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## Asgard Revisited

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Simon Halink

# **Asgard Revisited**

**Old Norse Mythology and Icelandic National Culture  
1820-1918**

University of Groningen

2017

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# **Asgard Revisited**

Old Norse Mythology and National Culture in Iceland, 1820-1918

**PhD thesis**

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
 University of Groningen  
 on the authority of the  
 Rector Magnificus Prof. E. Sterken  
 and in accordance with  
 the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on  
 Wednesday 11 October 2017 at 14.30 hours

by

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Was sich nie und nirgends hat begeben,  
Das allein veraltet nie.

– *Friedrich Schiller*



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The idea was received with great enthusiasm by my lecturer at the University of Utrecht, Frans Willem Lantink, who did not only supervise the thesis, but also encouraged me to publish an article on the same subject and to apply for a PhD scholarship in order to further pursue this line of research. His enthusiasm – and that of Marjan Schwegman of the Dutch Institute for War Documentation – proved contagious, and eventually inspired me to write a research proposal strong enough to be accepted by the Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG) of the University of Groningen in 2011. In the flourishing intellectual climate of Groningen great ideas were born, especially in meetings with my promotor Mineke Bosch and the other PhD candidates supervised by her, and during coffee breaks and conversations with my fellow PhD students. Without the mental support and comic relief offered by my colleagues Guido van Hengel, Margriet Fokken, Stef Wittendorp, Johannes Kester, Roald van Elswijk, Odile Strik, Femke Swarte, Nelleke IJssennagger, Birte Schohaus, Lianne van Beek, Petra Boudewijn, Boh Learn Toh, Marieke Luurtsema and Rendel Geertruida, the whole process would have been considerably less enjoyable. I have gained a lot from the thought-provoking conversations with Han Nijdan (of the Frisian Academy) and Riemer Janssen, and especially with Kim Middel, my fellow 'Icelandologist', with whom I could share frustration, euphoria, ideas, and an office, and with whom I founded the unofficial 'Groningen branch' of the Arnarnagænan Institute. Kim has been a great support to me – both mentally and intellectually – throughout the whole research.

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contemporary Icelandic society. Here, I would like to thank Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson in particular, High Priest (*allshejargoði*) of Iceland's rapidly-growing Ásatrú Association, for providing me with unique insights into the various ways in which the gods and goddesses of the Eddas tie into many of the islanders' modern sense of 'Icelandicness'. Although Icelandic Neopaganism is too recent a development to be examined in the present study – I will only touch upon this topic in Chapter 10 –, the link between Old Norse mythology and national identity as 'performed' by contemporary followers of Ásatrú has taught me a lot about the dynamics of myth and identity in general.

English is not my native language, and even if it were, *academic* English is something else entirely. Therefore, I am greatly indebted to Ciaran McDonough, a PhD candidate at the National University of Ireland (Galway) and a great Iceland enthusiast, for proofreading my manuscript and correcting my – often very chaotic – sentences, while at the same time providing me with interesting parallel case studies in the Celtic revival of the Irish national movement. It is thanks to her comments and suggestions – as well as those of all the aforementioned scholars who have, in one way or another, contributed to this project – that this book has eventually turned out the way it has. For that, I am immensely grateful. Any remaining errors and mistakes that the reader may stumble upon in the following pages are of course my sole responsibility.

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## Note on the Text

Since the original Icelandic orthography will be adhered to in this study, a short introduction to the pronunciation of certain letters and a note on the text is included. When writing about Old Norse-Icelandic or modern Icelandic concepts, places and persons, I always use the original version of the names and words – Ásgarðr, Þórr, Alþingi –, also when an anglicised equivalent – like Asgard, Thor, and Althing – is available. Only where the standard English transliteration is used in a quote, this will not be modified. Throughout the text I will use the Old Norse versions of the names of gods and eddic, mythological concepts. The modern Icelandic versions of these terms – Þór in stead of Þórr, Ásgarður rather than Ásgarðr – will only be adopted where they occur in a literal quote.

For the sake of authenticity, I will adhere to the Icelandic custom of addressing Icelanders by their given or first name – after they have been properly introduced under their full name –, rather than by their patronymic last name. In the references and the bibliography however, I will not distinguish between Icelanders and non-Icelanders, meaning that the last name will always be leading. That may not be the Icelandic way of doing things, but it will certainly render the bibliography more orderly and easier to use. The spelling of personal names often changes according to the grammatical cases; thus Egill Skallagrímsson becomes Egils Skallagrímssonar in the genitive case, and Egla Skallagrímssyni in the dative case.

As to the Icelandic alphabet; a few letters deserve some explanation here. The letter þ (upper case: Þ) is pronounced ‘th’ as in ‘thought’, whereas the ð (upper case: Ð) is pronounced ‘th’ as in ‘weather’. The æ (upper case: Æ) is pronounced ‘i’, as in ‘kind’. The sound of several vowels changes when diacritical marks are added; á (upper case: Á) is pronounced ‘ow’ as in ‘down’, ú (Ú) is pronounced ‘ou’ as in ‘you’, í (Í) and ý (Ý) both become ‘ee’ as in ‘creek’, and é (É) is pronounced ‘ye’ as in ‘yes’. Finally, the letter ö (Ö) is pronounced ‘u’ as in ‘usher’. All translations in this study are my own, unless otherwise indicated.





## Introduction

On the occasion of the Nordic Capital Cities' Conference of 2007, hosted by the Nordic Association of Reykjavík, Iceland's former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir<sup>1</sup> delivered an address on the central theme of the meeting: Nordic mythology, and its influence throughout the ages. Before an audience of Nordic attendees, she emphasised the appropriateness of this topic, "because it is striking how Nordic mythology has accompanied us, at least in Icelandic society, as a matter of course for one thousand years."<sup>2</sup> The old faith may have been replaced by Christianity a millennium ago, but much of the wisdom of the forefathers remained, and has had a formative effect on the culture and mentality of the Icelanders. The former stateswoman traced not only the characteristic individualism and fatalism of the Icelanders, but also their widespread belief in life after death to the ancient religion the Vikings brought with them when they first settled the island. This pagan world-view, contained in the stories about Óðinn, Þórr, and all the other inhabitants of Ásgarðr (Asgard), is something the Icelanders once had in common with their 'cousins' in mainland Scandinavia. But it was an Icelander, the medieval author Snorri Sturluson, who transformed "this ancient world picture into poetry, giving it the freedom of the mind as a gift. Through his stroke of genius in transforming mythology into poetry and literature, Snorri created a common heritage for all of the Nordic countries, one that has undoubtedly remained strongest in Iceland ever since."<sup>3</sup> It is this common heritage that forms an 'invisible tie' between Iceland and the other Nordic nations, magical and unbreakable, just like "the chain the gods used to fetter the wolf Fenrir".<sup>4</sup>

These musings, voiced by no less a person than the former president, and a beloved icon of the nation, form a lucid example of what we could refer to as applied mythology. In this particular case, the myths are mobilised to celebrate a 'common heritage' and a 'magical tie', which vouch for the brotherhood and unity of the Nordic nations.<sup>5</sup> But at the same time, Vigdís invokes this corpus to underline the national uniqueness and literary greatness of the Icelanders in particular, whose link with this Nordic heritage is described as stronger than that of the other nations. It was an *Icelander*, not a Dane, a Norwegian or a Swede, who had transformed mythology into poetry and literature, and thus provided the other peoples of Scandinavia with their common heritage. Vigdís's account gravitates between pan-Nordic diplomacy and national pride, and the speech is infused with a fascinating kind of ambivalence; the eddic myths may be common heritage and tokens of Nordic unity, but they are *also* very Icelandic, a formative element in Iceland's national character, and something for which the other nations should be grateful. As such, this corpus secures the small island's privileged position in the constellation of larger Nordic nations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vigdís served between 1980 and 1996, and was the world's first democratically elected female head of state.

<sup>2</sup> Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, "We have a common heritage", in Unnar Stefánsson (ed.), *Hvat er með Ásum?/Hvad er med Aser?/Mikä Aasoilla on?/What ails the Æsir?* (speeches at the Capital Cities' Conference, Reykjavík September 2007; Reykjavík 2009) pp.165-172, 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p.166.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.172. The wolf Fenrir, offspring of Loki, was considered a threat by the Æsir gods and was therefore tricked and fettered with a magical tie. However, come Ragnarök, he would break free and kill Óðinn (see *Gylfaginning* in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*).

<sup>5</sup> For a similar diplomatic application of the Eddas by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, see her "Foreword" to Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rákel Sigurðardóttir-Rosenblad, *Iceland from Past to Present* (Reykjavík 1993) p.xv. Here, she quotes a famous verse from the eddic poem *Hávamál* to stress the importance of Iceland's friendship with other nations.

This ambivalence is by no means something new. Rather, it typifies the way Icelanders have engaged with their mythological heritage since the early nineteenth century, and reverberates in their attempts to carve out a prestigious cultural identity for this tiniest of nations. As the present study will demonstrate, Vigdís places herself with this speech in a long line of Icelandic intellectuals, artists, politicians, poets and scholars. The protagonists of this research have all engaged with Old Norse mythology in one way or the other, and in doing so, implicitly or explicitly, expressed their views on the Icelandic nation and its position vis-à-vis Scandinavia and the rest of the world. The national cultivation of the myths is characterised by an interplay of two opposing forces: a *centrifugal* one – focussing on the exclusivity of Icelandic culture and its being *different* from other cultures – and a *centripetal* one, which stresses Iceland’s interconnectedness with other – primarily Nordic – nations. Both strands of Iceland’s national discourse have found expression in refashionings of eddic mythology, and the tension between the two will be a central theme in the case studies of this dissertation. Most importantly, this study will establish that the perpetual re-interpretation and re-signification of mythological narratives constitutes the true ‘apple of Iðunn’, which keeps the gods forever young. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the role of mythology in national narratives is markedly different from that of historical and saga narratives; whereas the last category is mainly concerned with cultivating a glorious past, mythology represents the forward-looking face of Janus, and generally serves to construct ideological, more abstract visions of the *future* and the *eternal* nation, beyond the spatial and temporal limitations of historical narrative.



Being an isolated, exotic, and volcanically active island in the North Atlantic, just scratching the polar circle at its northernmost fringes, Iceland has always been a popular case study for biologists, sociologists and historians alike; the history and culture of its small and homogenous society has been typified as “splendidly splittable into Ph.D. topics.”<sup>1</sup> The island itself, situated on top of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge which separates the North American tectonic plate from the Eurasian one, is the result of millions of years of volcanic activity that is still shaping the island, and leaves the otherworldly and inhospitable in- and highlands void of trees and inhabitants. At present, all of the peripheral island’s just over 330.000 inhabitants live in the more inhabitable coastal regions, two thirds of them in the greater Reykjavík area. Iceland was the last European outpost to become permanently inhabited, from the second half of the ninth century AD onwards.<sup>2</sup> The turbulent story of its settlement – until ca. 930 AD – and the following Saga Age (*söguöld*; ca. 930-1056 AD) are remarkably well documented in the Old Norse sagas and other medieval accounts, like *Íslendingabók* (Book of the Icelanders) and *Landnámabók* (Book of the Settlements), both compiled in the twelfth century. They paint a heroic image of primarily Norwegian farmers and adventurers, unwilling to bow to the political ambitions – uniting all of Norway under one crown – of king Harald Fairhair (Old Norse: *Haraldr Hárfagri*, ca. 850-932), and found refuge on the newly discovered and uninhabited island. Most of the Viking Age settlers (*landnámsmenn*) described in the medieval sources originated from Norway, other parts of Scandinavia, and the British Isles; the significant Celtic contribution to this new community – which is evidenced by names of places and people, traces in both language and DNA – has to a large extent been neglected,

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<sup>1</sup> P.V. Kirch (ed.), *Island societies. Archaeological approaches to evolution and transformation* (Cambridge 1986) p.2, quoted in Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (eds.), *The Anthropology of Iceland* (Iowa City 1989) p.xi.

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the beginning of Iceland’s permanent settlement has been situated in the year 874 AD. Recent archaeological evidence suggests however that this date can probably be pushed somewhat further back in time.

overshadowed by the recorded tales of valiant Norsemen who brought their Gaelic slaves and women with them.<sup>1</sup> The Norse settlers did not elect a monarch, but formed an autonomous ‘Free State’ – in Icelandic historiography often referred to as a ‘Republic’ or ‘Commonwealth’ (*þjóðveldið*) –, governed by the annual assembly, or parliament, the *Alþingi* – established in 930 AD –, which convened every summer. Iceland’s official conversion to Christianity in 1000 – or possibly 999 – AD took place in a relatively diplomatic spirit, and did not entail the bloodshed associated with Christianisation in Western Europe. This rather peaceful transition enabled heathens to continue – at least for some time – their pagan worship in the privacy of their own homes. Although this leniency towards paganism did not last very long, the unique circumstances of Iceland’s Christianisation may have facilitated the oral transmission of the old myths, until they were eventually – undoubtedly modified by the process of transmission in a Christian setting – confided to parchment by (Christian) medieval writers like Snorri Sturluson. It is this corpus of Icelandic ‘pagan’ literature that would, in later centuries, become an object of admiration to European intellectuals in search of the pagan roots of their own nations.

After a short period of intense political violence known as the *Sturlungaöld* – the ‘Age of the Sturlungs’, named after Snorri Sturluson’s powerful family –, the Free State came to an end in 1262 as Iceland subjected itself to the Norwegian king. Between 1380 and 1814, it was part of the united kingdoms of Denmark and Norway, and considered a part of Norway. In the Treaty of Kiel (1814) the union of Denmark and Norway was dissolved, and Iceland became part of the Danish realm, to which it would belong until 1944. The four centuries between 1400 and 1800 are popularly perceived as a period of cultural and material stagnation, with poverty, famine, natural catastrophes, and an oppressive Danish trade monopoly. This ‘dark age’ has, in traditional Icelandic historiography, been contrasted to the ‘golden age’ of the Free State (930-1262), and to the ‘national awakening’ from ca. 1800 onwards. As in the case of most nineteenth-century national awakenings, the very soul or spirit of the nation was sought in the culture and literature of an idealised national golden age (*Gullöld Íslendinga*), hidden underneath layer upon layer of external – political and cultural – oppression.<sup>2</sup> This tripartite narrative template (golden age – national decline – national awakening) can be considered the historiographical blueprint of cultural nationalism, and inspired philologists and poets to salvage, study, cultivate, and emulate all historical and literary remains connected to that first stage of Icelandic history, for the benefit of restoring former greatness in the present.<sup>3</sup> Under the influence of Johann Gottfried von Herder, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the Grimm brothers – among others –, research into the origins and evolution of folk culture, mythology and language moved towards a fascination with national characteristics, and with everything that characterises a nation, and which distinguishes it from other nations. Outside of Iceland, the reception of the Eddas was marked by a tendency to present the myths as a Germanic *alternative* to Greco-Roman mythology, and thus as – according to Herder – more suitable material for German poets to turn to. This new philological paradigm did not only contribute to the construction of separate national identities, but also to the creation of a particular image of ‘the North’, which was supra-national and clearly juxtaposed to ‘the South’. Like Germanic languages, Norse mythology became a marker of identity, an expression of the Nordic *Volksgeist*, and evidence for the great antiquity and continuity of the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> On this Celtic element in Icelandic history, see especially Chapter 7.2.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and national renewal” in G. Hosking and G. Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood* (London 1997) pp.36-59.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical assessment of this national paradigm in historiography, see Stefan Berger, “A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present”, in *The Journal of Modern History* 77:3 (2005) pp.629-78.

