

WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Mythology

Contents

Ancient Period
Postclassical Period
Early Modern Period
19th Century
20th Century

ANCIENT PERIOD

Old Norse. Old Norse Mythology is the collection of tales from the peoples of North Germany, tales which have their origins in Norse paganism, and which continue to reach out and multiply into the Scandinavian folklore of the modern period. The ancient Norse mythology has its origins in the stories of various heroes, gods, and beings who came to life in the creative cultural imaginations of the pagan Norse, as well as in their mediaeval manuscripts, archeological materials, and folk traditions—which we will treat elsewhere. It need hardly be said that the stages of development of this mythology are difficult to delineate, and that, as with all mythologies, internal inventiveness, indifference to historical precision, and lack of archival consolidation prevent anything like a definitive chronological picture.

Development. Many languages at many stages of development have gone into the composition of such a mythology as the Norse, which is most prolifically testified by such a language as Old Norse, and in such a removed location as Iceland, where by the thirteenth century a fervent attention was devoted to the collection of old manuscripts, and which generated texts like *The Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturlisson or *The Poetic Edda*, which contained voluminous anonymous materials pertaining to Norse mythology. The best account of such a mythology, we see in surveying a mass of not yet organized myth-growths, is that which sees myth branching out in multiple forms around the 'believer' or 'user' who is invested in the beauty, wit, or healing good sense of the myth branch in question. Myth does not aspire to heal, save, or necessarily to instruct, but it preserves, entertains, and 'explains,' as when the narrative materials it tracks provide a useful setting for historical events or human behaviors.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Mediaeval. When we view the mass of materials that compose Norse mythology, its extensive thirteenth century manuscripts, the great cast of major players, the high drama in which they engaged, we realize that the coalescence point, of all these themes and creations, is clearly the postclassical era, with a peak toward the thirteenth century. It is here—and this 'here' is wide and amorphous—that we find the Norse mythical cosmos at its most formed—and presumably belief-sustained.

Characters. The cast of divine figures—every national mythology can be viewed as a psychodrama sustained from within the *Volk*—centers around Thor, the 'father of the gods,' their power center, who is married to the beautiful blonde *Sif*. Thor is a force of stability, who is constantly en garde to destroy his many foes. While Thor is a stable, avenger god, fighting always to preserve the good, he is often thought out in relations to Odin, 'one eyed, wolf and raven flanked,'—in other words partly feral, but at the same time a tragically self-destructive figure like Prometheus, ever hungry for knowledge, ever eager to put that knowledge to the use of mankind. (A characteristic story portrays Odin hanging himself upside down for nine days on the cosmological tree (Yggdrasil) to gain knowledge of a runic (secret disclosing) alphabet, which he can pass on to mankind).

Odin. Odin, this malleable and modern figure, has for wife the powerful goddess Frigg, who can foretell the future but will tell no one what it will be. This couple have as son the god Baldr, who, killed by the brilliant trickster Loki, is relegated to the role of king of Hell. A predator, a body snatcher on Hell, is the sexy goddess, Freyja, who claims a portion of all the slain for herself. Freyja rides into battle, to reclaim whom she can of the slain, and at the same time to continue her search for her husband Odr.

Freyr Freyja's brother, the god Freyr, is like Odin, a multifaceted god figure, with whom the poetic imagination can work, to transcend the simple—but well nigh endless—network of god-figures and god-relationships through which the creating imagination configures ever new themes of implication. We can say of Freyr, for instance, that where he goes there is a spirit of calm, peace, the pastoral, and sexuality. The consequences of this mood-coloration are that Freyr is love-susceptible, and falls for the beauty, Gerdr, but at the price—and here is the epic bite in the great mythologies—of his own doom.

Njordr. We are on the way to the continuation of the lego puzzle; the mother of Freya and Freyr is the sister of another power god, Njordr, whose moods and strength overwhelm them. The skein of connections passes out farther into the supra local blue, in which the millennial intelligence of the Nordic Volk draws its values together, sets down benchmarks for reflection, and sharpens the raw materials of thinking, for such repositories of tale as the *Poetic Edda*, or, also over in Iceland, for the tragic vision of epics like the thirteenth century *Njalasaga*, in which doom, pride, and honor confect a brutal cocktail of revenge.

Finale. It is in its concluding vision that Norse mythology, in its classical form, transformed the puzzling in it into vision; I mean in the vision of the twilight of the gods (*Ragna rok*), the world-overturning, god-destroying power explosion with which this universe is destroyed. Whereupon, after this catastrophe, the fields of the earth were born anew fresh and green, ready for repopulation by two humans who appear 'from a wood.'

