

**NORSE MYTHS AND VIKINGS IN EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM: AN  
INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WILLIAM RIX**

**MITOS NÓRDICOS E VIKINGS NO ROMANTISMO EUROPEU: UMA  
ENTREVISTA COM ROBERT WILLIAM RIX**



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1. *SCANDIA*: The so-called Nordic Renaissance (a concept created by Anton Blanck in 1911) started with Paul-Henri Mallet in his book "Introduction à l'histoire du Danemark", published in 1755 in Copenhagen. Although Norse Mythology was widely popularized in many places in Europe, it was in Denmark particularly that the visual and literary arts achieved great success between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In your opinion, what cultural, political or ideological motivations led Copenhagen to be so receptive to Nordic themes?

This is an interesting question about a fascinating period of cultural history. I think an answer must take its starting point in the fact that Paul-Henri Mallet wrote his history within a political framework. His research into the Nordic past was supported by the Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs J. H. E. Bernstorff and the Lord High Steward A. G. Moltke. Hence, *Introduction à l'histoire du Danemark* is replete with a dedication to King Frederik V and a map of Denmark. At the time, there was a push to improve Denmark's rather poor international reputation as a backward and despotic state. Robert Molesworth's *An Account of Denmark as It Was in the Year of 1692* (1694) is often mentioned as an influential and politically damaging text in this respect. Mallet reached back in Nordic history (which essentially was seen as history relating to lands that belonged to the Danish Crown, including Iceland) to speak about the spirit of liberty. Mallet celebrated the people of the old North for releasing Europe from the "yoke of Rome," which had banished "all elevation of sentiment, all things that were noble and manly." The political and cultural mythology of a brave and liberty-loving Nordic people was welcomed as both compelling and expedient by the Copenhagen establishment.

A reason why the Norse past became so important in Denmark must also be sought in the fact that Denmark saw political uncertainty in the early nineteenth century. In the wake of adverse circumstances, pride in the ancestral past came to function as a compensatory ideology. Historians and artists reached back to the Nordic past and a muscular Norse mythology to shore up faith in the nation. A good example of this is the poet Adam Oehlenschläger, one of the main figures of Danish Romanticism, whose debut collection, *Digte* (1803) [Poems], includes a piece about the British attack on the Danish fleet in 1801. At a pivotal moment of the battle, the Danish navy is encouraged by a vision of the god Thor. Oehlenschläger also includes poems on Norse giants, sacrificial groves, and the Vikings at

Lejre. This shows how contemporary patriotism and an interest in the old North were sometimes closely interrelated.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Rasmus Nyerup and Christian Molbech, who both worked at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen helped galvanize a sense of patriotism through their writings on medieval literature, archaeological sites, and the relics of the Nordic past. Nyerup was also the driving force behind the establishment of a museum for Nordic antiquities, which was a forerunner to the Danish National Museum. This took place against the backdrop of the catastrophic and humiliating bombing of Copenhagen in 1807 and the forced cession of Norway to Sweden in 1814. The pastor and historian N. F. S. Grundtvig, a towering figure in Danish intellectual life, addressed the latter event in the foreword (dated 12 September 1818) to his Danish translation of Saxo's early thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum* [Deeds of the Danes]. Grundtvig speaks of how the severed unity between Denmark and Norway has compelled him to make Saxo's history of Danish heroism available to a wider public. So, the receptiveness to Nordic themes must be seen as part of a national-political dynamic that developed at a particular juncture in Danish history.

2. SCANDIA: In your paper "Runes and Roman: Germanic Literacy and the Significance of Runic Writing" (*Textual Cultures*, 2011), you discussed how runes were, especially during the 18th century, printed in books as part of a nationalist interest and a vernacular past. How did the concept of "rune writing" perpetuated by these publications come to influence 19th-century romantic poetic fiction? In another study, "Letters in a Strange Character: Runes, Rocks and Romanticism" (*European Romantic Review*, 2005), you have analyzed the differences between the literary and the archaeological reception of the runes during the first half of the 19th century. In your opinion, why did the elements of mystery and antiquarianism prevail in European art (like the paintings with runic elements from J.L. Lund)?

