

Problems in Mythological Reconstruction: Thor, Thrym, and the Story of the Hammer over the Course of Time

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Abstract: In this article, the Old Icelandic poem *Þrymskviða*, which depicts an ancient myth about the theft and retrieval of Thor's hammer, is compared with a number of later texts describing the same story – a late medieval Icelandic rhyme *Þrymlur* and a number of ballads from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, – in order to find out if it is possible to reconstruct an earlier, common Scandinavian version of this myth. While such a reconstruction appears to be plausible, none of the extant sources reflects the proto-myth in its complete form: although the oldest source *Þrymskviða* generally appears to be the most conservative among the different versions of this story, some of the scenes from the proto-myth have been preserved better in the later sources.

1.

The myth about the theft and retrieval of Thor's hammer, which was highly popular among early Scandinavians, over the course of time has also enjoyed almost exceptional popularity among philologists: few other mythological Scandinavian stories – or concrete texts – have attracted as much scholarly interest as this myth.¹

It may be beneficial to provide a brief summary of the story, as it is presented in the oldest – and the most familiar – text, the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*: one day, the mighty thunder god Thor wakes up to realize that his hammer Mjöllnir has disappeared. The trickster Loki finds out that the hammer has been stolen by the giant Thrym, who only agrees to return the precious hammer if the Æsir give him the most beautiful

¹ A relatively recent overview of the very rich literature on this myth may be found in Lindow (2001, 295f.).

goddess Freyja as wife. Instead of Freyja, however, gods send the giants Thor himself, dressed as the bride. Thor devours an astonishing amount of food and alcohol at the feast, and, after the hammer is brought in to consecrate the marriage, Thor seizes his weapon and smashes all the giants.

Early studies of the hammer myth were often preoccupied with the dating of the sources (primarily *Þrymskviða*), as well as the origin of the myth itself – the latter concern spurred an intense search for extra-Scandinavian mythological parallels.² Much research has also been devoted to the investigation of the historical relationship between the Icelandic poem *Þrymskviða* and its later counterparts, viz. the late medieval Icelandic rhyme *Þrymlur* and a large number of even later continental Scandinavian ballads presenting variant descriptions of apparently the same myth.³ In some of the more recent scholarship, researchers have also interpreted the symbolism of this poem, reflecting upon the meaning of Thor's transvestism (Lindow, 1997), or the reception of *Þrymskviða* in the medieval Icelandic “shame and honour” society (Clunies Ross, 2002).

2.

Regarding the dating of *Þrymskviða*, which poses much more serious difficulties than the dating of the later ballads, very different opinions have been expressed: while some scholars classified this poem together with the very oldest eddic songs, others argued for a much more recent origin, often citing stylistic peculiarities of *Þrymskviða*, e.g. not infrequent employment of formulae also present in other Eddic poems, or the exceedingly comical – even satirical – tone of the poem.⁴ The currently most widespread belief among philologists regarding the date of *Þrymskviða*, however, as pithily summarized by Lindow (1997, 204), is that this poem is “a very late reworking of very early materials”, that is, while the familiar text of *Þrymskviða* is likely to be relatively young, the myth that it retells must go back to some very early times.

2 See Singer (1932), Schröder (1965, 21ff., 41), Puhvel (1972); more recently Lindow (1997, 209).

3 The term “rhyme” will be used throughout this article to refer to late medieval Icelandic epic poems known as *rímur* or *rímnaflokkar* in Icelandic, whereas the term “ballads” will be reserved for the much later continental Scandinavian poems.

4 For overviews, see Hallberg (1954, 52–70), Schröder (1965, 4–12); more recently Lindow (1997, 203–204).

What “early times” the Scandinavian hammer myth goes back to, and what this myth was like in that distant past is a question that is not possible to answer, due to absence of even earlier Scandinavian texts, close parallels in the mythologies of other nations, as well as the generally changeable nature of orally transmitted texts. Over the course of time a fair number of myths comparable to the Old Norse hammer story have been presented either as mythological parallels, or even as the potential sources of this myth. Even a quick comparison of all these myths, however, reveals large numbers of differences, making such claims speculative, and even if there once existed a single myth that all the known theft-and-retrieval stories, bearing any similarity to the Scandinavian hammer myth, could be derived from, its reconstruction today is beyond reach.

3.

Although the putative ancestor of all the stories adduced in literature can no longer be reconstructed with any certainty, the multiple similarities among the Scandinavian texts still suggest some sort of historical relationship, with at least two major possibilities available: on the one hand, the similarities among the texts may imply a common source, a single proto-myth that once was known to all pre-Viking Age Scandinavians. On the other hand, it is also possible that the very late continental ballads might be somehow based on the much older Icelandic sources: early on, the latter possibility was advocated by Bugge & Moe (1897).

4.

Bugge & Moe (1897) derived the continental ballads directly from the Icelandic rhyme *Drymlur*: according to a very complex scenario proposed by the two authors, the original Icelandic story was carried to continental Scandinavia by a presumably Norwegian poet at the time when Norwegian and Icelandic were still largely mutually intelligible (Bugge & Moe, 1897, 78, 111ff.). Shortly after that, the hammer story in its new Norwegian form would have travelled further to Denmark and Sweden.

