

Myth and Reality: the Contribution of Archaeology

John Hines

School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University

Myth is not simply a matter of fiction and fantasy — the absolute antithesis of factual reality. An understanding that myth is a type of allegory, springing as a representation of conceived truths, has either been handed down, or reinvented, in sufficiently literate contexts through every age since classical Antiquity. It is reasonable to assume that both the truth which is expressed in mythic form, and the form in which it is embedded, will represent topics that were particularly significant in the myth's native circumstances. Thus (to try to find a relatively simple example) the mythical motif of *Valhøll* and the *einherjar* ought to reflect circumstances in which, say, the idea of an afterlife was an important one for at least some part of society, while warfare and the use of a hall as a social central place were significant aspects of the life of that same social group.

As myths are transmitted over time, through different historical and cultural circumstances from those in which they arose, they may gain increasing autonomy: a life of their own. And it is undeniable, then, that realities may be modelled after or constrained by inherited ideology in the form of myth — in simpler terms, that life may imitate art rather than the other way around. Even

without any such markedly determinative role, it would be wrong to assume that a myth is shorn of functional significance when it passes out of its original context. Its very survival ought to imply that it still has some role to play. On the strength of comparative literary analysis, it can in fact be argued that the allegorical technique is an adaptive feature that serves to maintain myth in these circumstances. Where the meaning and function of a tale remain essentially implicit, that tale is more open to re-interpretation and thus to adaptation to different circumstances. A corollary of this is that such a tale's principal signifiers — such as its characters, settings and images — and, perhaps most significantly, the relationships between them, are inherently more likely to be readily identifiable with features in the immediate historical context, as this is perhaps the easiest way to make a connexion between the meaning of the myth and its external circumstances.

There are some very different kinds of myth in medieval Scandinavian literature. Without assuming any categorical position on how accurate a historical view they give, the historiographies of, for instance, ninth- to eleventh-century Iceland and ninth- to eleventh-century Norwegian kingship can properly be described as historical myth. The tales of Vinland and the exploration of the Atlantic likewise provide a body of geographical myth. What I, however, shall concentrate on here, like, I assume, the majority of other studies at this conference, will be the cosmological myths that derive from pre-Christian Scandinavia and which were intimately associated with the pre-Christian Scandinavian 'pagan' religion. These are myths whose roots must lie in prehistoric Scandinavia, and which will have been transmitted — undergoing substantial changes, one must assume — through the threshold phase called 'proto-history' into the historical Middle Ages.

Archaeology — the study of the past through its material remains — is the sole basis for writing prehistory, and is thus the best point of reference for locating the earliest detectable forms of these myths within a concrete culture-historical framework. Archaeology also makes its own special contribution to the study of history. In the case of early or otherwise distant historical periods, quite obviously, there are more likely to be substantial gaps in the documentary record that can be filled by archaeology. But irrespective of the quality and range of written evidence, archaeology can always broaden the range of cultural history by providing a view of the material and technical circumstances of life. Archaeology is thus often better suited to yielding insight into long-term continuities and processes of development in the past than are historical sources. I hope that this paper will provide some convincing examples of how this perspective can produce vital insights into the functional character of some central Norse mythological motifs, both in their conception and their transmission.

Society, economics and eddic poetry

None of the eddic poems attempts to explain the human world more comprehensively than *Völuspá* and *Rígsþula* — unusually, two poems preserved in different sources, but appropriately placed side-by-side by Ursula Dronke at the head of her edition of the mythological poems of the Edda. Both of these poems also take full cognisance of the facts of flux and change over time in human history, and indeed one can suggest that they do this in such a way as constitutes the most fundamental argument for regarding them as essentially non-Christian in structure. This would not, of course, automatically be the same as making a case for the pre-Christian composition of the poems rather than their being antiquarian anachronisms from a medieval Christian context, although I believe that the contextual evidence that will be outlined below substantially justifies a reading of the poems as crucially Viking-age in both form and content.

Neither poem makes any acknowledgement of an eternal deity. The human audience is identified as the [*megir*] *Heimdalar* in the opening invocation of *Völuspá* (st. 1),¹ while Rígr is portrayed as the begetter of the three human social classes in *Rígsþula*. The identification of Rígr with Heimdallr is, of course, made by the prose introduction to *Rígsþula* in the fourteenth-century Codex Wormianus, but the antiquity of this explicit identification does not appear to me to be any more important than a further structural parallel between the two poems. In the noble class, Rígr passes his name on, eventually as a title, first to Rígr jarl (36,5), and then to Jarl's son Konr ungr, who:

Rígr at heita *eiga gat* (45,6–7).