The Renaissance historian Ole Worm introduced the misconception that runes were used when writing down Old Norse poems in manuscript. In *Runir, seu, Danica literatura antiquissima* (1636), Worm therefore transliterates the poem known as *Bjarkamál* (from the Latin version in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*) into runes in an attempt to simulate how the poem may originally have appeared. The misguided assumption of a lost runic manuscript culture

was perpetuated in scholarly circles. In the 18th-century, the adjective “runic” became a common term for Old Norse/Icelandic poetry, although this had an origin in oral tradition and had only later written down in manuscript using predominantly Roman script. Nonetheless, the English antiquary Thomas Percy places some of Worm’s transliterated runes on the title page of his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Islandic Language* (1763). As I have argued in the article ‘Thomas Percy’s Antiquarian Alternative to Ossian’ (2009), Percy saw skaldic poetry as a means to promote a literary heritage for Anglo-Saxon England, which he claimed was essentially based on Nordic culture. At a time before *Beowulf* was discovered, Percy reached back to the Norse past, aggrandizing a script-based and bibliographic culture that would trump the uncertain and dubious orality of the Gaelic tradition, which James Macpherson propagated for Celtic Scotland. From the end of the 18th century, authors of romantic or semi-romantic works take an interest in runes. Since runes were associated with mystical rituals, they are often included in literary works to add a dark and gothic atmosphere, such as we see in, for example, Richard Hole’s *Arthur; or, the Northern Enchantment* (1789). But in some poems, the purportedly magical properties of runes are also associated with the idea that skaldic (“runic”) verses had the ability to sway and enchant the listener in ways that were lost to the modern poet.

You mention the painter J. L. Lund, who places runic stone tablets in the hands of the Norns. This I interpret as propagating the notion of the Nordic past as a bygone golden era that was not only literate, but also brimming with wisdom and learning. This, I believe, is an attempt to show that Roman culture was not the only light that shone in Antiquity. In Lund’s study of Ansgar, “the Apostle of the North” (who we see preaching the Christian faith to pagan Nordic people), the fact that that he stands on top of a slab inscribed with runes indicates a sense of continuity: the old North was not mired in barbarian darkness, but upheld a culture that was prepared to receive the true Gospel. In studies by Wilhelm Carl Grimm, Johan Gustaf Liljegren and others from the 1820s and 1830s, runes became associated with a national/ethnic dimension. This was reinforced by the erroneous assumption that runes had been invented as a unique Germanic system, independent of Roman letters.

3. SCANDIA: In the introduction to the book *"Norse Romanticism: Themes on British Literature - 1760-1830"* (Romantic Circles, 2012), British writers, editors, antiquaries, translators and poets who made use of Norse literature in their works are presented. Matthew Lewis' interest in folklore and his mediation by Herder are also mentioned. Were there any mutual influences and similarities between the other German romantics and nationalists and the English romantics who worked with Norse literature and Mythology? Do you reckon the fact that Thomas Percy, Richard Hole and William Mason were clergymen (meaning they had religious lives) has influenced their interpretations of Norse Mythology? Has it also possibly influenced their textual compositions about Scandinavian magic and folklore?

I'm glad that you ask me this question, because it addresses what I see as an important and intense circulation of material between Scandinavia, Germany, and Britain, which warrants attention. In Percy's essay "On the Ancient Minstrels of England," appended to *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (first published 1765), the Nordic skalds are represented as the progenitors of medieval English balladry. Inspired by this suggested genealogy, J. G. Herder wrote the essay "Von Ähnlichkeit der mittlern englischen und deutschen Dichtkunst" [On the similarity between Middle English and German poetry] (1777), in which he describes the Danish invaders of England in the eighth century as "nördlichere Deutsche, noch desselben Völkerstammes" [northern Germans, still of the same ethnic group], thus claiming a unitary medieval ballad tradition that derived from the Norse poetry.

