

EDITORIAL NOTE:  
NORSE MYTHS IN THE ARTISTIC RECEPTION

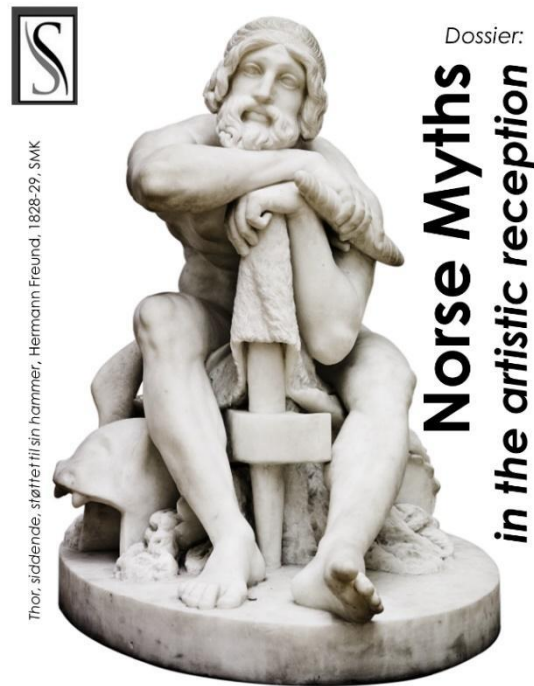


Fig. 1. Hermann Ernst Freund, *Thor, siddende, støttet til sin hammer*, marble, height 71 cm, 1828-29, SMK, The National Gallery of Denmark, public domain: <https://open.smk.dk/en/artwork/>

Johnni Langer<sup>1</sup>

Editor-in-Chief

The image that opens this dossier is a photograph of a sculpture by Hermann Freund (1786-1840). It depicts the god Thor<sup>2</sup> sitting, contemplative and melancholic, while resting on his hammer (fig. 1). Unlike the expressive representations of Thor energetically fighting the giants or the great serpent, which can be seen in his famous *Ragnarokfrisen*, this time Freund

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<sup>2</sup> In the first part of this Editorial we adopted the Danish names for the Norse gods, due to the fact that we used works produced in Denmark for our initial reflection.

had opted for a very different way of representing this god – and thus gave rise to a unique case in the history of sculpture.<sup>3</sup> This tells us a lot about the artistic reception of Norse myths. Freund's Thor bears a neoclassical reference, depicting the deity as being notably and strongly influenced by the figure of Heracles (as well as the sculptures of Thor by the Swedish Bengt Fogelberg). One can nevertheless wonder why he is sitting and contemplating.



Fig. 2, Søren Henrik Petersen, *Volas Spadom*, drawing based on the original of Andreas Ludvig Koop, 1822. SMK, The National Gallery of Denmark, public domain: <https://collection.smk.dk/#/en/detail/KKSgb10381>

The artist got his inspiration from the idea of another Danish, Andreas Ludvig Koop (1792-1849) who, in a drawing made for a Copenhagen Mythological contest,<sup>4</sup> performed the

<sup>3</sup> There is another version of this sculpture by Freund, currently exhibited at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Denmark.

<sup>4</sup> The contest was promoted by the Scandinavian Literature Society and held in 1822, with the participation of several sculptors and painters, including J.L. Lund (Langer, 2021a, p. 6-10).

same theme, depicting Thor resting after killing several giants (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> Beside him lies Tjalfe, and at the top the Vola is also noticed narrating the events of the future, Loke takes a furtive position behind the god. In this case it seems rather clear we are dealing with a modified adaptation of medieval sources in which Thor usually takes the lead in the necromantic act described in *Völuspá*. This is due to the great prominence that this deity assumed in Scandinavian art in the beginning of the 19th century, although Koop had not envisioned this scene himself. It was created by writer Adam Oehlenschläger in 1819, in his book *Nordens guder*.<sup>6</sup>