Cosmology

Networks. The character networks we allude to above were part and parcel of a cosmology, which gave them their *raison d'être*, as a theology gives to the supernatural figures who play out a particular religion. (In whose mind was such a *raison d'être* formulated? To whom do we owe the total fabrication of any myth? Is it any wonder that the mystique of the Volk, which proved disastrous in the early twentieth century, led the answer to our question into shapeless speculation?) If not the Volk, who created a cosmology in which 'all beings live in nine worlds, that center around the cosmological tree, Yggdrasil'? Who ascribed to the gods the heavenly dwelling of Asgard, while consigning humanity—oh yes, and elves and dwarves—to Midgard, a region near the center of the cosmos? And who but language consigned personality and gender to the major astronomical bodies of the cosmos? (Sol, a goddess, the sun; Mani, a god, the moon; Joerd, a goddess, the earth...) Rhetorical questions of this sort simply throw us back on our own 'empiricized' universe, the personality-less cosmos we have been forging, in the west, since the seventeenth century—Newton, Galileo, Kepler—and force us to wonder whether perhaps our own cosmology may not also be a special kind of imaginative recreation of the universe.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Retrospection. The culture and mythology generated by the early Christian centuries in Scandinavia were longer and more deeply pervasive than, say, the similar cultural products of ancient Greek mythology, which segued fairly neatly into the categories, if never exactly the *espiritu*, of the Roman mind. Thus it was when Scandinavian intellectuals and scholars stepped into the tradition that had been hailed in the two thirteenth century *Eddas*. In 1514, just as the craft of printing was sharing out its transformational energies, the culture of the northern nations was prepared to offer an eager audience for news of the Norse past. In 1514 appeared the first printed edition of the *Gesta Danorum* (*Deeds of the Danes*) written by Saxo Grammaticus in the thirteenth century; in 1555 Olaus Magnus' *History of the Northern Peoples* was printed (in Latin). In Britain, which had during the later middle ages been victim of savage attacks and oppression from Norse invaders, there had long been an awareness of the presence of Norse Runes on the British landscape, as well as of innumerable smaller archeological evidences of a

former Norse presence. (Among the interesting mistakes of British antiquaries, in their search for Norse relics, was the attribution of such a structure as Stonehenge to the Norse, or the confusion of Iron Age artefacts with the Norse.)

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Matthew Arnold's long narrative poem, *Balder Dead*, was published in 1855, and can be taken as a sample of the Victorian read on Norse mythology. The poem, we know from the start, is dedicated to a god illustrious for his purity and joy.

I. SENDING.

So on the floor lay Balder dead; and round
Lay thickly strewn swords, axes, darts, and spears,
Which all the gods in sport had idly thrown
At Balder, whom no weapon pierced or clove;
But in his breast stood fixed the fatal bough
Of mistletoe, which Lok the Accuser gave
To Hoder, and unwitting Hoder threw—
'Gainst that alone had Balder's life no charm.
And all the gods and all the heroes came,
And stood round Balder on the bloody floor,
Weeping and wailing; and Valhalla rang
Up to its golden roof with sobs and cries;
And on the tables stood the untasted meats,
And in the horns and gold-rimmed sculls the wine.
And now would night have fallen, and found them yet
Wailing; but otherwise was Odin's will.
And thus the Father of the ages spake:

Poetry. How would we describe the language? Multiply generously the tenor of the language, and you come on what seems to the twentieth century ear a monotonous, if highly literate, attempt to restore the Norse tone for contemporary English ears. (English, and then German, were in that order the languages entering the translation and retelling narratives of the nineteenth century, as they strove for an archaic that they fast felt slipping from them.)

Nationalism. Throughout nineteenth century Scandinavia, the nationalist urge to feel one's past was directing attention 'back' into the Norse mythical world, which was by this time seen as a deposit of valiant warriors, all enduring men of the sea, and buyers-in to the national image. 'Viking' ships were beginning to surface; in 1867 the Tune ship was unearthed in Norway, and with artifacts of its kind promoted a new knowledge of the Norse past, as did the discovery of items like the Gjermendbu helmet, inside which archeologists could easily imagine the bearded visage of a Viking sailor. Already in 1837 Carl Christian Rafn had expounded the view that the Vikings had explored the North East Coast of America long before Christopher Columbus, a thesis which had naturally captured the Norwegian imagination.

Twentieth Century. As puzzling as is the meaning of many ancient Norse tales, even more puzzling is the explosion of Norse culture into twentieth century popular culture in Europe—and worldwide, for such cultural waves don't even pause at national borders. We are speaking both high culture and low culture. Low culture might refer to the hundreds of video games now dominated by the figures—Thor, Odin, Freyja, Freyr—who slip easily into the tracer-violent scenarios that drive a wired youth culture into frenzies of simulated emotion. High culture could carry us all the way to the deep engagement with the Norse in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, or Rowlings' pick-ups on the werewolf Fenrir Greyback, in *Harry Potter*, or Ingmar Bergman's pained reflections onto Norse paganism in *Virgin Spring*. We will have to conclude, on this one, that the superheroes of Norse legend are among the world's greatest gifts to pop culture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Does your nation have a built in mythology to which it looks back either for inspiration or entertainment, and which is passed on somewhat carefully from generation to generation? If so, is that mythology useful to your nation for its daily functioning? Is that mythology intertwined with laws or values of your nation?,

How does Norse mythology compare, for you, with another major set of myths—Greek, Celtic, Hindu? How does any one of those mythological structures relate to ‘religion’? Does myth grow from ‘belief’ or is myth simply narrative you follow with interest and perhaps instruction?

What would you postulate as the origin of Norse Myth? Do you think such a body of myth can have been created by a group of individuals? Or would you agree with the Romantic notion that myth is the collective will of the people, and is gradually established by them, through archaic time?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Christiansen, Eric, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, Malden, 2002.

Colum, Padraic, *The Children of Odin; The Book of Northern Myths*, New York, 2004.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: Gods of the Vikings*, Harmondsworth, 1981.

Davidson, H.R.Ellis, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Syracuse, 1988.

Gaiman, Neal, *Norse Mythology*, New York, 2017.

Keary, A @ E, *The Heroes of Asgard*, New York, 1979.