Modern national self-awareness was – and still is<sup>1</sup> – fuelled by the idealisation of an imagined past, cultivated through new editions of ancient, ‘national’ epics – rediscovered or forged<sup>2</sup> –, the construction of national literary canons, the glorification of primeval heroes in poetry and statues, and the staging of mass commemorations of key-events in the development of the nation. All these activities are manifestations of national historicism, or what Joep Leerssen has called the national ‘cultivation of culture’.<sup>3</sup> National historicism was a Europe-wide phenomenon, and it mobilised the ancient past for ideological means on an unprecedented scale. Both aspiring and established national communities passionately embraced history as a “reservoir of political arguments”, turning it into a “battleground of divergent interpretations and explanations” with far-reaching ideological implications.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Jorma Kalela, it is “the usefulness of the past in the present that is the core of history.”<sup>5</sup> But in order for a historical narrative to retain its usefulness in the present – and to forestall the onset of ‘cultural amnesia’ –, it has to be perpetually retold, refashioned, and – just like monuments and statues – “continuously invested with new meaning”.<sup>6</sup> And what goes for historical narratives and monuments goes for ‘ancient’, ‘ethnic’ mythologies – Old Norse, Germanic, Celtic, Greek, Egyptian et cetera – as well; their very presence in modern national discourses evidences their ‘usefulness in the present’, and their rhetorical potential in contemporary debates on culture and politics. Myths are palimpsests, and they provide powerful narrative templates for conveying ideological ‘truths’.



Ever since Jöran Mjöberg’s seminal study on Swedish, Danish and Norwegian national culture and its infatuation with Old Norse literature appeared in the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> much research has been done on the philological aspects of Scandinavian nationalisms, and on the role of the sagas in the construction of national cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The articles collected in the seminal anthology *The Waking of Angantyr. The Scandinavian Past in European Culture*, edited by Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Aarhus 1996), have been instrumental in reconsidering the role of Old Norse culture in modern history.<sup>8</sup> The same goes for the collections *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock 1994), edited by Andrew Wawn, and the more recent, more Scandinavia-centred anthology *Det norrøne og det nationale* (‘The Nordic and the National’), edited by Annette Lassen (Reykjavík 2008). Several monographs deal with the same subject in a more ‘national’ fashion, focussing on the reception of Old Norse culture in one specific national or linguistic context, but without neglecting the influence of foreign ideas. Julia

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<sup>1</sup> On the problem of demarcating Romantic nationalism chronologically, see Joep Leerssen, *When was Romantic Nationalism? The onset, the long tail, the banal* (Antwerp 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The best known examples of forged national literature are the songs of Ossian in Scotland, the *Kalevala* in Finland, and the *Oera Linda Book* in Dutch Friesland. Although a high degree of creative interference characterises all three ‘rediscoveries’, they are by no means all equally fraudulent.

<sup>3</sup> Joep Leerssen, “Nationalism and the cultivation of culture”, in *Nations and Nationalism* 12:4 (2006) pp.559-578.

<sup>4</sup> Jorma Kalela, *Making History. The Historian and Uses of the Past* (London 2012) p.147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Ann Rigney, “The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing.”, in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin – New York 2008) pp.345-53, 345.

<sup>7</sup> Jöran Mjöberg, *Drömmen om sagatiden*, part I (*Återblick på den nordiska romantiken från 1700-talets mitt till nygoticismen (omkr. 1865)*) and part II (*De senaste hundra åren – idealbildning och avidealisering*) (Stockholm 1967, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> For more bibliographical details of the works mentioned in this section I refer to the bibliography.

Zernack's very erudite *Geschichten aus Thule. Íslendingasögur in Übersetzungen deutscher Germanisten* (Berlin 1994) constitutes an in-depth study of the reception-history of Icelandic sagas in Germany, whereas Andrew Wawn has scrutinised the Viking vogue in Victorian Britain in his original study *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain* (Cambridge 2000). In her book *Sagans svenskar. Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 300 år* (Malmö 2004), Anna Wallette traces the Swedish cultivation of Old Norse-Icelandic culture back all the way to its Early Modern beginnings.

Within this expanding field of research, there have been several initiatives focussing on the modern reception – or *Wirkungsgeschichte* – of Old Norse *mythology* in particular: John L. Greenway has studied the mythic dimension of Nordic Romanticism in his *The Golden Horns. Mythic Imagination and the Nordic Past* (Athens 1977), and Klaus Bödl focuses in his *Der Mythos der Edda. Nordische Mythologie zwischen europäischer Aufklärung und nationaler Romantik* (Tübingen-Basel 2000) on the Pre and Proto-Romantic reception of eddic mythology, mainly in the German speaking lands. Between 1989 and 1998, Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth headed the research project *Eddornas sinnebildsspråk*<sup>1</sup>, or simply *Norse Muse*, under the auspices of which several interesting publications appeared, including Wawn's aforementioned anthology *Northern Antiquity* and Lönnroth's *Skaldemjödet i berget* (Stockholm 1996). In 1999, Lönnroth and Clunies Ross outlined the conclusions of this project in a long article published in the journal *Alvíssmál*, providing scholars with an extensive and insightful account of the international reception of Norse myth in general, and Snorri's *Prose Edda* in particular.<sup>2</sup> Iceland is only treated marginally in this publication, first and foremost as an *exception* to the general rule that the Old Norse material had to be *rediscovered* before it could be cultivated in a Romantic context.<sup>3</sup> The project's comparative approach to this topic has proven both rewarding and refreshing, and has yielded many insights into the ideological instrumentalisation of mythology. But a project of this magnitude is bound to leave the field with many loose ends, and the authors conclude their article with the rightful remark that much research remains to be done. Some of these loose ends, particularly those concerning the Icelandic case, will be addressed here in considerable detail. The Swedish research project *Vägar till Midgård* (2000-2007) presented a long-term perspective on Old Norse mythology, and has produced – alongside publications on *actual* pre-Christian paganism, as well as Roman and medieval/Christian receptions thereof<sup>4</sup> – several highly relevant publications on the cultivation of Old Norse mythology in modernity.<sup>5</sup>

As far as methodology and theoretical framework are concerned, the present study is most indebted to the international research project *Edda-Rezeption*, which is based at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, and which has – under the inspirational leadership of Julia Zernack – so far issued two sizeable volumes of collected essays.<sup>6</sup> Although my study is not directly affiliated to this ambitious research initiative, I have sought to approach my sources with a similar level of interdisciplinarity and awareness of the transmedial quality

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<sup>1</sup> The project's official title is a reference to the Swede Per Henrik Ling and his 1819 book named *Eddornas Sinnebildslära för Olärde* ('The Symbolic Doctrine of the Eddas for the Uneducated').

<sup>2</sup> "The Norse Muse. Report from an International Research Project", in *Alvíssmál* 9 (1999) pp.3-28.

<sup>3</sup> On the question of continuity in Iceland's cultivation of Old Norse-Icelandic themes, see Chapter 4.2.

<sup>4</sup> See Anders Andrén and Kristina Jennbert (eds.), *Old Norse religions in long-term perspectives. Origins, changes, and interactions* (Lund 2006).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Catharina Raudvere, Anders Andrén and Kristina Jennbert (eds.), *Myter om det nordiska. Mellan romantik och politik* (Lund 2001), and idem., *Hedendomen i historiens spegel. Bilder av det förkristna Norden* (Lund 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Resulting in Katja Schulz and Florian Heesch (eds.), *Edda-Rezeption* vol. I ("Sang an Aegir" Nordische Mythen um 1900) and Katja Schulz (ed.), *Edda-Rezeption* vol. II (*Eddische Götter und Helden. Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption*) (Heidelberg 2009, 2011).

of mythology. The subjects treated in the project's output range from N. F. S. Grundtvig's use of the Eddas and German national theatre around 1900, to the Neo-Pagan black metal scene and Brazilian websites in the present, demonstrating that the myths form an inexhaustible *Motivreservoir* which can be activated at any time and in any imaginable medium.<sup>1</sup> What most of these receptions – both old and new – have in common, is that they play a role in the establishment or cementing of collective identities, often – but not exclusively – of an ethnic nature.<sup>2</sup> This specific function of mythology, which forms a recurrent theme in the contributions to the *Edda-Rezeption* volumes, will also take center stage in my own analysis of the link between eddic myth and Icelandic national culture.

It has been noted that foreign scholars have generally been more productive in charting the role of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in the national cultures of their own countries than the Icelanders themselves.<sup>3</sup> A plausible explanation for this has been put forward by the eminent Icelandic historian Gunnar Karlsson (see Chapter 1.2.2), who proposed that the entanglement of Old Norse literature and “Icelandic nation-building in the 1800s” has not been neglected by Icelanders “because we do not believe that this literature was of crucial significance, but because we all know, and have always known, how crucial its significance was”.<sup>4</sup> The influence of sagas and Eddas on the national self-image of the Icelanders has been, in other words, too self-evident, or too ‘banal’ (see Chapter 9.1.1) to be subjected to serious scholarship. This is obviously an overstatement, and as a hypothesis, it is easily debunked by the growing body of Icelandic literature on exactly this topic in recent years: Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson's seminal study *Arfur og umbylting* (‘Heritage and Upheaval’: Reykjavík 1999) constitutes the most comprehensive monograph on Iceland's Romantic cultivation of Old Norse literature. Another prolific literary scholar at the University of Iceland, Jón Karl Helgason, has studied both foreign – *The Rewriting of Njáls Saga* (Clevedon-Buffalo 1999), *Höfundar Njálu* (‘Authors of Njála’: Reykjavík 2001) – and Icelandic – e.g. *Hetjan og höfundurinn* (‘The Hero and the Author’: Reykjavík 1998) – receptions of medieval Icelandic literature, primarily *Njáls saga*.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Árni Björnsson has traced the often neglected Icelandic origins of Richard Wagner's operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in his study *Wagner og Völsungar* (‘Wagner and the Völsungs’: Reykjavík 2000), which also appeared in German. An important Icelandic collection of essays edited by Sverrir Tómasson (*Guðamjöður og arnarleir*; Reykjavík 1996) deals with the persistence of eddic themes in post-medieval Icelandic art and literature, and resulted from Clunies Ross's and Lönnroth's *Norse Muse* project.

In the present study, I will focus exclusively on the cultivation of Old Norse or eddic mythology, its gods and its heroes, and their place in the construction of Iceland's national self-image. Their role is less straightforward than that fulfilled by the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), which are set in Iceland and tell the stories of the first generations of people to live on the island and refer to themselves as Icelanders. The popularity of the sagas in Icelandic society at large is illustrated by the fact that some of the most beloved ones carry affectionate nick-names, like *Njála* for *Brennu-Njáls saga* (‘the Saga of the Burning of

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<sup>1</sup> Katja Schulz, “Einleitung”, in idem (ed., 2011), *Edda-Rezeption* vol. II (*Eddische Götter und Helden. Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption*) pp.7-10, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.9.

<sup>3</sup> Clarence E. Glad and Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, in the unpublished grant proposal and description of the project *Icelandic Philology and National Culture 1780-1918* (Reykjavík 2013), p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, “Den islandske renæssance”, in Annette Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008) pp.29-40, 29. Quoted and translated by Clarence Glad and Gylfi Gunnlaugsson (see previous note), p.3. See also Karlsson, “Icelandic Nationalism and the Inspiration of History”, in Rosalind Mitchison (ed.), *The Roots of Nationalism. Studies in Northern Europe* (Edinburgh 1980) pp.77-89.

<sup>5</sup> In his book *Echoes of Valhalla. The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas* (London 2017), Jón Karl explores the role of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and mythology in modern popular culture and literature.

Njáll’), or *Egla* for *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. Even though the popular treatment of the Eddas differs significantly from that of the sagas, this should not lead to an underestimation of the influence of their reception. Icelandic research focussing specifically on the Icelandic cultivation and reinterpretation of the Eddas has been conducted by scholars like Sverrir Tómasson,<sup>1</sup> Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson<sup>2</sup> and Gylfi Gunnlaugsson<sup>3</sup>, whose writings will be frequently referred to and critically assessed throughout this study.



Iceland takes a special stand among the Nordic countries, in that the local eddic literary tradition was never entirely interrupted – mythological themes remained essential to Icelandic poetics throughout the ages – and the idea of a (pre-)Romantic ‘rediscovery’ of the eddic sources, as it occurred in the other Nordic countries, is problematic in the light of this assumed cultural continuity.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Icelandic treatments of this old material *did* undergo a profound transformation under the influence of Romanticism. In fact, many of my nineteenth-century protagonists were radically opposed to the – in their eyes – uninspired and dispassionate adaptation of mythological themes and commonplaces in the poetry of their predecessors and contemporaries composed in the highly popular *rímur* tradition (see Chapters 2.2.1 and 4.2.2). But instead of breaking with the pre-Christian pantheon all together, new ways of incorporating eddic themes into a national, cultural revival were explored. In the larger context of Icelandic national culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the reinvention of Old Norse mythology has been described as playing “an important if limited part.”<sup>5</sup> The aim of this research is to examine this assumption within the broader constellation of Icelandic cultural life, by assessing both literary and non-literary sources. Furthermore, the Icelandic interaction with foreign adaptations of ‘their’ eddic heritage, and the complex processes of cultural transfer that has reshaped Icelandic Edda-reception and national culture in general, has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. How did intellectuals in Reykjavík react to Scandinavian or German appropriations of *their* ‘national’ literature, and how can these reactions – as voiced by Benedikt Gröndal for instance (see Chapter 6.3), or by proponents of the so-called ‘bookprosit’ school (see Chapters 7.1 and 10.1) – be linked to non-academic, ideological motivations?

By analysing the multiple roles of the gods and goddesses of Asgard in ‘Icelandic culture’ – which encompasses the divergent but entangled cultural arenas of poetry, the visual arts, philology, politics, historiography, journalism, public spaces, folkloristics, invented traditions, given names, and modern forms of spirituality –, I will bring together a wide range of original sources which have never before been studied in this integrated constellation, if in any constellation at all. As Joep Leerssen states in a recent publication, the study of myth never quite evolved into a separate discipline in its own right<sup>6</sup>, which is why the primary sources for a study like the present one are necessarily scattered, and of very amalgamous origin. The same can be said about expressions of myth cultivation beyond academia. These

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<sup>1</sup> Sverrir Tómasson (1996).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. “The Reception of Old Norse Myths in Icelandic Romanticism”, in Lassen (2008) pp.103-122.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. “Benedikt Gröndals “Götterdämmerung”. Zur Edda-Rezeption im 19. Jahrhundert in Island”, in Schulz (2011) pp.215-236, and “Heidnische Romantik, nordischer Geist – die Aufsätze von Grímur Thomsen zur altnordischen Literatur und zu deren Aktualität”, in Andreas Fülberth and Albert Meier (eds.), *Nördlichkeit-Romantik-Erhabenheit. Apperzeptionen der Nord/Süd-Differenz (1750-2000)* (‘Imaginatio Borealis Bilder des Nordens’ vol. 15, Frankfurt am Main 2007) pp.177-190.

<sup>4</sup> Clunies Ross and Lönnroth (1999) p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.119.

<sup>6</sup> Joep Leerssen, “Gods, heroes and mythologists: Romantic scholars and the pagan roots of Europe’s nations”, in *History of Humanities* 1:1 (2016) pp.71-100.



sources – generally selected on the grounds of their *public* nature, and hence their influence on public discourses – are analysed in broad detail, and from a *functionalistic* perspective: what ideological message did the creator of the source in question seek to convey with his or her rendition of a certain mythological theme (*mytheme*)? How should this message be interpreted in its historical and ideological context, and how did it affect the further cultural reception of this specific mytheme? In asking these questions, I will approach mythology as an elaborate ‘symbolic language’, with its very own vocabulary, syntax and grammar, which generally – like any other language – serves very pragmatic and rhetorical purposes (see Chapter 1.1). Since the ideological message enveloped in a mythological narrative can be very implicit, hidden in the depths of a vast and ever-expanding symbolic universe, unravelling it through discourse analysis will entail a good deal of ‘reading against the grain’. The main objective of this project is not merely to come to a clearer understanding of the way mythology functions in modern societies, but also to clarify the intricate link between cultural heritage – and the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>) attached to this – and national identity. In order to do so, the following threefold central research question will serve as my compass, in the bewildering jungle of primary sources:

- How did the Icelandic engagement with Old Norse mythology – in the period between 1820 and 1918 – relate to the development of Iceland’s cultural and political identity? How were ideas about Iceland’s national identity negotiated through the cultivation of mythological images? And to what extent was this discourse shaped by external factors, such as foreign theories, discursive templates, and adaptations or appropriations of the same mythological material?
- As a rhetorical means of expressing contemporary notions of ‘Icelandicness’, how did mythological narratives differ from the ideological mobilisations of other genres of literary heritage, especially the famed ‘Sagas of Icelanders’ (*Íslendingasögur*)? Did the cultivation of eddic motifs fulfil a distinct function in Iceland’s national discourse, markedly different from that of saga themes?
- Which mythemes or mythological characters figure most prominently in the sources under scrutiny, and on what basis could they be considered more suitable objects of national cultivation than other mythemes or characters? How does their prominence in modern sources relate to their ‘original’ role in the medieval narratives? And how were these mythemes modified or rewritten in order to convey ideological meaning?