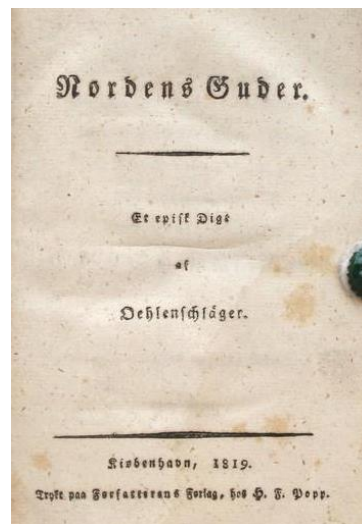


Fig. 3, Photograph of the first edition of the book *Nordens Guder* (Oehlenschläger, 1819).

In *Valas spaadom*, the last of a set of thirty poems, the Vola appears in a fog to talk to Thor (after he had killed the giants), accusing him of having been negatively influenced by Loke and occasionally telling him of the upcoming Ragnarök, perceived here as the consequence of the cruelty and moral decay brought by the gods. Through the analysis of *Nordens guder* in general terms a great emphasis on Thor is noticed throughout the Norse worldview,

<sup>5</sup> The drawing, originally named *Vola åbenbarer sig for Thor efter jætternes nederlag* (Eilbach, 1872, p. 190), was lost, and today only one copy remains made by Søren Henrik Petersen (fig. 2). Koop made an oil painting of this scene in 1823 (*Volas spådom*), currently in the Kunstakademiet in Copenhagen.

<sup>6</sup> Our main analytical basis for understanding Herman Freund's sculpture, Andreas Koop's drawing, and Adam Oehlenschläger's poem came from reading a study by Emma Salling (1989, pp. 284-296).

considering he assumed a role in Oehlenschläger that goes far beyond the hero described in the Icelandic sagas and Eddas, therefore acting already as a creator, sage and judge, among other things. Oehlenschläger perceived and manipulated the Norse myths according to his yearnings, his ideological aspirations and his dreams.

Another example of this is a detail from the drawing by Andreas Koop (fig. 2). His contemporary audience may have regarded the figure who sneaks up behind Thor undoubtedly as the god Odin: carrying a large spear, a cloak and a helmet with two side wings. However, it is another deity: Loke. Koop was inspired by the 15<sup>th</sup> stanza of the poem *Valas spaadom* in which Oehlenschläger mentions the arrow Høder used to shoot Baldur (made of mistletoe in Medieval sources) when instigated by Loke, but transforming it into a spear.<sup>7</sup> It is evident the artist produced a military object different from the one originally described in the Eddas, making the scene much more exaggerated also by presenting the winged helmet in accordance with the influence of the Germanic aesthetic from the period.<sup>8</sup> Loke was generally depicted more simply and with malicious streaks in previous Danish art.<sup>9</sup>

Such transformations are not just about adapting and changing medieval myths. In this case, the individual ends up understanding the work of art as a myth contrasted from the expectations of the society in which he was inserted.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the artist's subjective interpretation is extremely important if we are to comprehend how Norse myths were received across History as well as the reasons why the artist has adopted certain references in

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<sup>7</sup> "Det grumme Spyd i Mørket Loke finder" (Oehlenschläger, 1819, p. 378, "The grim spear in the dark Loke found"). Oehlenschläger describes many goddesses with great sensuality and Loke appears as a Peeping Tom; another detail, which certainly deserves further analysis, is this author's difficulty in accepting the independent female characters of Old Norse literature (Andersen, 2018, p. 340-342). Interestingly, twenty years later after *Nordens guder*, several writers, artists and members of society will adopt the figure of independent and martial women from Medieval Nordic literature (Valkyries and shield maidens) as important references in Danish society: Adriansen, 1987, p. 105-163; Langer, 2021c.

