

Introduction

Andreas Nordberg, Klas Wikström af Edholm and Olof Sundqvist

“The Old Norse Mythology Conferences”, also called “The Aarhus Mythology Conferences”, were introduced and held in Aarhus, Denmark, between 2005 and 2008. The original initiative for these conferences was taken by Pernille Hermann and Jens Peter Schjødt. As Pernille mentioned at the 2014 conference in Aarhus, the original concept was that the meetings should have a relatively informal character, and should provide the possibility of presenting new ideas rather than final thoughts. It was not the intention that the papers were to be published afterwards. Over the course of time, however, the conferences have grown in size and have become more formal than their early forerunners. There is no doubt that they have in recent years meant much to interdisciplinary research on Old Norse mythology,^{*} not only in Aarhus, but for all scholars who are dealing with these matters generally.

In 2009 the conference started to circulate between universities. It has since been held in Aberdeen, Reykjavik, Zürich, Bonn, Harvard, and – in 2014 – at Aarhus again. Every year the

^{*} By the concept Old Norse mythology, we refer to the mythic traditions transmitted orally and occasionally written down in medieval manuscripts in Old West Nordic, which embraces Old Norwegian, Old Icelandic, Old Faroese etc. In this presentation we use the term Old Norse mythology in a wide sense, and also include mythic traditions, which may have been rendered in Old East Nordic and Old Gutnish. For a discussion on the concept Old Norse religion, see Nordberg 2012:124–130.

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organizers have managed to set up excellent research events, so admittedly it was a great challenge to take responsibility for the programme and activities in Stockholm, in November 2015.

Each of these conferences has been organized with an eye to the local research community and has thus been an integral part of the different research environments. At Stockholm University, the collaboration between scholars in the departments of History of Religions and Archaeology had been ongoing for some years, and we wanted this interdisciplinary milieu to reflect the theme for the Stockholm conference.

Looking back a century or so, the boundaries between comparative religion, archaeology, philology, history and place-name studies were diffuse, and to a certain degree the fields may at the time even be viewed as aspects of a common grand cultural historical discipline. In Scandinavia at least, this began to change in the 1930s. There are several reasons for this, but the most salient one was probably the increasing institutionalization of individual disciplines at the universities, which lead to the emergence of academic territorial claims and institutional boundaries. This, in turn, resulted in specializations of research interests within each discipline. In the late 1930s and 1940s, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow and generations of Swedish folklorists under his influence broke with scholars of comparative religion and disputed the possibility of studying religious history from a folkloristic perspective. In the 1940s and 1950s, Jöran Sahlgren, and some of his disciples, stated that historical place-names could not be used in the study of Old Norse religion. In the 1960s, the emergence of the so-called New Archaeology fashioned some generations of archaeologists, who found the study of religion uninteresting or even archaeologically impossible. As a result, the academic study of Old Norse religion became for a long time almost the same thing as the study of Old Norse mythology, conducted by philologists and historians of religion dealing with Old Norse texts.

This situation lasted well into the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, however, several interdisciplinary seminars and conferences announced the beginning of a new direction in Old Norse scholarship. Again, scholars insisted on the necessity of the study of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion being an interdisciplinary

project. As organizers of The Old Norse Mythology Conference of 2015, we can proudly state that many of the scholars who initiated this significant change of direction some 20 to 25 years ago, were present at the meeting in Stockholm.

The Theme of the Stockholm Conference 2015

The theme and title of the Stockholm conference 2015 was *Myth, Materiality, and Lived Religion*. As this title suggests, the conference focused on the material dimension of Norse mythology and the role played by myths in everyday life. More broadly expressed, the theme referred to the social, ritual and material contexts of myths. To some extent this theme was also related to the novel theoretical understanding, often called “the ontological turn”, or “the stance to materiality” visible in anthropology and the human sciences more broadly (see e.g. Miller 2005; Henare *et al.* 2007; Meyer *et al.* 2010). This issue has not been fully featured in previous research on Old Norse myths, especially considering the theoretical implications it has had (see, however, for example Hedeager 2011; Sundqvist 2016:26ff.). The discussion concerning materiality (in a more general sense) has, on the other hand, for a long time been crucial for historians of religions and especially archaeologists, and we think it has become relevant for historians of literature and philologists as well. Several questions related to this theme may be posed, for instance: What do myths tell us about the material culture of the periods in which they were narrated? In the mythic traditions we encounter several interesting concepts and descriptions of things which refer to the materiality of religion, such as *hǫrgr*, *hof*, *trémaðr*, and the hapax legomenon *hlautviðr*. People probably encountered such concepts and things in their everyday life, and it is interesting to explore how these could have been perceived. Another relevant question is whether material things and iconographic expressions contribute to our knowledge of Norse mythology, for instance the Gotlandic picture stones, the so called “guldgubbar” (gold foil figures), and the symbol of Þórr’s hammer. Another aspect of this theme is the significance of myth in everyday life, i.e. in the “lived religion” (see also below). What role did myths or mythical

