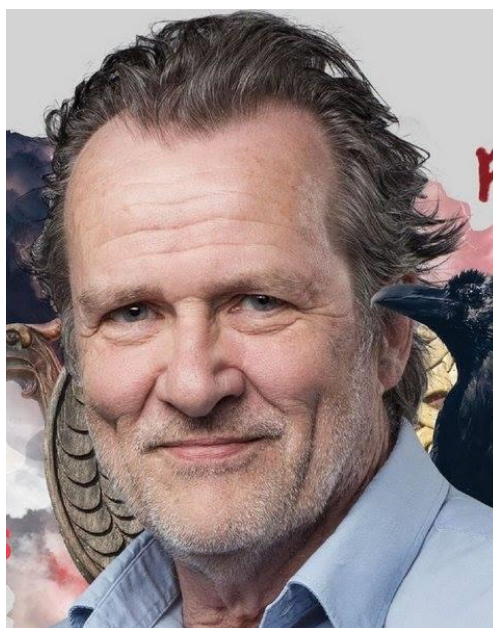


**MYTH AND OLD NORSE RELIGION: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENS PETER
SCHJÖDT**

**MITO E RELIGIÃO NÓRDICA ANTIGA: UMA ENTREVISTA COM JENS PETER
SCHJÖDT**



Jens Peter Schjødt is an historian of religions and professor at the Department of the Study of Religion at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Schjødt's research and teaching focus are the pre-Christian religion, North-Germanic paganism and comparative religious studies of the Indo-European religions. He is the author of several monographic studies, articles and reviews, notably the books *Initiation between Two Worlds: structure and symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion* (2008) and the co-organization of *Old Norse Mythology: Comparative Perspectives* (2017).

1. SCANDIA: *In 1986 you published the study “The Meaning of the Rock Carvings”. Today, twenty-two years later, how do you perceive the studies that seek to relate the medieval sources of Norse Mythology to the images of rock art of the Bronze Age, especially regarding Cosmology? How do you understand a potential continuity between the Scandinavian Archaeological Bronze Age and the Germanic historical mythological Iron Age?*

Jens Peter Schjødt: Basically I still believe in some continuity from the Bronze Age till the Iron Age due to an Indo-European heritage, and thus also some potential continuity between the rock carvings and the sources from the Iron Age (and the medieval written sources). I also have the same doubts as to our possibilities of confirming such continuity. Since 1986, however, I have been somewhat more skeptical when it comes to the three functions of Dumézil as the only possible marker of such continuity. On the other hand I have become less critical towards the evolutionistic framework than I was at that time. The so called ‘new evolutionism’ proposed by, for instance, Robert Bellah in his famous book *Religion in Human Evolution* and also the results gained from cognitive perspectives on cultural evolutionism has convinced me that we can – perhaps not get definite answers to problems of reconstruction of Old Norse religion – but at least create models to be used for proposing relevant questions, considering the type of religion that we deal with in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

2. SCANDIA: *In the book Initiation between two worlds (2008), you analyze the phenomenon of initiation in Norse sources, especially the rites related to the god Odin. You consider that these conceptions were pre-Christian (p. 97) and that the most important part concerning eddic poetry was its content, whereas form and date were secondary attributes (p. 92). Other researchers such as Christopher Abram are skeptical about considering the eddic poems as primary sources for the Norse myths of the pagan period. In your book, you reaffirm the ancient existence of “sacral kingship” (pp. 374-378), something which is very questioned by authors like Walter Batke and Claus Krag. At the*

end of the work (p. 453), you criticize the queer theory for Brit Solli's construction of Odin. Nowadays, how do you apprehend this academic debate about the treatment of medieval literature (eddic poetry and skaldic poetry) as sources for the study of Norse paganism?

Jens Peter Schjødt: Again, I have not changed my views in any substantial way; actually quite on the contrary. I think that the debate that has taken place during recent years about the oral nature and possible connection to pagan rituals does substantiate these viewpoints. The eddic poems were most likely not created by any 'author' in the modern sense of that word. As is always the case with oral poems, stanzas have been lost, and others have been added during the long period of their existence. This means that we have to shift our focus from the poems as they are transmitted in the *Codex Regius* and other manuscripts, to the individual pieces of information. It also means that we must assume beforehand that there are pieces of information which are most likely added by Christians (for instance the famous stanza 65 of *Völuspá*), whereas others are fully in accordance with the expectations that we should have concerning Old Norse mythology. Of course we will never know for sure, but I do believe that the content of most eddic poems should be viewed as 'pagan', and thus as some sort of 'primary sources'. This is not to say that everything in them is pagan, which I did not believe then, and certainly do not believe now; but the main part probably is.