In the romantic period, imitations of ancient ballads became popular. The impact G. A. Bürger's "Lenore" and J. W. Goethe's "Erlkönig" had on British romanticism cannot be underestimated. Goethe's dark poem about the death of a young boy was inspired by a traditional Danish elf-ballad, which Herder had translated for his collection *Volks poesie* (1778-1779). Because of this link, the poet Anna Maria Porter published an adaptation of the ballad in 1797, in which Goethe's boy is called "little Dane." William Taylor, an indefatigable translator and promoter of German literature in England, interpreted the evil spirit in the poem as a version of a Frost giant in Norse mythology. This he takes great pains to explain in a headnote to his rather free 1798 translation of Goethe's poem.

When it comes to men of the church who, like Percy, took an interest in pre-Christian art, it is fair to assume that they may have been circumspect when delving into barbaric paganism.

Yet one may often discern a wistful longing for a time before the world became disenchanting (as Max Weber would say), and religion meant something to man. Where Odin was once passionately worshipped, there is now only indifference, “dead is the realm of imagination,” as Oehlenschlaeger writes in his poem “Harald in the Sacrificial Grove.” Since Norse tradition was considered cultural heritage, it was a legitimate study to pursue. Furthermore, Norse society was seen to offer a template for social structures that harmonized with the ideals of modern Christian nations. In my article “Romancing Scandinavia: Relocating Chivalry and Romance in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain,” I discussed how Percy and others aggrandized the Old Norse code of chivalry. In one place, Percy for example compares the ancient Scandinavians to what he sees as the Islamic disregard for the fair sex. This shows how Norse heritage was sometimes contrasted with other traditions in cultural-religious contexts.

For a committed and direct attempt at incorporating Norse mythology into a Christian world view, we must turn to N. F. S. Grundtvig, who was mentioned above. He interpreted the Nordic gods and the narratives about them in the Edda as symbolic of the true religious life (although only Christianity could offer salvation). Throughout his life, Grundtvig struggled to reconcile Norse mythology with Christianity. In one iteration of this, he saw the former as prophetically pointing forward to the latter, so that Norse mythology could almost be interpreted as a Scandinavian “Old Testament,” which would eventually be surpassed by a higher understanding.

*4. SCANDIA: The recent invasion of a supremacist in the United States Capitol (January 2021) highlighted the political uses of Old Norse religious symbols. This question, as a matter of fact, is much older, if we bear in mind that the 19th century was the period in which several of the idealized conceptions regarding the social forms of the Nordic peoples of the so-called “Viking Age” were originated and started being used by contemporary societies. In particular, how do you perceive the representation of the “Viking” as an identity tool for politicians, artists and romantic intellectuals to develop their ideal of nation and nationalism?*

It is well known that Nazi Germany co-opted Norse tradition in the construction of Aryan ideology and a racist agenda. The legacy of this today is that Viking symbolism often attracts the ultra-right. At a Charlottesville rally in 2017, some protesters carried banners depicting



Thor's hammer, alongside swastikas and Confederate Battle flags. In the age of romantic nationalism, however, Norse tradition did not have such flagrantly racist connotations, but neither was it apolitical. Herder, for example, saw Norse mythology as a German legacy that defined a *Kulturnation*. This was not to argue for its superiority over other traditions, but more to flag it as an identity that was important in resisting the threat of French dominance in cultural and political matters. In Sweden, Norse tradition was also used to engender pride in the nation; it became a form of political progressiveness that offered opposition to conservative forces and the establishment.

In many romantic-period writings, the Norse past was interpreted as showing independence from foreign domination and resistance to tyranny. But there is often only a small distance to travel from something idealistic into something more insidious. I may point to a fairly recent collection of essays, *Old Norse Myths as Political Ideologies: Critical Studies in the Appropriation of Medieval Narratives*, ed. Nicolas Meylan and Lukas Rösli (Brepols, 2020), which discusses the manifold and contradictory uses of Norse tradition in the Romantic period and beyond.

