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## Transmission – transformation – memory: Reflections on modern recreating pre-modern Nordic myths

This article treats various general aspects of transformations in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian mythology as they appear in written narratives and visual pictures. In the first paragraph, some basic questions of the phenomenon of variation in the pre-modern manuscript transmission are discussed. The second paragraph analyses different versions of the Old Norse-Icelandic myths about the precious mead in modern literature. In the final paragraph, transmission and myth are integrated into a combined look at transformations with regard to cultural memory.

**Keywords:** transmission, transformation, manuscript variance, cultural memory, Scandinavian mythology

### 1. Introductory remarks

Working with Viking Age and medieval Old Norse-Icelandic textual culture is essentially working with transformations in pre-modern texts and images. These changes are in a fundamental way different from what one encounters in modern and contemporary author- or artist-fixed works. Changes of whatever kind are by no means restricted to transformations caused by social, political, cultural developments in global cultures since 1945. Quite the contrary, phenomena of changes, be they verbal, visual, acoustic (oral/aural) or related to other media, have been ubiquitous through the ages, and media revolutions of different kinds have taken place long before the World Wide Web was invented. Even societies that from our perspective were supposedly stable, static and developed slowly, such as for example the European Middle Ages, were characterized by continuous changes and constant transformations of the ways in which they expressed their cultural forms.

The following short reflections on some features of re-creating mythical narratives in pre-modern Nordic literature were first presented at the international conference “Cultural and social transformations in Post-War Scandinavia and their reflection

in contemporary literature, film and arts”, Tischner European University, Center for Nordic Culture “Nordicus”, Kraków, 25<sup>th</sup>–27<sup>th</sup> October 2023. The oral form of the presentation has only been moderately adopted. This article continues some recent works in the fields of pre-modern Nordic memory studies and media studies.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Transformation I: Transmission

Archaic, medieval, pre-modern and to a certain degree early modern literary culture was characterized by handwritten transmission, by a continuous activity of copying texts and thereby changing them slightly or substantially, voluntarily or incidentally. In the field of literature, the result of such tendencies to change and transform contents, genres, styles and so on was what we today in narratology call unstable, fluid, or unfixed texts. This was such a widespread feature of medieval literature, that the French philologist Bernard Cerquiglini (1947–), in a famous essay from 1989, *Éloge de la variante* (English translation *In Praise of the Variant*, 1999), made the statement that the Middle Ages were not only characterized by variants in handwritten manuscripts, but rather that the Middle Ages and medieval textuality were variant: “Tout, dans l’inscription littéraire médiévale, paraît échapper à la conception moderne du texte, à la pensée textuaire.” (Cerquiglini 1989: 43) / “Everything about medieval literary inscription seems to elude the modern conception of the text, of textual thought.” (Cerquiglini 1999: 21) And Cerquiglini continued: “L’œuvre littéraire, au Moyen Age, est une variable.” (Cerquiglini 1989: 57) / “In the Middle Ages the literary work was a variable.” (Cerquiglini 1999: 33) This fact had fundamental effects on the pre-modern idea of texts and their stability respectively fluidity. Transformation and change were the “essence” of medieval and early modern literature. In recent medieval studies observations about this basic and fundamental nature of pre-modern literary culture led to a performative turn, the so-called “New Philology”, or “Material Philology”, and this new conception of medieval textuality had in its way far-reaching consequences for scholarly approaches applied to and aesthetic evaluations made of old texts in the past thirty years or so. As one of the results of these reconsiderations, each extant manuscript of a medieval narrative was given a voice and is now assessed in its own right and valued and analysed accordingly. That movement was a significant change from earlier scholarship that as a rule had focused on the oldest manuscripts as these were considered “best” because of their age and supposed closeness to a now lost original.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See for example Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007; Bergsveinn Birgisson 2010; Driscoll 2010; Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018; Glauser 2018a; Glauser 2018b; Glauser, Hermann, Mitchell 2018; Heslop, Glauser 2018; Horn, Johansson 2021; Hermann 2022; Heslop 2022; Glauser 2019; Glauser 2023; Valpola-Walker 2025.

<sup>2</sup> For one of the most profound discussions of these methodological changes and new approaches following from them in saga studies see Driscoll 2010.

