specific episode is preceded by a brief presentation of current theory concerning Indo-European myth in its cosmological framework to provide context. In the cosmological view sketched by Michael Witzel in *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*, the hero/young god must engage in a series of feats to create the conditions for human life to flourish. I have suggested that the conditions before the hero's actions in the Indo-European context are envisaged as the extremes: too close; too hot; too dry; and too wet. It is argued that this particular threat is 'too hot' and comes from a giant figure who is one of the old gods, probably identifiable as Odin. When Geirrod throws a red-hot missile at Thor, Thor catches it and kills the giant when he sends it back. The related stories of Thor's visit to Utgarthloki and Thorstein's visit to Geirrod are also treated, and attention is drawn to Welsh and Irish parallels which make an equivalence between thrown weapon and destructive gaze. It is suggested that the story may culminate in the motif of eye as star found separately.

*Keywords: Edda, giants, Indo-European cosmology, Odin, Old Norse mythology, Thor*

In order that the proposed cosmic interpretation of the specific episode of Thor's return of Geirrod's missile can be received and considered, it may be helpful to provide preliminary notes on the whole cosmological approach now available to scholars. In recent years study of Indo-European myth has often followed the well-tried method of working back in time with a linguistic emphasis, such as, for example, M. L. West's *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007). By contrast, the cosmological approach stresses the need to posit the nature of the source society, i.e. its synchronic inter-relationships, as well as hypothesising the diachronic changes that would have occurred to produce the situation in each of the daughter cultures for which evidence becomes available with the advent of writing. As the anthropologist N. J.

Allen made clear (2000, 39–60), the structuring of Indo-European mythology implies that it had its source in a tribal society. Such societies were capable of building and transmitting elaborate cosmologies, and the abundant traces found in the Indo-European daughter cultures indicate that the source culture placed a high value on complex myth and ritual.

The Indo-European situation for myth is comparable to that of language in some respects, but myth probably reaches further back into prehistory than the linguistic material, which is tied rather closely to the first records in any of the related languages (Lyle 2006). The stories of myth, though expressed in language, are conceptual rather than linguistic and so readily cross language boundaries. The fact that the stories take a variety of different forms in different languages is the expected result of the long period that separates the known myths from the point of common origin. It is essential to keep in mind this diachronic factor while exploring the synchronic pattern which forms the initial ‘grammar’ of interconnected components, comparable to linguistic grammar.

An important element in the transmission of myth that differs from that of words is that myth was the verbal part of an integrated cosmology, so the re-creation of a proto-form involves positing the nature of the associated society. Indeed, it seems that myth offers a unique way of accessing knowledge about the root proto-Indo-European society, so supplying a new level of understanding about the genesis of the highly successful modern Western society as well as its other related cultures (Lyle 2012a, b, c). Jaan Puhvel (1981, 159–62) appreciated the possibilities of such an approach some decades ago:

Basic to the new insights is the assumption that Proto-Indo-European culture possessed a structured ideology, a set of beliefs and traditions which served as a charter for social and supernatural organization alike. Names are less important than concepts and functions. [...] I hope I have conveyed some feeling of the great and exciting discoveries that are being made and remain to be made in the areas of Indo-European prehistory and myth. Herein lie the ultimate origins of European civilization, which were only secondarily covered with non-Indo-European overlays of Mediterranean and Near Eastern origin.

By definition, the Indo-European society before written records was an oral one and so had ways of organising the holding and transmission of its cultural knowledge that differed markedly from those used from the time that

writing became dominant. The importance of this point should be stressed, and I suggest that it is impossible to grasp the operation of Indo-European myth fully unless account is taken of the fact that it must have arisen in a completely oral culture. Some factors will be constant for any oral culture with an intricate cosmology such as is found among the Indo-Europeans. The cosmological system will involve a system of correlations that include space and time and social organisation. The daughter cultures may vary widely in the degree to which they retain the correlations on which the system was built.

### **The treatment of sovereignty**

The traces of the posited early society in the literate records emphasise kingship and, indeed, the mythology seems to be what Jan Assmann (2008, 61) has called a cratogony – an expression of power and the means to hold it. However, the presentation of kingship has been partially subverted in the Old Norse case. A central kingship is found in all the Indo-European branches, but its story is normally one of succession, with the power, after creation has been fully achieved, lying with the youngest generation, as is seen most explicitly in the Greek tradition found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Zeus replaces Cronus (West 1988, 6–17). The major difference brought about at some point in the diachronic development from the Indo-European root to the Old Norse position is that power has been taken back from the last generation and placed in the generation before it, in the person of Odin.

The Old Norse material is remarkable in having a rather well-defined group of gods, but the group is skewed by this development. It lacks the young king as king, although it is Thor that is the young god who can be equated with the kings Zeus, Lug, and Indra. The equation does not lie in common attributes, although some may be present, but in the unique position within a structure (Lyle 2014, 43f.) which is that of the most powerful of the young gods. The Old Norse material also lacks the young queen as queen, although it is Freyja who is the young goddess who can be equated with the unique queen represented by Hera, Mebh, and Śri in the Greek, Irish, and Indian traditions. At an earlier stage of development, of which there is no direct record, it can be assumed, if the general Indo-European evidence be allowed to carry weight, that the figures found historically with the names Thor and Freyja were king and queen. A story about Frigg having Odin's brothers, Vé and Vili, as lovers during the absence of her husband seems to exemplify the transfer of power back from the youngest generation

to the preceding one. The story is alluded to in *Lokasenna* 26 (Larrington 2014, 85), where Loki accuses Frigg of being man-mad and of lying with Vé and Vili, and it is told in full in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga* 3 (Finlay and Faulkes 2016). When Odin was away from his kingdom, it was ruled by his two brothers, Vé and Vili, and when he had been absent so long that it was assumed he would never come back, Vé and Vili divided the kingdom between them and both married Odin's wife, Frigg. When Odin eventually returned, he took back Frigg as his wife. The comparable narrative of one female and three consorts is the conception story that results in the birth of the young king with his triple nature that can be traced in Irish, Welsh, and Greek/Egyptian traditions in the figures of Lug and Llew in the *Dindsenchas* and the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*, and in the figure of Horus/Zeus in Plutarch's *Of Isis and Osiris* (Bek-Pedersen 2006, 331f.; Lyle 2012a, 61ff., 77). In the Old Norse account, however, while the sexual encounters are retained, the conception and birth are lacking. No young king is born, and Odin remains in power.

### **The functional triad based on age grades and the tenfold family of gods**

The three brothers, Vé, Odin, and Vili, are probable representatives of the three functions that Georges Dumézil claimed existed in Indo-European ideology: 1) the sacred; 2) physical force; and 3) fertility and prosperity (Littleton 1982). I suggest that the first and last of these correspond to Tyr and Njörd. Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 1, 16 n.4) argued rightly that Dumézil's early claim that the functions were directly tied to the social classes of priests, warriors, and cultivators was invalid since these social classes would not have existed at the period of Indo-European unity. However, a direct link with the life stages of old age, youth, and maturity would have been possible at this period. Kim McCone (1986; 1987) proposed replacing the social classes in the Dumézilian functional theory with age grades, like those found among East African pastoralists, and I have explored the idea further (Lyle 1997). Since age-grading is still current (see Bernardi 1985), recent anthropological studies throw light on the way it operates and provide a valuable resource for those who would like to grasp its implications for the Indo-European case.

It is proposed that Dumézil's general insight about the functional triad is valid, but that the total system is much more complex than the one he outlined, having ten distinct components represented by gods, two females and eight males (Lyle 2012a). There is no difficulty in identifying the two

dominant females in the Old Norse pantheon as the old goddess Frigg and the young goddess Freyja (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007). Of the eight proposed males, six are validated by the place-name evidence – the old gods Tyr, Odin, and Njörd and the young gods, Thor, Ull, and Frey (Brink 2007, 108, 116ff., 124f.) – while another two young gods, Baldr and Loki, are prominent in narrative. Any proposed instance of the functional triad in Dumézil's scheme must be re-examined in the light of the positions of the various elements in the more inclusive tenfold scheme. In particular, it can be noted that the set of statues of Odin, Thor, and Frey in the Uppsala temple in the Latin account by Adam of Bremen of c. 1075 CE (Tschan 1959, 207f.) is not a functional triad but treats Thor as a king and not as a simple representative of physical force (Lyle 2004, 12–19; Lyle 2018b).

The myths of the Indo-Europeans evidently come down to us from the pre-Axial-Age 'religion' which is distinct from the moral religion of the books (see, for example, Bellah and Joas 2012) with which it coexisted after the emergence of the latter. In the primary cosmology that survived in fragmentary form the gods were imagined in analogy with the human experience of social relationships. On the basis of the revision of the trifunctional theory it can be said that this experience would have included connections through age grades, but the principal place among the relationships in oral society was taken by the family. As James Cox observes, '[I]ndigenous religious beliefs, rituals and social practices focus on ancestors and hence have an overwhelming emphasis on kinship relations' (2012, 11).

Considering what is known about the Indo-European gods in kinship terms, it is quite apparent that they are presented as a family consisting of members of several generations. Since our information is incomplete, there is room for debate on the precise kinship structure, but I have proposed that the divine kinship network consisted of four generations, three being those of the old gods, and the final one being that of the young gods, with the pivotal places in each of the four generations being taken in Greek tradition by Ge, Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus (Lyle 2012a, 61; 2017, 344–47). Old Norse tradition has a sequence of three birth levels, with the generation of the giantess Bestla being followed by that of Odin (*Gylfaginning* 6f., Faulkes 1995, 11), and that generation being followed by the generation of Odin's sons. A hypothetical Old Norse formulation which takes account of succession as in the Greek case would have the giantess Bestla in the first generation, and the Aesir, Tyr, and Odin in the second and third generations, with the dominant Odin coming last, having displaced his predecessor. The young gods in the fourth generation, including Thor, could not have come into

existence without the old gods, but it is argued that they were obliged to subdue their predecessors to create conditions tolerable for living. It is this conflict, in which the young king of the gods, the proto-Thor figure, plays a major part, that is apparently remembered in the story of Thor's fight with the giant, Geirrod.