beings play in connection with, for instance, illnesses and remedies during the Viking Period and the Middle Ages? How did ordinary people experience taking part in a more formal sacrificial feast led by ritual specialists? In addition to this, also more general and classical issues were addressed at the conference, such as the question of whether mythical traditions preserved in medieval texts and other types of sources actually tell us anything about the pre-Christian mythology and religion. “The Old Norse Mythology Conferences” have always adopted such perspectives on myths, and, of course, such contributions are always relevant in this context. The major aim of the Stockholm conference was, however, to contextualize the myths, to go beyond the texts and discuss their historical and material backgrounds as well as their social and ritual settings. As this book shows, the contributors have approached the dimensions of *Myth, Materiality, and Lived Religion* using a variety of methods and from different perspectives. These approaches and perspectives could be summarized in three different themes, which also constitute the basic disposition of the present book: Part I “Myths and Texts”, Part II “Myths and Pictures” and Part III “Myths and Lived Religion”.

Outline and Themes

During the Stockholm Mythology Conference, the participants took a decision to publish their contributions by rewriting them as articles. Since there were commentators to each presentation, we also decided to publish these contributions. The outline of this book follows the three themes mentioned above.

Ever since the research on Old Norse myths became an important issue for scholars at universities in the early 19th century, the source material has mainly been made up of old texts. This is, of course, natural, since myth in its form is a narrative which is transmitted in verbal accounts and/or texts. The most important sources of the ancient Scandinavian myths in the scholarly undertakings have often been the Old Norse poetry, that is, the Eddic lays and the skaldic poetry. These poetic traditions were written down in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, but some of them may have been composed during the Viking Age. This poetry was thus passed on

by oral tradition into later centuries when it was fixed in texts. There are also some prose texts which have played a crucial role in this research on myths, especially Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (c. 1220) and Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danorum* (c. 1200) written in Latin. They were composed during the High Middle Ages and must be regarded as the medieval reception of the old mythic accounts. In addition to the intense discussion of the age and background of these mythic traditions, conducted by Sophus Bugge, Eugen Mogk and others, a number of different themes and questions have been investigated in these materials, for instance, the function and significance of individual gods and goddesses in the myths, the relationship between the different groups of mythical beings and the issue of whether the myths had a relation to specific cultic contexts. This variety of questions and themes is also featured in Part I ("Myths and Texts") in the present anthology. Jens Peter Schjødt, for instance, discusses the origins and development of the god rendered as "Óðinn" in Old Norse prose and poetry, and how the older conceptions of the god Wotan, and through *interpretatio romana* Mercury, may be crucial for our understanding of certain aspects and characteristics of the Old Norse god. Tommy Kuusela draws attention to the question of whether Gullveig in the Eddic poem *Völuspá* st. 21 should be identified as a giantess, rather than Freyja or some unspecified female being. Kuusela suggests that she is a giantess and that the war in *Völuspá* st. 24 was between the giants and the gods, rather than between the Æsir and Vanir, unveiling a deeper structure of conflict and dependence in the relation between the two categories of gods and giants in the Old Norse mythology. Merrill Kaplan, on the other side, investigates some gifts (funerary goods) offered by Brynhildr to the females attending at her death, as mentioned in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, and the associations between the colours red and gold in this context.