Although the authors were aware that the extant Norwegian and Swedish versions of this myth are much more fragmentary than the Danish versions, they insisted on the Norwegian ballads being the oldest – the primary reason for that was their belief that the Icelandic poems could have only successfully reached Scandinavia via a speaker of some

continental West Scandinavian (i.e. Norwegian) dialect, attributing the relative length and complexity of the Danish ballads to a speedy transmission of the myth from Norway to Denmark. In the later times, the myth would have had rather different fortunes in the three traditions, over the course of time losing much of the original material in Norway and Sweden, but being preserved much better in Denmark (Bugge & Moe, 1897, 62ff.).

5.

The complexity of the scenario described in the preceding section clearly results from the way in which the two authors imagined the transition of the story, as well as their belief that the continental Scandinavian ballads must derive from *Þrymlur*. It is highly unlikely, however, that *Þrymlur* served as the model for the later ballads: while the similarities (most of which are also shared with *Þrymskviða*) can be equally easily interpreted as reflexes of some even older prototype, Bugge & Moe's model is seriously undermined by the very numerous structural, lexical, and formulaic differences between *Þrymlur* and the texts from continental Scandinavia. If the ballads indeed derived from *Þrymlur*, they should exhibit a significant number of secondary features clearly borrowed from the medieval Icelandic rhyme – while there is a large amount of such secondary material in *Þrymlur*, no traces of it can be discerned in any of the preserved ballads.

6.

It is suggested here the continental Scandinavian stories about Thor's hammer do not derive from the Icelandic texts: instead, all the extant stories may more or less directly reflect a probably much older source, a sort of "proto-myth" that was once well-known throughout the entire continental Scandinavia. Although the oldest source *Þrymskviða* probably recounts that proto-myth in many ways more accurately than the later texts, the early common Scandinavian prototype most likely still differed from the Eddic poem in certain aspects: as will be demonstrated below in this article, several scenes that occur in the rhyme *Þrymlur* all the later ballads are completely absent from *Þrymskviða*, suggesting that *Þrymskviða* itself has lost some of the original material.

The Scandinavian ballads display a number of obvious similarities, too, but while they imply close historical relationship among particular texts,

the structural differences between the continental Scandinavian and the insular (i.e., Icelandic) texts strongly favour an earlier common source.

7.

In this article, I will compare the plot of the hammer story as presented in *Brymskviða* (later: “Pk”) with the other extant, more or less complete versions of this myth, seeking to determine what insights they can provide into the structure and the contents of the underlying proto-myth. Including the fragmentary texts, over 20 different versions of the hammer story have been registered in Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, and 17 more complete texts have been selected for this study:⁵

1. *Brymlur* (Pm): an early fifteenth century Middle Icelandic ballad preserved in ms. AM 604 g 4^o (the manuscript itself is much later, from mid sixteenth century). This ballad is the longest of all, and many scenes are unique to it. Much of the text seems to be the author’s addition (cf. Finnur Jónsson 1896:iii). *Brymlur* both shares certain scenes with *Brymskviða* vis-à-vis the continental ballads and agrees with the continental ballads on some scenes absent from *Brymskviða*;

2. *Torekall* (N1): Norwegian; recorded 1913 in Fyresdal, Telemark.⁶ Exhibits clear similarities to N3 and N4, both recorded in the same county (*fylke*), as well as most of the Danish versions listed below;

3. *Torekallvisa I* (N2): Norwegian; recorded 1877 in Vestre Slidre, Valdres. Displays many similarities to N5 and N6, as well as some to the Swedish version (HH);

4. *Thor-guten* (N3): Norwegian; recorded 1913 in Fyresdal;

5. *Thor af Havsgaard, eller Asgaard* (N4): Norwegian; recorded ca. 1840 in Seljord, Telemark. It is in some ways different from N1 and N3,

⁵ Throughout this article, the individual poems will be referred to using their abbreviated forms, e.g. “N5”, “D1”, “HH”, “Pk” etc. When a specific stanza from a certain text is cited, the number of the stanza will be separated from the abbreviation of the text by a period, e.g. “D1.12”, “N5.1”, “HH.3”. In the case of *Brymlur*, which consists of three individual rhymes (*rímur*), it will be necessary to cite both the rhyme (Roman numeral) and stanza (Arabic numeral), e.g. “Pm I.10”, “Pm II.1” etc.

⁶ The texts of the Norwegian ballads have been retrieved from http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/lister/tsbalfa_titler/tittel_290e.html, and the order of presentation follows the website. The titles of the individual ballads follow the corresponding manuscripts.

and exhibits some minor similarities to the Swedish version (HH);

6. *Torekallvisa II* (N5): Norwegian; record discovered 1877; text from Ulnes, Valdres;

7. *Thore Kalls viise* (N6): Norwegian; recorded 1750 in Hallingdal, Buskerud;

8. *Tor af Havsgård* (D1): Danish; from *Seks indgange til balladen*, by Anelise Knudsen and Thorkild Knudsen, 1995. Displays many similarities to D2 and D7;⁷

9. *Thors Hammer* (D2): Danish; from *Jydske Folkeviser og Toner*, by Evald Tang Kristensen, 1871. D2 is closer to D7 than D1;⁸

10. *Tord aff Haffsgaard oc Tosse Greffue* (D3): Danish; from *It Hundrede udvaalde Danske Viser* by Anders Sørensen Vedel, 1591. Displays some similarities to D5;

11. *Tord aff Haffsgaard I* (D4): Danish; from *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*, by Svend Grundtvig, 1853. Displays some similarities to D9;