### **Thor's return of Geirrod's missile**

The story of Thor's encounter with Geirrod is told by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson in the *Prose Edda*. This early thirteenth-century work is divided after a prologue into three parts called *Gylfaginning* (the tricking of Gylfi), *Skáldskaparmál* (the language of poetry), and *Hattatal* (list of verse forms), of which the first two contain the narratives drawn on here. The present discussion also draws on an anonymous Icelandic narrative of the fourteenth century, *Þorsteins Þátr Bæjarmagns*, where the god Thor is represented by a human equivalent, Thorstein Mansion-Might. The full complex containing these Geirrod stories and other related narratives has been the subject of a recent detailed study by Declan Taggart (2017). A separate episode concerning the giant Thiassi which is told in *Skáldskaparmál* 56–57 is also drawn on here in the allusion to it in *Harbardzljod* (Harbard's Song) from the *Poetic Edda*, which stems from the period before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in 1000 CE.

The episode of Thor's return of the giant Geirrod's red-hot missile is found in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda* (Faulkes 1995, 82f.). Setting it in a cosmic context is potentially illuminating both for Old Norse mythology and for the broader Indo-European field of study. The episode, as will be shown below, occurs as part of a sequence, which can be understood as a cosmological one dealing with a phase of creation. We can turn for background to Michael Witzel's wide-ranging book on *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*. Witzel emphasises story lines in an interesting way (2012, 64–65), and one such line is when the young cosmic hero, who is Indra in the Indian context, removes the obstacles to establishing a world fit for human habitation. Witzel gives two instances that are relevant to this study: the propping up of heaven and the releasing of waters through the defeat of a dragon/serpent. He notes that after the emergence of Heaven and Earth, 'there is a need to separate the two by propping up Heaven' (77), a cosmic event that was commemorated annually in India and Nepal by the erection of a pillar during a festival (134f.). Witzel continues the cosmic narrative as follows (77f., cf. 149):

After the separation of Heaven and Earth, other actions are necessary to turn the young world into a livable space (*oikumene*). [... The old gods are depicted] as monsters who have to be slain or at least subdued [...]. Most prominent in these fights is the slaying of the primordial dragon by the Great Hero [...].

Following on from Witzel's position and taking a hard look at what the hero had to face, it seemed to me that all that was there before the young gods was the old gods embodying the cosmic levels, and that the hero is seen to defeat these cosmic gods by force or guile (Lyle 2015a).

The cosmic gods are those of the vertical levels, and it is necessary to envisage the universe as articulated in a particular way to make statements about it which may then be subjected to scrutiny. Of course, the main scheme of a system, which runs from a top above the dwelling place of people on earth to a bottom below it, is found in Old Norse tradition in relation to the world tree, Yggdrasill, which has an eagle at the summit and a serpent, Nidhogg, at its base (*Gylfaginning* 14–17, Faulkes 1995, 17ff.). However, this threefold system does not appear to entirely reflect the Indo-European situation since, in the Indian case, the upper part of the system is envisaged as consisting of a heaven at the top and a realm between earth and heaven. In accordance with this, the cosmic levels can be taken to be heaven, sky, earth, and sea (Lyle 2012a, 56, 98f.; 2015a), of which only earth, the primal goddess, is female.

In the as-yet-unordered universe the cosmic gods present threats which I have argued are probably to be regarded as embodying respectively the extreme conditions: too close; too hot; too dry; and too wet (Lyle 2015a; 2018a, 127–30). Of these Witzel's discussion relates to the 'too close' in the propping up of heaven and the 'too dry' in the releasing of the waters through the defeat of the dragon/serpent. The 'too hot' condition appears to relate to the contest of Geirrod and Thor discussed here. The 'too wet' condition, not treated in India but discernible in Old Norse tradition in Thor's contest with the Midgarth serpent, relates to a water monster, which has the capacity to drown the earth but is forced to remain in its own water-world (Lyle 2015b, 6–10). Thor's contest with the Midgarth serpent occurs as an independent story in the *Prose Edda* and elsewhere (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1986), but its indirect representation in the account of Thor's visit to the giant Utgarthloki forms part of a series that can be understood as reflecting cosmic levels.

The story of Thor's visit to Utgarthloki is told in the *Gylfaginning* section of the *Prose Edda* 46–48 (Faulkes 1995, 41–46). In the giant's hall Thor

and his companions are presented with challenges which relate to an eating contest, foot races, drinking liquid from a horn, an attempt to lift a cat, and a wrestling match with an old woman. The fifth of these is an extra, but the other four can be placed roughly in correspondence with the cosmic levels through Utgarthloki's explanations, taken with the parallel episode in the hall of the giant Geirrod recounted in *Skáldskaparmál* 18 (Faulkes 1995, 81ff.). Utgarthloki explains that the winners of the first two contests who defeated Thor's companions, Loki and Thialfi, were Fire<sup>1</sup> and Thought. He also reveals to Thor that, although Thor's efforts had been made to appear feeble, he had actually produced an ebb tide by his drinking from the horn and had affected the stability of the world by partially lifting the cat, which was in reality the world serpent. Utgarthloki was mocking the visiting gods through his deceptions, and John Lindow (2000, 179–83) has proposed that he stands in the place of Odin, who is displaying his mental superiority over Thor.

When Thor visits Geirrod's hall, there is no equivalent to the world serpent (the 'too wet' threat from the old gods). There are, however, elements that can be placed in a relationship with the propping up of the heaven (too close), destruction by a fiery object (too hot), and, in a reverse image, the release of water from the female earth (too dry). In a preamble in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 18; Faulkes 1995, 81f.), it is explained that Loki had been captured by the giants and, to gain his freedom, had agreed to bring Thor into the land of the giants without his hammer, Miöllnir, or his belt of strength. Thor is accordingly meant to be in a vulnerable state and at the mercy of the giants. However, before the travellers arrive at their destination, Thor has been given three objects by the helpful giantess, Grid: her staff, a belt of strength, and a pair of gauntlets. He saves himself from being crushed against the roof of a giant dwelling by pushing Grid's staff up into the rafters, and from destruction by a fiery object by using her gloves. The belt of strength helps him to cross a river in flood. The river is being swollen by a giantess urinating into it, and Thor hurls a stone to dam it at its source (as he says), stopping up the vagina. Since a potential reading of the Indo-European release of the waters from the serpent has the hero pluck his weapon from her vagina,<sup>2</sup> this is where

1 Rosemary Power comments (1985, 164) that in this story version 'the fire-game is absent, unless some vestige remains in an eating contest between Loki and an opponent who is the personification of fire'.

2 Lyle 2012a, 106–11. It is in keeping with this interpretation that Margaret Clunies Ross (2002, 187) comments that the physical appearance of Miöllnir is 'unmistakably phallic'.



a narrative reversal may come in. If the cosmic encounters are taken in order of the levels of the universe, this incident comes third, and Thor would have been without his hammer in the first two encounters since he has not yet obtained it. In the third episode, in the proposed primary form of the narrative, he both releases the waters and obtains his distinctive weapon. When it comes to the fourth encounter, told at *Gylfaginning* 48 (Faulkes 1995, 46f.), Thor wields Miöllnir when engaged in contest with the Midgarth serpent. It appears that the fore-story about Loki can be understood as a development to explain why Thor does not have his hammer. This element would not have required explanation in a narrative in which Miöllnir was not yet in his possession.

The fanciful treatment in the *Utgathaloki* case appears to be secondary to the Geirrod narrative and to have been adapted to give roles to Thor's companions Loki and Thialfi in the first two feats where they are defeated by the challengers, who turn out to be Fire and Thought. The relevant parallels are shown below.

<i>Utgathaloki</i>	<i>Geirrod (plus fourth independent story)</i>
Eating contest (versus Fire)	Propping up roof with staff
Races (versus Thought)	Returning glowing metal with iron gloves
Drinking from horn (ebb tide)	Stopping flow of river with belt of strength
Lifting cat (world serpent)	Subduing world serpent with Miöllnir

In another account of a visit to Geirrod's realm in *Dorsteins Þáttr Bæjarmagns*, Thorstein receives the dwarf gift of a pebble with a pointer to activate it,<sup>3</sup> which he uses in the encounter with Geirrod. With these objects Thorstein produces flame and sets fire to the building, and finishes by killing Geirrod by hurling them through his eyes. His activity is treated as a game until its fatal outcome for the giant king (Pálsson and Edwards 1968, 126f., 136f.).

Similarly, in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 18, Faulkes 1995, 82f.), Geirrod invites Thor into his hall for games. There are fires burning throughout the length of the hall and, when Thor comes opposite Geirrod, Geirrod takes up a red-hot piece of iron with some tongs and hurls it at him, with the evident intention of destroying him. However, Thor has Grid's gift of iron gloves and is able to catch the glowing metal and hurl it back at Geirrod. The giant takes refuge behind a pillar, but the metal goes right through it and kills him.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Simpson (1966, 6f.) points out the similarity to a Thor's hammer and spike used in charming.

Whereas Thorstein in the *thattr* has weapons in the form of a pebble and pointer in his possession, Thor has nothing until he catches the thrown object that was meant to kill him. It is a core feature of this narrative cluster (not present in the *thattr*) that it is an act of retaliation that causes the death or injury of the giant. The *thattr*, however, does include a motif not in the *Prose Edda* account which resonates with comparable tales in the Irish context. The giant in the *thattr* is killed in a specific way – by objects penetrating his eyes.