<sup>8</sup> The winged helmet was popularized in the 1830s in the figure of the Valkyries and certain ancient Germanic leaders and Norse heroes such as Frithiof. From the 1840s onwards it became an iconic standard in Viking representation. On this topic, see: Langer, 2021b, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> As in the illustration *Loke*, 1780, by Johannes Wiedewelt, for the opera *Balders Død* – where Loke is presented carrying a headscarf and carrying a snake, with sinister and malicious features; or the Loke depicted in the painting *Balders død*, 1817, by C. W. Eckersberg, who presents himself with an ironic smile and covering his mouth with his robe, without any helmet or spear in his hands.

<sup>10</sup> "(...) the art seems to mirror the oral tradition where each 're-telling' is its own version of the same story" (Karen Bek-Pedersen, Aarhus University, email - March 15, 2020).

this reception (Ross, 2018, pp. 3-4). At the same time artistic reception also mythologizes myths, that is, it is part of the process of social investment by a group in which mythology provides reference symbols, such as the example of *Kalevala* in 19th century Finland (Frog, 2015, p. 101).

This Meta mythology is therefore nothing more than a modern mythology created based on a supposed heritage of ancestry myths in the nationalist context. In this way, Danish art of the 1820s was part of this same mythologizing scheme; a writer adapted and modified the Eddas (Oehlenschläger) and exerted influence on a visual artist who in turn modified the account once more (Koop) and which was finally reinterpreted by another artist (Freund). Reception is an incessant and extremely dynamic process, but the three authors were all involved in a broad process of using Norse Mythology as a reference for the construction of a national identity for Danish society at that time.

Norse myths represent one of the greatest cultural legacies from ancient Scandinavia. Throughout history, they have been perpetuated, re-signified and transformed by a great variety of artistic means. The Medieval period was responsible for producing several artifacts and works of material culture that established and built some relations between image and orality in myths, such as pendants, tapestries and sculptures, while spaces of Christianity reveal moments of hybridization and religious interpretations (as seen in Church doors, for instance).

From the 16th century on, many publications and manuscripts started to present a close relationship between text and image, eliciting various situations in which these myths were used as part of ideologies of identity and antiquarianism. But it was only with the *Nordic Renaissance* (1755) that images of these myths started being more frequently and intensively used, becoming one of the main means of expression of Romantic Nationalism in several European countries (Ljøgodt, 2012). These were presented in great paintings, public sculptures, theatrical productions, dramas and operas. The 19th century acted in a fundamental way in the construction of modern definitions regarding certain iconic categories of mythology, a topic that is still full of investigative possibilities, especially for Scandinavistics (Gerven, 2020).

Other types of media later tried to further popularize Norse narratives, such as comics, cinema and electronic games. Some of our contemporary interpretations of such myths depend to a greater extent on different images that have been created in the past. Although some major publications have brought several analytical proposals, the study of the artistic reception of Norse myths still constitutes a field calling out for new investigations and research proposals.

It is with this perspective in mind that we would like to present the latest dossier of Scandia Journal: *Norse myths in the artistic reception*. The issue starts with a thought-provoking study (*Fatal spinters: thread works in 19<sup>th</sup>-century artistic depictions of Norse mythological women*, by Susan Filoche-Rommé) on representations of weaving and spinning and their relationship to Nordic female deities during the 19th century, demonstrating that this relationship was more of a construction based on Germanic folktales and classical references than on Medieval sources from Norse Mythology.

Next, in his study, *Ludos in Mytos: God of War and the subversion of Snorri*, Luca Arruns Panaro investigates how the videogame God of War has modified medieval narratives of Norse Mythology, motivated by contemporary discourses of race, gender, colonialism and fatherhood.

Andrea Caselli's paper analyzes an illustration by one of Norway's most important visual artists of the 19th century, Theodor Kittelsen, and his connections to folklore, Norse mythology and nationalism (*Skogtroll: brief analysis of Theodor Kittelsen's illustration*).