A myth could also be brought to life by means of a ritual drama, a religious dance, and also via religious art, icons, symbolic signs and other types of illustrations. Thus, myths do not have to be verbalized (cf. Honko 1972). This fact has been noticed in the study of Old Norse myth, especially when investigating the Gotlandic picture stones, images on runic stones, bracteates, gold foil figures, figurines and symbols such as the hammer of Þórr. Most of these

materials are contemporary with Late Iron Age society and have as sources a more direct character for the researcher when reconstructing pre-Christian myths. The iconographic manifestations of the myths reflect how people in contemporary society perceived the mythic accounts, divine beings and cosmic world in different contexts. Several contributions to the present book take this approach to the Old Norse myths, and they have been gathered in Part II “Myths and Pictures”. Stephen Mitchell, for instance, focuses on the *drakormar* (“dragon serpents”) and certain female figures as depicted on the Gotlandic picture stones. He discusses the role they may have played in the lives of the Gotlanders during the Merovingian Period and later. A critical assessment of scholarly interpretations of Ragnarøk motifs in Viking Age iconography, both on stones and tapestries, is presented by Anders Hultgård. His answer to the question: “Do we find Ragnarøk motifs in pictures?” is neither a clear “yes” nor a definite “no”. Sigmund Oehrl studies the iconography of the Gotlandic picture stones with support from the new RTI-method. For instance, he investigates the motif traditionally called “Gunnar in the snake pit” as represented on the stone from Hunninge in Klinte Parish. From the RTI-picture, Oehrl can conclude that the person in the snake pit is not a man but a woman, which calls for a new interpretation of the image. In her contribution to the present volume, Margrethe Watt focuses on the relationship between the gold foil figures from the Merovingian Period and Old Norse mythology. Rather than entering into a discussion identifying specific gods or mythical scenes on these foils, Watt prefers to look at the general concepts as expressed in the iconographic details, such as the concept of “the warlord”, “the king of gods”, “the seer” and “the legally binding marriage”.

The concept of lived religion has been formulated and developed especially by North American scholars, in an effort to bridge the problematic dichotomy between the categories of official religion and popular religion (see e.g. McGuire 2008). In this regard, the lived religion includes all religious aspects of life. It includes the fundamental, common structures of religion as well as its many individual variations, among common people as well as the specialists of the religious institutions. The lived religion includes

formal feasting and institutionalized cult and official rituals, as well as varied religious traditions in everyday life. It comprises the official theology and personal beliefs, as well as the professional mythical epics and popular narratives. In Part III of the present book, “Myths and Lived Religion”, some of these kaleidoscopic aspects of the lived religion are explored. The contributions written by Ola Magnell, and Christina Fredengren and Camilla Löfqvist, for instance, highlight how pre-Christian sacrificial feasts are reflected in the archaeological materials. Rudolf Simek discusses religious beliefs and rites in the context of diseases and remedies in medieval Northern Europe, focusing especially on magical charms on amulets, both in the vernacular and Latin. Frederik Wallenstein illuminates some central aspects of the pre-Christian conception of the soul as reflected in *Hávamál* st. 155, while Frog discusses ideas about “embodiment” in Viking Age society. Andreas Nordberg proposes that Old Norse religion was never homogeneous, but rather that people in Viking Age Scandinavia shifted between four overall configurations of the lived religion, linked to four corresponding socio-cultural contexts.

The volume points future research in a direction of considering the long continuation and widespread roots of Old Norse mythology. The results emphasize the fact that we cannot always expect to find a clear-cut divide between pre-Christian and Christian religious motifs and conceptions in the religion during the Viking Age or Early Middle Ages, or between Old Norse religion and the religion of its bordering cultures. The lived religion seems to have been more complex than the sources sometimes appears to indicate. New methods and perspectives in the analysis may prevent the expectations from shaping what we read, or want to read, into the source material. A close reading of the textual sources may also give new insights into possibly underestimated and infrequently represented ideas possibly found in other source materials, such as human grave goods. The aggregation of different source materials shows a discrepancy between the archaeological finds of animal and human remains, and the descriptions of sacrificial traditions in the written sources. The lived reality seems to have been more complex and perhaps less formally structured when it comes to sacrificial gifts and the killing of animals and

humans in a ritual manner than the written accounts may tell us. This is inspiring for the future interdisciplinary study of sacrificial traditions and customs, as neither discipline may be given the sole role of interpreting the lived reality. The need for interdisciplinary cooperation is growing with the new finds.

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