In the Celtic context the attack may take the form of the giant's destructive gaze instead of a weapon.<sup>4</sup> In either case a destructive force is returned. In the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* Ysbaddaden Chief Giant has an eye which has such destructive power that it is normally kept covered. At the culminating point of this story, when the eyelid is raised, the giant throws a spear at Culhwch, which the young hero catches and throws back so that it goes into the giant's eye and comes out at the nape of his neck (Davies 2007, 194). The equivalence of gaze and weapon seems clear in this case. In the Irish *Second Battle of Moytura* Lug sends a sling stone into Balor's destructive eye which carries the eye through his head and turns around its destructive force so that it falls on his own army (Gray 1982, 61). There is no mention of heat in this account, but later Irish folktales speak of the threat that Balor will burn up Ireland with his eye unless a spear is thrown into it as soon as it is uncovered (Curtin 1894, 293, 311; Lyle 2018a, 129).

It is characteristic of the set of events at the cosmic level that the old gods are brought under control rather than being totally annihilated. The Old Norse story of the retaliation involving the cosmic god's eye does not appear to be brought to a conclusion with cosmic consequences. Geirrod is simply killed outright. However, if we take the incident of the objects thrown by Thorstein penetrating Geirrod's eyes and the story of the eyes of Balor and Ysbaddaden being driven through the backs of their heads, we can sketch a possible cosmic scenario. The destructive fiery object that was the giant's eye might be propelled into the distance and become a harmless star. This possible outcome receives support from the episode that Thor recalls in a speech in *Hárbarðsljóð* which is a flyting between Thor and Odin, who is disguised as Harbard:

I killed Thiaz, the powerful-minded giant,  
I threw up the eyes of Allvaldi's son  
into the bright heaven;

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4 On the destructive power of the gaze in the Celtic context see further Borsje 2012.

they are the greatest sign of my deeds,  
those which since all men can see.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth recalling that there are two scales in operation in these stories. Some of the feats are enclosed within a smaller-scale building which can be placed in correspondence with the larger-scale universe. In another context Terry Gunnell (2005) has pointed out the equivalence of the human hall to the cosmos. When the Geirrod story ends with the partial destruction of the building as well as the killing of the giant, it is told in this contained form appropriate to the living quarters of humans and giants. The continuation of the story to end with the establishment of a star or stars could be seen as an opening out of the narrative into the cosmic dimension. It can be noted that Thor's contest with the world serpent also places him in a constructed environment when he fishes for the serpent from a giant's boat. Equivalent Celtic and Greek stories treating Fergus and Perseus/Herakles operate at the cosmic level and have the hero enter into the water-world to combat the water monster (Nagy 2018, 36f.; Lyle 2015b, 7–10). There may be a trace of this feature in a version known to Snorri in which the serpent is cut down by Miollnir 'by the sea-bed' (Faulkes 1995, 47).

## Conclusion

In exploring the regional distribution of evidence on the Old Norse gods, Gunnell speculates that 'there probably was an individual body of mythology which originally centred on Þórr', and that it would have been natural that 'this mythology would also have included some explanation of the origin of the world and mankind, in terms relating to Þórr'. He goes on to ask, 'If that was the case, what has happened to that myth?' As shown in the present discussion, it can be argued that one Thor cosmogonic myth, a set of combats with the old gods, is discernible in well-known stories in the *Prose Edda* and elsewhere.

In throwing back Geirrod's glowing metal, Thor apparently saves the world from its burning heat. In his book on Thor Taggart (2017) explores the idea that the weapon might have been lightning in accordance with a perception of Thor as god of thunder, but he finally discards this interpretation. It should be noted as a factor to be kept in mind that the weapon is not actually Thor's but belongs to his antagonist; Thor merely returns it. This

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5 *Hárbarðsljóð* 19 (Larrington 2014, 68). This feat is ascribed to Odin in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 56f.; Faulkes 1987, 61).

threat from burning heat has still to be explored fully in the Indo-European context, but the initial concept was perhaps that of a primeval sun which had to be brought under control by distancing it from the earth to the point where it was diminished into a star. This would have left the way open to the later appearance of a different sun as it has been known to humans.

It seems that fragmented parts of the initial cosmic ideas have been retained in Old Norse stories which include an element of entertainment. If they are given the context of worship, the series of episodes to which this belongs could be expressed in some such words as:

Hail to Thor, who propped up the heaven and hurled the burning star far away; who unstopped the waters of the world river and subdued the great sea serpent.

Of course, not all features of the Old Norse stories call for cosmological explanation, since there is clearly plenty of scope in them for creative development, but the Geirrod series does seem to correspond to a sequence in a creation story, and it appears to be the fullest statement of the sequence throughout the Indo-European world.

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# Pagans, Nazis, Gaels, and the Algiz Rune: Addressing Questions of Historical Inaccuracy, Cultural Appropriation, and the Arguable Use of Hate Symbols at the Festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society

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## Abstract

Although Beltaners – members of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society (BFS) – can trace the immediate origins of their society's festivals to the collaborative efforts of anarchist performance artists and folklorists reacting against the Thatcherite government policies of the late 1980s, the ritual celebrations they routinely re-enact in the present ultimately derive from much older traditions associated with Scotland's highly minoritised Gaelic-speaking population, a cohort to which few modern Beltaners belong. Performers at today's festivals often incorporate runes into their regalia – a practice which does not reflect Gaelic tradition, but which is not unknown among ideologues of the far right. This paper interrogates rune use at BFS festivals, asking whether the employment of Germanic cultural elements in Celtic festivals by non-Celtic-speakers represents a distortion of history and debasement of an embattled ethnic minority, and whether it is ethically acceptable for an explicitly anti-racist organisation to share a symbolic repertoire with representatives of known hate groups. Based on data derived from fieldwork consisting chiefly of participant observation and on the consultation of relevant academic literature, this paper evaluates the potentially problematic nature of BFS ritual performers' rune use and related behaviours by analysing the intentions that underlie their actions, the consequences that have resulted from them, and the historical interaction of runes, ethnonationalism, and the occult that has shaped perceptions of runic meaning among those who use runes in modern times.

Keywords: *Runes, Beltane, Beltane Fire Festival, Gaelic, Algiz, pagan, Nazi, occult, performance*

This research examines the use of runes – especially, the Algiz rune – as a ritual element and aesthetic motif in the festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society (BFS): the Beltane Fire Festival and its sister ceremony, the Sam-

huinn Fire Festival. The chief concern of this research is whether one can deem BFS members' use of runes in these events ethically unproblematic in light of the historical and cultural incongruity of the presence of runes at a 'Celtic' festival, and in consideration of the far-right associations now so often ascribed to runes in popular culture.

In the interest of disclosing barriers to objectivity, and in the attempt to accurately cite the sources of all data to be later presented, let it be stated here that a significant portion of the information presented in the following pages – especially that which concerns the beliefs and attitudes of festival participants – derives from the author's own experience of three years as a ritual performer in the Samhuinn and Beltane festivals under examination. While this experience has ultimately served as the fieldwork that provided the basis for this and other articles, it was not with the intention of academic publication that the author originally undertook to participate in the festivals. It should also be stated that the fieldwork in question – insofar as it contributes to this article – was entirely qualitative and based largely on participant observation. Whenever data yielded by the fieldwork features in this paper, it is fully disclosed as such; and – because it stems directly from the author's unpublished original research – will be unaccompanied by in-text citation. When self-reference is necessary, the author will usually do this by means of the sobriquet 'the author', except in instances where – in the interest of both clarity and lexical variation – it seems more prudent to write in the first person.

### **Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival**

It seems necessary before initiating further discussion to give a brief description of the history of the Beltane festival itself, and the relationship between what is known of historical Beltane celebrations and the festival as it is practised by Edinburghers at present. Originally, Beltane was one of four festivals reputedly celebrated by Goidelic-speaking Celts in pre-Christian times to mark the stages of the solar year. The earliest known attestation of Beltane comes from the *Sanas Cormaic* (Cormac's Glossary), an Old Irish text composed circa 900 CE (Williams 2005, 123–25). Cormac's very brief account associates the festival with the worship of a pagan deity and mentions the passing of cattle between bonfires (MacLeod 2018, 87). The festival is further attested by folklorists as having survived in various forms in rural and urban communities throughout Scotland and Ireland well into the eighteenth century (MacLeod 2018, 78), and in some areas –

including the Lothians, in which Edinburgh resides – later still, although its observance had died out completely by the early years of the twentieth century (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 2).

In Edinburgh the Beltane festival was revived in the late 1980s in the form of small-scale performance art chiefly enacted by an informal society of anarchists and folklorists (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 2). Participants at that first revival included the industrial anarchist musician, Angus Farquhar, and the renowned Scottish ethnologist, Margaret Bennet – both of whom have disclosed the fact of their involvement in that festival to the author and attested to their pride at having taken part in organising the event. At the time of the festival's inception, the ritual-performers' purpose was to protest against Thatcherite anti-assembly laws, reclaim Calton Hill as a public space, and revive local interest in Scottish cultural traditions and the natural environment (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 12f.). Performers counted the initial festival a success, and thus decided both to establish the ritual as an ongoing yearly tradition and, in subsequent years, to stage a revival of the similarly ancient Samhuinn festival as an annually recurring counterpoint to Beltane.

Since the time of their first revivals Edinburgh's Beltane and Samhuinn celebrations have evolved into massive public spectacles, each involving some three hundred volunteers, and no small amount of pyrotechnics and body paint. Growing administrative complexities and intervention by the civic government in the avowed interest of public safety have since vastly increased the amount of time and money required to conduct the festivals, in response to which ritual performers involved in the festival in the early 2000s felt it necessary to reform the then loosely structured performance organisation into a registered charity with a formal board of directors (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 16f.). Although some participants have looked retrospectively on the formalisation of the BFS as a dangerous concession to neoliberalism marking a transition away from Beltane's erstwhile tradition of anarchic activism, participation in the festivals has continued to increase, and they have become fixtures on the Edinburgh cultural events calendar (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 19ff.). Adding to the throngs of newcomers and annual participants are the hundreds of Edinburgh residents who no longer directly take part, but who remain active in social circles structured around their members' current or former involvement at BFS festivals. The community comprising all active and former BFS festival participants resident in Edinburgh – which, in the author's estimation, includes around one thousand people – constitutes

a distinct and highly visible subculture within the broader Edinburgh counter-cultural landscape.