An investigation of the literary and nationalist influences of Peter Arbo's two most famous paintings, *Åsgårdsreien*, which were made during the 1860s and 1870s, one of the heights of the artistic reception of Norse themes (*The Wild Hunt for Norway: Nationalism and Myth in Two paintings by Peter Arbo*), is presented by Pablo Gomes de Miranda

And finally, Johnni Langer investigates the creation of modern Viking images (*Horned, barbarian, hero: the visual invention of the Viking through European art, 1824-1851*), developed essentially by 19th-century Romanticism, and the social context in which such representations were popularized. In particular, the image of the Norseman wearing a horned helmet refers to notions of barbarism and civilization inherent to nationalist artists aiming to delineate ethnic borders and elements of otherness for figures from the past.

Scandia's current issue also gladly presents an excellent interview with Robert William Rix (University of Copenhagen), addressing themes related to the articles in the dossier - *Norse Myths and Vikings in European Romanticism: as interviews with Robert William Rix*.

The articles section has received contributions from many different perspectives on varied themes and methodologies. It begins with the study *Ráði saR kunni: remarks on the role of runicity*, by Nicollas Jaramillo, which investigates the role of reading and interpreting rune information within a social context of orality.

Right after his study, the article *Kinsmen, Friends or mercenaries? Problematizing the Presence of International Forces in Scandinavia between the Twelfth and the Fourth Century*, Beñat Elortza Larrea analyses the presence of foreign forces in Scandinavia in the 12th and 14th centuries, their origins and motivations, bringing a comparative discussion from an Inter-Scandinavian point of view.

The study *Medieval motifs in the Pokémon franchise: a survey*, by Dario Capelli and Roberto Luigi Pagani, points out how elements of medieval culture were assimilated by the video game (among which the runes and the *berserkir*), investigating at the same time how the products of pop culture influence the perception of History.

Alessandra Mastrangelo's study *Gli incantesimi svedesi per fermare il sangue* addresses the historical transformations of blood incantations in the Swedish magical tradition, from the medieval to the contemporary world.

The issue contains two articles in Spanish. The first conducts a comparative study between an American film and a television series addressing the Nordic theme (*Del cine a la television: un estudio comparado entre los personajes de The Vikings y Vikings*), by Ana Melendo. The second, *Del Ginnungagap al Ragnarok: el origen y el ocaso de Juego de Tronos*, by América Leticia Méndez Osorio, investigates the literary and Nordic influences present in the Game of Thrones series.

Three studies are presented in Portuguese. The first is an unprecedented translation of the article *Mythic Discourse Analysis: From Formal Principles to Social Alignments and Interaction*, written by Professor Frog and which received the title *Análise do Discurso Mítico*:

*dos princípios formais aos alinhamentos sociais e interação.* The next study is presented by Victor Hugo Sampaio Alves, called *Os elementos (Trans)culturais do Vafþrúðnismál: do Galðr ao tietäjät fino-careliano*, which compares some mythological and magical elements between medieval Scandinavia and modern Finland. In the third article, *Vikingmania: dois séculos de construção da representação do Viking*, Leandro Vilar investigates the different ways in which the Viking was represented by contemporary art and media.

The reviews section counts eight books and a television series that received critical reviews: *The Normans: The Conquest of Christendom, A History*; *The liturgical past in Byzantium and Early Rus*; *Tracing the Jerusalem Code, volume I, The Holy City Christian Cultures in Medieval Scandinavia (ca. 1100–1536)*; *Equinox (TV series)*; *Myth, materiality and lived religion in Merovingian and Viking Scandinavia*; *The pre-Christian religions of the North: research and reception*; *Inari sámí folklore, stories from Aanar*; *Rivers Kings: a new History from Scandinavia to the silk roads*; *Os Vikings: narrativas da violência na Idade Média*.

The translations section was contributed by Professor Luis Lerate de Castro, who translated an important medieval Norse manuscript into Spanish: *Háttatal (recuento de estrofas): traducción y notas*.

We are extremely grateful to all contributors of this edition and the articles, reviews and translations they have submitted. This is of utter importance to the advancement of studies on Medieval Scandinavia. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their effort in making the research results even better. We would like to invite anyone interested to send contributions for the fifth edition of 2022. We wish everyone a fruitful reading.

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