### 3. Transformation II: Myth

When it comes to medieval Scandinavian literature and its transmission and variance, it is first and foremost mythological narratives that offer some splendid examples of this literature of transformation, as one could call it. In a seminal article with the title “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos” [Reality concept and impact potential of myth], published in 1971, the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920–96) argued that myths must be understood as phenomena that have always already been transformed to a state of “reception”:

Eine Betrachtungsweise wie die hier vorzuschlagende sucht nicht historisch oder philologisch zu klären, was “der Mythos” ursprünglich oder in einer bestimmten Phase unserer Geschichte bzw. Vorgeschichte gewesen sein mag; vielmehr wird er als immer schon in Rezeption übergegangen verstanden. [An approach such as the present one does not intend to look for a historical or philological explanation of what “the myth” originally or in a specific period of our history or pre-history might have been; rather, myth is understood as something that has always already transgressed to reception.] (Blumenberg 1971: 28; tr. J.G.)

According to H. Blumenberg, there are no “original” myths accessible to us. So, in the specific case of pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology, what *is* transmitted for instance on pre-Christian Viking Age picture stones or in Christian medieval as well as in post-Reformation manuscripts on vellum or paper are mythological narratives, or fragments of such narratives, that had been and were constantly re-used and re-written. And consequently, as long as they are (re)used and are still part of an actively performed transmission, myths stay alive.

It is not at all merely in recent times that (mythic) narratives from the Scandinavian Viking Age and medieval times have been transformed and adapted to new media and as such enjoyed tremendous popularity, although there is to be sure a wealth of recent modern adaptations of old stories in both written, visual, and other forms. Among the many works of global literature and world films based heavily on Nordic mythology, but representing only tips of the iceberg, are of course J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1892–1973) fantasy novels *The Lord of the Rings* (1–3, 1937–49), filmed by Peter Jackson (1961–) in the motion picture trilogy with the same title (2001–03); George R.R. Martin’s (1948–) books *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1–5, 1996–2011), the basis of the fantasy TV-series *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) by David Benioff (1970–) and D.B. Weiss (1971–); or Michael Hirst’s (1952–) historical drama TV-series *Vikings* (2013–20). Viewed in the long perspective of transmission and transformation of mythic story telling it must be critically noticed that many of these modern adaptations are disappointing. The main reason is that they tend to make the wonderfully ambivalent, ambiguous, errant, and unconcise old tales unambivalent and unambiguous, straightforward and simplified. The new aesthetics, owed to the exigencies of the current media, is for the most part one of predictability in both content and form and thus the adaptations usually offer little that is unexpected.

Today's global popularity of Scandinavian mythology in contemporary media is however only the latest link in the very long chain of retold myths.<sup>3</sup> Early modern, modern, and contemporary writers in the Nordic countries have been attracted by the pre-Christian myths for centuries. Among these, many excellent works were the result of the culture of re-writing mythological narratives. The stories about the pagan gods were for instance popular themes in the magic realism Scandinavian literature of the 1980s and 1990s, and it is especially in modern and contemporary Icelandic literature that highly innovative examples of this movement appeared. *Blóðhofnir* (2010, English translation *Bloodhoof*, 2012), e.g., is a fascinating recent re-interpretation of the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* [The Lay of Skírnir] from the point of view of the giantess Gerðr, written by the contemporary Icelandic writer, Gerður Kristný (1970–).

Another prominent example was Svava Jakobsdóttir's (1930–2004) somewhat older novel *Gunnlaðar saga* (1987, English translation *Gunnlöth's Tale*, 2011). It takes up the ubiquitous myth of the mead of poetry which tells of how Odin rescued or rather stole the precious mead from the giants. This story is one of the central and most influential and long-lived narratives in Old Norse-Icelandic literary and visual culture. The myth of the mead is a typically multiform narrative that has been preserved in Viking Age, medieval, modern and contemporary Scandinavian literature and other medial forms whose continuous development and changes have not come to an end yet (see Figures 2–5). It was alluded to and transmitted in countless metaphoric tropes in the poems of early Norwegian and Icelandic skalds of the Viking period, in texts such as the prosaic and poetic eddas and other medieval writings, as well as perhaps on at least one Viking Age Gotlandic picture stone (see Figure 1). In her significant novel, Svava Jakobsdóttir succeeds in presenting the old myth in a fresh and attractive way. Also, Svava's approach was one of magic realism. She re-wrote the old myth by building on textual allusions in the *Poetic Edda* that are assumed to be older than the medieval narrative in the thirteenth century's *Prose Edda* and tells the story from the perspective of the female figure Gunnlöð who in her novel is not a victim as in the *Prose Edda* but a strong figure of sovereignty.