### **A brief history of runes**

Undertaking an investigation of the socio-political significance of 'runes' in a Beltane context necessitates a discussion of the term's definition. The word 'rune' has various meanings in popular culture, but in an academic context it usually denotes a character from any one of several writing systems that derive from an antecedent script developed by Germanic-speaking peoples in contact with the Mediterranean world sometime in the early centuries CE (Barnes 2012, 1–9). The geographical location of runic origin remains a point of contention, as does the precise time of its inception, although runologists have catalogued examples of the script which date to no later than the second century CE (Barnes 2012, 9), and note that similarities between runes and writing systems developed earlier, such as Greek, Etruscan, and the Latin alphabet, strongly suggest runic writing's derivation from one or more Mediterranean originals (Barnes 2012, 10).

Runic writing systems saw extensive use in Germanic-language-speaking areas of northern Europe – especially Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England, and Iceland – until the time of their gradual disuse as practical writing systems in most regions by the Late Middle Ages, and in some cases much earlier (Barnes 2012, 129). After their transition away from quotidian use runes became the object of antiquarian interest (Barnes 2012, 133), which on occasion coincided with a propensity towards nationalism and/or the occult (Barnes 2012, 190–96). Polemical and mystical runic research had by the 1930s ensconced runes in some social circles as sacred emblems of Nordic ethnonationalism, which resulted in their incorporation in the iconography of the Nazi regime (Barnes 2012, 195). The same nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship's tendency to interpret runes as bearing magical properties also led to a general flowering of runic popularity among European occultists outside the ethnonationalist sphere – a phenomenon which has not diminished between that time and the present (Barnes 2012, 194f.). Thus, as of the mid-twentieth century, runes had already developed the close associations with both white supremacy and neopaganism that they maintain today (Barnes 2012, 190–96).

### **Runes and the far right**

Although certainly spurred by the zeitgeist, the intellectual entanglement of rune lore and German National Socialism in the early twentieth century largely resulted from the scholarship and enthusiastic ideologising of one Nazi intellectual, the German Indo-Europeanist academic and political propagandist Alfred Rosenberg (Strmiska 2005, 24ff.). Rosenberg helped articulate and popularise the now discredited theory that the first Indo-Europeans – an ethnonym at that time synonymous with ‘Aryans’ – had been essentially Germanic in speech, behaviour, and appearance, and that white speakers of Germanic languages thus represented their ‘purest’ genetic descendants and cultural heirs. This formulation would be used to justify the territorially expansionist and genocidal policies of the Third Reich on the basis that Europe had become the homeland of the Indo-Europeans through military conquest, and that, as the modern incarnation of that once-great people, Germans had the right both to occupy the entirety of the European continent and to dominate or destroy any ethnic group that represented either a competitor with or a defective offshoot of the Aryan bloodline. Those who subscribed to the theory advocated racial purity not only insofar as it was seen as the genetic component of Aryanism but in terms of its cultural aspects. For Rosenberg and others who supposed the essential Germanness of the Aryans, this entailed the worship of gods known to have been revered by the pre-Christian Germans, and the use of runes – to which, like many runologists of the period, he supposed the ancients to have ascribed numinous properties. Although Rosenberg’s opinion that a form of reconstructed Germanic paganism ought to serve as the religion of the National Socialist movement met stiff opposition from those Nazis who instead advocated the use of an altered form of Christianity – and sometimes waned in favour even among its own most ardent proponents (most of whom were Christian by upbringing) – his ideas concerning the use of runes and rune-like symbols as emblems of the regime won general acceptance among his contemporaries (Strmiska 2005, 24ff.).

The association of neopaganism, runes, and Nazism popularised by Rosenberg and perpetuated by the Nazi regime has persisted long after the fall of the Third Reich. To at least some degree modern popular culture assumes the intersection of Germanic neopagan religious observance and white nationalist affinities – a stereotype reinforced by the racist ideologies still openly espoused by some neopagan practitioners. Many adherents of the Nordic neopagan Odinist religion, for instance, uphold racial purity as a tenet of their religious doctrine and fraternise in person and print with

known Neo-Nazis (Strmiska 2005, 27). Runic iconography of the style employed by the Nazi regime remains popular among those groups who lament its defeat, to the extent that the website of the Anti-Defamation League mentions runic writing in its list of widely used hate symbols, among icons such as the swastika and the flag of apartheid South Africa (Anti-Defamation League 2018). That ethnonationalists employ the same symbolic repertoire as Beltaners creates the danger that uninformed onlookers might infer that the latter embrace the racist ideologies of the former, and raises the question as to whether that inference is incorrect. To begin to answer that question, this discussion must offer a description of rune use within the BFS and give at least a brief account of performers' motivations for engaging in the practice.

### **Rune use at the Edinburgh Beltane festival**

Perhaps incongruously for a festival with obviously Celtic roots, runes feature prominently in modern realisations of the Beltane Fire Festival. To some extent, they serve as an artistic motif primarily intended to generate the desired ambiance – displayed on the elaborate costumes of ritual performers to convey to witnesses a general ethos of 'ancientness' and 'otherness', and to aid participants in assuming the personas of their ritual characters (Beltane Fire Society 2017). It would be misleading, however, to suggest that their function is purely a question of aesthetics; many who take part in the festivals are practising neopagans, and some of these practitioners ascribe explicit spiritual meanings – or even numinous properties – to certain runes. Within the context of the Beltane community the so-called Algiz rune – ʏ – is of special significance, hailed as a protective talisman invocative of divinely sanctioned safety and well-being (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Over the decades the rune's use has become so ritually significant that many long-time festival participants expect highly visible Algiz iconography to adorn the central characters in the ritual performance, including the all-important May Queen and her court, as well as the Blues – the annually recurring performance group whose members don blue paint in remembrance of the purported Pictish tradition of dying the skin with woad<sup>1</sup> on the eve of battle, and who serve as the Beltane community's masters of ritual (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 10).

The Beltane traditions concerning the Algiz rune and the highly specific interpretations of runic meaning that undergird them invite enquiry into the

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1 A plant endemic to the British Isles and the blue dye derived from it.

origins of such practices. The question as to whether some Beltaners' beliefs about runic meaning are grounded in ancient or modern spiritual praxis springs immediately to mind, along with a further query as to how such beliefs came to have currency among anarcho-socialist performance artists.

### **The Algiz rune**

Much expert discourse about the evolution of runes necessarily tends towards the speculative; inscriptions can provide definitive evidence as to which runes and runic writing systems saw use in a given region and historical period, but phonological values of the various runes at any given period cannot be empirically corroborated beyond what insights can be gleaned from comparative and reconstructive linguistics (Barnes 2012, 21–23). We can know, therefore, that what many today call the Algiz rune definitely featured in the Elder Fuþark – a runic alphabet used between approximately 150 and 800 CE, and a probable ancestor of all subsequent runic writing systems (Barnes 2012, 37). We can further attest that Algiz occurred within that writing system primarily as a word-final consonant (Barnes 2012, 21). With less certainty we may assert that it probably represented a sound similar, if not identical, to that often represented in modern English by the Latin letter 'z' (Barnes 2012, 206).

Evidence from comparative linguistics suggests that in later runic writing systems pervasive sound changes meant that, for most Germanic dialects, the final consonant the Algiz rune is thought to have represented in the Elder Fuþark would have evolved into a range of sounds usually represented in modern Latin-based alphabets by the letter 'r'; while epigraphic evidence demonstrates that in Scandinavia the rune itself came instead to denote the sound represented in modern English by the Latin letter 'm' (Barnes 2012, 60). In the Anglo-Frisian runic system, by contrast, Algiz first became largely redundant and then seems to have come to represent the sound denoted in modern English by the Latin letter 'x' (Barnes 2012, 41).

With academic consensus, but no absolute certainty, as to how the Algiz rune was pronounced – and even less positivity as to its original name (Barnes 2012, 22–23) – it might seem unreasonable to propose that the rune had any definitive ideographic significance among ancient Germanic-speakers, let alone to speculate as to what that meaning might have been. However, it happens that interrogating the meaning of runes has been a pastime of rune enthusiasts since at least the Late Middle Ages, and a small body of evidence soon to be discussed supports the argument that rune-

writers ascribed runic characters significance beyond their graphemic values for many hundreds of years before the present century. Whether – if at all – the early meanings correspond to those which Beltaners have assigned to the runes, however, remains to be seen.