This *status quaestionis* constitutes a solid point of departure, and is embedded in a set of theoretical and methodological assumptions which will be scrutinised in detail in Chapter 1. Throughout the different sections of this book, covering all the aforementioned cultural areas that constitute Icelandic society, I will focus on the dynamic, intermedial, and versatile character of myth, and provide the reader with a comprehensive impression of the Eddas’ role in nineteenth and early-twentieth century Iceland. Never before has anyone attempted such a systematic and integral analysis of mythology in modern Icelandic culture, encompassing the academic, artistic, poetic, political and metaphysical cultivation of this ancient heritage. This requires a very interdisciplinary mindset from the scholar taking on this challenge, as well as the capacity to recognise the importance of minute details by placing them in their larger

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’ will be of considerable importance to the present study. For the original application of the term, see Pierre Bourdieu, “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction”, in Richard K. Brown (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change. Papers in the Sociology of Education* (London 1973) pp.71-112.

context. It is only then that the full ideological ramifications of this engagement with mythology – an engagement which is, according to the controversial ideas of Bruce Lincoln, *per definition* ideological<sup>1</sup> – comes to light. Mythology has been likened to a ‘soluble fish’, playfully modulating between all the cultural disciplines, “making its appearance everywhere in Europe” in the nineteenth century as a subject of great academic interest, only to melt “back from scholarly solidity into an ambient national-cultural repertoire”.<sup>2</sup> Tracing the migration pattern of this agile creature requires an integrated approach to the concept of culture, and a large degree of attentiveness to the implicit rhetorical functions of narratives.



In this study, I will treat nationalism and national thought first and foremost as a *cultural* phenomenon, the study of which requires an integrated approach to the concept of culture. As the lively interaction between foreign and indigenous Edda-receptions will illustrate, internalist modes of describing and explaining the construction of national identities – through the ‘cultivation of culture’ – will not suffice. In order to attain a more profound understanding of national self-images, it is pivotal to move beyond internalism and focus on processes of cultural transfer and cross-pollination. The nationalisation of Norse antiquity and Romantic images of Viking Age Scandinavia serve as a fascinating illustration of exactly these processes, which underlie the construction of national identities. In constant competition with classical mythology and its two and a half millennia of uninterrupted tradition, (pre-)Romantic intellectuals in the Nordic countries have sought to operationalise the Old Norse tradition in a *classical* sense; that is, as a model for innumerable and very divergent texts and cultural expressions.<sup>3</sup> Studying the cultivation of eddic mythology in Iceland involves infinitely more than the writing of an editorial history of the Eddas, or reconstructing philological debates that once raged among scholars. In this study, I will attempt to move beyond the dimension of philology in its stricter sense, and towards a more inclusive *Wirkungs-* or *Stoffgeschichte*, in order to demonstrate the various manifestations of creative ‘Icelandification’ to which the old myths have been subjected.

My approach to this topic will be chronological, encompassing the roughly one-hundred years spanning from the advent of Icelandic Romanticism and the establishment of Icelandic literary societies around 1820, to the Act of Union with Denmark in 1918, marking the beginning of a sovereign Icelandic state in personal union with the King of Denmark. This extended period in Iceland’s past is by no means a monolithic chunk of history, and since the cultural, social, and political parameters of the early nineteenth century are markedly different from those of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, each of the chronological chapters focuses on a specific cultural sphere within the limited timeframe of several decades. The demarcations of these sub-periods are not at all very clear cut and differ per chapter, depending on the specific fracture points within each of the cultural disciplines themselves – for instance: the death of Finnur Magnússon in 1847, or that of Jónas Hallgrímsson in 1845. But, ever so roughly, we can discern three relatively uniform periods, each one with its own distinct cultural and political characteristics, which should each be studied on their own historical terms. These periods are:

- **1820 – 1845** (Chapters 3, 4 and 5): A distinct form of Icelandic Romantic nationalism begins to take shape, initially among Icelandic students in Copenhagen, and finds

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth. Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2016) pp.71-100.

<sup>3</sup> Böldl (2000) p.4. See also Böldl’s reference to Jan Assmann there.

expression in journals and literary societies. Poets and scholars like Bjarni Thorarensen and Finnur Magnússon break with traditional approaches to Norse mythology and introduce a – distinctly Danish – Romantic paradigm in Icelandic poetry and scholarship. The ‘Sublime’ and national authenticity are the central themes that both poetry and mythological studies revolve around. The Romantic cultivation of Old Norse culture reaches its first climax in the works of Jónas Hallgrímsson and the other men associated with the journal *Fjölnir*. A more pragmatic, modernistic strand of Icelandic nationalism is headed by Jón Sigurðsson, and in 1845 the re-established Icelandic Parliament (*Alþingi*) convenes for the first time, now in Reykjavík.

- **1845 – 1880** (Chapters 5 and 6): The next generations of Icelandic Romantics are more inclined to apply eddic motives in their poetry than their predecessors, and readily mobilise the myths to make ideological statements, including Nordic co-operation (Grímur Thomsen), a call for revolution (Gísli Brynjúlfsson), and the establishment of Iceland’s exclusive national rights on Old Norse-Icelandic literature (Benedikt Gröndal). In these endeavours, Icelandic poet-scholars actively engage with the theories and works of foreign heavyweights like Lord Byron and Hegel. Simultaneously, the continuity of Icelandic history is established by folklore enthusiasts and folktale collectors in the spirit of the Grimm brothers: the great Nordic past, waiting to be ‘revived’, still slumbers in contemporary rural culture. An infrastructure for national culture takes shape in the form of initiatives like the establishment of a national museum and a national theatre, rendering Reykjavík – rather than Copenhagen – the epicentre of Icelandic national awareness. The call for more autonomy from Denmark results in free trade in 1854, and eventually culminates in Iceland’s first constitution (1874). Jón Sigurðsson dies five years later, in 1879.
- **1880 – 1918** (Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9): In this last phase I will investigate in the present study,<sup>1</sup> national symbolism permeates all of Icelandic society, and references to a glorified Old Norse-Icelandic past have become omnipresent, even ‘banal’. Home Rule is established in 1904, and in 1915, the island receives its own national flag. Public spaces are adorned with statues and monuments, and sagas and Eddas are reflected in a growing network of street names. Eddic names and themes become increasingly familiar, and appear as personal names, names of companies, periodicals, buildings and societies, and in contemporary art. Modern cultural movements (Realism, Symbolism etc.) enter the Icelandic scene, as the Neo-Romantic poetry of writers like Einar Benediktsson reinvigorates the glorification of nature and ‘the Sublime’. Rather than merely a larger degree of autonomy, full independence now becomes the political aim of the national movement: an objective prefigured in the realisation of *intellectual* independence in 1911, when the University of Iceland is established. This paves the way for a more nationalistic school of Icelandic philology – spearheaded by Björn M. Ólsen –, which seeks to undermine Scandinavian claims on ‘their’ national heritage. While alternative spiritualities and Theosophy – the latest fashion in *fin de siècle* Europe – endow the old myths with new metaphysical significance, Icelandic emigrants find in the Eddas a narrative template for their epic

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<sup>1</sup> The cultivation of Norse mythology during the final phase of Iceland’s struggle for independence, between 1918 and the establishment of the Republic of Iceland on the seventeenth of June 1944, will have to wait for a future research project.

exodus and settlement of ‘New Iceland’ in Canada. Ever since the mass festivities in Reykjavík and Þingvellir on the occasion of Iceland’s millennial celebration of 1874, the national movement has become a *mass* movement, firmly established through the use of modern media. The declaration of an independent ‘Kingdom of Iceland’, in personal union with the King of Denmark, takes place on the first of December 1918.<sup>1</sup>

This chronological division into three sub-eras is not random, and reflects, to a considerable extent, the tripartite model of the development of national movements as described by Miroslav Hroch. I will discuss Hroch’s influential theory – alongside its critical reception and revision by other scholars – in some detail in Chapter 1.2, and I will assess its usefulness to the study of Icelandic nationalism throughout this study’s core chapters and in the conclusion.

Within the chapters themselves, the structure is thematic and associative, rather than chronological. Each of the aforementioned cultural spheres is explored through the works of my protagonists, whom I have selected on the basis of the originality, representability, and/or influence of their engagement with the Eddas. Some of these protagonists – such as Jónas Hallgrímsson, Benedikt Gröndal, and Matthías Jochumsson – are towering figures in Icelandic cultural history, whereas others – like Finnur Magnússon and Halldór Briem – are not exactly household names. What brings them together on the pages of this book is merely the fact that they have all, in one way or another, participated in the Icelandic discourse of national mythology; their fame in the present – or the lack thereof – is not necessarily indicative of their impact on this particular discourse. However, the *real* protagonists of this study are not the philologists, poets, artists or politicians who people these chapters, but rather the gods and the goddesses of Asgard themselves, the stories and the mythemes, moving through a never-ending flux of transformation and re-interpretation. The agency of culture in the process of nation-building forms one of the central themes of the present study. Just like all other texts or discourses, mythologies are first and foremost ‘objects of appropriation’, authorless ‘forms of property’ (Foucault) susceptible to ideological functionalisation by its consecutive appropriators.<sup>2</sup> In the larger narrative of their evolution over the ages, the historical protagonists of this work are only passers-by, delivering their limited contributions to a ‘national mythology’ which is always under construction. I will chart this historical development in greater detail by distinguishing between two different modes of myth-cultivation; firstly, I will look at myth as *cultural capital*, or a corpus of narratives, the appropriation of which endows the appropriator with a sense of cultural *prestige*. How has this corpus been fashioned and appropriated as national heritage, and by whom? What were their exact motives, and how did they justify their claims on this material? Secondly, I will investigate how Old Norse mythology has been applied as a *symbolic language*; a reservoir of national images, actively cultivated and modified to express contemporary ideas on Icelandicness. I will argue that this second strand of cultivation is a direct result of the first one; only after the Eddas were generally considered national heritage could they be instrumentalised as the nation’s symbolic language. While in the process of

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed division of the history of Iceland’s national movement into six phases, see Birgir Hermannsson, *Understanding Nationalism. Studies in Icelandic Nationalism 1800-2000* (Stockholm 2005) pp.11-12. Birgir distinguishes between an initial phase which he calls the ‘rise of nationalism’ (1830-1845), then a short period in which ‘positions are defined’ (1845-1851), a ‘constitutional campaign’ (1851-1874), ‘reassessments’ after Iceland’s first constitution (1874-1883), followed by the ‘home rule campaign’ (1883-1904) and, finally, the ‘union campaign and economic take off’ between 1904 and 1918. Useful though this division may be, it pertains first and foremost to the *political* evolution of Icelandic nationalism, and less to the cultural developments that will be scrutinised in this study.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, lecture presented to the *Société Française de philosophie* on 22 February 1969, translated and modified by Josué V. Harari; [http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp\\_foucault12.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_foucault12.htm) (last accessed: 25 October 2016).

ploughing through the primary sources of this study, I formulated five rhetorical functions of myth as a symbolic language, being: primordialisation, indigenisation, universalisation, association, and differentiation. It occurred to me that all of my sources could be explained through either one, or a combination of two or more of these functionalisations, whether their creators were consciously aware of this or not. I will clarify these five functions in greater detail in Chapter 1.1, and apply them to all the case studies that make up the main body of this book.

A historical prologue (Chapter 2), acquainting the reader with the historical sources of Old Norse mythology and the pre-Romantic reception thereof both in Iceland and abroad, as well as an epilogue (Chapter 10) exploring the role of the Eddas in contemporary, post-1918 Icelandic culture, supply the historical frame and demarcation of this study. Preceding the prologue is an introductory chapter on the conceptual framework and methodological approach which I will be applying to the Icelandic ‘case study’. The two central concepts that constitute the theoretical backbone of this whole study, namely national culture and mythology, will be theorised and defined in Chapter 1.

# 1. Conceptual Framework: Eddas and Identities

## 1.1 Theorising Mythology

When examining the role of mythology in post-medieval society and culture, one cannot but conclude that it was Greek and Roman – that is: *classical* – mythological narratives that retained their hegemonic position throughout Europe. As a crucial element of the dominant Humanist educational system, Hellenic mythology has served as a medium for aesthetic, pedagogical and political thought and world-views throughout the ages.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, *Nordic* mythology appears little more than a marginal phenomenon, situated on the peripheral northern edges of this all-pervasive and pan-European classical paradigm.<sup>2</sup> However, it is exactly in the confrontation *with*, and the ambivalent relation *to* the ‘significant other’ – in this case classical mythology – that intellectuals from Scandinavia and North-western Europe were able to instrumentalise Old Norse myths for the purpose of articulating *their own* cultural identity, vis-à-vis the rest of Europe.

Pre-Christian polytheistic mythologies – or at least the fragmentary remains thereof – have been essential to the national projects of nineteenth century Europe.<sup>3</sup> In Lithuania for example, one of the very last areas in Europe to convert to Christianity, nationalists prided themselves on belonging to the most archaic – and thus *authentic* – nation in Europe, boasting a rich pagan heritage which facilitated identifications with the pagan heroes of Homeric epic, as well as the equally admirable ancient Romans.<sup>4</sup> And in Britain, Sir James Hall set out to prove that gothic architecture originated in the pagan practice of tree worship, by tying willow rods together in a primitive arch.<sup>5</sup> By suggesting historical continuity, reaching from primordial pagan times to the revived Gothicism of his own day, Hall primordialised and ‘naturalised’ – most literally – a post-conversion and imported phenomenon, rendering it a more authentic element of the British townscape. But also the origins of non-physical, more abstract phenomena and ideals such as parliamentary democracy were sought in the political, ‘democratic’ culture of Germanic tribes in their primordial forests, and were hence indigenised, embedded in a perennial and organic *Volksgeist*. In these cases, as in many others, the pagan past was utilised as a blurry source of – national and political – authentication. It is on this ideological instrumentalisation of pre-Christian – or *supposedly* pre-Christian – heritage in modern times that I will focus in this research.

It has been argued that in Iceland, eddic mythology never quite disappeared from public life, and that knowledge of the pagan stories remained crucial to poets and intellectuals alike (see Chapter 2.1.1). The notion of a (pre-)Romantic rediscovery of eddic themes – as it occurred in other parts of Europe – appears incompatible with this assumed cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Bödl (2000) p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Leerssen (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Monika Baár, *Historians and Nationalism. East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford-New York 2010) p.226.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Bath 1995) p.17. The identification of gothic ruins with holy groves or forests is a popular theme in Romantic iconography, especially in the work of Caspar David Friedrich.

continuity.<sup>1</sup> When analysing the secular cultivation of pagan elements in Icelandic culture, a high level of interdisciplinarity is of the essence. However, before continuing this line of inquiry, it is important to come to a more precise definition of mythology as it will be applied in the present study. Following an exposition of different theories and interpretations of the phenomenon, I will explore the *functions* of myth in culture and society, and formulate five ways in which mythology has been – and still is – employed rhetorically to formulate and enforce modern national identities.