12. *Tord aff Hafsgaard II* (D5): Danish; from *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser*, by Svend Grundtvig, 1853;

13. *Tor af Havsgaard* (D6): Danish; from *Danmarks folkeviser i udvalg*, by Svend Grundtvig, 1882. Displays some similarities to D8 and D9;

14. *Tor aa Hagensgaard* (D7): Danish; from *Et hundrede udvalgte danske viser* by Jørgen Lorenzen, 1974;

15. *Thor av Havsgård* (D8): Danish; from *Hjemligt Hedenskab i almenfattelig Fremstilling* by Gudmund Schütte, 1919;

16. *Tord af Havsgaard* (D9): Danish; from *Danmarks Fornviser*, by Ernst von der Recke, 1927;

17. *Hammar-Hemtningen* (HH): Swedish; from *Svenska fornsånger* by Adolf Iwar Arwidsson, 1834–1842. Two nearly identical variants exist, and only one is used in this study. The Swedish variant displays similarities to N2, D6, and D8.⁹

8. The introduction

Although all the texts agree that Thor's hammer was lost, the descriptions of *how* it was lost vary so drastically that an accurate reconstruction of this scene is impossible. In almost all the texts (with the exception

⁷ This version of the ballad has been retrieved from <http://www.skjaldesang.dk>.

⁸ This and the following Danish texts were retrieved from http://heimskringla.no/wiki/Tor_af_Havsgård.

⁹ Retrieved from http://heimskringla.no/wiki/Hammar-Hemtningen_I.

of *Brymlur*), the story has an abrupt beginning that feels incomplete: in *Þrymskviða*, the poem begins with Thor waking up to learn that his hammer has disappeared (Þk.1), whereas at the beginning of the Swedish version, Thor is already lamenting his loss (HH.1). The Danish and the Norwegian sources – which overlap to some extent – possess only slightly longer introductions: in one version, shared by all the Danish texts and the Norwegian ballads N1, N3, N4 (which generally display many similarities to the Danish texts), Thor is said to have either thrown his hammer to some unknown location, or lost it there. The Norwegian texts N2, N5, and N6 begin the story in a still different way, depicting Thor as returning home from the forest, and realizing that a thief had stolen his hammer.

The only text with a detailed introduction is the Icelandic rhyme *Brymlur*. After a lengthy presentation of various heathen gods (stanzas I.1–10, the last six and a half describing Thor alone), the text proceeds to a description of the circumstances under which the hammer disappeared: Thor throws a party at home, and one of the guests is Thrym. During the night, the hammer mysteriously disappears (Þm I.11–12).

While the beginning sections in most of the texts appear too short, the introduction of *Brymlur* is clearly too long: the initial 10 stanzas of *Brymlur* are obviously a later addition (cf. also Finnur Jónsson, 1896, iii), and introductions exhibiting a very similar flavour can be found in two other contemporary Icelandic rhymes, viz. *Völsungsrímur* and *Lokrur* (both preserved in the same manuscript as *Brymlur*). It is also conceivable that the poet/performer of *Brymlur* may have secondarily lengthened his introduction, desiring to make the text more complete, or to have a less abrupt beginning.

9. The search for the hammer

All the texts agree on this scene, but it is described rather differently in the texts from different countries, the continental Scandinavian ballads exhibiting more similarities to each other than to the Icelandic versions of this myth. In the ballads, this scene is quite brief: Loki puts on wings (or some sort of a feather suit, cf. No. *fjederham*, *fjærhame*, Da. *fjederham*), and goes to look for Thor's hammer to a place generally described either as Thrym's palace, cf. *Gremmeli-gard* (N2, N5, N6), *Trolltrams gård* (HH), or some northern/Norwegian location, cf. *Nordenrikji* (N4), *Norgefjæld* (D1, D2, D7), resp. *Nørrefjæld* (D4, D6, D8, D9).

In the Icelandic texts, this scene is considerably longer, more detailed and humorous, although the two versions do not completely agree with each other: in *Þrymskviða*, this scene starts with an apparently bewildered Thor confessing to Loki that his hammer has been stolen (Þk.2). The two go to find Freyja, and ask her to lend them the feather suit, after which Loki flies to Jotunheim (Þk.3–5). In *Þrymlur*, on the contrary, Thor does not involve Loki until Freyja asks him who is going to search for the hammer (Þm I.14–17). The conversation between Thor and Freyja is quite different in the two texts, too. Nevertheless, these scenes in the two Icelandic texts exhibit certain lexical similarities, suggesting that the author of *Þrymlur* may have been familiar with *Þrymskviða*, cf. the following formulae from the two texts that employ very similar vocabulary:

fagra Freyio túna ‘Freyja’s beautiful dwellings’ (Þk.3) vs.
fagran Freyiv gard ‘Freyja’s beautiful abode’ (Þm I.14);

muntu mér, Freyia, fjaðrhams líá ‘lend me your feather suit, Freyja’ (Þk.3) vs.
Freyia líá mier fjadr ham þinn ‘Freyja, lend me your feather suit’ (Þm I.15);

ef ec minn hamar mætta-c hitta ‘if I am to come upon my hammer’ (Þk.3) vs.
ef þu hamarinn hitta matt ‘if you are able to come upon your hammer’
 (Þm I.16).