### The question of runic meaning

For some Beltaners, as earlier mentioned, wearing the Algiz rune entails either literally or symbolically invoking benevolent supernatural powers to protect one's person (Beltane Fire Society 2017). A ritual witness might wonder whether in upholding this belief Beltaners act as relatively recent meaning makers or as heirs to an ancient tradition. Although the question cannot be answered definitively, some sources suggest both that runic characters could have had an extra-graphemic significance for at least some rune writers in the pre-modern era and that – at least in the case of the Algiz rune – pre-modern meanings ascribed to the runes could have some bearing on their current interpretation by Beltaners. In a particularly salient example the Algiz rune occurs as the rune 'Maðr' ('Man') in the Icelandic Rune Poem – a work which dates in its oldest surviving manuscript attestation to at least 1500 CE, and which might therefore be older still in earlier recensions no longer extant (Page 1998, 1–7). In the text the poet describes Maðr as '*manns gla]man ok moldar auki ok skipa skreytir*' (Page 1998, 7) – which, in translation,<sup>2</sup> reads 'man's pleasure, earth's increase, and ship adorer'. This description would seem to suggest that even in late medieval or early modern Iceland at least some people literate in runes attributed beneficent powers to the Algiz rune ('man's pleasure') and might have associated the character with the amplification of salutary cosmic energies ('earth's increase') and the protection of those persons or vessels that bore its insignia ('adorner of ships'). On the other hand, 'earth's increase' and 'ship adorer' are somewhat vague epithets. 'Increasing the earth' could entail any number of natural or supernatural processes involving the ground, including simple tilling of the soil by farmers – whom, as men, the poet could have conceptually connected to the Maðr rune by simple virtue of the meaning of its name. As for 'adorner of ships', the title might refer merely to sailors – the men aboard ships, and therefore in some sense their adorners – or even to the cruciform shape of a ship's mast, which bears at least a passing resemblance to the shape of the rune. Even if the poet did intend to imply

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2 The author is grateful for the help of colleagues in the School of Linguistics at Edinburgh University regarding this.



that ancient Icelandic mariners adorned their ships with literal runes, the sailors could have undertaken this project for a variety of reasons other than attempting to protect themselves or their ships against preternatural evil. The above caveats notwithstanding, the similarity between Beltonian and Icelandic interpretations of runic meaning, at least in this instance, seems more than coincidentally similar.

### **Rune lore for Beltaners**

If indeed medieval or early modern interpretations of the Algiz rune's significance did influence the rune's framing by members of the Beltane community, a question arises as to the vehicle of that influence. A person of romantic inclination might be tempted to entertain the hope that the image of the rune itself has maintained a singular continuity of purpose throughout the last several centuries: that either its symbolism is not socially constructed, but absolute, and that it thus is, and has long been, a literal repository of supernatural power; or that the rune's meaning has been conferred faithfully by word of mouth, generation to generation, from the rune-writers of the late medieval Nordic cultural zone to the ritualists of modern Edinburgh. Sadly, neither explanation withstands scrutiny in light of the available evidence. The very nature of symbols as arbitrarily designated representations of objects or ideas to which they otherwise have no concrete connection guarantees that no symbol has a universal, perfectly intuitive meaning; and even if the proverbial 'carrying stream' of folklore were so swift and steadfast as to regularly bear along cultural artefacts without their evolving to at least some degree – which it is not – the Beltane community's links with the rune writers of ages past would be too tenuous to support the hypothesis of Algiz-rune dissemination via a series of master-apprentice or other didactic relationships. Alternatively, while it is not inconceivable that some Beltaners might have obtained the information at the source – that is, that they took it upon themselves to read the relevant Icelandic literature – there remain far more readily accessible founts of information whereby they might have encountered the necessary rune lore.

As earlier mentioned, a great many rune enthusiasts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries shared an inclination towards the occult. Following the World Wars, however, global interest in the esoteric ebbed somewhat, and the pre-war era's mystical musings on runes were largely set aside. In runic academia, especially, mid-century runologists began to challenge long-held dogmas concerning the supposed use of runes as tools

for practical magic among the ancient Scandinavians (Barnes 2012, 207f.). With the countercultural beat and hippy movements of the fifties and sixties, however, popular discourse on metaphysics again took a turn for the romantic, and public interest in runes and other media associated with the numinous began to resurge in earnest, as evidenced by the immense popularity of esoteric works such as Joseph Banks Rhine's *New World of the Mind* (Rhine 1953), Lyall Watson's *Supernature* (Watson 1973), and Colin Wilson's *The Occult*, subtitled *The Ultimate Book for Those who Would Walk with the Gods* (Wilson 1973). Books written in the pattern of the former two examples sought to examine the paranormal in light of new discoveries in fields like psychology and neuroscience, while the latter demonstrates that by the seventies mainstream authors had become confident enough of audience receptivity towards the occult to delve less guardedly into outright mysticism – including by revisiting previously discarded theories of sacred runology. After examining the available scholarly and general-interest works of turn-of-the-century runic researchers, following the resurgence in public interest in the occult uses of runes, neopagan practitioners in various emerging spiritual traditions had arrived by the mid-1980s at a broad consensus as to the symbology of Algiz and other runes, and have since broadcast this consensus extensively by word of mouth, in print, and online (Barnes 2012, 142).

It is most likely by this means – the exposition of reanalysed pre-war runic mysticism by and to post-war rune enthusiasts via print and electronic media – that Beltaners first arrived at their current shared beliefs concerning runic meaning. At this juncture, as a caveat against academic condescension, it must be emphasised that the relative youth of neopagan rune use and imputed runic meaning vis-à-vis the better-established sacred symbolic traditions of older, more widely practised belief systems does not diminish their perceived validity among those who uphold them, and should not – in and of itself – invite the condemnation of outside observers. The investiture of numinous significance in the Algiz rune, however novel it may seem by comparison to the treatment of symbols such as the Christian cross, represents no less sincere or authentic an act of meaning making by observants of the tradition, no matter what the tradition's age or ultimate origin is.

### **Why use Germanic script at a Celtic festival?**

In any case, having ascertained the most probable means by which Beltaners acquired knowledge of runes, a reader might now wonder why this Ger-

manic script – among all the great panoply of other known cryptic writing systems, including some more popularly associated with the Celts – would become the first choice for use at a ‘Celtic’ festival. The simple answer is that little distinction is generally made in Beltane culture between Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic cultural traditions – or, for that matter, between traditions well outside the realm of the Indo-European (Beltane Fire Society 2017). It should be noted that this collective indifference to difference does not stem from wilful ignorance: few if any Beltaners have made a conscious effort to ignore the distinction between Celtic cultural artefacts and those of other cultures; and many are already well aware that – despite prolonged periods of interaction in the British Isles in the early Middle Ages – the Gaels and the Norse constituted distinct ethnic groups, and that runes represent a cultural province of the latter to a far greater extent than the former. Information on the BFS website readily acknowledges this very distinction (Beltane Fire Society 2017).

However, although collectively possessed of sufficient knowledge of the differences in rune use between Celtic-speakers and Germanic-speakers to appreciate the incongruity of runes at a ‘Celtic’ festival, those Beltaners of the author’s acquaintance who have seen fit to opine on the subject do not consider it necessary or desirable to emphasise such cultural differences. Some have suggested that intermingling disparate elements from multiple cultures – whether or not such interaction would have been feasible or appropriate in the elements’ original contexts – actually constitutes both an artistic and a social good. They feel that conscientious support for the practice of eclecticism – which furnishes the widest possible range of sources from which to draw creative inspiration for the festivals and allows ritual performers to showcase their support for cultural diversity – should far outweigh any consideration for historical accuracy in coordinating BFS events. In the author’s experience this attitude prevails among both the general membership and the managerial echelons of the BFS, whether at the level of performers, group organisers, or board members. Reaffirming this anecdotal evidence, a statement on the BFS website declares that Beltaners ‘draw [...] runes from a range of sources’ and ‘welcome folks of all backgrounds to share [...] the cultural heritage of this northern land while bringing with them their own experiences and symbols’ (Beltane Fire Society 2017).

Even so, despite conscious efforts to promote an ethos of inclusivity and eclecticism, not all source materials are welcomed at BFS festivals with equal enthusiasm. Although elements incongruous with Gaelic culture can find general acceptance, tropes that defy the Beltane community’s own

cultural traditions can meet with widespread resistance. Overtly Christian elements, for instance, seldom feature – perhaps on the basis that they might reduce the festivals’ efficacy in serving as a haven for neopagans and the non-religious, or simply because no one involved tends to propose their inclusion in the first place. Motifs adapted from Graeco-Roman culture also rarely feature – even if solidly pagan – both because the Roman legacy of patriarchy, conquest, and colonisation is seen as anathema to the Beltane values of social justice, pacifism, and anti-capitalism, and because Roman culture is seen by many participants as exerting too great an influence on the modern West to merit inclusion in a festival that attempts to subvert Western social norms. For the same reason overtly ‘modern’ aesthetic or technical motifs are discouraged – including mobile phones and recognisably contemporary clothing – unless either legally required (as in the case of high-visibility attire for festival stewards) or necessary to a production aspect of the festival (as in the case of pyrotechnic paraphernalia).

This desire to distance Beltane from the cultural mainstream provides one impetus for the continued presence of runes: the symbols see little use in day-to-day Scottish life and so exude an air of ‘otherness’ which – like the extravagant costumes and ritualistic behaviour of the performers – sets the festivals apart from the quotidian and mundane, and advertises this distinctness to witnesses. Essentially, the artistic character of BFS festivals emphasises the non-Christian, the non-Roman, and the apparently ancient to draw a conceptual boundary between the festivals’ atmosphere and the routine realities of a Scottish society which is post-industrial and heavily inflected by the legacies of Roman culture and Christianity. Runes very much fulfil these criteria: they have a long history, strong ties with paganism, and few overt connections – at least in aesthetic terms – to the Roman world. These characteristics make runes ideal for BFS festival use despite the characters’ absence from the traditional Gaelic cultural practices that have provided the core inspiration for the festivals.

### **The nature of the allegedly problematic of Beltaner rune use**

This paper has thus far discussed the use of runes, both in general history and in the context of the festivals of Edinburgh’s Beltane Fire Society. The discussion now turns to the question of whether Beltaners’ performative praxis is socio-politically problematic, especially insofar as concerns the use of runes. Arguably, in terms of ethical correctness, Beltaners’ conduct at their festivals invites three potential critiques: historical inaccuracy;

cultural insensitivity or appropriation with regard to Gaelic culture; and the furtherance of racism by the normalisation of symbols associated with the far right. Fortunately for the Beltaners the preponderance of evidence upholds their innocence – or at least excuses their conduct to date – in the face of all such accusations.