In the introduction to his seminal study on the reception of myth in English Romanticism, Anthony John Harding states that “the very term ‘myth’ designates something that has slipped from our grasp, and can be studied only as a reconstruction or reinterpretation of what someone else might at one time have believed.”<sup>2</sup> Our access to historical significations of mythological narratives is indeed frustratingly limited, and we will have to make do with the ‘reconstructions and reinterpretations’ that have been handed down to us. In modern times, mythology has been interpreted as:

... a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God’s Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the view-points of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, the term *myth* applies to any traditional story which serves as a form of explanation of the present state of the universe, humankind or a community.<sup>4</sup> These explanatory narratives often involve gods, heroes and supernatural powers, and clarify the role of mankind in the larger, invisible scheme of things. Mythology as a system of explanation is not restricted to the realm of description, but also emphasises and validates the naturalness and sanctity of the existing social order, and is therefore *prescriptive* where the organisation of communities and the behaviour of the individual therein is concerned. According to the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade, mythologies combine models for behaviour with religious experiences of the divine.<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, arguably the most widely read mythologist of the twentieth century, distinguished four central functions of myth: a mystical, cosmological, pedagogical and a sociological one.<sup>6</sup> These last two functions are directly concerned with the justification of communal organisation and individual moral behaviour, and are infused with cosmic and religious significance by the first two.<sup>7</sup> Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Clunies Ross and Lönnroth (1999) p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony John Harding, *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism* (Columbia 1995) p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton 1968 [1949]) p.382.

<sup>4</sup> In ancient Greece, the term *mythos* referred to one of three kinds of ‘words’, next to *epos* – associated with poetics and melody – and *logos*, which was concerned with reality and the truth of nature. In this study, the term *mythology* will refer to a systemised collection of myths or mythological narratives, e.g. Greek, Egyptian or Old Norse mythology. I will refer to the study of mythology – often confusingly also referred to as ‘mythology’ – as ‘comparative mythology’.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York 1963) p.8.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York 1988) pp.22-3.

<sup>7</sup> The most influential theory concerning the interrelatedness of mythology and the organisation of society is Georges Dumézil’s ‘trifunctional hypothesis’, which divides Proto-Indo-European society into a sacral, martial

these four functions of myth should not be considered as operating completely separately from each other; together, they can also be conceived as a coping system, providing solid answers and hence consolation in a world that – as a result of a long chain of events narrated by mythology – is so imperfect, and fundamentally different from the primordial golden age or the world of the gods, against which our present state of life is silhouetted. Both Eliade and the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski have emphasised these consolatory qualities of myth and its tendency to explain the existence of suffering.<sup>1</sup> The quest for consolation and sense-making through mythological knowledge has led mythologists to conceptualise myth as a precursor to modern science, comprising everything that was known about the world, and the ‘meaning of it all’. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths help to solve contradictions and incompatibilities in the world through mediation and reconciliation of that which, at first glance, appears irreconcilable.<sup>2</sup> This is generally achieved by fixating on the *origin* of the things we see around us, making mythology a profoundly *etiological* discipline.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the mythological narrative of the ‘forbidden fruit’ and ‘original sin’ reconciles the concept of a benevolent God with the problematic experience of omnipresent and ‘unfair’ suffering in the world. And since this explanation ‘works’ so well, the theme of Adam and Eve in Paradise has been cultivated, recycled and reworked throughout the ages, in the visual arts, music, theological expositions and literary classics such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and C.S. Lewis’s reworking thereof in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This process of reconciliation and explanation transforms the world into a more organised, fairer, less chaotic place, uncluttered and infinitely more graspable. Or, to use a description Friedrich Nietzsche applied to Richard Wagner: mythology is – for all its complexity – the great *Vereinfacher der Welt* (‘simplifier of the world’).<sup>5</sup> (Over-)simplification can be a powerful rhetorical tool in the hands of anyone who ‘has a point to make’; the more mythical an ideological narrative becomes, the more successful it will prove to be.<sup>6</sup>

Mythology as a collective phenomenon or ‘activity’ constitutes a universal feature of human culture, and can best be defined by the social functions it fulfils in societies. First and foremost, humans are ‘meaning-seeking creatures’, and naturally inclined to compose stories in order to make sense of a chaotic world:

Dogs, as far as we know, do not agonize about the canine condition, worry about the plight of dogs in other parts of the world, or try to see their lives from a different perspective. But human beings fall easily into despair, and from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave

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and economic caste. See Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna. Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté* (Paris 1940).

<sup>1</sup> See Bronisław Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London 1926) and Eliade (1963).

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York 1963) p.224.

<sup>3</sup> Etiology entails “the investigation or attribution of the cause or reason for something, often expressed in terms of historical or mythical explanation.” Definition retrieved from [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com); last accessed: 21 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Shippey (2001) pp.179-80. In this context, Shippey also refers to the myth of Þórr’s journey to the court of the giant-king Útgarda-Loki, where the god fails to perform even the simplest tasks, like beating the old hag Elli – who is in fact old age and mortality personified – in a game of wrestling (see Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* chapters 44-47, and Chapter 8.2 of the present study). Shippey interprets this myth as an explanation for the gods’ mortality and lacking omnipotence (p.180), even though the narrative does not go into the *origin* of this imperfect state. I would therefore interpret this myth as a *demonstration*, rather than an explanation of these characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> From Friedrich Nietzsche’s notes, quoted in Kerstin Decker, *Nietzsche und Wagner: Geschichte einer Hassliebe* (Berlin 2012) p.284.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Between History and Myth: Stories of Harald Fairhair and the Founding of the State* (Chicago-London 2014) p.119.



us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.<sup>1</sup>

This anthropological and rather popular rendering of mythological sense-making as an indispensable element of the *condition humaine*, can serve as a starting point for exploring the impenetrable jungle of scholarly debates on the nature of myth, waged among historians, anthropologists, psychologists, mythologists, sociologists, folklorists, theologians, and anyone in between. In this section, it will suffice to give a short overview of the main topics and controversies in the academic study of mythology, in as far as they shed light on the communal functions of mythological narrative, and its role in the process of collective identity formation.<sup>2</sup>

In twentieth century scholarship, the normative interpretation of mythology as a primitive, outdated precursor to science has lost most of its credibility and has been replaced by a more anthropological and psychoanalytical approach to the phenomenon of myth. According to Freud, myths represent on a collective level what dreams represent on the level of the individual; they are enigmatic stories that defy logic, but carry in themselves deeper meanings shrouded in symbols, and wisdom essential to the community or the dreamer respectively.<sup>3</sup> Or, in the words of Joseph Campbell: “Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind.”<sup>4</sup> This observation is founded on the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, who saw myths as expressions of a *collective* unconscious, and mythical figures as personifications of universal archetypes: a view that bears resemblance to earlier Romantic conceptions of myth as an organic expression of the collective *Volksgeist*.<sup>5</sup> According to Jung, the personal unconscious rests on “eine tiefere Schicht, welche nicht mehr persönlicher Erfahrung und Erwerbung entstammt, sondern angeboren ist”<sup>6</sup>: the collective unconscious. Through this deeper layer, the individual has direct access to a veritable treasure trove of images and symbols, which links the individual to the group. These archetypes, as Jung called them, acquire a new kind of significance or personal semantic value every time they emerge in an individual’s conscious. So, even if the images themselves are static and timeless, the meaning attributed to them fluctuates depends on the interpretation of those who become aware of their existence. This psychological discourse on mythology has become so dominant in the past century, that it threatens to overshadow all other potential readings of the same material; Campbell even defines mythology as “psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology”, and regards psychoanalysis as the designated method to redress this monumental misinterpretation.<sup>7</sup> This may very well be true from our modern perspective; judged from the holistic world-view in which these narratives took shape, and in which history, cosmology and the psyche were all emanations of the same universal principle, there

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh 2005) p.2.

<sup>2</sup> For a more exhaustive general introduction to the study of myth, see Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney, *Introduction to Mythology. Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths* (New York 2009), or William Doty, *Myth: A Handbook* (Westport 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Ira Progoff, *The Death and Rebirth of Psychology* (New York 1969 [1956]) p.136.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell (1968) p.19.

<sup>5</sup> On the link between Romantic mythography and psychoanalysis, see Martin Chase, “The Ragnarok Within: Grundtvig, Jung, and the Subjective Interpretation of Myth”, in Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (eds.), *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society. Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference* (Sydney 2000) pp.65-73.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Von den Wurzeln des Bewußtseins. Studien über den Archetypus* (Zürich 1954) p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell (1968) p.256.

is no ‘misreading’ to speak of. The inner self and the self of the community coincided, and the ‘truths’ of mythology applied as much to the collective as they did to the individual. It is this collective function of mythology, its role in society, that I will focus on in the present study.

A central theme in all debates on mythology appears to be the element of coping and sense-making, which lies at the very core of all of mankind’s philosophical, religious and mythological endeavours. The larger setting that mythological narrative enables us to place our lives in<sup>1</sup>, is not necessarily of a religious or supernatural nature. In fact, it is the *social* function of myth that will occupy us here; how are myths involved in the construction of community, and how do these communities influence the narration or reinterpretation of myths? How should we understand the functionalisation of mythology in society?

The first cultural anthropologist to perform an extensive structural analysis of mythology was Claude Lévi-Strauss, who published his four-volume magnum opus *Mythologiques*, on native American culture and myth, between 1964 and 1971. In order to convey his findings on the uses of myth in these societies, Lévi-Strauss employed concepts and terminology – theme, fugue, variation etc. – from the arts and especially music: a revolutionary and controversial move that would prove influential in all fields of cultural research.<sup>2</sup> He approached mythology as a dynamic force in society, a constantly changing narrative structure consisting of mythological building-blocks he referred to as *mythèmes*: the irreducible, minimal units or elements of mythological narrative, which are continuously ‘bundled’ in various constructions, thus giving rise to new retellings of the same basic material.<sup>3</sup> The perpetual rearrangement of these mythemes into new narrative structures, or *bricolages*<sup>4</sup> as Lévi-Strauss calls them, is what keeps the stories alive and relevant from one generation to the next, and imbues ancient motifs with new significance. The story-teller, or *bricoleur*, gives meaning and structure to his or her community by adjusting and upgrading the ancestral tales to the needs of the present, from which we can conclude that the stories change over time.<sup>5</sup> According to Bruce Lincoln, even the tiniest, seemingly most trivial modifications that occur in the retelling of a myth have an ideological function; these stories form the narrative backbone of entire societies and are cherished to such an extent, every change in their texture must be the result of deliberate adaptation, rather than carelessness or misinformation.<sup>6</sup> Rearranging the old mythemes to fit the ideological discourse of the *bricoleur* and his audience, helps the re-teller to obtain a – temporary – grip on the text.

Modern nationalism is, in most cases, a *secular* ideology, in which the organic unity of the nation is valued above the traditional ideals of universal Christianity. The rise of national thought in Europe is, to a large degree, linked to the secularisation of industrialised societies in the course of the nineteenth century. However, in their formulation of new, secular world-views, Europe’s national movements have created an entirely new set of dogmas, rituals, relics and convictions, as well as a national calendar with corresponding festivities and ‘holy’ days on which national heroes – or national *saints* – are commemorated. This secular cult of the nation is what the sociologist Thomas Luckmann has called an

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<sup>1</sup> Armstrong (2005) p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Babette Hellemans, *Cultuur* (Amsterdam 2014) p.85.

<sup>3</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1963) pp.210-211. In the present study, I will use the Anglicised version of this term (*mythemes*).

<sup>4</sup> There is no exact equivalent of this term in English, but it is closely related to the concept of ‘do-it-yourself’: the product of a process in which something new is created through assembling a wide range of things that just happen to be available.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques* (4 vols.; Paris 1964-1971).

<sup>6</sup> Lincoln (2014) pp.104-5. In an earlier publication, Lincoln defines myth as “ideology in narrative form”; Lincoln (1999) p.209. I will return to this controversial definition in Chapter 7.1.

‘invisible religion’, or “objectivated systems of meaning that refer, on the one hand, to the world of everyday life and point, on the other hand, to the world that is experienced as transcending everyday life.”<sup>1</sup> As such, nationalism constitutes – like religion and mythology – a symbolic universe, in which ‘religion’ – in the wider, functional definition of the term – is not necessarily linked to religious institutions, but rather an omnipresent element in society, embedded in symbols, rituals, and the very language we speak. Luckmann’s concept of invisible religion greatly inspired Jan and Aleida Assmann in their theory of ‘cultural memory’, in which collective rituals, texts and monuments – collectively referred to as ‘cultural formation’ – as well as recitation, practice and observance – ‘institutional communication’ – are considered the essential means of cultivating a collectively ‘remembered’ past, and consequently create a community of rememberers.<sup>2</sup> The individual members of such a community do not have to know each other personally in order to feel connected to one and other; participation in the collective act of remembrance, being part of a larger system of cultural markers, suffices to generate a mutual sense of connectedness. In the models suggested by Assmann and Luckmann, national heritage is not a static collection of valued texts, traditions, objects and monuments, but rather a dynamic force in the constant re-formulation and re-establishment of collective identities. This is an important observation in the light of the present study; mythological narratives have been employed for the same purposes, and have evolved into an integral part of the invisible religion of national thought. They are first and foremost ‘objects of appropriation’<sup>3</sup>, which any ‘bricoleur’ can assemble and reassemble – or *re-member* – at will. As rhetorical instruments and markers of identity, the myths constitute a priceless body of ‘cultural capital’, susceptible to appropriation by every possible faction in the ideological spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

It requires a large degree of attentiveness “to social signs and symbols, to constant underlying social functions” to grasp the function of myth in society; an attentiveness historians like Fernand Braudel have found lacking in their own discipline.<sup>5</sup> I subscribe to Braudel’s observation, and propose a more interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon of myth to redress this defect. Anthropological fieldwork like that of Lévi-Strauss provides the historian and philologist, struggling with the ‘fossilised’ versions of extinct myths in medieval manuscripts, with essential insights into the workings and origins of mythological narrative. Unlike ancient manuscripts, people keep changing the myths, adjusting them to their own circumstances and enriching them with personal anecdotes, much to the frustration of scholars trying to record the ‘original version’ from their mouths. But this should come as no surprise to anyone who, like Lévi-Strauss and Maurice Bloch, realises that myths, like political dominators, “put on a mantle that has been worn by different types of dominators before them, they do not make this mantle anew”.<sup>6</sup> The practice of ‘mythologising’ is not restricted to non-Western cultures or ancient civilisations alone; also in our own time and culture, ancient mythemes are reinvented and recycled in order to create new stories and new networks of meaning. Myths constitute that which “is always available for individuals to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Luckmann, *Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York 1967) p.43.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, in *New German Critique* 65 (1995) pp.123-33.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault; see the Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 3.4, I will demonstrate that mythology did not all of the sudden ‘become’ cultural capital around 1800, but rather that the Romantics’ cultivation of the myths resembles the cultural strategies of Snorri Sturluson.

<sup>5</sup> Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago 1980) p.71.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge 1986) p.191.

make over, and apply to their own circumstances, without ever gaining control or permanent single-meaning possession.”<sup>1</sup>

In order for anyone to fully participate in this mythological game of adjusting and reassembling the available mythemes, one has to know the rules<sup>2</sup>, and be fluent in the symbolic idiom and grammar of the community in question. Whether the ‘truths’ concealed in myths are – as Joseph Campbell maintains – *universal* or not<sup>3</sup>; as long as one lacks the antennae for picking up and interpreting mythological references and metaphors, one is essentially *excluded* from the discourse in question. In Old Norse poetry, the deliberate ‘obscurization’<sup>4</sup> of the language through complex and hermetically sealed circumlocutions, or *kenningar*, was a very common practice. Singular nouns are replaced with elaborate figurative descriptions, loaded with references to myths that the listener or reader is supposed to know in order to make sense of the text. The *kenningar* are in themselves small riddles, games, and tests of one’s mythological knowledge. As such, they cement the collective cultural identity of those who do have the means to partake, while at the same time excluding ‘the others’, the outsiders, who do not. As the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga already established in the 1930s, myths form an instrument of *in-* and *exclusion*, and with only a limited group that “understands their language, or at least knows it, they form a closed culture group of a very ancient type.”<sup>5</sup> Long after the heathen religions of Europe had made way for Christianity, and the old stories had lost their metaphysical relevance, the myths retained this function as cultural demarcators, separating ‘us’ from ‘them’.<sup>6</sup> Myth may no longer be considered true in a spiritual sense, but it is still “true because it is effective”.<sup>7</sup> This explains why these narratives were still considered useful in the Christian Middle Ages<sup>8</sup>, and also in later centuries, when new collective identities were formulated in the context of modern, *national* thought. The creation of identities through games of *bricolage* with ancient mythemes was not only practised by the Norse *kennig*-masters of old, but also by their Icelandic descendants, the protagonists of the present study, who engaged with modernity by reviving their ancestral myth games. By and large, this social function of mythology has not changed much over the centuries.