The longer description of this scene, displayed by the Icelandic texts, probably reflects the original story more faithfully than the shorter scenes from the ballads. The scene in which Thor asks Freyja for help resembles a motif that occurs fairly frequently in mythological stories and folktales, in which a character in distress asks others for assistance (and is often rejected for a number of times): a comparable scene may be found in the structurally similar Anzu myth from Mesopotamia (Dalley, 1989, 203–221), as well as numerous stories from around the world, including such diverse places as Siberia, Taiwan, and Australia.

10. The meeting with Thrym

While this scene is described in all the texts, the individual details vary so much that it can only be reconstructed in a very sketchy way. Both Icelandic texts agree that Loki finds Thrym on a mound (OÍc. *haugr*), but Thrym is

involved in different activities. In the continental ballads, the lord of the giants appears walking by the seashore (D₁, D₇), staying in some sort of building (D₃–6, D₈, N₄), stirring fire (N₂, N₅, N₆), or forging something (HH; cf. st. 3: *Trolltram stodh och smidde* ‘Trolltram stood and forged’).

The conversation between Loki and Thrym (or the corresponding character in the continental ballads) starts differently in the different versions of this story, too: whereas in all the Danish ballads as well as N₁ and N₃, Tossegreve welcomes Loki with (at least seemingly) friendly words, asking about life in Asgard and/or Thor’s personal life, in some of the Norwegian texts (N₂, N₅, N₆), at first Gremmil briefly teases Loki. In some other texts, Thrym goes straight to the point of Loki’s visit (N₄, Pk, Pm), whereas in the Swedish version, it is Loki himself who addresses Trolltram first, asking him to admit having stolen the hammer (HH.4).

Thrym admits having stolen and hidden the hammer in all the texts. The depth at which Mjollnir was hidden exhibits much variation, and although the variation itself is banal – and in most cases due to alliteration, – one can notice that some of the numbers recur: most of the Danish texts agree on “55 feet”, whereas three sources say “44 feet”; N₄ and HH have “55 fathoms” (the text actually says “15 and 40 fathoms”), N₁ and N₃ show “15 fathoms”, and N₂ and N₅ (which generally agree on many details) have “8 ells and 9 fathoms”. The two Icelandic texts in this case greatly disagree with each other, although the numerals employed in these texts are strangely similar to the numerals used in N₂ resp. N₅, cf. “8 leagues” in *Þrymskviða* vs. “9 feet” in *Þrymlur*.¹⁰

In exchange for the hammer, the lord of the giants demands a bride. The Icelandic versions of this story, in both of which Thrym demands Freyja – the sexiest goddess of all, – must reflect the original story the most faithfully,¹¹ whereas the various names of the bride in the conti-

10 Unlike the continental texts, in the Icelandic poems, the numerals alliterate not with the units of length, but with some other words, cf. *átta rǫstum fyrir iorð neðan* ‘eight leagues under the ground’ in Pk.8, resp. *nyv feta nidur j jord nu er hann grafin med ollv* ‘nine feet down the earth now it has been buried entirely’ (Pm I.25).

11 Divine or semi-divine beings threatening to capture the most beautiful goddesses also occur in other mythologies, cf. the Greek myth about the powerful brothers Otos and Ephialtes who set out to kidnap the Olympian goddesses Hera and Artemis. Also in Indian mythology, the invincible twins Sunda and Upasunda fatefully seek to possess the perfectly beautiful apsaras Tillotamā. Another parallel may be adduced from the *Prose Edda*, in which a certain giant tries to strike a deal with Æsir, demanding Freyja in exchange for a powerful defensive wall.

mental ballads, such as “Frøieborg”, “Fredensborgh”, “fruga Valborg” etc. are later corruptions of the original name “Freyja”.

11. Loki returns to Asgard

This scene exists in all the sources, but the texts display great variation, making an accurate reconstruction of the proto-scene almost impossible. In some of the continental Scandinavian ballads, the scenes in which Loki meets Tossegreve/Gremmil and Thor employ the same formulae, e.g. in D1, Loki finds both Tossegreve and later Thor walking by the seashore,¹² whereas in D4, D6, and D8, Loki finds both in a “stoffue/Stue”, i.e. their respective manors. In N5, Loki finds the giant and Thor just before they retire to their respective beds, cf. *kom han se aat Gremmeli-gard / før Gremmil han gjikk se aat senge* ‘he came to Gremmeli-gard before Gremmil went to bed’ (N5.2) vs. *kom han se aat Æsagard / før Torekall gjikk se aat senge* ‘he came to Asgard before Torekall went to bed’ (N5.8). Also *Þrymskviða* employs almost identical vocabulary in the two scenes.

In the other texts, the description of this scene is much briefer, as Loki proceeds straight to retelling Thrym’s words: such are three Norwegian versions (N1, N3, N4), three Danish ballads (D2, D7, D9), the Swedish text, and *Þrymlur*, in all of which the text is reduced to minimum, retaining only the word-exchange between Thor and Loki. Although it is likely that this minor scene has always been brief, the poems of the latter group probably display an abbreviated version of the original story.

12. Freyja approached

This scene is present in most of the variants, with the exception of the closely related D1, D2, and D7. The descriptions of this scene exhibit much variation, but the greatest differences lie between the continental texts vis-à-vis the Icelandic sources.

