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OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY — COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Edited by Pernille Hermann,
Stephen A. Mitchell, and Jens Peter Schjødt
with Amber J. Rose

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Series Foreword

As he planned his famous study of the living tradition of oral epic singing in the Balkans in the 1930s, the prominent Harvard Classicist, Milman Parry, signaled the significance that the Old Norse field held in his mind when he noted that the results of his investigations would be of importance, not only for the study of Greek and South Slavic epic, but also for such early poetries as Anglo-Saxon, French, and Norse.[1] Thus, key to Parry's approach to the study of Homeric Greek tradition—as both that comment and, of course, the entirety of his Yugoslavian fieldwork indicate—was comparativism, or as he knew it, the *méthode comparative*.[2] That the present collection of essays specifically focusing on Old Norse mythology in a comparative perspective should appear in a publication series of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature might then be deemed especially appropriate.

Furthermore, Harvard's engagement with the study of Scandinavian history, culture, and literature has deep roots, a fact one can infer from its acquisition on January 14, 1766, soon after the destructive fire of the college library in 1764, of *A Compendious History of the Goths, Svvedes & Vandals, and Other Northern Nations*, the 1658 English translation of Olaus Magnus' 1555 ethnography of the Nordic world. And Harvard was one of the first, if not the first, institution in the New World to offer instruction in Old Norse—it is said that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow taught it in University Hall shortly after his 1835–1836 stay in Copenhagen and Stockholm. Of her visit to the Harvard College library in December of 1849, the famous Swedish writer, and feminist activist, Fredrika Bremer commented,

> I one day lately visited the several buildings of the university and the library. In the latter I was surprised to find one portion of the Swedish literature not badly represented here. This is owing to the

[1] See the complete text in Stephen A. Mitchell and Gregory Nagy, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd ed. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. ix. On the relevance of Parry's prediction for Old Norse studies, see, for example, the essay by Hermann in the current volume.

[2] Cf. Mitchell and Nagy, "Introduction to the Second Edition," xvii–xviii.

> poet, Professor Longfellow, who having himself traveled in Sweden, sent hither these books. He has also written about Sweden, and has translated several of Tegnér's poems. I found also the Eddas among the Swedish books.

To which she adds—wryly and much bemused by the intensity of the young men's interest, one senses—speaking about her childhood friend and visiting legal scholar, Professor Pehr Bergfalk,

> Bergfalk laid his hands on the Westgötha laws, which he treated as an old friend, and in which he showed some of the gentlemen who accompanied us an example of that alliteration which was so much in vogue in the writings of our forefathers, and about which the gentlemen found much to say.[3]

A half-century later, massively supplementing Harvard's growing Nordic collection, the perspicacious acquisition of the personal library of the German scholar, Konrad von Maurer, took place, a purchase that brought some 10,000 titles to the library, as well as, to paraphrase the bill of lading, a trunkful of Icelandic manuscripts.[4] The university's continuing commitment to Scandinavian as a vital area of humanities research has not wavered greatly over the decades; indeed, the essays in the current volume, *Comparative Perspectives on Old Norse Mythology*, are an indication of this ongoing dedication, as most of them were presented at the Aarhus Old Norse Mythology Conference held at Harvard University in the autumn of 2013.

—David Elmer, Casey Dué, Gregory Nagy
and Stephen Mitchell

[3] Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America.* Transl. by Mary Howitt of *Hemmen i den Nya verlden.* New York: 1853. I: 134.

[4] Some of these manuscripts formed part of the exhibit of Icelandic manuscripts at Harvard's Houghton Library, curated by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Marie Curie Research Fellow at Harvard University and The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík, held in conjunction with the conference, Old Norse Mythology—Comparative Perspectives, in 2013.

Foreword

Joseph Harris
Harvard University

Interest in the individual myths and the mythic systems of the pre-Christian North has traveled a varied way through highs and lows since the seventeenth century. The twenty-first continues a period of intense scholarly interest since, perhaps, the 1960s and in this volume renews and modernizes the comparative (and reconstructive) view that has been one of the main approaches for many decades. In fact, although the volume has nothing of the textbook about it, its fifteen particular studies of very high intellectual and scholarly quality, along with its usefully contextualizing introductions, embody and illuminate practically all the possibilities for comparative approaches. In Folklore 101 our students learn a framework for explaining cultural similarities generally as "descent, diffusion, and polygenesis". And there the topic ends in 101. This volume foregoes any such simple schema while potentially teaching subtle variations, combinations, and mediating forms of this very fundamental meme. Even as each scholar pursues his or her specific interests beyond theories of comparison and reconstruction, the meme remains a subtext well below the direct attention of most of the contributors.