For a myth to fulfil any function in society and to maintain its relevance in the course of generations, it has to reinvent itself continuously in order to provide answers to the specific needs and questions that occupy each and every generation. As a result of perpetual reinterpretation, myths have evolved and given rise to elaborate taxonomies of local variations and diachronic reinventions of the same mythological material. There can never be one ‘original version’ of a myth as opposed to the many ‘bastardised versions’ that originated

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<sup>1</sup> Shippey (2001) p.192.

<sup>2</sup> “A myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly. If we do not apply it to our own lives, it will remain as incomprehensible and remote as the rules of a board game, which often seem confusing and boring until we start to play.” Armstrong (2005) p.9.

<sup>3</sup> I will not venture into the dangerous field of modern psychoanalysis and ‘universally valid’ archetypes.

<sup>4</sup> Johan Huizinga’s ‘verraadseling’; see his *Homo Ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (Haarlem 1958 [1938]) pp.137-8.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.138; “Met een engen kring van lezers, die hun taal verstaat, althans kent, vormen zij een gesloten cultuurgroep van een zeer oud type.”

<sup>6</sup> On the application of Norse mythology in the formulation of Scandinavian identities, see Heinrich Anz, “Die eigene und die fremde Mythologie. Die Wiederbelebung der nordischen Mythologie als Medium skandinavischer Identitätsbildung im 19. Jahrhundert”, in Hans-Joachim Gehrke (ed.), *Geschichtsbilder und Gründungsmythen* (Würzburg 2001) pp.145-55.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong (2005) p.10.

<sup>8</sup> See John McKinnell, ‘Why Did Christians Continue to Find Pagan Myths Useful?’, in Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Trandum Kirstensen (eds.), *Reflections on Old Norse Myths* (Turnhout 2007) pp.33-52.

from it; mythology has never been static, but always a project under construction.<sup>1</sup> This dynamic, shape-shifting character of myth has been captured as follows by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg:

Myth has always already passed over into the process of reception, and it remains in that process no matter what violence is applied in order to break its bonds and to establish its final form. It is present to us only in the forms of its reception, there is no privilege of certain versions as more original or more final.<sup>2</sup>

From the semiotician's point of view, the ongoing process of attributing meaning to the world around us through the use of mythological narrative forms an interesting object of contemplation. The semiotician Yuri M. Lotman has argued that mythological texts differ from any other text that relates to 'news' or events in the outside world, since myth per definition "is perceived as something intimately relevant to each member of the audience. Myth always says something about me."<sup>3</sup> Due to the multiple layers of significance that make up mythological narrative, its relevance seems to apply to both the universe, the yearly cycle of the seasons or the movement of the planets – that is, the *macrocosm* –, as well as to the inner life of the individual – or *microcosm* – simultaneously. "This results in an elementary semiotic situation, namely every message has to be interpreted, or translated, as it is transformed into the signs of another level."<sup>4</sup> The semiotic process of (re)signification or translation may be interpreted as an ongoing process of reinvention, largely unfolding along the lines of Paul Ricœur's schematic representation of *mimesis*. This model consists of three stages, and explains the role of the recipient in relation to the text.<sup>5</sup> The first stage, which he refers to as *prefiguration*, constitutes everything preceding the process of configuration; every event and situation that makes up the context in which a narrative is constructed and/or received. This is important, because these personal contexts are per definition unique and form a vital factor in the personal experience and reconstruction of a certain narrative, which is therefore always different from that of others. The second stage, the *configuration*, can best be described as the action of creation. In this phase, the 'raw material' offered by the corpus of mythemes is moulded into a new creation, the shape of which is determined by everything that has occurred in the pre-figurative phase. In the third and final phase, the *refiguration*, this new narrative is translated to the situation of the recipient and thus internalised, interpreted, and consequently reinvented. According to Ricœur, this circular process of mimesis (and similarly, that of *metaphor* as well<sup>6</sup>) forms a capacity through which "we are able to do more than reflect the given world or refer to other texts; with them, we are able to open new worlds and make *new orders of action*."<sup>7</sup>

This concept of 'new orders of action' bears resemblance to Malinowski's claim that mythological narrative serves as a 'charter for social action', and as such constitutes an

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<sup>1</sup> The quest for the first or original *Urfassung* of mythological texts, leading back to some universal source of all human culture and religion, is closely linked to the Romantic idea of a primeval or natural *Urreligion*, from which all modern religions have descended, initiated by Friedrich Creuzer.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge 1990 [1979]) pp.270-1.

<sup>3</sup> Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington – Indianapolis 1990) p.153.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume I* (Chicago 1984) pp.52-90.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor. Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Robert P. Scharlemann, "Ricoeur's Mimetic Trinity: A Review", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985) pp.271-275, 273. Emphasis added.

integral part of society at large.<sup>1</sup> Ricœur's three-staged theory of mimesis coincides roughly with the double movement between *decontextualisation* – or *dehistorisation* – and *recontextualisation* – that is, embedding the narrative in the situational context of the recipient –, resulting in *actualisation*, which makes up the very engine of mythology. Viewed as a specific kind of *narrative template*, a term introduced by James Wertsch,<sup>2</sup> the structure of myth can be projected on contemporary or historical events in order to somehow make sense of them, and to structure collective memory into a coherent, intelligible and easily transmittable story. By doing so, certain storylines that simply do not fit the mythologising template are excluded, and not integrated into the greater narrative of collective historical memory. Thus, the narrative template serves as a kind of magnet, attracting those mnemonic elements that are compatible with the archetypical niches in its structure, while at the same time repulsing those that do not. In this function, mythology represents so much more than just a fixed corpus of stories; according to the influential French semiotician Roland Barthes, mythology is a *modus operandi*, or a *way* of saying things, in which a complex sign-system is elevated to the level of myth.<sup>3</sup>

The process of projecting mythological templates on contemporary events does not only alter the collective memory of a community, but forms a double movement that also reshapes the myth that is being projected. Before World War I, the alliance between the German and the Habsburg Empire was solidified and rhetorically naturalised by linking it to the legendary past of the German peoples as narrated in the 'national epic' of the *Nibelungenlied*. The loyalty that united the two states was described as *Nibelungentreue*,<sup>4</sup> reminiscing the unconditional and emotional loyalty the Burgundian king Gunther and his brothers displayed towards their 'friend' and loyal vassal Hagen von Tronje, Siegfried's murderer, when they refused to hand him over to their vengeful sister – and Siegfried's widow – Kriemhild. The immense bloodshed resulting from this fatal loyalty could not downplay the positive interpretation of this act of *Treue* in German pre-1945 political discourse, in which even Hagen, the killer of the quintessential German hero Siegfried, could be refashioned into the very epitome of German loyalty, and an example to both German and Austrian politicians. With the devaluation of unconditional *Treue* as a political merit after 1945, the positive interpretation of the 'villain' Hagen quickly dissolved.<sup>5</sup> This episode in German political thought serves to demonstrate that the creative interaction between mythological narrative and political or historical actuality is very much a two-way movement, refashioning both the myth *and* the context in which it is received.

The social function of mythologies as narrative templates, through which 'communities of meaning' are constructed within certain idiomatic boundaries, is driven by the dynamics of reinterpretation and re-semanticisation. Due to this mechanism, myths are continuously re-valorised within their ever-changing social and cultural contexts. As a structured reservoir of symbols, a mythological system is fundamental to the process of collective identity formation. Symbols are by their very nature abstract, multivocal, and susceptible to an infinite multitude of interpretations; "they do not tell us *what* to mean, but

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<sup>1</sup> Malinowski (1926).

<sup>2</sup> James V. Wertsch, "Collective Memory and Narrative Templates", in *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75:1 (2008) pp.133-156.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes traces the process of mythologisation in contemporary culture in his influential collection of essays *Mythologies* (Paris 1957).

<sup>4</sup> For the first time by *Reichskanzler* Bernhard Fürst von Bülow in 1909, in a speech addressing the Bosnian crisis (1908-1909).

<sup>5</sup> See Werner Hoffmann, "Das Buch Treue. Werner Jansens Nibelungenroman", in Joachim Heinzle, Klaus Klein and Ute Obhof (eds.), *Die Nibelungen. Sage – Epos – Mythos* (Wiesbaden 2003) pp.511-522.

give us the capacity to make meaning.”<sup>1</sup> As such, myths and symbols are per definition not bound to one specific ideology.<sup>2</sup> The less substance a symbol carries, the more susceptible it becomes to ideological reinterpretation. In fact, symbols “are effective *because* they are imprecise.”<sup>3</sup> They create a sense of communal sense-making, or a belief that all community members partaking in the same mythological system are making a similar sense of things. This automatically implies an awareness of the fact that this communal sense may differ from the sense that *others* make of the world through their own, different mythological narratives.<sup>4</sup> Thus, idiomatic boundaries are constructed and with them the ‘symbolically constructed communities’ they encompass. In his analysis of mythological classifications, Émile Durkheim is primarily interested in this social function of mythological narrative, and he identifies social organisation as the origin of all mythology. Since all hierarchy is per definition social in his eyes, the omnipresence of hierarchy in all mythology serves to prove this argument.<sup>5</sup>

Durkheim’s ideas on a ‘collective conscience’ have influenced modern thought on (national) identity formation, and bear resemblance to Anthony Smith’s emphasis on what he calls the *myth-symbol complex*, and the role of a *mythomoteur*, or constitutive myth which provides a community with a sense of purpose, in the process of ethnogenesis;

In other words, the special qualities and durability of *ethnie* are to be found, neither in their ecological locations, nor their class configurations, nor yet their military and political relationships, important as all these are for day-to-day experience and medium-term chances of survival of specific ethnic communities. Rather one has to look at the nature (form and content) of their myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values, which we can summarize as the ‘myth-symbol’ complex, at the mechanisms of their diffusion (or lack of it) through a given population, and their transmission to future generations, if one wishes to grasp the special nature of ethnic identities. Because (...) ethnicity is largely ‘mythic’ and ‘symbolic’ in character, and because myths, symbols, memories and values are ‘carried’ in and by forms and genres of artefacts and activities which change only very slowly, so *ethnie*, once formed, tend to be exceptionally durable.<sup>6</sup>

The Romantic glorification of national character and national history automatically entails, to a certain extent, the *mystification* of the nation’s past and its origins. The more obscure the roots of the seemingly organic community, shrouded in the mists of mythical prehistory, the more room they leave for romantisation and ideological cultivation.<sup>7</sup> Every national grand narrative contains certain key characters or events that form the inspiration of perpetual mythologisation and reinterpretation throughout the course of that nation’s (modern) history; the Revolution in France, the Battle of Courtrai in Flanders, King Arthur in Britain, or even the Berlin Wall. The role of these mythologised pasts in the formation of collective identities has been the subject of several studies by Anthony Smith, in which he manages to bridge the

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen (1985) p.16.

<sup>2</sup> Unless they have – like the swastika, or the Roman *fasces* – become too contaminated to be appropriated by rivalling ideologies.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen (1985) p.21 (italics added). This is why the saga heroes have become such successful national symbols in Iceland; the inner motivation for their deeds remain a mystery to the reader, making these heroes very susceptible to ideological appropriation (see Chapter 4.2.3). The same can be said about the vague, undetermined character of the eddic poems.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> See: Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford 1999 [1986]), p.13. See also Lajosi (2005) pp.56-58.

<sup>7</sup> In that respect, national narratives appear to have taken over the function of mystification from royal genealogies, which traditionally stretched back to some mythical dynasty-founder or – even in Christian times – to Óðinn himself.

gap between the study of poetic and artistic myth and more traditional studies of nationalism. In his view, national mythologies are systems of ethnic symbolism, and indispensable tools in the perpetual project of (re)defining the collective being.<sup>1</sup> National mythology is not a static narrative, unaffected by the historical setting in which they are retold, but a dynamic set of *mythemes*, continuously re-arranged and orchestrated to fit the communal needs of the time. According to Smith, these historically flawed interpretations of historic events – often rather insignificant in themselves, until they are mythologised and elevated to the level of symbolic key event – form the foundations of nationalisms worldwide. It is through mythology and its position outside of linear, Newtonian time, eternally unfolding *in illo tempore*, that it becomes possible to “reintegrate a substance of action with its mythic, holy origin, or even to experience the future.”<sup>2</sup> The *coincidentia oppositorum* of past and future, of glorified antiquity and ambitious modernism<sup>3</sup>, is accommodated by the a-historicity of mythological narrative, as well as their a-locality. Myths are not restricted to any specific place or time – as legends or sagas generally are<sup>4</sup> –, and they therefore possess the rare ability to ‘localise the universal’, while simultaneously ‘universalising the local’.<sup>5</sup> Local, autochthonous stories are infused with universal significance in their mythical dimension, and universal truths can be experienced directly in the indigenous wisdom of one’s own community. The mythological order of things transcends both space and chronology, and “the linear passing of time” is eliminated when the “sequence of historical events is over-written by mythical structures”.<sup>6</sup>

When Smith formulated his three conditions a myth has to meet in order to generate or renew a nation, he was referring to national mythologies – or mythologised national narratives –, not to nationalised, pre-Christian polytheisms. This is an important distinction to keep in mind, but nevertheless: two of his three conditions *do* apply to the Romantic cultivation of eddic mythology in Iceland; the chosen mythology should have the kind of ‘mythic quality’ that stimulates inspiration, and it should be ‘susceptible to reinterpretation.’<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the inspired reinterpretation of mythology lies at the very heart of the present study. The centrality of symbols and mythology to the creation of identity presupposes a process of historical *decontextualisation* – or abstraction – and *recontextualisation* through which the old stories remain important and applicable to contemporary events and situations. Given the timelessness and otherworldliness of mythological narrative, these stories are exceptionally susceptible to this creative process since they generally lack a clearly defined historical context. In their undetermined universality, myths appear to be uncontextual in nature, and are therefore easily recontextualised and applied to any situation or event imaginable.

As Anthony Paul Cohen has pointed out, the drawing of boundaries is crucial to the construction of identity. The demarcation of *self vis-à-vis the other* has traditionally occurred in polarising and highly mythologically charged terms. Mythology is by nature concerned with battles between the forces of good and evil, order (gods/heroes) and chaos (giants), light

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford – New York 1999) pp.97-118.

<sup>2</sup> Greenway (1977) p.13.

<sup>3</sup> The two ‘faces of Janus’ in Tom Nairn’s concept of modern nationalism; see Chapter 1.2.1.

<sup>4</sup> “One of the differences between applicability and allegory, between myth and legend, must be that myth and applicability are timeless, allegory and legend time-constrained. The difference of course is not an absolute one, and a story can have elements of both at the same time”; Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien. Author of the Century* (London 2001 [2000]) p.188.

<sup>5</sup> Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of “National Character”. A study in interwar East European thought* (London-New York 2012) p.60.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*, p.59.