This superseding of the father(-creator) figure is silently embodied in *Völuspá* in the disappearance of Heimdallr from the new world after the battle of Ragnarøk. I must admit that I then find it very tempting to see a parallel between the controversial character *inn ríki* in *Völuspá* 65 — the Hauksbók stanza (possibly written by the same scribe as the Codex Wormianus) that seems so easily dismissable as a simple Christian interpolation — and the successive holders of the name/title Rígr. One recognizes that Rígr konungr is portrayed as wresting power from Rígr jarl by his own abilities rather than descending from above as *inn ríki* does. Yet the mid-fourteenth-century written copies of both poems show at most only a very superficial concern to adhere to good Christian doctrine, and it appears simply to be far less reductive to entertain seriously an alternative, non-Christian, explanation for the structural parallel between them.

There is certainly a case to be made that both poems are fundamentally directed less by concerns with religious dogma (be that pagan or Christian) than

¹ For reasons of consistency with the arguments put forward here, all quotations are from G. Neckel/H. Kuhn, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, 4th ed., 1962.

with human social issues to which the introduction of Christianity was only indirectly relevant. *Rígsþula* accounts for a hierarchical class system (I find it misleading to refer to these as ‘three estates’). The practical concerns of this class ideology can be shown to have had early roots, and indeed to have been culturally topical issues from the Viking Age onwards. The perspective in *Rígsþula*, as that in *Völuspá*, is that from the top of the social hierarchy; as Ursula Dronke points out, *Rígsþula* reads well as a truncated version of a royal genealogical panegyric. There are many common elements to, or activities associated with, the aristocratic lifestyle in both poems. Most explicit of these are the responsibilities and distinctions of being concerned with warfare, philosophy and government, and the related, educational pleasures of sport and gaming (*Rígsþula* 32, 35–38, 43–48; *Völuspá*, 6, 8–9, 21).

The endorsement or claiming of these activities for this class is done by association in *Völuspá*, and thus less directly than in *Rígsþula*. Even more indirectly but nonetheless definitely implied as distinctive features of aristocratic behaviour are hunting and gathering rather than agricultural work for subsistence, and a conscious and heightened sexuality. Faðir (of Jarl) is first seen in *Rígsþula* making his bow and arrows (28), items that were treated primarily as hunting equipment, and rarely represented amongst weaponry in burial deposits. Jarl learns these skills (35) and Kong ungr practises them (46). Farming for production is a job for the class of Karl’s descendants (22, 24). In *Völuspá*, likewise, the gods of the golden age do not have to farm their food, and again in the new world after Ragnarøk the gaming pieces with which they formerly *teflðo í túni* (8) are found lying in the grass like seed (61) from which:

muno ósárir acrar vaxa (62,1–2).

Similarly it is with Móðir that sensuous female beauty is first portrayed and appreciated in *Rígsþula*, with a very clear example of the shifting male gaze:

*Keisti fald, kinga var á bringo,
síðar slýðor, serc bláfán;
brún biartari, brióst líósara,
háls hvítari hreinni miðlo.*

In *Völuspá*, the disruptive effect of sexuality in the gods’ lives can be seen as implied first by the sexual element in the arrival of the three *þursa meyjar* (8,5–6), and then echoed in the antagonistic roles acted out between the gods and the next characters appearing with the feminine pronouns *hón* and *hana*, Gullveig and Heiðr.

A particular alertness on the reader’s part to what might seem very casual and even accidental allusions to these themes in these poems can be justified by considering the material-historical (i.e. archaeological) context, most clearly so in the case of the economic activities. *Rígsþula* manifestly presents a scheme in which it is the two lower classes which are the working, productive ones. The