On the subject of historical accuracy it is certainly true that based on the available evidence, Beltaners fail to faithfully recreate Beltane and Samhuinn observances as they would have been conducted prior to the 1988 revival of the tradition. The Beltane Fire Festival as currently celebrated in Edinburgh – a pyrotechnic extravaganza involving several corps of acrobats, at least one choir, technicolour body paint, theatre-quality costuming, and as many as five drum crews – would scarcely be recognisable to Beltane celebrants from the time of the festivals' extinction in or before the early years of the twentieth century. However, it was only ever the stated intention of Beltaners to revive ancient practice – not to reproduce it in every detail, as the society's website explicitly states (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Indeed, veteran Beltaners of the author's acquaintance have argued cogently that the number and historical diversity of sources of inspiration for the modern fire festivals as practised in Edinburgh would, ironically, preclude the wholly accurate portrayal of any one of their component traditions. Most often cited in defence of this argument is the wilful and longstanding incorporation of authentically Scottish but decidedly non-Celtic cultural practices into the ritual – such as the ritually important but historically novel role played at Beltane by the May Queen (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 14) – and the inclusion in the Samhuinn festival of narrative motifs from the Lowland Scots and more broadly Anglo-Saxon tradition of the so-called Galoshin plays (Tanaka 2013, 837).

In attempting to incorporate themes not only from various stages in the evolution of the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd* but also the late medieval Scottish Lowlands – all the while maintaining fidelity to the performative innovations of past generations of modern Beltaners – the festival organisers must necessarily discard any stringent notions of historical accuracy, as these could scarcely be applied with any degree of success. Beltaners seem generally to believe that this eclectic approach allows them to pay homage to the maximum number of Scottish and international folkloric motifs, and thereby maximally connect the citizenry of Edinburgh to those historical traditions of their city – both native and imported – that the homogeneity of modernity has denied them (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Thus, on the subject of historical accuracy, the BFS can hardly be criticised for failing to accomplish something it never undertook to achieve.

Beltaners' avowed eclecticism, however, though it largely relieves them of the burden of historical accuracy, opens them to another accusation: infidelity to social justice in their treatment of Gaelic culture. The BFS cannot deny its use of Gaelic tradition as source material for its festivals: their very names – Beltane and Samhuinn – are derivations of Gaelic words denoting Gaelic cultural practices on which BFS events are, however loosely, modelled (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 10). From a social justice perspective the decision to borrow from Scottish Gaelic culture for the sake of public performance entails certain responsibilities. Foremost among these ranks the obligation to treat Gaelic cultural artefacts in a way that demonstrates respect for the descendants and cultural heirs of the people who originated them, especially in consideration of the fact that, even within Scotland, Gaels are a highly marginalised ethnic group (McKinnon 2007, 200ff.). Dealing with the cultural artefacts of an historically oppressed people should merit special consideration in the minds of anyone interested in the defence of minority rights – a concern which is dear to the hearts of many Beltaners. In light of this some Gaelic-language activists of the author's acquaintance have been disappointed to discover that the Gaelic language features only tokenistically at BFS festivals; that the festivals themselves bear little resemblance to their traditional Gaelic counterparts as they are believed to have been conducted in any attested period of their history; and that few if any native Gaelic-speakers actively participate in the festivals annually.

While Beltaners' conduct with regard to Gaelic culture is less defensible than their disregard for historical accuracy, much can still be said in support of the conduct of BFS and the wider Beltane community – largely because even now some within the society are attempting to rectify the festivals' erstwhile lack of Gaelic visibility. The author can attest to having participated directly in performance groups dedicated to incorporating Gaelic song in the festivals and teaching rudimentary Gaelic-language skills to willing members of the BFS at the Samhuinn festivals of 2017 and 2018, and the Beltane festival of 2018. Furthermore, a similar group has received provisional approval to perform at the Beltane festival of 2019. Each of these iterations of the Gaelic song group has thus far invited its members to attend lectures on the history of Gaelic cultural oppression as part of their festival preparation to impress upon participants the importance of upholding Gaelic cultural traditions in the face of English-language hegemony and according proper respect to the Gaels as members of a minoritised culture. Gaelic use thus shows every sign of slowly increasing within the BFS, and enhanced Gaelic visibility will hopefully signal to members of the Edinburgh

Gaelic community that Gaelic speakers and learners are welcome at BFS events – an implicit invitation which may ultimately result in an increase in the Gaelic-speaking membership of the society.

Having established that Beltaners' lack of concern for historical accuracy is largely justified by their dedication to the simultaneous representation of various historical and cultural contexts, and that the long-time relative absence of Gaelic and Gaels from BFS events – while decidedly problematic in light of the historical marginalisation of Gaelic speakers – is slowly being remedied, there remains the question of the appropriateness of rune use itself at BFS events. With runes having served as an emblem of white ethnonationalism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – most notably in the hands of the Third Reich and its admirers – one might justly question whether it is politically correct, or indeed even morally conscionable, for leftist neopagan performance artists to employ these symbols unironically as artistic motifs at their modern festivals. In determining whether this usage does or does not further the white supremacist cause, this paper argues that three factors logically merit consideration: foremost, the intention with which the group under scrutiny employs the symbols in question; second, the real-world consequences of the actions in which the group proposes to engage; and, ultimately, the context in which the cultural artefact under scrutiny has been used historically, from the time of its origin to the present. One may appeal to these criteria on the basis that symbols become dangerous because of their weaponisation by the malicious, and that it is the nexus of intention, consequence, and historical context in which this weaponisation occurs.

In terms of intention it can be posited with near certainty that most, if not all, Beltaners who use runes do so for the sake of their mystical associations, both for purposes of scene-setting for the benefit of performers and witnesses to the ritual, and – for some – in metaphorical or literal invocation of supernatural powers they associate with the runes. It is almost equally certain that Beltaners do not use runes as racist dog whistles or to advertise a latent affinity for white supremacist ideology; the author's experiences with Beltaners to date have continually demonstrated their community's explicit devotion to anti-racism and their pride in cultural diversity – values they showcase through their aforementioned openness to cultural eclecticism in their selection of performance elements. The BFS even goes so far as to acknowledge on its website the far-right associations of the runes its performers employ and to explicitly disavow the right-wing populism which in some social circles the symbols connote (Beltane Fire Society, 2017).

With regard to the real-world ramifications of Beltane rune use the ritual-performer's actions thus far seem to have elicited few complaints from either members of the Beltane community or observers from outside it. In the author's three years of BFS involvement no articles in the local press have condemned the society or its members on the basis of rune use, and the only mention of the runic connection to fascism as it might pertain to Beltane occurred in the course of the single, lighthearted conversation among Edinburgh University academics – few of whom had even previously seen one of the festivals – that precipitated the writing of this article. While this seeming absence of critique by the festival-going public concerning BFS rune use does not mean without doubt that the presence of runes at the festivals has offended or endangered no one, it does little in and of itself to problematise that presence.

Finally, the discussion approaches the subject of historical context and asks whether Beltaners – whatever the intentions that underlie their actions or the consequences resulting therefrom – can morally justify their rune use in the face of runes' historical usage by people whose values were completely antithetical to their own, and whose actions caused tremendous harm, up to and including loss of comfort, property, sanity, and life for millions of innocent people. This paper posits that the answer to that question is a definitive 'yes'. As previously mentioned, it is well attested that many German ethnonationalists in the early to mid-twentieth century, including many high-ranking Nazis, had a great affinity with Germanic runes (Barnes 2012, 195). One can assert with equal certainty, however, that runes existed for centuries before the advent of Nazism (Barnes 2012, 9), and that there is nothing inherently racist about runic writing. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that runes themselves are not racist unless wielded with racist intent – an intent wholly absent on the part of Beltaners.

## **Conclusion**

An examination of the history of runes from antiquity to the present reveals the enduring fascination they have held for occultists – some of whom have had ties to Germanic ethnonationalism. Likewise, an examination of the history of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival traces the evolution of an eclectic subculture of bohemians, performance artists, political activists, community organisers, cultural revivalists, and neopagans who in the present day take great liberty in making use of runes – especially the Algiz rune – in their artistic and ritual endeavours, irrespective of both the seeming incongruity



of rune use at Gaelic festivals and the popularity of runes among past and present devotees of the far right.

This paper therefore concludes that the Beltaners are ethically justified in taking such liberties in their use of runes. The Beltaners straightforwardly prioritise cultural diversity over historicity and so may unproblematically mingle Celtic and Germanic elements in their creative oeuvre. Although the BFS has suffered in the past from the under-emphasis of Gaelic traditions within its cultural gestalt, some members of the society have recently recognised this deficit and its incompatibility with Beltaners' general support for the cause of social justice, and the BFS itself has thus far supported these members' remedial efforts at Gaelic promotion within the Beltane community.

The vast preponderance of evidence suggests that Beltane rune use itself has no direct connection to fascism in terms of either ritual performers' intentions or the known public impact of their performances. Only with regard to the historical context of the runes themselves do Beltaners' activities resemble those of the far right, and only insofar as both Beltaners and racial ethnonationalists have attributed similar symbolic meanings to specific runes and have used runes in general as artistic motifs in public performance. The tendency of both groups to draw from the same symbolic repertoire is in this case wholly incidental and therefore no more suspect or significant than Albert Einstein and Adolf Hitler having availed themselves of the same language for the public expression of certain of their ideas. So it is with Beltaners and white supremacists in their use of the runes: following the consensus established by mystics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and affirmed by those of the post-war era, both groups agree about the meanings they ascribe to individual runes, yet the overall timbre of the messages they choose to convey by their use of them remains completely distinct. Those of a fascistic bent use runes to evince their solidarity with their more powerful ideological predecessors and to signal their purported descent from and desire to restore an imagined, ethnically 'pure' utopia. By contrast, the Beltaners use runes to mark their collective investment in a different utopian vision – one in which the supernatural power of a mythic past imbues tired contemporary urbanity with meaning and beauty, and inspires people of various ethnic backgrounds to surmount their personal and cultural differences to connect with both their fellow city-dwellers and the natural world that sustains them. Both imagined futures are only that – though, fortunately, the latter seems more achievable than the former – and yet to anyone of

conscience the Beltaners' vision must seem vastly preferable to that of the white supremacists.