The two Icelandic texts display a number of differences, too: in the older *Þrymskviða*, Thor goes to Freyja accompanied by Loki (Þk.12), whereas in *Þrymlur*, Thor goes alone (Þm II.1). The conversation between

¹² In D7, which otherwise often agrees with D1, only Tossegreve walks by the seashore.

the gods also proceeds differently in the two texts: in *Brymskviða*, Thor tells Freyja to dress up and accompany him to Jotunheim (st. 12). Freyja angrily refuses (st. 13), becoming so angry that even her necklace Brisingamen (Oic. *Brisingamen*) falls to the ground. In *Brymlur*, the text is, as usual, more comical: in a way that seems nearly naïve, Thor asks Freyja if she would like to marry a giant (st. II.2), offering her gold¹³ and a necklace (=Brisingamen?; st. II.3). Freyja – red in the face from anger – says she would rather drown herself than go to Jotunheim (st. II.4). Rejected by Freyja, Thor is so distressed that he cannot fall asleep at night (st. II.5).

13.

The accounts in the ballads are generally much briefer, and they normally begin with Freyja's reaction to Thor's request. The descriptions of her reaction vary greatly: in the Danish ballads D6 and D8, Freyja becomes so upset with Thor's request that blood splashes from her fingers and flows to the ground (st. 12). She firmly tells Thor she will never marry a troll, cf. *Ret aldrig tager jeg til Mand / den Trolde så led og lang* 'never shall I take as husband such an unpleasant and tall troll' (D8.13). Thor asks Freyja how much gold she will give him for another solution (st. 14). This scene is presented in a very similar way in HH, although in the Swedish ballad, it is Freyja's fingers that fall to the ground, and the goddess does not maintain that she would not marry a troll.

The rest of the Scandinavian texts are still briefer: the Danish D3-D5 and D9, as well as the Norwegian N1, N3, and N4 only contain the scene in which Freyja refuses to marry a troll. This scene is obviously related to the same scene from D6 and D8, but, unlike D6 and D8, in all the latter texts it is further specified that Freyja would rather marry a Christian man than a troll, cf. *I giffue mig helder en Christen Mand / end denne her Trolde saa læd* 'give me rather to a Christian man than such an unpleasant troll' (D3.12).

The Norwegian versions N2, N5, and N6 only contain the scene in which blood splashes from Freyja's face (cf. D6 and D8 above), but the Norwegian text is in a peculiar way different from the Danish: whereas in the Danish ballads, Freyja's blood flows to the ground, cf. *Da. blodet...*

¹³ The text says <þigg nu malmm> 'now accept metal', but some precious metal (gold or silver) is clearly implied.

randt paa Jorden ned (D6.12), in the Norwegian texts, Freyja is said to have become “as black as earth”, cf. No. *ho sbartna so de vore jord* (N5.11).

14.

The comparison of the interaction between Thor and Freyja in all the sources reveals both differences and similarities. Among the ballads, D6 and D8 may well display the most archaic and the most complete variants of the story; nevertheless, they are quite different from the Icelandic accounts. It appears, therefore, that the continental and the insular versions of the myth may have begun to diverge quite early. Which of these differences and similarities are likely to reflect the most archaic elements?

It is likely that the scene in which Thor (whether alone or with Loki) goes to search for Freyja, and which is only described in the Icelandic texts, is an inherited feature – the later ballads may have simply lost this connecting scene.¹⁴ It is also safe to maintain that the main points of this part of the story are Thor’s request for Freyja to marry Thrym in exchange for the hammer, and her refusal, that are described in the simplest and clearest way in *Þrymskviða*. Freyja’s claim that she would rather marry a Christian man than a troll (as per some of the Danish and Norwegian ballads), is an obvious innovation that could have been added to the story only after Christianity had become quite familiar to Viking Age Scandinavians (probably not earlier than IX c.). Likewise, also the scenes occurring in some of the texts, in which Thor either offers Freyja gifts (Þm II.3), or, conversely, demands that she pay him (D6, D8, HH), must be later additions: since all the texts indicate (sometimes indirectly, see section 16 below) that the ultimate decision to send Thor to Jotunheim instead of Freyja was taken at the divine assembly, the special negotiation between Thor and Freyja looks secondary.

15.

As for the rest of the details displayed by the individual texts, the most puzzling among them appear to be the following two: on the one hand,

¹⁴ Other instances of connecting scenes poorly reflected in the ballads include Thor going to meet Freyja at the beginning of the story, the gods Æsir meeting to discuss the loss of the hammer, the description of Thor wearing bridal clothes, Thor travelling to Jotunheim – these scenes are described in a more or less detailed way only in the Icelandic sources.

the differences in the descriptions of the necklace scene in the Icelandic texts (*the only* texts that mention a necklace), and, on the other hand, the differences and the similarities among *Þrymskviða* and many continental ballads, in which it is said that as Freyja becomes angry with Thor's words, something that belongs to her falls to the ground: whereas in *Þrymskviða*, it is her necklace Brisingamen, in the continental texts it is either blood from Freyja's face or fingers, or the fingers themselves.

Regarding the latter scene, it is obvious that the different descriptions presented in the individual texts ultimately reflect a single proto-scene, which developed differently in different areas. *Þrymskviða* probably displays the most archaic features here, whereas the ballads are almost certainly innovative: first and foremost, the paragon of divine beauty cannot afford to lose her fingers, or to have them (or her face) mutilated. Furthermore, one may also speculate whether the word 'finger' (or 'fingers') cannot be a late corruption of the original 'Brising-', as the two display much phonetic similarity. In the texts where blood splashes from Freyja's limbs or face, one can probably see another variation of the same theme, a different attempt to dramatize the scene.