class of Þræll is straightforwardly the basal group of agricultural labourers. More specialized agricultural skills of training oxen, making ploughs, constructing barns and carts, and ploughing itself, belong to Karl, one of whose sons is Bónði (22; 24,5). The names of his other sons, meanwhile, imply social and military service (*Halr, Drengr, Hǫlðr, Þegn*), and different productive skills are represented by *Smiðr* (24,3–4). The attitude to the smith here is pejorative only in terms of the role being definitely assigned to a middle class in a poem prioritizing an aristocratic perspective, but its inclusion even in this brief form is enough to evoke a recurrent stigmatization of the smith figure in eddic poetry and other Norse literature. This is most obvious in the persistent identification of dwarfs as craftsmen (and vice versa), e.g. in the character of Reginn. That skilled smiths are viewed as highly valued and respected figures, but nonetheless volcanic and menacing to the good order of society, especially the aristocracy and above all royalty, is perfectly represented by the figures of Vǫlundr and Skalla-Grímr. It is interesting in this regard to note that the poetic diction used in *Vǫlundarkviða* contains no epithets that endorse or value his mechanical skill: rather he is referred to more than once as *veðreygr skyti* (weather-eyed huntsman) and *vísi álfa* (master of elves) — the latter term both times in the speech of Niðuðr (or his wife), although the narrative itself also once refers to Vǫlundr as *álfa lióði*, thus associating itself, one may suggest, with the antagonistic perspective of the royal family.

Such attempts ideologically to circumscribe the figure of the skilled craftsman coincide with a growing economic importance and social potential of such manufacturers, and evidence of attempts by the governing social elite to harness and control those forces. This is not a historical fact that one can properly restrict to any one period between about the seventh century and the present day, but is nonetheless something that appeared as a particularly acute issue of pressure and tension in Viking-age Scandinavian culture. It is no coincidence that much recent discussion in archaeology about the definition and dating of the beginning of the Viking Age has revolved around the site of Ribe on the west coast of Jutland, founded in planned form as Scandinavia's first 'town', presumably by some political and therefore monarchical authority, early in the eighth century as a site for craftsmen to produce and market their wares. The site represents an attempt, apparently successful, by an aristocratic social leadership, previously represented at the neighbouring rural hall site of Dankirke, to exploit a burgeoning new, international trading network. When Ribe was founded this demonstrably involved long-distance trade in both luxury goods (e.g. glass) and basic commodities (cattle, fish), a common North-Sea region coinage (the *sceattas*), and a series of urban sites or *emporia* which were both trading sites and centres for craft production and distribution. The purpose of the site was to attract and control, by offering good conditions for working and trade, seasonal craftsmen-traders. Apart from at the few sites like Ribe, and not long afterwards at Hedeby, the Scandinavian economy was to remain

coinless for some time yet. Exchange must have been mediated by direct barter, or by using worked silver as a currency. By the Viking Age, however, Scandinavia was 'importing' (i.e. acquiring by fair means or foul) valued items of all kinds — precious metals, silk, quernstones — from both east and west. Yet it was also producing the overwhelming majority of the artefacts — weapons, jewellery, utensils — used there itself, and the local imitation and adaptation of important artefact-types point to the essential role of local skilled craftsmen of many kinds in maintaining the Viking-age Scandinavian economy and hierarchy.

One of the most interesting archaeological reflections of this relatively new level of importance of craft production in the Viking Age takes the form of ritual deposition of tools. This presents itself most unambiguously in the form of the deliberate inclusion of tools as markers of the identity and status of the deceased in what are known as smith's graves. There are also several examples of what appears to be the non-funerary, sacrificial deposition of tools and tool-kits as symbolically valuable items in votive hoards. Such hoards are typically collections of items of both real and symbolic value placed in contexts from which retrieval would be difficult — e.g. under water. It is a problem that in any single case — for instance the Mästermyr tool chest from Gotland — it is usually impossible to be sure that deposition was deliberate rather than the loss being accidental. However votive hoarding of this kind had a long and indeed unbroken history in prehistoric Scandinavia down to the Viking Age, and the deposition of the same items predominantly in graves in one area and votive hoards in another is also a familiar pattern from other periods.

The occurrence of graves, and a few hoards, containing metalworking tools starts to become a regular rather than a rare and sporadic feature of Scandinavian archaeology from about the eighth century AD — more or less contemporary with the founding of Ribe. There is approximately a threefold increase in the number of graves found with tools in the Viking Age. Most of these graves contain just one or two tools (a hammer, tongs, or a file), while some fifty or so have a set of three to five tools, and a few contained large tool-kits. The great majority of Viking-age tool graves are from Norway, while hoards, conversely, are more frequent in Denmark and Sweden. In the graves, the tools are often found associated with the weapons that are the normal status symbol of the Viking-age fighting man. This suggests that the status of a recognized craftsman was not different nor necessarily even alternative to that of a warrior (cf. *Rígsþula*, 24; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 58: the burial of Skalla-Grímr). The tool deposits are regular enough for us to conclude that they had a recognized cultural function, while the hierarchicization within the smiths' graves implies that smiths could aspire to high social status. Meanwhile the clustering of smiths' graves, for instance around the Møsstrand area of Telemark, indicates that we are looking at real metalworkers' status here, not some purely symbolic appropriation of smiths' attributes by an elite for display

purposes alone.