As to the 'sacral kingship' debate: Exactly because of the typology of religions, proposed by, for instance, Bellah, I would say that it would be very unusual, if there was no such thing as a political leader with some numinous and even divine attributes. Therefore the burden of proof would certainly be on those who reject the idea of a sacral kingship, and both Baetke's and Krag's (and many other's) contributions just show that according to the sources, we cannot know for sure that it existed, since almost no sources for Old Norse religion are 100% reliable and we can cast doubt on all of them. Nevertheless, our knowledge of tribal and archaic religions in general, would definitely suggest that what these sources tell us about sacral kingship is most likely quite in accordance with the pre-Christian reality.

I am not that interested in the debate about queer theory. As far as I can see there were very strict rules concerning what belonged to the masculine sphere and what belonged to the female sphere and I can see nothing to suggest that anything like 'a third gender' was seen as positive. Of course there must have been males who behaved in an effeminate way, and of course homosexuality existed, but I really cannot see anything pointing in the direction that this was viewed positively. Besides, some of these ideas are due to poor reading of the sources; for instance there is no indication that Odin should be seen as queer. He did perform seiðr because he had to, but there is not the slightest piece of evidence that he had any queer sexuality.

3. *SCANDIA: In "Contemporary research into Old Norse Mythology" (2007), you criticize Lotte Hedeager and her statement that during the fifth and sixth centuries, a new religious form was established with the emergence of Odin as a new god during the period of the migrations. In this direction, how do you perceive the studies of (1) Kaliff and Sundqvist on the influence of Mithra in the cult of Odin and (2) the vision of Anette Lassen of Odin in Eddic poetry as a medieval Christian construction?*

Jens Peter Schjødt: In speaking of Odin (and all the other gods, too) as a new god we have to define what we mean. In my view all gods like any other human ideas change all the time, sometimes slowly and sometimes faster. Concerning Odin this means that there could very well have existed a god of the 'Odin type' very early, perhaps even back in the Bronze Age. He may have had a different name, and the myths told about him were no doubt somewhat different from those transmitted in the medieval sources. And cultures influence each other, so I see no problem in accepting that some influence from the cult of Mithras has played a role. But that does not mean that a god of the Odin type did not exist much earlier. Likewise: the influences from Roman or Celtic Mercury in Antiquity and the Migration Age may very well have had a huge impact on the Odin of the later periods, but that does not make him a 'new' god. In the world of religions everything change over time,

so whether things are 'new' is more a matter of taste. I believe that, if we are going to have a realistic image of the pagan Germanic and Nordic religion we must accept that it is an ongoing process consisting of continuity as well as breaks: nothing is made from nothing, but neither is anything as it has always been. A god of the Odin type, in my view, can very well have existed since Indo-European times, but he would no doubt have changed dramatically in the encounters with the Romans around the beginning of our era, and again during the Germanic migration Age, and as new forms of society developed he would have to develop, too.

I do agree to some extent with Anette Lassen that the portrait of Odin that we get from the medieval sources change somewhat according to genre, but on the other hand I am sure, that the god has some sort of 'semantic centre' which is quite stable from genre to genre and over long periods.

4. *SCANDIA: Regarding your publications involving methodological discussions about comparativism, you affirm that the textual study, using critical and philological methods, is a limited perspective and that without comparison, it is impossible to study any kind of pre-Christian religion. Some of the more recent studies of Norse material generally use the genetic perspective or comparison with neighboring peoples, such as the Saami, Celts or Anglo-Saxons. Other Euro-Asian areas are usually left out. In your opinion, why recent researchers do not invest much time in a typological perspective? Is it a fear of returning to the Indo-European model of Georges Dumézil, much criticized in Germanic languages?*

Jens Peter Schjødt: I am not sure. Maybe there is some hesitance of broad comparative perspectives, due to Dumézil. On the other hand many scholars, also quite recently, have argued for parallels between the Indo-European cultures and religions (for instance M. L. West: *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*), and I really do believe that in order not to accept such parallels at all, you have to be both deaf and blind. This does not mean, of course, that Dumézil's tripartite model is 'correct' (whatever that means) or useful, but that some sort of

heritage exist is beyond doubt (as with the languages). Anyway, I will argue that models, based on comparative material, are unavoidable, if we are to make sense of religions that no longer exist. As a very banal example we can take the very terminology we use for describing religious phenomena, for instance 'sacrifice': how do we know that the pagan Scandinavians performed sacrifices. In order to use the archaeological sources they must be interpreted in accordance with some model, and the medieval written sources, as mentioned, are all doubtful. So why is it that we speak about sacrifices? And the answer is: simply because all comparable cultures and societies perform sacrifices. Of course that sort of comparisons are more or less implicit, but nevertheless, the very idea of sacrifice is based on comparative thinking. And the structure of sacrifice is likewise based on some sort of 'model' for sacrifice. In my opinion, since comparisons of a typological kind are useful, and in any case unavoidable, it is preferable that the individual scholar is aware of what he or she is doing, instead of just arguing that the sources from pre-Christian Scandinavia (including the medieval) are sufficient to reconstruct the pre-Christian religion; that is, to put it mildly, due to poor theoretical thinking.