As for the differences displayed in the necklace scene in the Icelandic sources, *Þrymskviða* may once again display the more archaic material: the necklace (note the definite article in Mlc. *men-it*, Þm II.3) that Thor is said to have offered Freyja in *Þrymlur* may or may not refer to Brisingamen. If it indeed refers to Brisingamen, this detail would have to be interpreted as the author's invention, as there are good reasons to believe that Freyja had obtained the beautiful necklace long before Thor lost his hammer: on the one hand, there exists another account of how Freyja acquired Brisingamen, described in the introduction of the Old Icelandic *Sǫrta þáttr* (see Sigurður Nordal, 1944, 304). On the other hand, another indication that Brisingamen must have been generally perceived as Freyja's major attribute is provided in *Þrymskviða*: when Heimdall suggests that the gods dress up Thor as the bride (see section 16 below), he specifically mentions that the bride should be adorned with Brisingamen (Þk.15).

All this makes it likely that Freyja did not receive Brisingamen from Thor, and that the necklace mentioned in *Þrymlur* most likely does not reflect any "archaic" or "lost" story, whether or not it indeed refers to Brisingamen.

To sum up, it is likely that the scenes from the proto-myth that have been discussed in the preceding sections 12–15 may be reflected the

most faithfully in *Þrymskviða*. Whenever the younger texts disagree with *Þrymskviða*, the differences may be plausibly explained as later additions or corruptions of the original story.

16. The council of the Æsir and the wedding preparation

This scene is clearly depicted only in the two Icelandic texts, in which it is clearly said that all the Æsir gathered at an assembly, wondering how to retrieve the hammer: in *Þrymskviða*, seven stanzas (56 half-lines) are devoted to this episode (Þk.14–20), whereas in the longer and generally much wordier *Þrymlur*, only five fairly short stanzas (15 lines) are allotted to this scene (Þm II.7–11). In both texts, Heimdall (called “Heimdallr” in *Þrymskviða*, but “Heimdæll” in *Þrymlur*) suggests that Thor is dressed as the bride instead of Freyja, and *Þrymskviða* contains an additional scene in which Thor initially refuses to put on women’s clothes.

In the Scandinavian ballads, this scene is not represented as well as in the Icelandic texts. In the Swedish text, only half a stanza is allotted to the description of how Torckar has bridal clothes made for him, cf. *Däth var Torcker sielfver han lätte bröllopskläde skiera...* ‘it was Torckar himself; he let cut bridal clothes’ (HH.10).¹⁵ Most of the Danish and the Norwegian texts tell how Thor is prepared for the wedding, but the descriptions are much briefer than in the Icelandic texts:

D8.15:

Tage vi Thor, vor gamle Broder,	(Let’s take Thor, our old brother,
så vel vi børste hans Hår,	we’ll comb his hair well,
føre vi hannem til Nørrefjæld	we will take him to Nørrefjæld
alt før så væn en Mår!	as a pretty maiden!

N2.14:

No vilja me taka han Torekall,	Now let’s take Torekall,
væl vilje me byste hass haar,	we’ll comb his hair well,
klæ so paa hono brureklæo,	[we will] put bridal clothes on him,
og føre n aat Gremmeligaard!	and take him to Gremmeligaard!)

Unlike the Icelandic texts, an assembly of the gods is nowhere mentioned in the continental texts; however, the usage of the first person plural pronoun ‘we’ in the description of Thor’s preparation (cf. N2 and

¹⁵ A fairly similar line occurs in D6 and D8.

D8 above) implies that the prototype of the ballads must have contained such a scene, too.

17. Thor travels to Jotunheim and meets the giants

This scene, too, is described in a detailed way only in the two Icelandic texts (although the two descriptions are quite different). In *Þrymskviða*, Thor is said to travel to Jotunheim in a rather noisy manner, breaking rocks and scorching Earth with flames (Þk.21); meanwhile, Thrym is rejoicing at the prospect of marrying Freyja (st. 22–23). The narration in *Þrymlur* is much longer this time, containing 11 stanzas (33 lines): in *Þrymlur*, Thor is said to travel to Jotunheim by Woden's "excellent boat" (Ic. *frábært far*)¹⁶ with a very numerous company that contains gods, birds, wild beasts, cattle, and other creatures – the description of Thor's company covers two full stanzas (Þm II.13–15). When they arrive at Jotunheim, the merry giants are waiting outside – not seeing Thor in the company, they ask the guests where he is, judging that the mighty thunder god did not have the courage to leave home without his hammer (st. 17–18).

In the ballads, also this scene is not given much space. In the Swedish text, Thor's preparation for the wedding and the subsequent journey to Jotunheim fit within a single stanza (HH.10). In the mutually close Danish texts D1, D2, and D7, this scene is somewhat longer: the texts mention Thor's boat trip to Norgefjæld (=Jotunheim), and the welcoming at the destination. This scene is the longest in D1, covering 5 stanzas (D2 and D7 only devote two stanzas to this scene).

The Norwegian sources do not contain this scene. Since all the other versions have at least some description, one must conclude that in the Norwegian tradition, this scene was lost in the course of time – perhaps because, not containing any dialogue, it did not contribute much to the development of the story.

The Icelandic texts once again probably contain more original material than the continental texts, and most likely fairly large parts of the original myth must have been cut out from the later ballads.