In the golden age in *Völuspá*, however, the gods do appear as makers: after building their own *horg oc hof*,

*afla lögðo, auð smíðoðo,
tangir scópo oc tól gorrðo.* (7,7–8)

But this was enough for them to pass over to play as a pastime (8), before the arrival of the giants' daughters, followed immediately by the decision to create the separate order of producers — the dwarfs (9). There is a strong though contrastive echo between this sequence and that of the creation of humankind (17–18), where three Æsir, mighty and loving (*qflgir oc ástgir*) come from their group and beget, or rather vivify, the as yet lifeless Askr and Embla. Since we can be aware of the dwarfs being made for a purpose, the question arises of what humankind was made for. There is an answer in the poem: they are to follow laws, life and fate (20,9–12) — to follow a destiny which can be prophesied (22), which involves performance in battles and rituals for the gods. Productivity, in this cosmological scheme, has been passed on from the gods to the dwarfs, and the model human activities are both more closely in line with the ideals of *Rígsþula* and directly accommodated to the service of the gods. So complete is the congruence between aristocratic and divine interests in this that it seems an inescapable realization that the formula can be read either way. The poem is thus not simply a pious pre-Christian legitimization of a privileged human order but rather seems to express full recognition that the pagan divine order is an idealization of human life. It does indeed appear to be a feature of the late traditional Norse religion to conceive of divinity in humanist rather than transcendental terms.

Love in a cold climate

As was suggested above, we can supplement the case for reading with such sensitivity to possible allusions to a real struggle to confine the power of the producing groups within society by analysing the aristocratic-mythological treatment of relations between the sexes through various forms of myth and image. Eroticism emerges from the mythological literature as one of the most manifestly serious forms of pleasure. It is dangerous and instructive as well as delightful. The archetype in this respect can be found in the stories of Óðinn's amorous adventures — for instance the seduction of *Billings mæ*r and Gunnlǫð (*Hávamál*, 96–110), yielding experience and the gift of poetry; Óðinn's lying with the seven sisters to gain *geð þeira alt oc gaman* (*Hárbarðsljóð*, 18). The brief invocations of aristocratic sexuality in *Rígsþula* and *Völuspá* thus rest on the background of an idealization of the triumphant and experienced male lover as artist, philosopher and hero. For this reason, one can argue that a further refinement of the socially particular perspective of these

mythological poems is that it represents solely male interests. It has no pretensions to encompass or represent any female perspective as well. Rather, the power of the female, to captivate and outwit the male as well as in her special craft — spinning and weaving yarn and fate — is taken as one of the givens of the dramatic scene: the *qrlog seggia* that the *meyiar margs vitandi* lay down for men (*Völuspá*, 20). The best of men are challenged to exploit and profit from this power — as they do the productivity of craftsmen and farmers — as best they can.

Textual and physical monuments

One would not suggest that the economic and social tensions thus reflected in the eddic poetry are not in some measure eternal. But they can be shown by archaeology to have developed in a particular way and to a particular prominence in the Viking Age and into the early Christian Middle Ages in such a way as appears plausibly and tellingly to shed light on the background and transmission of the mythological material. In the paper I presented to the last saga conference in Trondheim, I argued that, in respect of another major economic and social process of development over this period, urbanization, a difference in attitude was apparent between the genres of eddic poetry and saga prose, while a late shift from the one attitude to the other could be found in the conventions of skaldic poetry. Although having referred in detail only to eddic poetry in this introductory study, I wish to conclude the present paper by considering, again with the benefit of an archaeologically informed view, the question of whether that sort of difference in attitude between genres attributable to different strata of literary history is simply a matter of chronology and inertia. We can observe sequences of activity displaying a use of the immediate past within two major monumental complexes in Jutland that would appear to offer some valuable insight in this respect.