Almost in the same year as *Gunnlaðar saga* appeared, the Norwegian author Tor Åge Bringsværd (1939–) published a book on the same myth: *Den enøyde kongen* [The one-eyed king], illustrated by the well-known Norwegian designer Finn Graff (1938–) (Bringsværd 1986). While the quite drastic illustrations are an adequate transformation of a medieval narrative to a contemporary imagery, the Norwegian text reduces some of the myth's subtleties.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For some recent works on the reception of Old Norse-Icelandic myths in modern and contemporary literary culture see for example Clunies Ross 1994; Lönnroth 1996; Sverrir Tómasson 1996; Larrington, Quinn, Schorn 2016; Zernack, Schulz 2019 (this work is volume 6 of a series on *Edda-Rezeption*).

<sup>4</sup> *Den enøyde kongen* is volume 3 in the series *Vår gamle gudelære* [Our old mythology] (1–12, 1985–95); it is based on a series Bringsværd had written for the Norwegian TV in 1982.

There are plenty of other re-appropriations of old myths in modern Scandinavian discourses. Another interesting case that shows a dynamic re-use of Scandinavian mythology were the Danish artist Asger Jorn's avant-garde contributions in which he used Eddic and other "old" narrative and primarily visual materials in his attempts to revitalize art after World War II.<sup>5</sup> A member of the COBRA-group (1948–51), Asger Jorn (1914–73), together with other international artists, in 1962 founded a so-called "Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalsme" [Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism]. He postulated the existence of a Nordic, 10.000 years old unbroken, pictorial tradition ("billedtradition"), which he for example found in the so-called *helleristninger* (rock carvings, rock engravings, or petroglyphs). In his book *Ting og Polis* (1964), Jorn polemized *inter alia* against N.F.S. Grundtvig's (1783–1872) myth-reception in *Brage-Snak* (1844/1876): "Odin med det ene øje. Thor med de ødelagte tær. Tyr uden hånd osv. Nordens gudeverden er en mærkelig flok invalider og krøblinge." [Odin with only one eye. Thor with maimed toes. Tyr without one hand etc. The Nordic pantheon is a strange bunch of invalids and cripples.] (Jorn 1964: 78; tr. J.G.) But by polemizing against Grundtvig's views, informed by national romanticist ideas of the early nineteenth century, Jorn in fact recycled some of the myths. One of the most fascinating features in Jorn's multifarious works is to see how he thinks the Nordic myths from their visual side and not merely as verbal narratives. In his opinion which is an artist's and not primarily a philologist's, the pictorial tradition had more weight than the written texts. Here, Jorn is fully congruent with art historians such as Aby Warburg or scholars of cognitive literary studies such as Bergsveinn Birgisson (see below). Neo-'myths' as the ones created by Jorn contribute to shape new understandings and forms of memory about the Nordic past. One of the reasons of the Norse myths' success through the ages and not least in the past couple of decades is their continuously being part of an active process of reception, re-creation, and transformation. If not transformed and adapted to new cultural and medial circumstances, they would have died out a long time ago, fallen into oblivion, and not become integrated in the archive of narratives and images that formed the cultural memory. So, it is not despite, but precisely because of the many ongoing transformations that Old Norse-Icelandic myths are still alive.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Transformation III: Memory

If Blumenberg is right in stating that there was no "original" myth nor had there ever been any such primordial mythic narrative, it means that myths never existed in clean, unspoiled, unmediated forms. What was and may still be accessible to us

<sup>5</sup> For the following see Klaus Müller-Wille's excellent article on Asger Jorn (Müller-Wille 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See also Kozák 2019.

are thus “merely” reworkings of earlier narratives, and these, as their earlier versions in previous times, had always already been mediated during the myth’s transmission, “Rezeption”. “Reception”, as it was defined by the representatives of the 1960s and 1970s reception or reader-response theory, among them Blumenberg, is essentially nothing else but intertextual memory in literature, continuous re-shapings, actualizations, and manifestations of older stages of narrations.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence of this, memory must be seen as the result of a common activity of various narrators and audiences. Just as myths, memories are the outcome of such collective, discursive authorship and reception produced as a part of their long-term transmission.