18. The feast

None of the texts misses this episode, in which the suspension is about to reach the climax, but it is perhaps here that the texts exhibit the most

¹⁶ A "boat" or "sailing" are also mentioned in D1, D2, and D7.

variation in the narration. It is obvious that at least in some of the texts, the vocabulary choices were dictated by the form: e.g. in *Þrymlur*, the poet was confined not only by alliteration (as in the older *Þrymskviða*), but also by rhythm and end rhyme – the latter was a new feature in Icelandic poetry, but typical of rhymes and ballads.

The part of the story describing the feast consists of many scenes, presented differently in different texts. These scenes may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The bride is served by many trolls or Tossegreve (Thrym) himself;
2. Thrym wants to kiss the bride, but the bride looks scary; Loki tells him the bride had not slept for many nights out of desire to marry Thrym;
3. The bride asks Thrym to give her a large vessel to drink/eat from (or drinks from a large cup/horn);
4. The bride consumes enormous amounts of food and alcohol, making Thrym wonder why she seems to be so insatiable.

Not all the scenes listed above occur in all the sources, e.g. scene 1 only occurs in the Danish texts (all), as well as some of the Norwegian ballads. Furthermore, the Danish sources exhibit two variants of this scene: the bride is served by trolls in D1, D2, and D7, whereas in all the remaining Danish ballads, as well as the Norwegian N1 and N3, the bride is served by Tossegreve (i.e. Thrym).

19.

Scene 2 only occurs in the Icelandic sources. Although the text is not exactly the same in the two poems, the usage of an almost identical formula in both texts may serve as additional evidence that the author of *Þrymlur* may have known *Þrymskviða* (cf. section 9 above), cf. *hví eru þndótt augu Freyio?* ‘why are Freyja’s eyes terrible’ (Þk.27) vis-à-vis the almost identical *þvi erv ondott augu Freyiv?* in Þm II.22.

20.

Different variations of scene 3 only occur in some of the balladic versions – specifically HH, N2, N5, and N6. The Norwegian texts display the most consistency: the bride refuses to drink from a horn, demanding

a huge vat, and that it should be brought on poles, cf. No. ... *eg gjiet inkje drikke taa hødno / du gjeve me drikke taa bøllestampo / og føre so hit med stongo* (N2.19). The Swedish version is only slightly different: the bride tells the giants that, in order for the wedding banquet to take place, they should throw away the small cups/chalices, and provide buckets and tubs or vats, cf. Sw. ... *kasta dhe små bågare bort, bähr ihn medh ämmar och såå* (HH.11).

In the Danish versions, this scene is depicted somewhat differently: first, unlike the Swedish and the Norwegian texts, the bride does not specifically demand large drinking vessels, but is said to be drinking from them, cf. D3.17 and D5.17 (nearly identical texts). In some of the Danish texts, the large vessels are used not for drinking, but for eating, cf. D2.17 and D7.17 (the texts are almost identical). The two types of Danish texts are quite different from each other.

D1 is different from the other Danish versions in that in this ballad, the bride both drinks from a large vessel (like in D3 and D5), and demands her porridge to be cooked in a large pot (like in D2 and D7). It is obvious, though, that the text of D1 is based on the same underlying story as the other versions, as the same vocabulary and the same scenes are repeated.

21.

The Icelandic rhyme *Þrymlur* contains a unique variant of scene 3, displaying many differences from the continental ballads. Unlike the continental sources, Thor does not demand any large vessels for drinking or eating; nor does the description of the bride's drinking capacity resemble the formulae employed in the later ballads. In *Þrymlur*, scene 3 has to be discerned from a longer scene in which more than one thing happens: at the beginning of this scene, Thrym is wondering at the barbarous atmosphere of the banquet, then he orders the great drinking horn to be fetched, a scary "waiter" comes in, the drinking horn is briefly described, and, in the very last line, the bride empties it in a single gulp (Þm III.14–16).

22.

Scene 4 occurs in all the versions of this myth, although the individual texts display many differences. The most significant of these are the ways

the giants react to the bride's appetite, as it is once again possible to discern certain patterns, recurring scenes, and formulae:

1. Tossegreve/Trolltram wonders why the bride never becomes full (D1, D2, D7; HH);
2. Tossegreve wonders why the bride eats and drinks so much (D3, D5);
3. Tossegreve/Gremmil wonders why the bride eats so much (D4, D6, D8, D9; N2, N5, N6);
4. Tossegreive wonders why the bride drinks so much (N4);
5. Tussegre(i)ven/Thrym notes the "sharpness" (i.e. intensity) of the bride's bite (N1, N3, Þk).

One can quickly see that at times not only the story, but also entire formulae are repeated in texts from different countries, cf., e.g. D3.18 vis-à-vis N1.17, or D3.19 vis-à-vis N4.15. These similarities clearly point towards shared roots, although it is also obvious that in the course of time, the different versions of the myth mingled extensively, borrowing formulae and vocabulary from each other.

It has to be noted that no scene of the types listed above occurs in *Brymlur*: its omission is quite surprising, as otherwise the style of this text is very humorous, and direct speech is liberally employed. The bride's extraordinary drinking capacity, which is so pompously highlighted in most of the texts, in *Brymlur* is only vaguely alluded to at the very end of st. III.16 (see section 21 above).