5. SCANDIA: *You wrote an instigating chapter named "The Warrior in Old Norse Religion" (2011) where you revisited the concept of Männerbünde, which is central to the writings of Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler. This concept had fallen in a certain academic ostracism (although we could find it in comparative works like Kershaw's Odin – The One Eyed God). In your opinion, the possibility to see the Berserkir and Úlfhéðnar as living counterparts of the Einherjar, inside this concept of Männerbünde, as a category of initiatory rituals, could also be extended to the eternal battle, Hjaðningavíg? If yes, this could also be connected to the Berserkir and Úlfhéðnar?*

Jens Peter Schjødt: Yes. Again I would say that all the sources concerning these things are of course heavily influenced by lack of knowledge by the authors. Most often they knew nothing or very little about warrior bands in pagan times. I do believe that the

phenomena mentioned, are all concerned with these warriors and the ideology surrounding them. Again it is impossible to 'prove', but it certainly makes sense. To put it very briefly: the warrior bands probably constituted the king's or the chieftain's retinue, and so they and their leader would be related through a common ideology focusing on war. In my opinion this ideology involved initiations into the bands and a certain view on the afterlife with an eternal violent game going on, as related in *Gylfaginning* and reflected in other sources, such as *Sörlaþátttr*. So, I do not think, as did Höfler, that the warrior bands were viewed as 'dead' like the *einherjar*, but I do believe that the group of *einherjar* consisted of the dead members of the bands.

6. SCANDIA: *In the same chapter, you cite Anatoy Liberman's papers about the Berserkir (2003, Berserkir: a double legend Scandinavia, and 2005, Berserks in History and Legend), where he sought to criticize the classical idea of these individuals as warriors consecrated to Óðinn. Considering that his arguments were made mostly over the nature of these documentation in which the Berserkir were described late and many times called 'legendary', and also keeping in mind the few clues we have about the space of these individuals in old Norse society, how should we operate with the sources (sagas, poems etc) to maintain them as possibilities to investigate the Old Norse Religion?*

Jens Peter Schjødt: I think it is a little bit like the discussion of the 'sacral kingship': We should certainly expect that some groups of warriors would exist in this society; and this is confirmed in numerous sources from Tacitus and onwards, and not least in the very late fornaldar sagas. To me it simply appears counter intuitively to argue that they were not there, when all comparable societies did have that sort of élite warriors. There is no doubt that much information should be viewed as legendary, but 'legends' are often modelled on some phenomena in the real world, so considering the source situation in general we have relatively many pieces of information concerning these warriors, and I do think that we can safely assume that they existed, and that they were in some sense identified with bears and other ferocious animals.

7. *SCANDIA*: You published “Pre-Christian Religions of the North and the Need for Comparativism: Reflections on Why, How, and with What We Can Compare” (2017) a chapter in which you make an effort to recall not only your previous writings on Comparativism, but also to reinforce the typological comparisons as a valid methodological approach. The questioning of Óðinn as a Shaman, or even the existence of Shamanism as a complex of beliefs and practices were particularly interesting topics, because they always emerge as points of discussion regarding old Norse Myth and Religion. Although we agree with your perspective on this matter, and we even reckon that genetic comparisons to Saami religion and magic are more than welcome, maybe is it not the time for an historiographical discussion about the concept of Shamanism, to ponder if it is really pertinent to the reality of the Old Norse Religion?

Jens Peter Schjødt: As in so many other discussions, this is first and foremost a question of definitions. I have no doubt that the knowledge of Saami shamanism was influential on the Scandinavians, at least those in the northern parts of Scandinavia. Likewise I think it is likely that for instance the Odin of the Icelanders and Norwegians was somewhat influenced from ideas about shamanism. On the other hand, when it comes to definitional matters there seems to be a tendency to put any kind of magic under the umbrella of shamanism. There is, in my mind, no doubt that Odin from the earlier periods was connected to magic, but does that really make him a shaman? I would say no, but as just said it is a question of the definition of ‘shamanism’. Definitions are not, of course, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but they can be more or less useful. And I would definitely argue, that if we chose the very broad definition of shamanism that is necessary if we will define Odin as a shaman, this definition would be rather useless, since the specific world view connected to arctic shamanism would be lost. As mentioned, Odin may very well possess some shamanic traits, but he is so much more than a shaman, that I cannot really see the importance of these traits when it comes to a characterization of the ‘semantic center’ of Odin.