The bookends of the volume, the volume's first and last two contributions, are constituted by essays that elevate typology, on the one hand, and the genetic (specifically, descent), on the other, to prime importance. Jens Peter Schjødt argues for the application of comparison between appropriately analogous but unrelated mythologies through a specific idea of the "model", a relatively complete mental map derived from one reality and hypothetically applied to the fragments of another to be reconstructed. He does not need to use the textbook term *polygenesis*, but the native Hawaiian mythology on which his model is based does share with Old Norse certain social facts, its relationship to Scandinavia being purely "typological". Schjødt's is the volume's most explicit in respect to theories of comparative mythology, including comments on the other bookend, the essay by Michael Witzel and on genetic comparison in

general. But one might take up genetic comparison and its result in reconstruction less controversially with the volume's penultimate essay by Emily Lyle, who works here within the traditional framework of the Indo-European community, as represented by Iranian myth, but employs a model in a manner similar to Schjødt. And just as Schjødt is able to fill in some spaces between fragments of our knowledge of Odin, so Lyle—operating on one of the most fascinating myths in Old Norse, that of Baldr—is able virtually to augment that individual myth's relation to a whole. Witzel's comparativism in this essay is less explicitly concerned with theory and method, having previously written comprehensively in that vein. What makes his procedure startlingly new and controversial is his expansion of the historical field for comparison; it now stretches vastly farther into the human past than the Indo-European and presupposes genetic relations and evidences of population movements only recently introduced to historical studies.

Diffusion is most directly represented—and problematized—in Tom DuBois's "areal" study of conceptions of the sun in the Finnic and Baltic mythologies in comparison with Nordic, plotting the varied solar myths from the Sámi in the North right through the Lativian *dainas* in the South and examining the resulting pattern. DuBois does not directly invoke the "hard" concepts of the older historical-geographic school, but his analysis gives us evidence of the intercultural relations within the areal scheme. Incidentally, his analysis reminds us indirectly and without jargon that cultural patterns seeming to imply vague impersonal forces (the "superorganic") have to be complemented by focused and purposive diffusion in the form of "borrowing". The volume includes a second valuable study of Finnish and Old Norse myth, John Lindow's survey of many similarities between Nordic and Finnish mythologies; he tends to be skeptical of specific loans, even while giving a good account of the relevant cultural relations and making use of the model idea. Diffusion as specific borrowings comes into other papers as well. Joseph Nagy analyses a Nordic form of a strange tale with a history, presumably oral, extending back through Irish and Iranian. Contemporary, i.e., thirteenth-century, influences on Snorri's mythology from European learning, especially about the Jews, is Richard Cole's subject; Jonas Wellendorf shows, among other things, learned influences on conceptions of idols and other representations; and Mattias Nordvig posits influences from nature (in the specifically Icelandic form of volcanic eruptions) on the preserved cosmological passages and, reciprocally, mythic influence on the language used for such eruptions. Stephen Mitchell, Harvard's resident thaumaturge of this collection, gives a comprehensive survey of the background of Odin's communication with the dead, including possible source-representing analogues from the learned South.

While comparison and reconstruction in the senses just adumbrated do constitute themes through much of the volume, a core of excellent articles draw their comparisons more traditionally between segments of the greater field. The archeologist Torun Zachrisson and the history-of-religions scholar Olof Sundqvist, in their different ways, draw together evidence from both archeology and texts, two too often estranged disciplines. On the occasion of a striking new figural find from Southwest Sweden, Zachrisson gives an exhaustive account of Völund the Smith, especially in art and artifact. Sundqvist discusses the historical and archeological evidence for "the tree, the well, and the temple" at Uppsala, according to Adam of Bremen; but his article also has a strong theoretical component (favoring Eliade) and a valuable method that requires a broad survey of similar symbol-laden landscapes and of archival evidence. These two essays will be of great value to the mainly philological/literary readers of the volume. A voice from that literary side, that of Kate Heslop, also and very adroitly works with art-historical concepts around the "frame" in epigraphic and artistic contexts in comparison with eddic poetry. Heslop's essay will be seized upon by literary critics as theoretically rich and suggestive. Heslop and most of these contributors, when they deal with verbal art and content, assume oral contexts, but two papers deal principally with this vital theme of orality and literacy. Pernille Hermann's chapter embodies the more theoretical discussion, excellent of its kind; and Terry Gunnell applies oral tradition practically in a wide-ranging survey and defense of the Vanir gods.