In attempting to realise their ambitions of self-actualisation and community building through pagan ritual and collaborative performance art, Beltaners not only conduct an arcane rite and enact a public spectacle, they bring inspiration and entertainment to multitudes and foster a sense of benevolent fraternity among people who might otherwise never meet, let alone collaborate. What activists of the far right can only accomplish at the expense of human dignity and minority rights – the fostering of a sense of collective purpose in striving towards a common goal – the Beltane community achieves without attempting to exclude or demean anyone. If, in doing so, they happen to use the same runes as adherents of the far right, this coincidence presents no moral dilemma.

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## Book Reviews

Ida Marie Høeg (ed.): *Religion og ungdom*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017, 271 pp.

In this anthology, *Religion og ungdom* (Religion and Youth), edited by sociologist of religion Ida Marie Høeg, Norwegian authors from different research fields such as religious studies, sociology, and anthropology analyse youth's relationship with religion and spirituality in Norway. The term 'youth' is used as an umbrella term to include both adolescents and young adults in the book's chapters. The chapters focus on young Norwegians' experiences of religion and spirituality in various contexts such as schools, confirmation training, youth milieus and media. The chapters also include generational/cohort and life-stage perspectives on the study of youth, pose questions related to identities and practices, and present themes from gender to ethnicity and from individualism to social engagement. The data used in the chapters is extensive, ranging from survey results and popular magazines to fieldwork and interviews. The anthology is in Norwegian, so it is aimed at Norwegian (or Nordic) readers.

*Religion og ungdom* consists of an introduction and eleven chapters. Høeg's introduction emphasises that this volume examines Norwegian youth as agents, and religion is understood as something to be explored and tried, as well as some-

thing young people shape. Høeg introduces the reader to the concept of youth, the background of youth studies within the field of religious studies, and the characteristics of the lives of Norwegian youth in light of current research. Most young people in Norway live good lives, have good relationships with their parents and families, go to school and increasingly enjoy their leisure time at home, as well as in their hobbies and involvement in various organisations. Thus, religion competes with other leisure activities, not least those involving different media. Høeg summarises relevant Norwegian research that illustrates that a third of young adults are personally Christian (meaning they are Christian on their terms and in their understanding). Another third do not believe in God. Young adults between 21 and 26 find religion less meaningful than young people between 15 and 20. New religiosity or alternative spirituality is most widespread among young adults, and the number of young people with an immigrant background who identify more strongly with religion is increasing. Young Norwegians are also less critical of religion than Norwegians in general. In addition, young people's authority structures are looser, so they increasingly follow their own compass of inner values.

Høeg provides basic information about young adults in Norway in the introduction. However, some more

statistics would have been useful for the non-Norwegian reader. It would have been particularly helpful to have learned more about religiously affiliated Norwegians in general, the numbers of non-religious Norwegians, and the corresponding statistics for young Norwegians. The introduction's statistics are collected from several studies from different periods, and of young adults of different ages. As Høeg herself writes, youth seem more interested in religious questions than young adults, although research including both youth and young adults is not always presented or available.

After the introduction the volume continues with two studies of representations of Islam in the lives of young Muslims: Audun Toft focuses on classrooms; Janna Hansen focuses on Facebook. Next, Torjer A. Olsen studies how Sámi youth with a Laestadian background negotiate their identities, while Lill Vramo analyses young Norwegian Sikhs' turban practice and explores the borders of inclusion within Norwegian society. In chapter five Ann Kristin Gresaker illustrates how religion is discussed by celebrities in two lifestyle magazines, *Mann* for young men and *Det Nye* for young women. In the next chapter Irene Trysnes studies the identity negotiations of youth in relation to religion and gender in Christian youth milieus. Next, Trysnes and Pål Ketil Botvar explore young people, individualisation, and new religiosity or alternative spirituality. In chapter eight Høeg analyses the civil engagement of

youth participating in the Church of Norway's confirmation training, while in chapter nine Sivert Skålvoll Urstad explores who secular Norwegian young adults are, and how they relate to religious questions. Sindre Bangstad explores how young Muslims in Oslo relate to secularity, liberality, and tolerance. In the final chapter Levi Gier Eidhamar studies young Muslims' thoughts and beliefs concerning existential questions of life after death.

The introduction presents the chapters and their focus. However, the reader is not provided with a clear explanation of the chapters' order. Secular youth are presented towards the end of the book, but youth from different religions and contexts are not introduced in a thematic order. A clearer and explained structure would undoubtedly have helped underline central themes and provided a dialogue between the chapters, a dialogue now largely missing. Yet the volume offers a rich array of perspectives, some with a more obvious place in the volume than others. Most of the chapters focus on young people's experiences, but in chapter five Gresaker studies how celebrities discuss religion in magazines for young women and men. Its different focus means this chapter seems a little out of place. The chapter is interesting, but in relation to the volume as a whole it would have been even more interesting to read, for example, about how youth or young adults from different religious backgrounds understand and discuss the religious

and spiritual media representations of celebrities.

While many of the chapters make a strong case and relate to previous research meaningfully, others are less connected with current debates. In chapter seven Trysnes and Botwar analyse survey and interview data concerning new religious young adults and individualism. Their theoretical premise lies in Robert Bellah's (1985) utilitarian individualism, which is about maximising one's self-interests and gains, and expressive individualism, which entails everybody's possibility of fulfilling their own potential. Trysnes and Botwar maintain that young people are more utilitarian than older adults, focusing on the question 'What's in it for me?'. Although their findings are interesting, Trysnes and Botwar do not discuss the characteristics of the participants' particular life stage. Not only would this give more context, it would also afford a more nuanced picture of individualism(s) among new religious young adults. As Arnett (2004) and Høeg, among others, point out, young adulthood is a life stage during which young people learn to stand on their own two feet. The focus during this life stage is therefore on the self and the individual's choices. Thus, the results not only indicate generational differences, as suggested by Trysnes and Botwar, but also possible differences between life stages.

An important and partly shared theme for authors such as Toft, Hansen, Olsen, Vramo, and Bangstad is

the young people who are navigating different and at times multiple identities and places in Norwegian society. Young adults face questions of religion, spirituality, and non-religion in relation to questions of identity, gender, ethnicity, education, and media. One of the strengths of *Religion og ungdom* is the insights it provides into the several simultaneously lived realities of young people in contemporary, multicultural, and multi-religious Norway. While some of the chapters confirm the findings of previous research – for example, Urstad's chapter on the prevalence of secular young adults – the contributions also afford interesting insights into the lives of young people from religious backgrounds living in a secular society, as is the case in Bangstad's chapter on young Muslims. Another strength of the book lies in the rich quantitative and qualitative research data, the chapters employ. As many of the chapters discuss important and current issues within the field of youth studies and studies of religion, an English version of the volume would no doubt find a larger audience.

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**Inger Furseth (ed.):** *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 341 pp.

*Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere* is the final report of NOREL, a large Nordic project in the field of the sociology of religion. The project aimed to produce a comparative study of religion in the five Nordic countries in 1988, 1998, and 2008.

The book presents and discusses the results of this project according to four themes: religion and the state; religion and politics; religion and media; and faith communities and interfaith organisations. Each theme gets its own chapter, and the volume is completed by introductory and concluding chapters written by the head of the project and editor of the volume, Professor Inger Furseth from Oslo, as well as a chapter presenting an overview of the Nordic religious landscape. Altogether, 23 researchers are listed as the book's authors.

The overall aim of the book and the project is to compare the place and role of religion in the five Nordic countries, as well as to study processes of religious change during the period in question. The project is a follow-up to a similar Nordic study conducted in the 1980s. The previous project was written within a secularisation paradigm; a central premise for this book concerns whether religion is 'returning'.

As the book covers a large spectrum of issues within the sociology of religion, a variety of theoretical

perspectives is also brought to bear. However, the overall theoretical view is already indicated in the book's title: religious complexity. This describes a situation with an increased diversity of religious traditions in which secularisation and the increased public visibility of religion may occur simultaneously, and in which the processes of religious change are non-linear and unpredictable.

Overall, the approach is quantitative, presenting percentages for comparison between countries and over time. Much of this functions as an overview of the religious situation in the Nordic countries and often provides corroboration of previous knowledge instead of any big surprises. There are also a number of quite rewarding case studies which add concrete detail to the overviews. For example, the chapter on religion and the state contains discussions on church services at the openings of the respective parliaments, as well as on religious elements at celebrations at the end of the school year. Both cases are very relevant and frequently discussed. The media chapter presents studies of Nordic film and Scandinavian lifestyle magazines. Both studies provide excellent concretisation for the theoretical discussion of mediation running through the chapter. The chapter about faith communities conveys results from a study of Norwegian religious leaders – an exception to the rule of comparison.

The comparative perspective is the book's guiding principle and en-



tire *raison d'être*. As such, it serves its purpose well. Some minor issues with the comparative approach can be highlighted. Not least in the Nordic context it triggers something of a competition between countries: who has progressed furthest on the road of religious change, as it were, and who is lagging behind? Comparison also requires extensive knowledge, which the inclusion of researchers from all the Nordic countries is intended to achieve. There are still some small mistakes: the last Swedish government is given the wrong political colour, and a member of the Finnish parliament is described as a 'blogger and aspiring politician'. A stylistic issue with the comparative approach is its tendency to compile lists.

All these are minor matters. Another more critical point needs to be mentioned: the text is plagued by recurring errors of language and misprints. The large number of authors is the most likely explanation for this, but it is a regrettable and unnecessary shortcoming in an otherwise valuable book.

The book's main target audience is probably international scholars with an interest in the Nordic situation, but it will also be suitable for Nordic scholars and students, not least as an ambitious and comprehensive overview. With its thematic chapters the book reads as a handbook for the Nordic sociology of religion. As such, the book will surely be a reference work for years to come.