The first of these sites is that at Jelling. Jelling had a series of tenth-century monuments superimposed upon and consciously aligned with their predecessors: first a massive North-South ship-setting (a set of monoliths forming the outline of a ship); then two mounds raised over this, with the burial, probably, of Queen Þyra and then King Gormr, and Gormr's runestone commemorating Þyra (**kurmR:kunukR:karþi:kubl:þusi:aft:þurui:kunu:sina:tanmarkaR:but** : King Gormr made this monument after Þyra his wife, Denmark's benefit). The chamber grave in the North Mound is dendrochronologically dated to AD 958/9, and the South Mound, which has no burial under it and so may have been constructed as an assembly place, was raised in the 960's. Towards the end of Haraldr Blátǫnn's reign, i.e. after Gormr's body had decomposed sufficiently for the skeleton to be disarticulated, the contents of the grave under the North Mound were apparently translated to another wooden chamber grave within the first wooden church on the site, in

between the two mounds. Associated with this is the famous larger Jelling stone, with a crucifixion image, a new iconographic/heraldic zoomorphic motif of a lion and a serpent, and an inscription commemorating Haraldr as the offspring and successor of Gormr and Pyra, as lord of all Denmark and Norway, and as the king who made the Danes Christian.

The second site is another burial site, at Hørning, further north in Jutland. At a later date, apparently, than the major changes at Jelling, probably around the year 1000, one of the last known of the set of wooden chamber graves characteristic of the final century of the Viking Age was constructed at an existing burial site here and covered with a barrow. This grave housed the body of a woman, buried in clothing adorned with silver thread, within the body of a cart, with many other grave goods, amongst which can be recognized glass beads, fragments possibly from a glass beaker, a knife and whetstone, a weight, a wooden bucket and another wooden vessel, a ceramic bowl, a small wooden table, and a bronze bowl — the latter with finely incised ornament that suggests the date of about AD 1000. The barrow was raised over at least two other earlier burials, both of which were oriented East-West and contained no grave goods. There was further burial at the site between the construction of the barrow and the building of a church here, which can be dated to shortly after AD 1060 on the strength of a dendrochronological date from a plank with Urnes-style decoration from it.

Burial in the body of a cart is a form of ostentatious burial for women which is familiar from southern Scandinavia, especially Jutland, in the tenth century. It was a tradition inherited from the pre-Christian period which was apparently conceptually adapted to the early Christian context of later tenth-century Denmark in such a way as to allow it to survive in use for up to a generation after the demise of its ostensible male equivalents — ‘equestrian’ graves with rich riding equipment, and rich weapon graves. If it is true, as it would appear, that there is a systematic pattern of male-female difference here, then some general cultural explanation must be sought rather than the invocation of sporadic and individual instances of conservatism. The implication would be that the material culture associated with men and women was not accorded the same significance; or more likely, that they were evaluated and interpreted according to crucially different schemes. This is not the place to go into possible characterizations of such schemes. It is sufficient to appreciate that the evidence for a sexually differentiated pair of systems refutes any attempt to reduce the evidence for the adaptation of pre-Christian monuments and traditions in early Christian Denmark to a set of random, *ad hoc*, syncretistic transitions. In material culture as in the mythology, Scandinavians of the early Christian period determinedly laid hold of and came to terms with the differences of their historical context — the immediate past — in order to secure the foundations of the new era.

Closing the circle of inter-relationship between the disparate aspects of

social and historical division and relationship that we have been trying to bring into an integrated perspective in this paper, the Hørning area is also home to two very important, apparently early eleventh-century, runestones. Both were raised by a man named Toki, who identifies himself, unusually, as Toki smiðr. One of these, at Hørning church and decorated with a cross in a prominent place at the end of the inscription, reads:

**tuki:smiþr:riþ:stin:ift:þurkisl:kupmutaR:sun:is:hanum:kaf:kul:
uk:frialsi**

(Toki smith raised [the] stone after Þorgils Guðmundarson, who gave him [gold?]/ [coal?] and freedom.)

The other, at Grensten, contains a more explicitly Christian prayer:

**tuki:smiþr:riþ:stin:þisi:aiftiR:Rifla:sun:asgis:bianaR:sunaR:
kup:hiab:þaRa:salu**

(Toki smith raised this stone after Refli, son of Asgi Bjarnarson. God help their souls.)

Now during his life, the smith is able to take a traditional monumental form, and with it to commemorate both his personal identity and his social relations, as well as his social advancement and his power to pray. There could, I think, be no better encapsulation of how written and material sources together give us a properly complementary insight into the past, and one that is incomparably fuller than any one source taken on its own. In the case of Norse studies, archaeology is not only an accessible and a substantial source, but also an essential basis for understanding what both the factual history and the myths of the Viking Period and the Middle Ages meant in practice.

Acknowledgement

The author's participation in the conference in Sydney is supported by a British Academy Overseas Conference Grant.