At one point Lindow compares with Snorri's age the relatively sophisticated and thorough Finnish collecting of oral tradition in the nineteenth century; thousands of notebooks of the latter are neatly arranged in archives while loss of a few (more) medieval manuscripts would have left us with precious little knowledge of Nordic mythology. One point is the vastness of oral tradition vs. the limits of technology: the oral is fleeting by nature, and medieval writing gave only a fragile permanence to its accidental preservations. Another might be the reconstructive nature of any knowledge of fragmentary myths and their systems and the value of the comparative method in that enterprise. This book assembles an impressive and variegated team of senior and younger scholars with wide international distribution. Their contributions will be admired and built upon as an important phase in the evolving field.

Preface

Situating Old Norse Mythology in Comparative Contexts

Pernille Hermann, Stephen Mitchell, and Jens Peter Schjødt

The essays in this volume are centrally concerned with an all-too-apparent reality about the study of pagan religions in Europe, namely, that the study of any mythology, especially archaic and only haphazardly recorded mythologies, requires careful assessment of sources and the attempt to reconstruct the "system" which is understood to be at its heart. For the mythology of pre-Christian Scandinavia, this perspective has long been understood to be not only highly desirable but also, importantly, highly available, more so than for many other European pagan traditions, mainly due to the substantial corpus of extraordinary texts from the Icelandic Middle Ages, above all, its *eddas*, sagas and skaldic poetry.

That we are in this fortunate situation has naturally had an overwhelmingly salubrious effect on the study of the pre-Christian era in Northern Europe. Yet at the same time, the study of Old Norse mythology has also, paradoxically, been in a position to pursue its materials in "splendid isolation", to poach George Foster's elegant political locution, to a greater degree than have many other comparable traditions despite some notable exceptions to this trend.[1] In partial response to this situation, the essays in this collection look to address the issue of Old Norse mythology as an area of inquiry that can benefit substantially from comparative scholarly inquiry, comparativisms of different sorts, that is, comparative with respect to theories as well as to tradition areas.

[1] Works like Georges Dumézil's 1959 *Les Dieux des Germains. Essai sur la formation de la religion scandinave* and Matthias Egeler's recent *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen. Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum* are more exceptions than the rule in the field.

Comparativism and Old Norse Mythology

Comparativism has played a changeable role within the study of Old Norse mythology. Not surprisingly, the changes have largely followed the overall tendencies within the Humanities. Thus, in the History of Religions in the first part of the nineteenth century, the so-called nature-myth school flourished, in which the idea was that in order to understand mythology as such, one should compare mythologies from all over the world. The romanticism of the nature-myth school was towards the end of the century replaced by different theories based on evolutionism which were by necessity still moving within a comparative paradigm. In the beginning of the twentieth century, this view changed, and particularism became the ruling paradigm, with the idea that each individual culture is unique and can only be grasped as a universe of its own.

Although many of the results concerning the "essence" of mythology, as proposed by the older generation of comparativists, are not accepted today, the very idea that in order to understand a certain phenomenon, we should compare various expressions of this phenomenon at different times and places, seems quite rational. This procedure, however, involves a significant number of problems, perhaps the most conspicuous one being the very identification of similar phenomena within different cultures, and thus decisions involving categorization and classification. So, for instance, one is faced with questions as fundamental as "what is a myth"? Is the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis to be categorized together with the story of Þórr fishing for the World Serpent in *Gylfaginning*? And if so, what is it that bind these two narratives together, i.e., what do they have in common? No matter what answers are suggested, it must be clear that there are huge differences between them—in content, in transmission, in style, in the attitudes towards the narratives from contemporary audiences, and so on.

A similarly difficult issue arises regarding the relation between "similarities" and "differences" when a comparative method is applied. "Anti-comparativists" have often maintained that in applying this method, only the similarities are focused upon, whereas there may be huge differences, too, between the cultures being analyzed. Although it is very often true that the similarities are the focus of comparative analyses, it is, however, not the rule that the differences are rejected or denied. Mostly, this focus is due to the questions raised: what is similar between religion X and religion Y, or, conversely what is different between religion X and religion Y? Both types of questions are, of course, perfectly legitimate, but they require different perspectives and analyses.