<sup>7</sup> Smith (1997). Smith’s first condition, that the myth has to refer to an ‘authentic past’, does not apply to the subject of the present study. However, the Old Norse myths do represent an *authentic* link to an *authentic* past.



and darkness.<sup>1</sup> The bipolar nature of myth – be it pre-Christian mythology or mythologised historical memory – implies a heavily polarised world-view in which an inner circle – e.g. *Miðgarðr*, the world of man, associated with home, order, safety – is distinguished from an outer circle – e.g. *Útgarðr*, the world of giants, associated with chaos, darkness and insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Placing itself in the cosmological centre, a community intuitively associates itself with ‘rightness’, the gods, order, and other such positive qualities. Serving as Wertsch’s narrative template, the bipolar nature of myth consequently identifies the ‘other’, living beyond the demarcations of the community, with the opposite and hence negative qualities (chaos, evil), thus modelling the image of the other after archetypal conceptions of negativity. Like Wertsch’s narrative templates, these images work like magnets and generate new stories of their own, thus solidifying the image in the collective conscience. When over time one ‘significant other’, against which the self-image is silhouetted, is replaced by another, the decontextualised template of the mythologised other is effortlessly applied to the historical newcomer.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Romans who were – according to nineteenth-century German retellings of the story – defeated in Arminius’s epic struggle for ‘German independence’ could easily be supplanted by ‘new Romans’, like the French. Such actualised retellings transform the myths from old stories into Malinowski’s ‘charters’ for contemporary action. Mythology serves as a model of reality:

Myth confers ‘rightness’ on a course of action by extending it to an otherwise murky contemporary view. One reason which accounts for the particular efficacy of myth in this regard is its a-historical character. As one writer has put it, myth is ‘beyond time’. It ‘blocks off’ the past, making it impervious to the rationalistic scrutiny of historians, lawyers and others who may dispute precedent and historical validity ...<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to one of the key-functions of instrumentalised mythology, namely that of rhetorical toolbox. Myths take place in a symbolic grey-zone, and the very power of mythology itself lies in its lack of fixed and objective meaning, which makes it amenable to idiosyncratic interpretations. Since the distinction between the abstractions of good and evil are clearer and more essentialised in mythology than in other genres, identifying an opponent with mythological characters or motives associated with evil naturalises your claim to ‘rightness’. These powerful metaphors can empower any argument, and can be applied in any debate. Simultaneously, mythology can in its very a-historicity and undeterminedness also *unite* otherwise divided factions, since everyone can find his or her own ideals expressed in one and the same myth, no matter how divergent those ideals may be. Thus, an appearance of unity can cover up political and ideological diffusions in a (national) community, due to the ambiguity, vagueness and consequent multi-interpretability of the narrative itself. In other words: mythological metaphors, the legitimacy of which is “derived from its very association with the cultural past”,<sup>5</sup> can be powerful rhetorical tools in the hands of anyone who wants to divide or unite a community.

In the rhetorical process of construing sameness and difference through mythology, the decision to utilise one specific mythological system rather than another may be just as relevant as the subsequent operationalisation of the selected system. This goes especially for

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Vladimir Propp’s paradigmatic structural analysis of Russian fairy tales; *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin 2009). Also: Lotman (1990) p.158.

<sup>2</sup> Hastrup (1998) p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Eduard Norden’s concept of ‘wandering motifs’; Christopher B. Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book. Tacitus’s Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich* (New York – London 2011) p.50.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen (1985) p.99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

modern, post-Herderian times, in which ‘national mythologies’ were linked to ethnic identities and utilised in the practice of expressing national uniqueness, equality and independence from other nations and (hegemonic) mythological discourses. The nationalisation and canonisation of a certain mythological system, which was sometimes heavily contested, often formed part of a larger program of cultural emancipation vis-à-vis a significant and more powerful other. The oldest Early-Modern treatise on Germanic deities, *De diis germanis* by the German humanist Elias Schedius (Amsterdam 1643), may also be considered an attempt to emancipate the pre-Christian heritage of Western Europe. However, this was not done through the means of contrasting it with the classical mythologies of Hellas and Rome, but by *connecting* them; Schedius’s book reads like a classical treatise on the gods, only with a new nomenclature.<sup>1</sup> By identifying the Germanic pantheon with that of ancient Greece, North European culture could share in the grandeur and universal reputation of classical antiquity. This cultural strategy, best described as ‘contrastive association’,<sup>2</sup> was common in medieval and early modern times, and coexisted with Herderian nativism for much of the nineteenth century. In order to distinguish oneself from other nations, a unique and peculiar national mythology had to be canonised – or invented, as in the case of the Finnish *Kalevala*. The barbarian, invented in Antiquity to function as a negative to Athenian civic ideals,<sup>3</sup> had been rising in popularity ever since the publication of Tacitus’s rediscovered treatise on Germania and its Protestant mobilisation against the Roman-Catholic South. In the eighteenth century, the Ossianic vogue that swept through Europe, and Rousseau’s proclamation of the nobility of savages (primitivism), solidified the position of the pagan Celtic and Germanic ancestors of the western and northern Europeans in their fledgling national imaginations, and strengthened their campaign against the classical, universalised culture of Europe.<sup>4</sup> This development marked the beginning of literary historicism, that was to transform the cultural functions of philology for good; national literature had to be canonised and ‘cultivated’ in order for it to take centre stage in the first, cultural phase the development of national self-consciousness (see Chapter 1.2).

In a way, the more authentic, national-pagan past had to be intellectually *revived*; in his poem *To Ireland in the Coming Times* (1892) Yeats professes his identification with Ireland’s national poets of the past, and uses themes from quintessentially Irish narrative traditions to change a dead mythology to a living one. In this Romantic revivalist interpretation of national mythology – which was certainly not unique to Yeats –, heroes like Cuchulain and Oisín could be interpreted as archetypes of valiant resistance, and a maiden who is liberated by Oisín can come to represent Ireland itself, liberated from her English shackles.<sup>5</sup> In colonial settings such as these, it is the coloniser who functions as the ‘significant other’, in opposition to which a self-image is carved out, and which is narrated to fit the wandering motif of the evil oppressor. In Ireland that indispensable part in any

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<sup>1</sup> Bödl (2000) p.1. On the classical origins of the modern study of myth, see Leerssen (2016).

<sup>2</sup> A term first applied by Anne Holtmark to explain the myriad Christian motives in Snorri Sturluson’s Edda. She argued that Snorri imported these elements to remind his readers of their own Christianity, and simultaneously of the pagan nature of the contents of his book. See Rory McTurk, “*Snorra Edda* as Menippean Satire”, in Daniel Anlezark (ed.), *Myths, Legends, and Heroes. Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature* (Toronto 2011) pp.109-130, 119. I will argue that the same term can be applied to the later practice of ‘upgrading’ a distinctive mythology by means of association with classical or Christian narrative.

<sup>3</sup> See Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Clarendon 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Here I would like to point out the paradoxical fact that these national struggles against international, European cosmopolitan culture became *themselves* utterly typical of European civilisation in general: nationalism is a very international phenomenon. See Leerssen (2006a).

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats (1892), in Michael O’Neill (ed.), *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London – New York 2004) pp.101-3.

emancipatory national narrative was played by the Englishman, in Iceland – to some extent – by the Dane.

It is striking that this ‘repaganisation’ of the national imagination took place in a predominantly Christian cultural context, and was generally spoken of a secular nature.<sup>1</sup> In this research, eddic mythology will be scrutinised in its function as a reservoir for metaphors and rhetorical instruments, operationalised in various intellectual and artistic ways in the cultural and political debates of nineteenth and early-twentieth century Iceland. The theological implications of the Romantic reappraisal of Iceland’s pagan past will however not be ignored; *Eddufræði* (the study of the Eddas) was practiced by a relatively small network of educated Lutherans, generally trained at the University of Copenhagen, and was a product of the intellectual and religious climate in Iceland and Denmark at that time. The first early modern scholars to concern themselves with Germanic paganism tended to depict the cult of their ancestors as a brand of primordial and uncorrupted ‘Protestant’ religion, an original monotheism, in which the shining character of Baldr, Óðinn’s son, could be interpreted as a mythical prefiguration of Christ.<sup>2</sup> In this case, the strategy of contrastive association is used to elevate the native ancestors from their status of barbarian heathens and to primordialise and consequently *justify* the position of the new Protestant nations in North-Western Europe. The *virtuous pagan*, originally a concept from Christian theology referring to virtuous pre-Christian men like the prophets of the Old Testament and Greek philosophers like Plato and Socrates, anticipating their liberation from limbo during Christ’s harrowing of Hell, became a popular trope among Romantic admirers of Viking culture in their glorifications of Old Norse religion. Without jeopardising their own Christian beliefs, they – like J.R.R. Tolkien after them – “felt that Old Norse mythology provided a model for what one might call ‘virtuous paganism,’ which was heathen; conscious of its own inadequacy, and so ripe for conversion; but not yet sunk into despair and disillusionment like so much of (...) post-Christian literature; a mythology which was in its way light-hearted.”<sup>3</sup> This Christianised reading of eddic mythology – comparable to the Christian appropriation of classical mythology and culture in the Renaissance – owes much to the work of the Danish theologian and philosopher N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), who, as a good Christian, saw the Eddas as “the morning dreams of a people, foreshadowing its later historical life.”<sup>4</sup> During the Dano-German language conflict in Slesvig-Holstein, he considered the Eddas, the national mythology of the *Danish* people, “appropriate weapons in the battle between national identities. Here the Danes had something the Germans could never match!”<sup>5</sup> Thus, good Christians could mobilise the pagan stories of ‘their ancestors’ in the service of national causes. Nevertheless, the rise of nationalism and other political ideologies in the nineteenth century is generally linked to the ongoing process of intellectual secularisation of Europe’s industrialised societies.<sup>6</sup> The effects of this secularisation on Icelandic thought will be scrutinised in as far

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<sup>1</sup> In Iceland, the *religious* revival of Old Norse paganism did not take shape until 1972, when the Ásatrú Association (*Ásatrúarfélagið Íslands*) was founded by the farmer and poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson. See Chapter 10.

<sup>2</sup> Böldl (2000) pp.42-63. Similar arguments have been voiced throughout the centuries, e.g. by C.S. Lewis, who spoke of ‘Pagan Christs’; Lewis, “Myth Became Fact”, in idem., *God in the Dock. Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids 2001) pp.63–67. Compare Chapter 8.1.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Shippey, *Tolkien and Iceland. The Philology of Envy*, delivered at the Sigurður Nordal Institute, September 2002. Posted on: <http://www.nordals.hi.is/shippey.html>. (Accessed January 2004). See also Stefan Arvidsson, *Draksjukan. Mytiska fantasier hos Tolkien, Wagner och de Vries* (Lund 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Flemming Lundgreen Nielsen, “Grundtvig’s Norse Mythological Imagery-An Experiment that Failed”, in Wawn (1994a) pp.41-68, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.53.

<sup>6</sup> As portrayed by Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge 1975).

as they have influenced the debates on eddic mythology and the process of national self-definition.

In the chapters to come, I will distinguish between two central functionalisations of mythology in Iceland's national discourse, namely as *cultural capital* and as *symbolic language*. Bourdieu first introduces the sociological concept of cultural capital in a study on differences in children's outcomes in France<sup>1</sup>, but the term soon acquired wide-reaching theoretical significance after the appearance of Bourdieu's article "The Forms of Capital" in 1986. In this publication, he distinguishes cultural capital from economic and social capital, and defines it as both material and symbolic goods that are considered prestigious, rare, and worthy of acquiring in the context of a particular social system.<sup>2</sup> Acquiring or appropriating the goods in question enhances the social status of the acquirer, not least because they can be converted to one of the other forms of capital, e.g. material goods (economic capital). Texts or discourses, including mythologies, can be interpreted as forms of cultural capital as well, and constitute objects of appropriation (Foucault).<sup>3</sup> Along similar lines, the literary scholar Itamar Even-Zohar has proposed conceptualising culture as 'culture-as-goods' on the one hand, and 'culture-as-tools' on the other; with this distinction, Even-Zohar separates the concept of culture as "a set and stock of evaluable goods, the possession of which signifies wealth, high status, and prestige" (culture-as-goods) from that of culture as "a set of operating tools for the organization of life, on both the collective and the individual levels" (culture-as-tools).<sup>4</sup> This first idea, of culture-as-goods, corresponds to a large extent with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and both can refer to material and immaterial 'goods'. I will apply these concepts in my analyses of Old Norse mythology as a contested object of appropriation, as national – or nationalised – heritage, the ownership of which increased the cultural prestige of the owner. Especially when applied to the academic – and *pseudo-academic* – debates concerning the origin and ownership of the eddic poems (see Chapters 3.4, 6.1, 6.3 and 7.1), the concept of cultural capital is bound to yield interesting results.<sup>5</sup>

The second mode of functionalising mythology, or what I will – in the spirit of N.F.S. Grundtvig (see Chapter 3.2.3) – refer to as 'symbolic language', or 'applied mythology', coincides largely with Even-Zohar's idea of 'culture-as-tools', and entails the ideological, creative and artistic activation of mythemes as a mode of expression, or a way of saying things (Barthes). In a way, the concept of applied mythology is something of a pleonasm; just like the rules of a game, myths are intended for application. I will argue that the creation of a national reservoir of images and metaphors, readily available and best suited for conveying – and fashioning – national thought, was the direct result of nationalising the Eddas and establishing their status as cultural capital. However, both strands of functionalisation coexisted side by side in the period under investigation, and mutually enhanced each other; artistic cultivations of mythological themes in national poetry cemented their Icelandicness, and in turn strengthened the national claims on this material voiced by philologists and historians. In other words: within Iceland's national discourse, there was a constant interplay between myth as cultural capital and myth as symbolic language.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (1973).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York 1986) pp.241-258.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault (1969).

<sup>4</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, "Culture As Goods, Culture As Tools", in *Papers in Culture Research* (2005), available from <http://www.even-zohar.com> (last accessed: 26 October 2016) pp.9, 12.

<sup>5</sup> I will solely focus on the myths as *immaterial* goods, and leave the *material* aspect – that is, for instance, the actual medieval manuscripts containing the narratives – out of consideration. In the large-scale transportation of Icelandic manuscripts to Copenhagen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as in the debates leading up to the return of many of them in the second half of the twentieth century, the principle of cultural capital is too obvious to ignore. Unfortunately, both episodes fall outside the historical scope of this study.

In the course of my engagement with the primary sources of this research, I have formulated five separate rhetorical functions of eddic mythology as a modern symbolic language. Each one of these can occur separately, but also entangled with one or several of the other functions. In the main body of this study I will demonstrate that these five categories together can account for the full range of applied mythology in Icelandic national culture, meaning that none of the sources I have come across and analysed in this context fall outside this limited set of underlying functions, or rhetorical strategies. These five interrelated functions are:

1. *Primordialisation*: Through the use of mythological language, phenomena that are normally confined to a particular time and space can be *decontextualised* (Ricoeur), and projected onto a primordial time before time, a place beyond place, completely detached from the restrictions of chronology, causality, and conventional space. As an instrument of primordialisation, or mystification, mythology can be used to link contemporary developments, modern phenomena, invented traditions, but also natural landscapes and urban spaces to the eternal, organic and static spirit of the nation, rooted in timeless prehistory. Tom Shippey has argued that high age is a ‘great authenticator’<sup>1</sup>, so wrapping one’s argument in the symbolic language of something so old that it seems to predate time itself (myth) can be of great rhetorical value. By linking them to mythology, invented traditions such as the festival of *Porrablót* (‘frost offering’) could be presented as ancient, primordial phenomena.
2. *Indigenisation*: Closely related to the first function, is the strategy of indigenisation. When applied to phenomena or idea(l)s that are originally foreign or even exotic, decontextualisation through mythology leads to a *recontextualisation* in a national context. Hence, concepts as diverse as modern science, Christianity, parliamentary democracy, reincarnation and karma could all be naturalised or Icelandicised through Old Norse mythology. On the most literal level, foreign narratives – such as James Macpherson’s *Ossian* poems – were nationalised by replacing ‘Celtic’ mythological concepts with their eddic equivalents in the Icelandic translation. I will demonstrate that this functionalisation is not confined to Romantic discourses, and that even seemingly *anti-Romantic* actors – such as the editors of the avant-gardist journal *Verðandi* – paradoxically resorted to traditional mythological means to indigenise modernity. Furthermore, it will become clear that this particular strategy also works ‘in reverse’, that is: in situations in which Icelanders had to indigenise *themselves* in the new world, through mythological recontextualisation.
3. *Universalisation*: It would be too simplistic to consider this third function of myth merely the opposite of the previous one, although that may seem a reasonable conclusion. Rather, function two and three should be seen as two sides of the same medal. I will demonstrate that indigenising universal concepts in national images, while simultaneously universalising the national – for instance by presenting Freyja as the archetype of femininity, or associating local deities such as Hulda or Fjallkonan with universal, abstract concepts such as ‘life’ or ‘the divine’ – elevates the national to the level of *international*, ideal significance, not unlike the classical narratives of ancient Greece and Rome. Especially gods and goddesses are suitable instruments of universalisation, since they embody abstract concepts and are not restricted to the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Shippey, “A Revolution Reconsidered: Mythography and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century”, in idem (ed.), *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous* (Turnhout 2005) pp.1-28.

shackles of time and space. Their very names can provoke this two-fold movement of universalising the national and nationalising the universal. For that reason, many Icelandic – and Scandinavian – companies and banks with *international* aspirations still carry names derived from the Eddas.