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**Oliver Freiberger:** *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 240pp.

‘About time.’ This is what I think repeatedly when reading Oliver Freiberger’s new book about the comparative method in religious studies. Of course, as Freiberger underlines, comparison is nothing new in religious studies. It is one of many methods used in it and related fields. However, it is also a useful method in itself. Again, this is not a new idea, but one in need of exploration and development. This has been lacking thus far. Many of us do comparative studies, but we do not always reflect on why and how, and might even find it difficult to make a case for, what we do. We are aware of its issues – the risk of decontextualisation, essentialisation, and universalisation – but not of how to use this awareness to our advantage and get more out of comparison. This is what Freiberger wishes to help the reader with in presenting views on comparison in religious studies and its inherent challenges, and perspectives on comparison in theory and practice.

The postmodern and postcolonial critique of comparison has led to many doubts about it – and rightly so. Looking back at early comparative studies, it is easy to identify the problems with a non-critical approach. Aspects are taken out of context of both time and place, and forced into often largely western understandings and models. Spe-

cifics are ignored or downplayed, resulting in undue exoticisation and simplification. The critique of postmodern and postcolonial thinkers is thus to be taken seriously but can also be an aid. When as a scholar you properly consider the perspective from which you come, the risks and benefits of the methods you use, and the scope and limitations of your knowledge, you can create a solid and worthwhile study. The steps and perspectives Freiberger and the scholars on whom he builds offer can help with this.

A simple but noteworthy point Freiberger raises on several occasions in *Considering Comparison* is that comparison is not merely about similarities but about differences. This might sound obvious, but as Freiberger illustrates in his overview of previous research, scholars have tended to focus on either one or the other, often because of the theoretical perspectives in the field within which they are working. Both a general emphasis on difference and similarities can be problematic. By focusing primarily on difference, one might want to avoid interpreting contexts according to the norms of a different setting; however, one might at the same time risk essentialising the studied setting. In turn, by focusing on similarities, one risks only proving one’s own perspective instead of truly challenging one’s views and learning something new from comparison. Thus, a more balanced method is needed, and Freiberger proposes one such method.

Freiberger is not the first to present a methodology of comparison, as he shows in his study. His point is not that his method is better than others and should replace previous endeavours. Rather, he offers a discussion starter and practical outline on which a researcher can build. He also clearly illustrates how his method relates to previous methods, their similarities, and where he offers somewhat different views. The method he proposes has five stages: selection; description and analysis; juxtaposition; redescription and rectification; and theory formation. Although presented separately, the stages are of course in reality often interlinked and do not always follow a clear linear order. The two last stages especially are not also necessarily of the same concern in all studies. While Freiberger argues for the transparency of the research process, he does not call for an exhaustive description of it. He argues that comparison very much builds on and relates to previous knowledge, and that capturing a thought process exactly is far from always possible or even necessary.

In the final chapter of *Considering Comparison* Freiberger exemplifies his proposed method with a previous study of his own. In this case he calls the specific method discourse comparison, because his concern is to explore and compare discourses about ascetism in two collections of texts. Although this is an illustrative chapter, it is at the same time one of the weaker parts of the book, and it leaves the reader wanting more.

Wanting more is not necessarily a bad thing when one has come to the end of the book, but the chapter does highlight some of the limitations of Freiberger's work. His expertise is in certain historical settings and seems to be related mostly to literary sources. How can his method be adapted to working with different kinds of qualitative and quantitative material? Freiberger does underline that this first order method question – gathering the material as such and all it entails – largely falls outside the study, because so many processes are possible. However, this also means that many questions preoccupying scholars working with transnational studies, for example, and many forms of quantitative and qualitative material are not approached.

Having had the opportunity to be part of a study that has explored the worldviews of young adult university students in thirteen different contexts worldwide (Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective), the challenges of developing and realising a large quantitative and qualitative study and obtaining comparative data is a vivid one for me and my co-researchers. At first glance Freiberger's method seems too general and text-based to be really useful from this perspective. Nevertheless, a conclusion of this kind would miss several of the essential points Freiberger is trying to make. Instead of simply arguing for the need to be careful with comparisons because contexts are so different, it encourages not only an

acknowledgement of the challenges but of what we have done to address them. This pushes us to trust in the benefits of thoughtful comparison, and the opportunity to learn both something about the contexts being compared and about the area of comparison in the process.

Although *Considering Comparison* might not be a method book directly applicable to the whole range of comparative approaches available to the study of religions, it is still an excellent starting point. Critically used, Freiburger's theorising allows us to hone in on challenges and build a case for our approach, clarify the kind of comparisons we are seeking concerning aims, scale and scope, identify the stages and questions that need consideration, and present findings in a manner that can both be illustrative and help us develop new perspectives and insights. With its concise structure and clear and illustrative language, it also works well for researchers at many different stages of their research career. I therefore warmly recommend this study and look forward to the discussions, developments and, not least, comparative studies it will no doubt inspire.

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**Westbrook, Donald A:** *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* (Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism). New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 352pp.

Foolishly perhaps, but determined none the less, I have high hopes of smashing my name into history so violently that it will take a legendary form....

— L. Ron Hubbard

It seems that L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology's founder, is getting his wish to have his name smashed into history – but not as he imagined. To the general public the Church of Scientology (CoS) is the worst kind of destructive cult, founded by a science fiction writer who decided to get rich by inventing a fake religion. What most people know about Scientology is often confined to what they learned from the *South Park* episode which focused on the CoS's confidential teachings about the cosmic dictator Xenu. Additionally, the public is aware that Tom Cruise and other celebrities, especially in the film industry, are Scientologists. This, unfortunately, is the full extent of most people's knowledge of Scientology.

The Church of Scientology has acquired a reputation as a litigious organisation, ready to sue critics or anyone else who portrays the church in an unfavourable light. Partly as a consequence of this fierce reputation, and partly because in the past the CoS has tried to interfere with scholarship, academics have tended

to avoid publishing studies of Scientology outside the esoteric realm of specialised scholarly journals until relatively recently.

However, the CoS changed its tactics around the time of the now famous 2005 episode of *South Park*, 'Trapped in the Closet', which caricatured Scientology's once secret teachings. This programme represented an important threshold in that, contrary to expectations, the CoS did not sue its producers. Some observers have argued that the new hesitancy to use lawsuits or their threat to silence critics represents a conscious strategic shift.

However, the topic of Scientology has become white hot as a consequence of the Church's (losing) battle with the Internet and increasing media coverage. We are on the verge of experiencing a small tsunami of new scholarship on Scientology in the form of new articles, dissertations, monographs, and anthologies.

One of the best overviews of the CoS to emerge from this new scholarly activity is Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Practice*. In contrast with researchers who have drawn their information primarily from published sources Westbrook spent years talking with active Scientologists and attending events with the cooperation of the church. The result is a respectful and insightful treatment of the organisation.

Following a general introduction in which he discusses his research project and his methodology, Westbrook's first chapter, 'Preliminary

Conclusions from Interviews and Fieldwork', takes the unusual step of presenting some of his conclusions as a frame for the balance of his monograph. Chapter two examines the founder's background in the post-war era and traces the steps in the development of the Dianetics movement, Scientology's predecessor, and the beginnings of Scientology.

The third chapter, "'Keeping Scientology Working": Features of Systematic Theology', presents a general overview of Scientology as a religious system, but this overview provides more than the sum of its parts. Focusing on the period when the church was headquartered in the United Kingdom at Saint Hill Manor in East Grinstead, Westbrook demonstrates that it was during this period that Hubbard systematised his 'theology' in terms of his philosophical anthropology, views of education, 'sin', and 'evil'.

The fourth chapter, "'We Come Back": Past and Present of the Sea Organization', focuses on the next period, when Hubbard shifted his activities to Scientology's ships. Shortly before this move he formed the Sea Organization. It was also during this period that Hubbard began developing the Church of Scientology's upper level 'Operating Thetan' (OT) teachings, which would later become the source of so much controversy.

Chapter five, "'Build a Better Bridge!": From LRH to COB and Beyond', covers the final phase of Scientology under Hubbard until

his death and the church's transition to the leadership of David Miscavige (referred to internally as COB, Chairman of the Board). In his conclusion Westbrook reflects on the future of Scientology and its academic study.

While there are many points one could take up with respect to Westbrook's treatment of Scientology, the issue his volume presents for New Religious Movement researchers is that of the researcher's relationship with her/his informants. When studying a religious group, this relationship is usually regarded as unproblematic with any mainstream religious denomination like the United Methodists, and only moderately problematic when studying less controversial religious movements. But what about when one conducts research on a highly controversial religion like Scientology?

In his celebrated 'Theses on Method' the prominent historian of religion Bruce Lincoln asserts that 'When [in the course of studying a religious community] good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail': if you think the truth demands it, don't hesitate to step on your informants' toes. This is, of course, easy enough to say for someone like Lincoln, who mostly studies the dead religions of the past. The situation is different for anyone who studies a living religion, whose members will probably read what one writes about them. Whatever one says needs to be said respectfully to ensure the religious

community will allow one to return to conduct future research – and other researchers to approach the same community.

We thus deeply appreciated Westbrook's quandary in studying the Church of Scientology. Although not uncritical overall, he does present the church's account of events whenever a controversial situation from the past is discussed – and we do not think he is wrong to do this. Indeed, we appreciated knowing exactly how the CoS describes the contested events of its history.

This concern aside, Westbrook's treatment raises Scientology studies to an entirely new level. Just as all prior research on this group has had to refer to Roy Wallis's classic study, *The Road to Total Freedom*, all future research will have to refer to Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists*.

*Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Practice* will be of interest to scholars of religion, especially new religious movements specialists. It will also be attractive to a general readership curious about this group and why it has been so controversial.

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