These problems, and many more that have to do with comparativism, have been discussed at great length by scholars in the Study of Religion, taking into consideration most of the theoretical issues involved. A similar debate, however, does not seem to be the case within the study of pre-Christian religions of the North. The early proponents of the comparative method, exemplified by Jacob Grimm (1835) and Wilhelm Mannhardt (1858), were influenced by the romanticism of their day, and source criticism, as we know it today, had not really begun.

A debate of this sort within early Northern European studies happened towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the main opponent of comparativism within the study of Old Norse mythology was the Norwegian Sophus Bugge, especially in his *Studier over de nordiske Gude-og Heltesagns Oprindelse* (1881–1889). Bugge had an immense impact on the scholarship within the field for a very long time. The idea was—and is—that almost all our sources for Old Norse mythology are subject to Christian influence in one way or another. The opposite view—i.e., maintaining that the content and structures in Snorri's *Edda*, for instance, should be seen as anything truly pagan because of "superficial" similarities with indigenous or Indo-European mythologies—was rejected as pure romanticism and fantasy, and, in any event, not a "scientific" perspective. This position was the dominant one up to the 1950s or 60s, and has continued to play an important role to the present.

The "re-emergence" of comparative studies in scholarship on Old Norse mythology was mainly due to the analyses carried out by the great French linguist and historian of religion, Georges Dumézil (e.g., 1959). His idea that there were certain structural parallels between the various Indo-European mythologies, including that of Scandinavia, soon became rather popular among many students of religion, such as Jan de Vries (1955–1956) and E.O. Gabriel Turville-Petre (e.g., 1964), to mention only the most important. But many were very hesitant and just as many were very critical towards Dumézil, such as Folke Ström (e.g., 1961), Ray I. Page (1978-79) and a number of others. And one of the main criticisms was the very use of comparisons to reconstruct a pre-Christian mythology from the sources that are transmitted to us, reflecting specifically for Old Norse the ongoing discussions between advocates of comparativism and particularism in many of the human sciences.

Since the 1960s, however, this picture has been somewhat blurred, and it is far more difficult to pinpoint the various positions. Many scholars have accepted that there is a need for comparative perspectives in attempting to reconstruct the mythology of pre-Christian Scandinavia, combined, of course with traditional source criticism. The basic need for analogies when we try to create the lines of an entire mythology from scattered evidence in the sources—especially

with all the source critical problems we face in applying the information we get from the medieval sources, such as Snorri's works—is the main reason. Just as analogies have been used by archaeologists in placing individual finds correctly within the culture in question, there appears to be a growing awareness that without using analogies from other mythologies (mythologies from cultures where we are often better informed than is the case with pre-Christian Scandinavia), we would be equally incapable of correctly placing the individual pieces of information in the written sources into their correct positions. Even if there is still a debate between the historical source critics and those scholars who are more inclined to bring in anthropological parallels, the hard lines of this opposition have "softened" during the last three or four decades.

"Comparison" should, however, also be viewed in a broader perspective. First and foremost it is obvious that even within the Old Norse area itself there were differences in the religious and mythical worldviews. That means that myths told in one part of Scandinavia were not necessarily told in the same way in other parts, and thus even comparing two versions of a myth would constitute a comparative enterprise. Secondly, comparing various written versions of a myth with what may have constituted oral versions, or myths related in different literary genres or in different media should also be seen as comparative analyses. In this sense, the articles in this book are all working with different aspects of "comparativism", some of which are not traditionally seen as such.

Accordingly, this collection is divided into several sections, organized by the individual essay's distinguishing comparative feature, although these categorizations are far from absolute: there are articles that deal more or less exclusively with theoretical problems, such as the significance of the oral character of the sources, the problems with analogies, and so on, here gathered together under the label, *Theoretical and Conceptual Comparisons.* A different category of essays are those that are more concerned with specific texts and other empirical data, a category we have here divided into sub-groups, one of which is concerned with mainly "local" comparisons to cultures located geographically close to the Scandinavians, or even within the Scandinavian area itself, where such problems as "loans", parallel developments, common "proto types", and so on are discussed, what we have here labeled, *Local and Neighboring Traditions.* And then there are additional examples of comparisons going far beyond the immediate neighbors of Scandinavia, occasionally expanding well beyond them, what we here for the sake of convenience label *Global Traditions.*

Of course, no collection of essays, however diverse in their disciplinary orientations and however discursive in their treatments, could ever capture the full range of comparisons modern scholars would regard as necessary to locate Old Norse mythology properly within the study of archaic belief systems, but

our hope is that these essays collectively move us closer to that goal, and individually suggest what is to be gained by such an approach.

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