5. SCANDIA: *Would it be possible to understand the idea of 'Asiatic Gothic' as a possible selectiveness of the concept of 'East' and its connections to the 'North'? I.E. Weren't the scholars that used "Asiatic Gothic" separating the virtuous Asians (the ones that migrated to the North) from the "other" that stayed in the "East"? What role did the Scandinavian scholars who, from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century conceptualized the North as the "land of the hyperboreans", play in this literary development that you described in your study: 'The North' and 'the East': The Odin migration theory (Romantic Norths: Anglo-Nordic Exchanges, 2017)?*

There were certainly different concepts of Asia. The Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson's interpretation of Odin is euhemeristic, i.e. he sees him as a historical warlord, who was given the status of a god among primitive peoples. In *Heimskringla*, Snorri tells us that Odin's homeland is *Asaland* or *Asaheim*, which lies just east of the river Tanais. This would indicate a location in present-day Russia. So, Odin's Aesir were, ethnically, imagined as different from people of the Far East. In the western tradition (influenced by Snorri's legend), we occasionally find the accusation that the historical Odin and his sons, who came to rule over

northern Europe, shared in the despotic traits that Eastern rulers were thought to exhibit. But, overall, Odin's influence on the Germanic nations was generally seen as positive, instilling the North with a sense of heroism (see esp. Thomas Carlyle's essay "The Hero as Divinity. Odin" from 1841).

The literary critic Thomas Warton uses the hybrid term "Asiatic Goths" to speak of Odin and his train of warriors in *History of English Poetry* (1775) and points to Georgia as their place of origin. Warton sees the poetry and religion that these "Asiatic Goths" brought with them as the origin of Germanic culture. In one place, he notes that the Turks are said to have come "under jurisdiction of the Scandinavians [i.e. the Georgians]," for which reason the neighbouring Turks and later the prophet Mohammed adopted some of the notions and superstitions of Odin's people. Yet we sense that these are corrupted versions of what came to prevail in Germanic tradition, and that Germanic tradition had assimilated some of the more positive facets of Odin's Asiatic legacy. Other antiquaries traced Norse mythology to an origin in pan-Asian religious belief without indicating a hierarchy. The eminent British orientalist William Jones, for example, held that the figures of Odin and Buddha were the same person, and over the years the theory of Odin's Asian legacy had many different versions. Scandinavian scholars such as Thormod Torfaeus, Peder Syv, Eric Benzelius, Peter Fredrik Suhm, and Gerhard Schöning also discussed Odin's eastern influence on Northern Europe - each with their individual take on the legend and what it entailed for the Old North.

I appreciate that you bring up the myth of Hyperborea, as it is another fascinating topic. The idea that the Hyperboreans were a historical people is found in works by the seventeenth-century scholars Georg Stiernhielm and Olof Rudbeck. Basing their studies on ancient Greek myths, they both point to Sweden as the *vagina gentium*, the human birthplace, and therefore the North as the origin of language and culture. As an example of this, Rudbeck, in his extravagant work *Atlantica* (1679), saw the worship of Apollo in Greece as a religion exported from the Hyperboreans in the North. Rudbeck's ideas were known throughout Europe but not generally taken up. In the 18th- and 19th-century material I researched for the article you mention, the idea of Hyperboreans seems, perhaps surprisingly, to have had little traction as an ethnic legend. Some historians do suggest that the existence of the Hyperborean myth in Antiquity could be a reason why the historical



Odin decided to wander northwards, but it is predominantly the east-to-north trajectory of culture that is accepted in the romantic period and beyond.

6. SCANDIA: In your article "Out-of-Scandinavia: New Perspectives on Barbarian Identity" (*Origin Legends in Medieval Europe, forthcoming*), it is observed that Jordanes' work, a fabrication, served as raw material for the construction of traditions about the lords of Germanic peoples in Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages. What can explain his ability to penetrate, in some cases, to the present day, even with studies that have already shown that his work is an invention of traditions?

Jordanes' narrative of a people migrating from Scandinavia and populating the world was accepted as the default origin legend among Germanic peoples in several medieval documents. It is a legend we find in connection with the ethnic origin tales related to the Lombards, the Burgundians, the Saxons, the Normans, the Slavs, and it even rivals the Franks' traditional tale of their Trojan ancestry. Origin legends are always "intentional data", i.e. coded tales that carried with them a series of associations and subtexts. There are a number of reasons why Jordanes' *origines gentium* gained popularity. One central idea was that imagining a past in a cold and rough climate, inhabited by fierce warrior tribes, encoded the notion of "hard primitivism." This was often seen as a salutary counterpoise to the softness widely believed to vitiate life in the modern world. Tracing a people's origins to a mythical "Scandza" came to signal an anti-Roman sentiment in some later adaptations. Jordanes' "out-of-Scandinavia" legend in post-Roman Europe was underpinned by the ideology of *translatio imperii*, i.e. the belief that the Germanic races were the new rulers of Europe. For this ideology to be credible, a legend of non-Classical origins was expedient: since Scandinavia was never subdued by the Romans, it was a place that symbolized an indomitable spirit of independence. A similar notion was perpetuated (but without reference to Jordanes) by Montesquieu, Paul-Henri Mallet, and in cultural mythology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Today, Jordanes' "out-of-Scandinavia" legend has never had it so good. If no longer seen as a credible historical account, the tale has nevertheless been widely examined and debated in critical works, most notably in the scholarly exchange between Herwig Wolfram and Walter Goffart.