4. *Association*: A particularly useful instrument in the rhetorical toolbox is that of positive association with ‘others’ through the construction of mythological bridges; the association of Æsir and Vanir with their Greek counterparts – or with the heroes of Trojan legend – could transfer some of the cultural prestige of classical antiquity to the lands of the north, and contribute to their cultural emancipation. By *associating* Þórr with Attila, the archetypal Hungarian, Gísli Brynjúlfsson sought to import and Icelandicise the political ideals of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution.
5. *Differentiation*: Just like function two and three appear to be each other’s counterparts, ‘differentiation’ seems to indicate the exact opposite of ‘association’. However, yet again, the relationship between these two rhetorical strategies is more complex and dynamic than may be expected. This fifth function entails the process of self-exoticisation, of actively silhouetting oneself *against* ‘the other’, and cultivating those elements that most strikingly distinguish oneself from the rest – while, on the other hand, downplaying those that may indicate similarity between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In this context, eddic mythemes are first and foremost simply markers of ethnic identity, points of recognition without any specific deeper meaning, and a mechanism of contrastation, in- and exclusion. Especially when surrounded – and thus *threatened* – by ‘others’, cultivating these symbols of selfhood becomes a cultural priority, in order not to be confused with and absorbed by ‘them’. This function is exemplified by eddic place names in ‘New Iceland’ (Canada), which served to distinguish the Nordic settlers from the other ethnic groups surrounding them.

This set of function was formulated on the basis of *modern* sources, and hence does not include the more religious functions of myth related to mysticism, cosmology and sense-making as described in the above. Since I will be applying these supposed mythological functions in my analysis of national culture, I will now set out to theorise the notoriously problematic concept of national identity, both from the international and the Icelandic perspective.

## 1.2 Theorising National Identity

### 1.2.1 General Perspectives

The problem of defining national identity and nationalism has been, and still is fuel for scholarly vendettas, and has opened up academic fault lines crisscrossing their way through the heavily polarised field of nationalism studies. It is therefore important to determine my own position in this hazardous minefield of opinions and concepts, before setting out to explore the historical development of Iceland’s national awareness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First and foremost, a distinction has to be made between the concepts of nation, state, nationalism, and *ethnie* to render them workable categories. According to Oliver Zimmer, a nation can best be understood as “a cultural order (composed of certain idioms, values, symbols and myths).”<sup>1</sup> Despite confusing applications of the term – as in United

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Zimmer, “In Search of Natural Identity. Alpine Landscape and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Nation”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40:4 (1998) pp.637-665, 642.

*Nations* or *national* team –, nations are not identical to states, which are civic, *political* entities, which often legitimise their existence by means of nationalistic narrative. A self-conceived nation can be dispersed over several states, and a state can be comprised of several self-conceived nations. The political and cultural ideology that states that nations – or at least: one’s *own* nation – should coincide seamlessly with a state of their own – a *nation-state* –, thus securing their independence and their right to self-determination, can be referred to as nationalism. According to Joep Leerssen, nationalism is characterised by three central assumptions; 1. That the nation is the most natural and organic collective aggregate of humans, making the nation’s claim to loyalty superior to any other; 2. That the state derives its sovereignty from its incorporation of a nation; and 3. That in territorial terms, the most natural way to divide mankind into states, is along national – cultural, linguistic, ethnic – lines, thus carving out nation-states.<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to circumnavigate the confusion caused by increasing interchangeability of the terms ‘state’ and ‘nation’ in general parlance, prominent scholars like Anthony D. Smith and Hugo Dyserinck have pleaded for the introduction of the neutral term *ethnie*, to be used instead of nation. However, given the modern contamination of the terms ethnic and ethnicity - nowadays connected to the concept of ‘race’, but originally simply referring to the “collective acceptance of a shared self-image”<sup>2</sup> – one should wonder whether this idiomatic intervention serves any purpose other than simply replacing one problematic term with another. Throughout the present research, I will apply the term *ethnie* to any form of collective self-image as a people *prior to* its potential politicisation in modern nationalism, and ‘nation’ to those communities that have already developed such a political national self-awareness.

In sketchy lines, the scholarly debate on the issue of nationalism and national identity can be divided into the following camps: the *modernist*, the *primordialist* and the *perrenialist* schools. The discussion ensuing between the adherents of these schools centres around the themes of modernity (how *modern* is the phenomenon of national thought?), naturalness (have nations developed in a more or less natural fashion, or are they inventions?), and origin (does the national idea originate from a small cultural and political elite, or is it a popular grassroots movement?). Currently, the modernist school can be considered the most prolific and influential one in the field of nationalism studies, the constructivist proponents of which tend to emphasise the artificiality and the constructedness or invention of national identities in modernity. According to Ernest Gellner, the rise of nationalism should be considered in the light of the Industrial Revolution and the modern societies shaped by it; social mobility and the demand for centralised educational institutions created a need for linguistic and cultural homogeneity and social equality to facilitate the nationwide development of industrial society.<sup>3</sup> A view in which national identity is equally rooted in modernity – but less motivated by economical demands – is that promulgated by Benedict Anderson in his much acclaimed *Imagined Communities*.<sup>4</sup> Anderson stresses the influence of the printing press – and the consequent standardisation and nationalisation of vernacular languages – on the construction of entirely new and imagined collective identities. In order to legitimise these new collectivities historically, the modern age has witnessed the large scale ‘invention of traditions’ (E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger<sup>5</sup>), misleadingly endowing newly established

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<sup>1</sup> Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe* (Amsterdam 2006) p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2006b) p.16.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London – New York 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge – New York 1983).

See also: Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge – New York 1990).

institutions with a Romantic air of medieval or even primordial antiquity. National costumes, national music, royal ceremonies; many of them originated *not* from a revered ancient national *Volksgeist*, but from the drawing tables of nineteenth century intellectuals. Deconstructing these national myths – which, as the history of the twentieth century has demonstrated, could inspire ordinary people to ethnic cleansing and an intense hatred towards everyone *excluded* from the national ideal – is of the essence, and implies a strong normative bias in the modernists' approach to the *problem* of nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Levelling the imaginary boundaries separating in-groups from out-groups may *sound* like a noble mission, but one may wonder whether such moral objectives do not jeopardise the academic objectivity of research conducted under this banner.

The opposing school of the primordialist theory has as good as no serious proponents in the modern academic field of nationalism studies, and for good reasons. As its name suggests, primordialists hold on to the essentialist and deterministic view of nations as ontological and organic entities – internally bound by the ties of kinship and a shared race, religion and language – , the origins of which lay hidden in the mists of prehistoric antiquity. Every nation possesses its own distinct national character, determined by natural factors like climate or landscape, and is clearly distinguishable from neighbouring nations. Needless to point out that this simplistic discourse has fallen into disfavour in post-1945 academia, even though popular conceptions akin to these primordialist views have remained omnipresent outside the academic arena. In Iceland historiography, this strand of national thought has persevered much longer than in most European historiographies. This can be explained by the national ethos which characterises newly independent nation-states, and the very late beginnings of history as an independent academic discipline in 1965, when it was disentangled from the overarching and holistic curriculum of Icelandic Studies (*Íslensk fræði*), comprising language, literature/philology and history.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Iceland's insularity and the homogeneity of its small population may have facilitated the survival of essentialist perceptions of national identity, as those promulgated in the twentieth century by intellectuals like Sigurður Nordal and Guðmundur Finnbogason.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, Icelandic scholars like Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson – among others – have taken a more critical stance in the debate, and have approached Iceland's national identity more historically, as a phenomenon of the modern age.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, monolithic myths of 'Icelandicness' – pertaining to the community's egalitarian and homogenous character, for instance – have been criticised and debunked by from an anthropological perspective.<sup>5</sup>

A third position in the field of nationalism studies, represented by the perennialists, shares the primordialists' belief that ethnic identities have always been around in one form or the other – and will continue to do so –, but not their notion of nations as inert sociobiological

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<sup>1</sup> An approach epitomised by Edward W. Saïd's claim that it should be every historian's task to deconstruct any dominating system of in- and exclusion, both nationalism as well as stereotypical images of 'the other'. Saïd, *Orientalism* (London - Henley 1978) p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Loftur Guttormsson, "The breakthrough of social history in Icelandic historiography", in Frank Meyer and Jan Eivind Myhre (eds.), *Nordic Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Oslo 2000) pp.263-279, 266. See also: Ingi Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. öld* (Reykjavík 1986) 32. For an overview of Icelandic historiography in the twentieth century, see Guðmundur Jónsson and Sigurður Ragnarsson (eds.), *Íslensk sagnfræði á 20. öld* (Reykjavík 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk menning* (Reykjavík 1942) and Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Íslendingar. Nokkur drög að þjóðarlýsingu* (Reykjavík 1933). Finnbogason interpreted the typical Icelandic character as a product of Iceland's harsh landscape.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the historical development of Iceland's national identity, see Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.), *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* (Reykjavík 2003), Egilsson (1999) and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson *Íslenska þjóðríkið. Uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík 2007 I [2001]).

<sup>5</sup> See Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, "Icelandic Dialogues. Individual Differences in Indigenous Discourse", in *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48:4 (1992) pp.301-316.



facts of nature.<sup>1</sup> This distinguishes perennialism from primordialism, and renders it a serious alternative to modernism. However, the most promising approach to the subject of cultural nationalism may be a synthesis of modernist and perennialist thought; a synthesis embodied by the oeuvre of Anthony D. Smith.<sup>2</sup> Once a student of Ernest Gellner, Smith developed his own set of ideas and a theoretical framework for the study of nationalism which he labelled *ethn-symbolism*. In his works on the subject, he avoids being absorbed by the polarisation caused by the modernist-primordialist opposition, and takes a more sophisticated look at the *continuity* of collective identities throughout the ages. He interprets modern nations not simply as ‘updated’ continuations of preceding, pre-modern ethnic communities – or *ethnies*, in his terminology –, but he does argue that the ethnic core of every nation consists of a *mythomoteur*; a constitutive myth of the ethnic policy which forms the very foundation of national identity.<sup>3</sup> Nationalism is a modern phenomenon, but its pre-modern origins – e.g. bonds of kinship, belief systems and constitutive myths – are not. The fashion in which this pre-modern ‘raw material’ is cultivated in the modern nation depends on the ideological context in which it is reinterpreted. However, a nation without such a pre-modern ethnic core of myth, symbols and memories – stored in what Émile Durkheim refers to as the ‘collective conscience’ – is in Smith’s view unthinkable. His emphasis on the prominence of myths and symbols in the construction of national identities makes Smith’s approach an attractive one to everyone interested in the cultural dimension of nationalism, and the ideological, creative or ‘inspired’ reinterpretation of cultural heritage – such as Old Norse mythology – in modern national culture.

The ongoing debate between modernists and the proponents of Smith’s ethn-symbolism is reflected in Icelandic historiography by the opposing camps of Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Gunnar Karlsson. In his writings on Iceland’s struggle for independence,<sup>4</sup> Guðmundur clearly defends the modernists’ interpretation of national identity as a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gunnar Karlsson on the other hand focuses on expressions of Icelandic identity – notably in the writings of priests and well-to-do farmers – prior to the developments described by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, in which he discerns a cultural or *ethnic* national awareness which did not turn political until the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> I will explore the Icelandic interpretations of these different theories in more detail in Chapter 1.2.2.

Nationalism is characterised by a paradoxical dichotomy, engrained in its very texture. The cultivation of national heritage and a national past, epitomised in a glorified *golden age*, dovetails with a equally triumphalist discourse on modernisation and visions of the future; the template of national historiography implies a cyclical restoration of former greatness, a second golden age, rooted in primordial antiquity no doubt, but achieved through emancipation, modernisation, and full, *independent* participation in a world of modern nations. The double focus of modern nationalism can – as long as the divide remains unbridged – have a dividing effect on national movements, and place Romantic historicists face to face with their more future-minded fellow nationalists.<sup>6</sup> Tom Nairn has identified this dual nature of nationalism, and employed the metaphor of Janus – the double-faced Roman

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<sup>1</sup> These views can for instance be found in the work of Adrian Hastings, notably his *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Krisztina Lajosi, “National Opera and Nineteenth-Century Nation Building in East-Central Europe”, in *Neohelicon* 32:1 (2005) pp.51-69, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford 1999 [1986]) p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Notably his *Íslenska þjóðríkið. Uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík 2007 I [2001]).

<sup>5</sup> Karlsson (1999) pp.149-150, 176-178. See also his “The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland”, in Sven Tägil (ed.), *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World* (London 1995) pp.33-62.

<sup>6</sup> An Icelandic manifestation of this ideological problem will be explored in Chapter 4.2.

god of time, transitions and endings<sup>1</sup> – to clarify the dichotomy. Nairn indicates that re-interpretations of the past form an integral part of national ideologies. In fact, “[t]here seemed no way for nationalities to become nations without such new retrospect. Hence, modernising ambition and novel cults of a particular past and tradition notoriously co-exist within most varieties of nationalism: the backward- and forward-looking faces of any discrete population or area struggling for tolerable survival and prosperity.”<sup>2</sup> The observation of this uneasy co-existence is of great importance for the purposes of the present study, and Nairn’s concept of the backward and forward-looking faces of nationalism will form a recurrent theme in the chapters to come. My motivation for focussing on this aspect of nationalism in particular is related to the aforementioned function of mythology as a solution to contradictions and incompatibilities, a mediator and reconciliator of that which appears irreconcilable (Lévi-Strauss, see Chapter 1.1). I will argue that mythological narratives play a peculiar role in national discourses, because they have the capacity to reconcile Nairn’s two faces of nationalism. Mythology’s unconnectedness to time and chronology renders it the designated vehicle for transcending the past-versus-future dichotomy. Whereas the *Íslendingasögur* – recounting the fates of *historical* characters, set in *chronological* time – formed the preferred object of cultivation for Romantic historicists like the Men of *Fjölnir* (see Chapter 4.2) and represent Janus’s backward-looking face, eddic metaphors proved more efficient in formulating more abstract, timeless and modern conceptions of Icelandicness. Once properly ‘nationalised’, mythology is no longer seen “as medievalism but as a powerful expression of the emergent modern nation”.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, mythology is even actively employed to bring about a break with the past; Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel famously maintained that the time had come for a *new* mythology, one that would erase all the superstitions of the past and pave the way for a more enlightened society: a ‘Mythologie der Vernunft’.<sup>4</sup> Mythology is a way to overcome the ideological tension between old and new, and to anchor the nation’s primordial past in the present and the future. Goal of the present study is to explore the multiple ways in which Old Norse mythology has been cultivated in order to achieve just that.