In the massive body of Old Norse narratives, such stories are among others assembled in the *Prose Edda* from the thirteenth century, and they represent narratively cast memorized memories. Exactly like the diverse media of transmission memory does not exist as an isolated and stable fact. It is entirely dependent on communication, interactive dialogue, and social cultural collaboration. The modern Greek term for “fairy tale” – *paramyth* (*παραμύθια*) – includes many of these discursive, playful, non-static, fluid, variant features of storytelling in oral and written transmission and could serve as an apt concept for describing the mnemonics of myths. Myths as well as memories cannot exist without narrative discourse of this kind.<sup>8</sup>

As pointed out by the Icelandic author and scholar Bergsveinn Birgisson (1971–), the activity of remembering is often set in motion by some forceful and often awesome and bizarre pictoriality, especially found in the wide-spread tropes of the kennings in Old Norse-Icelandic skaldic and Eddic poetry from the early Middle Ages (see also Glauser 2019). As an example of a kenning for “sword” the compound *ímun-laukr* “battle-leek” from Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s (Norwegian poetry of the tenth century) *Lausavísá* 8 could be mentioned. In the Eddic *Hymiskviða* [Hymir’s Poem], stanza 27, the enigmatic word *brim-svín*, literally meaning “surf-pig(s)”, is interpreted either as “ship” or “whales”.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, the term pathos formula (“Pathosformel”), conceived and shaped by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) to describe widely known and commonly accepted images of excitation (“Erregungsbilder”), can be applied to scrutinize the mnemonic tropes created by the skalds in their kennings. A pathos formula is “an emotionally charged visual trope” (Becker 2013: 1) that evokes magically efficacious images of excitation (“magisch wirksame Erregungsbilder”, Echle).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Renate Lachmann’s seminal article on mnemonics and intertextuality as fundamental aspects of literature in general (Lachmann 2008).

<sup>8</sup> I thank Alexia Panagiotidis, MA, University of Zurich, for drawing my attention to the concept of *paramyth* at the international conference “Paramyth. The mythological dimensions of Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales,” organized by Klaus Müller-Wille at the University of Zurich, November 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> 2022 (see also Glauser 2023: 187).

<sup>9</sup> See also the chapter “Det bizarre bildets skjebne” in Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007: 143–147.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Becker 2013: 4–6: “Warburg and memory studies”.

And just as an exciting image arouses emotions through the media of a strongly loaded visual work of art, the verbal media of the kenning brings back or produces senses and feelings that make the narrative “stick in the memory” (*festa í minni*) (see Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007, 2010, 2018; Glauser 2018a, 2018b). The Old Norse-Icelandic mythic narratives are full of such images of excitation. It is precisely such a process that led to the unbroken, but never unchanged chain of transformations in Old Norse myths and this process is one of the main reasons for their longevity and lasting popularity and the fact that they became part of the cultural memory.

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## Figures

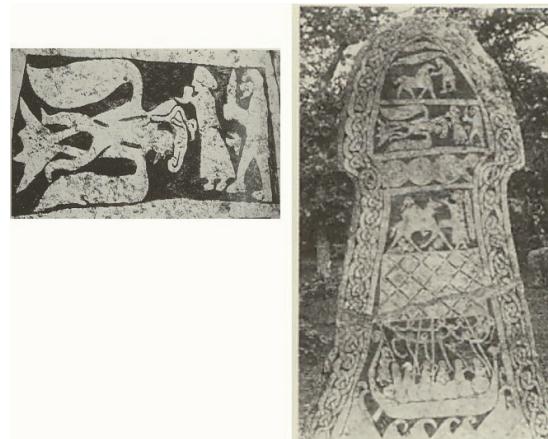


Figure 1. Picture stone, eighth century CE (?), Lärbro Stora Hammars III, Gotland: Three figures representing Odin, Gunnlöð, Suttung (?).

Second field from above, from left to right: Man in the shape of a bird, woman with (drinking?) horn, head of a snake (?), man with a sword.

Source: Nylén, Lamm 1981, p. 51.



Figure 2. Icelandic manuscript, AM 738 4to, 1680, so-called *Edda oblongata*: Gunnlöð with the vat.

Text to the left: Gunnlöð gives mead to Odin. He kissed her and was three nights with her.  
Sleep over and you shall become a poet.

Text to the right: The daughter of Suttungr. Embrace me and you shall compose well.

Source: Sverrir Tómasson 1996, cover.