In most of the texts, Thrym's surprise at the bride's appetite is followed by Loki's line, in which he tells Thrym that the bride had not eaten for many days/nights – from 7 to 14, depending on the text. Such a line is only absent from D1, D2, and D7, as well as the Norwegian N1 and N3.¹⁷

23.

Although the comparison of the various scenes discussed in sections 18–22 has revealed a large amount of variation, the good attestation of these scenes in the extant sources, as well as their relative similarity

¹⁷ This line is also absent from N5 and N6, both of which break off just before this scene. However, based on their general similarity to N2 (which contains this line), it is likely that N5 and N6 derive from a longer earlier version that contained such a line, too.

to each other, imply that these scenes reflect original parts of the proto-myth – this seems to be especially true of scenes 2 through 4. Scene 1, describing how Thrym or the trolls desire to serve the bride, must have certainly been somehow represented in the original myth, but its highlighting in some of the closely related ballads may well be their shared innovation. On the contrary, the scene in which Thrym desires to kiss the bride (scene 2; attested only in the Icelandic sources), most likely reflects an archaic section of the myth: as one can see from its comparison with scene 4, in both scenes, the giants are surprised by some feature of the bride – in scene 2 it is her looks, whereas in scene 4 it is her appetite, both of which are rather un-feminine. In both cases, Loki provides an explanation for the giants, dissipating their suspicion. Since scene 4, which is very well attested in the extant sources, is very likely to be an inherited feature, the same can be fairly safely assumed for scene 2.

Some variant of scene 3 must also be reconstructed for the proto-myth, even though it is absent from *Drymskviða*. As was discussed in sections 20–21 above, the texts disagree on whether the bride demands large drinking/eating vessels, or whether the giants supply them themselves (in the latter type of texts, the bride is silent throughout the banquet). It is tempting to view the texts in which the bride does not speak as reflecting a more archaic variant of the story: on the one hand, Loki's speaking is the only justification for his presence at the banquet at all. On the other hand, the omission of the scene in which Loki tells the giants that the bride had not eaten for many days prior to arriving at Jotunheim (cf. D1, D2, and D7) looks secondary: in the proto-myth, Loki must have provided the giants with the answers in all cases. Also the bride's demand for a large pot of porridge (as per some Danish texts) must be an innovation, as in the rest of the texts, only drinking vessels (cups, horns, buckets, etc.) are mentioned. In the original scene, therefore, most likely, the giants supplied a large drinking vessel (a drinking horn?) for the enormous silent bride, and, to everybody's surprise, she emptied it instantly.

24. The hammer is brought in; Thor beats up the giants

These two scenes conclude the story, and they appear in all the complete texts. They must have been part of the original myth, but here it is where *Drymlur* and the ballads display an important difference from *Drymskviða*. The scene of the fetching of the hammer is quite brief in *Drymskviða*, fitting within a single stanza 30, whereas in all the later texts,

the description of this scene is longer and more detailed: generally, after Thrym orders the hammer to be brought into the wedding banquet hall, the hammer turns out to be so heavy that it requires the strength of many giants to carry it. The bride, on the contrary, lifts it very easily – in some texts, she does it with one hand, and in others – with two fingers. In some texts, the bride lifts it as lightly “as a stick”. The continental ballads exhibit especially many similarities.

The Icelandic poem *Brymlur* contains this scene, too, although it is in certain ways unlike the corresponding scene in the continental materials. The text is not entirely clear (parts of it may be corrupt), but it appears that the hammer was brought in by an old ogress rather than a group of giants (Ðm III.21⁴) – it was only later that the bride snatched it (Ðm III.22³).

In spite of the differences between the ballads and *Brymlur*, it is obvious that the same scene is being described. The author of *Brymlur* only seems to have altered the story a little, substituting an ogress for the (probably more original) group of giants, and “re-assigning” Thor’s ability to lift the hammer easily to the ogress.

25. Conclusions

The similarities among the Scandinavian sources for the hammer story make it tempting to derive them from a single source, a proto-myth that once was known to all early Scandinavians. The fundamental points of the plot of this myth may be reconstructed in the following way: Thrym steals Thor’s hammer, Loki finds it out, but Thrym demands Freyja in exchange for the hammer. Freyja refuses to sacrifice herself; therefore, by gods’ suggestion, Thor goes to the giants himself, disguised as the bride. He keeps silent throughout the banquet, while Loki does the speaking. The giants are surprised by the bride’s appearance, appetite, as well as drinking ability, but do not realize they have been deceived until the hammer is brought to the banquet hall. Many trolls struggle with the heavy hammer, by Thor lifts it easily, and, having retrieved his weapon, beats up (or kills off) the giants.

Among the scenes that do not appear in all of the extant texts but can be plausibly reconstructed as part of the proto-myth, the following three must be stressed: the decision-making at the divine assembly, Thor’s drinking from a very large drinking vessel at the wedding banquet, and the fetching of the hammer.

The decision-making at the divine assembly is only described in the two Icelandic texts; however, hints towards such a scene are also provided in some of the continental texts (see section 16). As for Thor's drinking from an extraordinarily large horn (or some other drinking vessel), this scene of the proto-myth is primarily reconstructed on the continental evidence, whereas its depiction in the Icelandic sources is quite scanty (see section 21 above).

Perhaps the most striking difference between *Brymskviða* and the later texts is the absence of the hammer-fetching scene in the former: the structural similarities among the ballads and the Icelandic poem *Brymlur* make it fairly clear that this must be an archaic scene, not included in *Brymskviða*.

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