7. SCANDIA: Both your articles 'Oriental Odin: Tracing the east in northern culture and literature' (2010) and 'The Afterlife of a Death Song: reception of Ragnar Lodbrog's Poem in Britain Until the End of the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century' refer to the reception of Nordic material and its valorization in the formation of European national identities, evaluated by a group of intellectuals who promoted ideals based on ancient Nordic literature. In the case of the first article, we are struck by your example of a connection between Norse mythology and the political context of the British occupation of India (thinking here of Colonel James Tod's writings). In the second article it is possible to follow the course of an error from the translation and edition by Ole Worm. In both cases we are dealing with a central figure which is the rescue of supposed ancient Nordic values. Our questions are: 1) was there an antagonism between intellectuals who were dedicated to editing texts from other nations and cultures (like Ossian by James Macpherson)? And 2) what are the consequences and challenges of the valuation and praise of this model of national past for young researchers and the academia in general today?

1. Indeed. There was competition between supporters of Norse and Celtic antiquities – particularly in Britain. The Edinburgh professor Hugh Blair, a prolific supporter of Macpherson, writes in *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) that one could contrast the tenderness and delicacy of sentiment in Ossian's warrior code with the violence found in Ragnar Lodbrog's Death Song. Blair provocatively declares that a reader turning to Ossian after reading the Norse poem would find to be "like passing from a savage desert, into a fertile and cultivated country". So, what Blair implies here is that there was more for a cultivated 18th-century reader in Ossian than in the Norse tradition.

In the "Dissertation" appended to Ossian's *Temora* (1763), it is claimed that the poetic tradition from which Macpherson is translating had been preserved orally among the Highlanders and that the poetry was therefore "pure and original," free of influence from the Saxon "manners and language" introduced by Germanic landowners who came to Caledonia. Nonetheless, one of Ossian's fiercest detractors, the Scottish historian Malcolm Laing, accused Macpherson of imitating Norse poetics, even lifting phrases from the English translation of Ragnar Lodbrog's Death Song(!). On the English side of the border, some texts published against Ossian show cultural and political bias, and writers were sceptical of the poetry, which was seen to promote the political ambitions of Scotland and Scots. However,

there was no clear-cut division between English and Scottish critics; Ossian had supporters as well as detractors in both England and Scotland.

There were, however, those who were unconcerned about potential ethnic and political conflict. Thomas James Mathias included in his *Runic Odes: Imitated from the Norse Tongue in the Manner of Mr. Gray* (first edition in 1781), a poem inspired by “Images selected from the Works attributed to Ossian;” Frank Sayers’ *Dramatic Sketches of the Ancient Northern Mythology* (1790) shows influences from Norse and Celtic traditions; and the anthology *Poems Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792), printed translations and imitations of both Norse verses and Ossian’s poetry.

2. The challenge that both young researchers and more seasoned scholars face when studying nineteenth-century discourses of nationalism is how to interpret the gradations, nuances, and elusive shifts in the source material. As I have touched upon in my answers above, there is sometimes only a subtle difference between well-intentioned patriotism and falls under the category of nationalist/ethnic prejudice. Our job when studying the national past as it was practised in antiquarian studies must always be a question of carefully reading texts and discourses in their historical context. In recent years, I have met and been in contact with a number of really good and promising young scholars. So, the study of antiquarianism and nationalism is developing and progressing, and we will undoubtedly see much new and interesting work in the years to come.