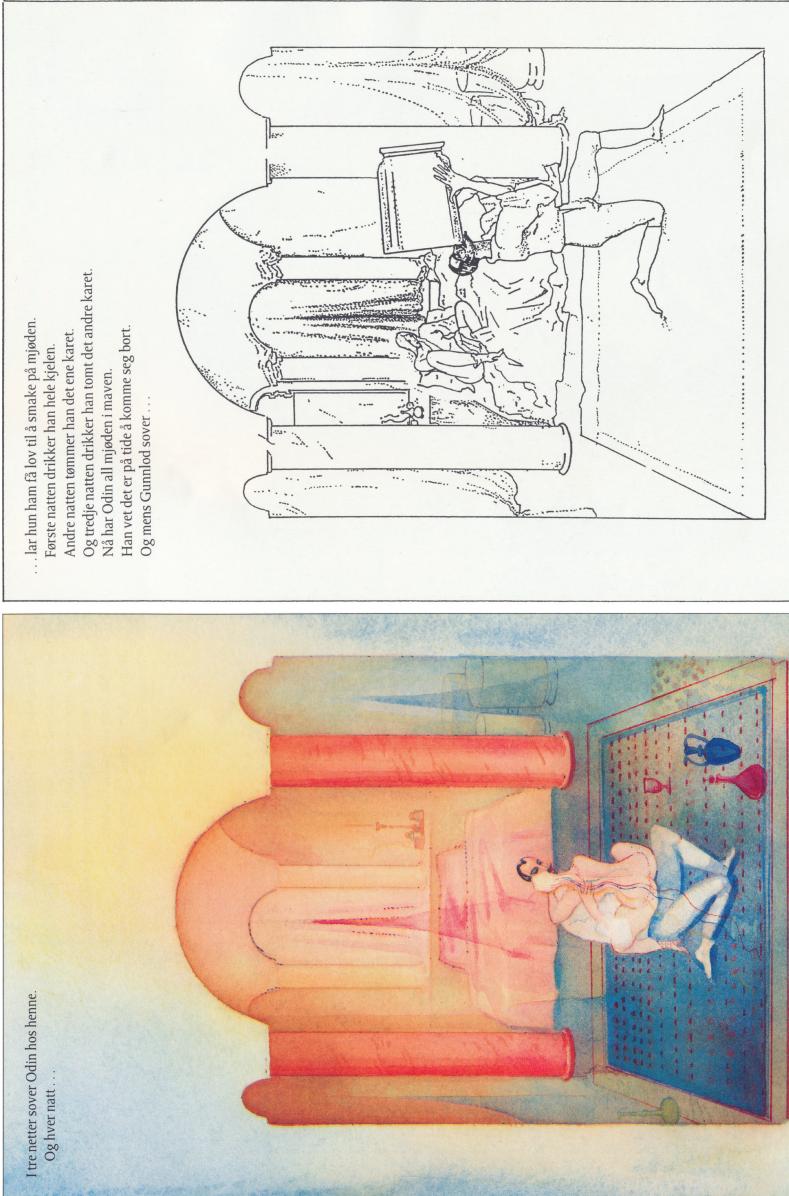


Figure 3. Tor Åge Bringsværd, *Den enøyde kongen* (1986): Odin spends three nights with Gunnlöð and empties the pot with the mead.

Text left: For three nights Odin sleeps with her. And each night...

Text right: ... she lets him taste of the mead. The first night he drinks the whole pot. The second night he empties one of the vats. And the third night he drinks out the other vat. Now, Odin has all the mead in his stomach. He knows that it is time to get away. And while Gunnlöð is asleep...

Source: Bringsværd 1986, pp. 27–28.



Figure 4. Icelandic manuscript, SÁM 66, 1765–66, so-called *Melsteðs Edda*, p. 76r: Odin, in the shape of an eagle, returns to Asgard with the mead.

Text: Here flies Odin in eagle-shape with the filling of the mead of Hvitbjörg across Ásgrindir, and Suttungr the giant after him in eagle-shape. As is shown in fabula 61. of Edda and about that the one who wishes may read.

Source: [https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/SAM-0066/155?iabr=on#page/75v mode/2up](https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/SAM-0066/155?iabr=on#page/75v	mode/2up) [accessed: 9.10.25].

Suttung er så rasende at han ikke enser at de flyr inn over murene rundt Åsgard.

Odin spyr mjøden ned i karene.

Men nå er Suttung like ved å sette klørne i ham . . . så Odin vet ingen annen råd enn at han samtidig lar noe av mjøden gå ut «bakveien» – rett i fjeset på den sinte ørnen!

Og det reddet nok livet hans. For nå får Suttung annet å tenke på!



Figure 5. Tor Åge Bringsværd, *Den enøyde kongen* (1986): Odin, in the shape of an eagle, returns to Asgard with the mead.

Text: Suttung is so furious that he doesn't realize that they fly over the walls around Åsgard. Odin spews the mead down into the vats. But now Suttung is just about to put his claws into him... so Odin didn't know any other advice than to let some of the mead go out "the back way" – right into the face of the angry eagle! And that probably saved his life. Because now Suttung has other things to think about!

Source: Bringsværd 1986, p. 32.