Without dismissing the uniqueness of (political) nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I believe that it is the cultural reinterpretation of pre-existing raw materials and pre-modern modes of collective self-awareness that lie at the very heart of modern national identities. This cultural reinterpretation should be considered within the ideological context of *self-exoticisation*,<sup>5</sup> or the articulation of essential otherness (*alterity*) vis-à-vis other nations, in order to legitimise nationalistic claims to independence and autonomy. A community, whether ‘constructed’ or not, evolves just as much around those elements that unite the self-perceived community as it does around those aspects that distinguish the group from other groups in a significant way; the relational concepts of *similarity* and *difference* are of equal importance in the self-definition of communities. In fact, one could argue – as A.P. Cohen has – that the need to discriminate and contrast oneself with ‘the other’ forms the very foundation for concepts of community and collective

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<sup>1</sup> The use of mythological metaphors in modern historiography constitutes an interesting theme for further study.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London-New York 1997) p.71. On the gender aspect of this dichotomy, see Tricia Cusack, “Janus and Gender: Women and the Nation’s Backward Look”, in *Nations and Nationalism* 6:4 (2000) pp.541-561. I will elaborate further on this gender issue in Chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Battarbee, “The Forest Writes Back: The *Ausbau* of Finnish from Peasant Vernacular to Modernity”, in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey* (Turnhout 2007) pp.71-96, 95. For this reason, modern companies and banks are still named after gods and concepts from the Eddas; see Chapter 10.3.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, in his so-called *Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* (1796/7).

<sup>5</sup> Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North”, in idem (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011) pp.3-22, 7.

identities, like nations.<sup>1</sup> The creation or confirmation of collective identities involves therefore a great deal of ‘thinking oneself into difference.’<sup>2</sup> The formulation of these unique communal identities entails a quest for those elements in the group’s culture that can be deemed *authentic* on account of their uniqueness, their indigenous character, and their essential alterity in comparison to other cultures. These authentic phenomena are de-historicised, politicised as expressions of a primordial collective character, and are explicitly cultivated at the expense of other cultural characteristics that the group has in common with other communities. Thus, in the case of nations, a *national canon* arises: a collection of authentic (cultural) objects, material and immaterial, in order to ‘negotiate authentic selves’.<sup>3</sup>

In Iceland, this cultural process of negotiating a distinctive national self has been linked to the study of the most distinctive characteristic of Icelandic culture, which sets the island apart from all others; its truly unique and exceptionally rich corpus of medieval literature. Or, as Sigurður Nordal once put it cynically, the national movement in Iceland was “constantly cashing cheques on deeds committed seven hundred years ago.”<sup>4</sup> Historical culture thus determines – and is in turn *determined by* – the fashion in which a nation ‘thinks itself into difference’, and becomes a historical actor in its own right. As demonstrated by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, Icelanders did not politicise their cultural difference from other groups until “this difference was disappearing and their society and culture were developing in the same direction as other western European societies.”<sup>5</sup> This effect of ‘the other’ on collective self-perceptions appears to be so universal and fundamental to the behaviour of groups, that it has even been observed in behavioural patterns in the animal kingdom:

This phenomenon, where two species differ from each other more when they overlap than when they don’t, is called ‘character displacement’ or ‘reverse cline’. It is easy to generalise from biological species to cases where any class of entities differ more when they encounter one another than when they are alone. The human parallels are tempting, but I shall resist. As authors used to say, this is left as an exercise for the reader.<sup>6</sup>

To historians and social scientists, this should be an exercise not to be resisted, or left to the reader; Dawkins’s observation can actually tell us a lot about the ways in which distinctive features in culture and cultural heritage have been instrumentalised to accentuate one’s otherness vis-à-vis ‘the other’. In *human* culture, world-views – either mythological, monotheistic or secular – have always constituted, along with languages and traditions, the most obvious opportunities for collective self-contrastation.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from these sociological musings on the machinations of national identity, the study of nationalism as a *historical* phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth century has

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Paul Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London – New York 1985) p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.117.

<sup>3</sup> Siân Jones, “Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves. Beyond the Deconstruction of Authenticity”, in *Journal of Material Culture* 15:2 (2010) pp.181-203, 182-183.

<sup>4</sup> Nordal (1942) p.19, quoted in Pálsson and Durrenberger (1989) p.xv.

<sup>5</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Þingvellir: An Icelandic ‘Lieu de Mémoire’”, in *History and Memory* 12:1 (2000) pp.4-29, 12. For a thorough examination of Romanticism in Iceland, see especially Egilsson (1999) pp.13-27.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor’s Tale* (London 2005) p.322.

<sup>7</sup> According to Gwyn Jones, Norse paganism already fulfilled this ethnogeneric function in the Viking Age; not only was this family of cults the most obvious common denominator – and hence unifier – of the otherwise rather divided Nordic world (Jones 2001, pp.73-4), it also constituted the strongest point of contrast with the great antagonist in the south, namely the Christian world. In the words of Jones: “Nothing was more characteristic of the northern lands than the Old Norse religion” (idem., p.315). A conversion to Christianity thus had serious consequences for the cultural identity of the convert: “In England, Normandy, and Kiev, the rejection of Æsir and Vanir in favour of Christ ate deep into the Norse sense of separateness, as back in Scandinavia heathendom had helped sustain it” (idem., p.394).

been profoundly influenced by the insights of Miroslav Hroch, who proposed a three-phased model to explain the emergence and evolution of national movements in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Anthony Smith has summarised this model as follows:

First, an original small circle of intellectuals rediscovers the national culture and past and formulates the idea of the nation (phase A). There follows the crucial process of dissemination of the idea of the national by agitator-professionals who politicise cultural nationalism in the growing towns (phase B). Finally the state of popular involvement in nationalism creates a mass movement (phase C).<sup>2</sup>

As can be deduced from this, the origin of a national movement is always in the first place of a cultural nature. Without overlooking the peculiarities of every individual national movement, these ‘small circles of intellectuals’ initiating the whole project can be identified in every European nation, regardless of their conflicting ideas on what their nations were supposed to be. A precondition for the development of national movements is a well-developed public sphere or *Öffentlichkeit*, which had – according to Jürgen Habermas<sup>3</sup> – become increasingly intellectual since the early seventeenth century. Acting as a virtual agora, this is where the contents of ideas are discussed and examined in a collective setting which transcends everyday meeting places – like churches, bars or schools – and is therefore more abstract, creating a virtual infrastructural community that defines itself as such exactly because large numbers of its members take part in the same virtual *Öffentlichkeit*. Benedict Anderson has attributed the construction of a public sphere, strong enough to support the development of modern style nationalism, to the development of the printing press and the replacement of universal languages like Latin by written versions of the local vernacular languages. Without this development in modern society, Hroch’s agitator-professionals who politicise cultural nationalism (phase B) would have remained powerless, and nationalism as a cultural and political mass movement (phase C) would have been unthinkable.

Even though Hroch’s model has become widely accepted, many valid arguments have been raised against the application of this schematic approach to the analysis of national movements. Joep Leerssen has argued convincingly that the division into three subsequent phases of development may evoke too teleological an interpretation of the elements constituting phase A and B; the cultural and intellectual activities that characterise phase A (cultural) nationalism, are not necessarily an ‘overture’ to phase B, but might just as well remain without any further political consequence.<sup>4</sup> These activities are only conceived as phase A nationalism when analysed through the teleological lens of later generations, with the benefit of hindsight. Also, the cultural aspirations of phase A are not restricted to the early development of a national movement alone, but remain important throughout its evolutionary path towards becoming a mass movement, and even until after the realisation of a nation-state. The three phases are therefore not necessarily successive, but rather overlapping and intertwined. Leerssen maintains that the study of nationalism should not be considered an archaeology of the modern state, which contents itself with demonstrating how some nationalisms ‘failed’ in one of the earlier stages of their development, whereas others were successful. Nevertheless, Hroch’s emphasis on the cultural origins of national thought and his

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas. Eine vergleichende Analyse zur gesellschaftlichen Schichtung der patriotischen Gruppen* (Prague 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London- New York 1998) p.56.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied - Berlin 1962).

<sup>4</sup> The cultivation of regional cultures may serve as a good example in case.

attempt to reconcile modernist and ethnosymbolist views, render his analytical model indispensable to the study of cultural nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

As emphasised by Hroch, the cultivation of national culture commences in the actions of a selected group of intellectuals. Typically, the stereotypical nineteenth century intellectuals fitting Hroch's profile can be described as veritable cultural omnivores, more often than not involved in politics, philology, the study of law, linguistics, philosophy, folklore, historiography and creative writing simultaneously. Although this may seem odd at first glance, the endeavours of these cultural brokers or cultural agents on all these different fields sprang from the same ideal, namely: the 'recovery' and glorification of the national past, and the implementation thereof in the present and future. By creating an intellectual climate based on literary historicism,<sup>2</sup> allowing a more organic concept of national literature as the product of a people – instead of the incidental stroke of genius attributed to one single individual – to thrive, the collection, creative reconstruction, or even invention of – often fragmentary – national epics and folk stories served to unearth the primeval roots of the community, and to justify its claims of being a *Kulturnation*, with its own distinct character and unspoiled cultural authenticity.<sup>3</sup> The idea that the study of medieval literature and the language in which it has come down to the reader has the capacity to unveil the timeless spirit of a people, originated in the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803)<sup>4</sup> and facilitated the articulation of national *essences* – clearly identifiable in scientific botanical models made up of branches and roots – and, consequently, the identification of distinct groups and races. By adopting the vocabulary of the natural sciences, philologists presented their grand idea that nature, character and race are interdependent entities, as actual fact.<sup>5</sup> This intellectual enterprise, and the search for native literatures and folk cultures it inspired, cannot be considered in separation from its creative component; Walter Scott, Victor Hugo and their fellow medievalists throughout Europe blended their historical and philological studies with their fictional work, and inspired a historical culture that manifested itself not only in literature, but in neo-gothic architecture, music, and the visual arts alike. In fact, in many cases – such as the Finnish *Kalevala* epic, or the Scottish verses of Ossian – the boundaries separating actual antiquarian material from the imaginative Romantic poetry it inspired – in order to 'complement' the fragmentary originals – was blurred to such a degree, that it became impossible to disentangle them before they started their own careers in the European imagination, triggering the Romantic primordialisation of national identities. The ancient traditions and customs of rural populations, geographically isolated and unspoiled by urban modernisation and foreign ideas, were elevated to the status of national heritage, and formed the inspiration for writers and poets who composed new ballads and folk songs inspired by these oral traditions, and also invented archaic pseudo-folklore; functional

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2006a) pp.567-571.

<sup>2</sup> Historicism in this case refers not so much to Leopold von Ranke's adagium 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' (historiographical historicism), as to its adaptation in philological terms, where it came to represent a way of understanding the present in terms of 'how it came to be.' History was thus perceived as an organic growth process. See Joep Leerssen, "Romanticism, Philologists, the Presence of the Past", in *Modern Language Quarterly* 65:2 (2004) pp.221-243, 229. The beginning of literary historicism is often associated with the Ossianic hype in European culture. See idem., "Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism", in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London 2005) pp.109-125.

<sup>3</sup> One could argue that the literary historicists aspired to a *Kulturelles Gedächtnis*, being in the definition of Jan Assmann "die Tradition in uns, die über Generationen, in jahrhunderte-, ja teilweise jahrtausendelanger Wiederholung gehärteten Texte, Bilder und Riten, die unser Zeit- und Geschichtsbewußtsein, unser Selbst- und Weltbild prägen." Assmann, *Thomas Mann und Ägypten* (Munich 2006) p.70.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Berlin 1772).

<sup>5</sup> Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism. A New Quest for the Nineteenth-Century Historical Jesus* (London – New York 2012) pp.121, 128-129.

fictions, invented traditions, in order to popularise the idea of national authenticity among the ‘common folks’.<sup>1</sup>

It is by inventing traditions, popularising them, and presenting them as ancient and authentic, that these intellectual omnivores functioned as intermediaries between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. As demonstrated in the above, the – contested – boundaries separating the cosmopolitan intellectual elite – the initiators of Hroch’s phase A – from popular culture practiced by the rest of the population, became highly permeable in the course of literary historicism’s ascent. Rural folklore influenced the cultural production of the elite, which in turn gave shape to the pseudo-folkloristic practices of a general populace.<sup>2</sup> In the ‘practice of everyday life’ (Michel de Certeau), ‘ancient’ rituals and cultural phenomena – invented or not – are constantly subjected to a process of appropriation and alteration, through which their practitioners position themselves in society and the world at large.<sup>3</sup> When studying this phenomenon in small-scale societies like Iceland, it is justified to question the distinction between high and low culture all together, given the fact that the island did not boast a highly developed urban culture<sup>4</sup> nor – until 1911 – a university, and that the level of literacy and education was thus that ‘simple farmers’ could – and would – participate in intellectual discussions and creative production, that in most countries of mainland Europe were reserved for the cosmopolitan elite. These demographical peculiarities may have had a smoothing effect on the development of the national movement as described by Hroch, from an intellectual endeavour to a popular mass movement. Viewed from this perspective, Tim Edensor’s attack on scholars like Smith who, in his eyes, overemphasise the seminal position of intellectuals – ‘writers, classifiers, artists, historians, scholars and folklorists’; representatives of a ‘high culture’ – in the process of national identity formation can be, especially when scrutinising an age before mass and digital media, dismissed as ungrounded and irrelevant, *without* simultaneously downplaying the crucial importance of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Culture is too fluid and dynamic a concept to be caught in monolithic classifications of high and low, especially when studied in the context of small societies. In the spirit of Wittgenstein’s and Bourdieu’s pragmatism, I am more interested in the cultural *practices*, or the *performance* of culture, instead of a presumed and static concept of culture underlying these actions. What functions do cultural practices fulfil in societies, and how do they contribute to the construction of communities?

In my approach to the subject of national thought and national culture, the contestation of boundaries will not be confined to those on the social ladder, separating high from low. In recent years, the study of national movements has started to deviate from national frames of historiographical interpretation and their internalistic approach to the topic, towards a new focus on the *international* aspects of nationalisms and the importance of cultural transfer. The initiators of national movements in Europe were not restrained to their own national frames of activity, but were international entrepreneurs and cosmopolitans, often travelling the continent, reading foreign languages, and entertaining elaborate correspondences with foreign colleagues. Thus, influential concepts like ‘national epic’ or *Volksgeist* could travel and be *transformed* through the dynamic processes of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> These functional fictions have aptly been described as ‘fakelore’. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago 1977) p.4. See also Anne-Marie Thiesse, “National Identities. A Transnational Paradigm”, in Alain Dieckhoff and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds.), *Revisiting Nationalism. Theories and Processes* (London 2005) pp.122-143, 134-136.

<sup>2</sup> A good example being the invented tradition of the ‘Burns supper’ in Scotland, which includes addressing the haggis with Robert Burns’s popular poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley 1984).

<sup>4</sup> The population of Reykjavík, Iceland’s largest (and arguably only) city and administrative centre, grew from merely 600 in 1801 to 1,450 in 1860. In 1901 the city boasted some 6,321 inhabitants.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford - New York 2002) p.9.

decontextualisation and recontextualisation, resemantisation, and indigenisation. Spearheading these developments in the study of nationalism were Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, who in their work on intellectual Franco-German interaction developed the concept of cultural transfer, by which they transcended the static practices of comparative historiography and moved beyond internalistic explanations of national movements and cultural processes.<sup>1</sup> Ever since, nationalism has been treated as an international affair and interesting insights have been generated by the global perspectives of scholars like Stefan Berger<sup>2</sup> and Anne-Marie Thiesse<sup>3</sup>, among others. Theoretical frameworks from other fields of research, notably literary criticism, have contributed to our understanding of the mechanisms underlying identity formation and the imagination of self and the other. Studying the dialectic processes originating from the interaction of *auto-images* and *hetero-images* (self-images and images of others) as expressed in literature as well as in every other form of human expression – thus exposing the historical fluidity of national stereotypes –, we come to a deeper understanding of the dynamics that give shape to national identities and their symbolic discourses.<sup>4</sup> After all, nationalism can be interpreted as the politicised version of such *auto-images*, formulated in the course of polarising identity strategies aimed at differentiating one's own community from 'the other'.

Determining what a community's unique cultural characteristics consist of is only possible, when they are contrasted with cultural stereotypes of 'the other', and when 'national' peculiarities detected by outsiders, describing and characterising the community from without, are internalised and labelled quintessentially national. The methodology of imagology, as developed by Hugo Dyserinck, Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen<sup>5</sup>, is centred around this very assumption of *international* cultural interaction, which functions as the driving force behind identity formation. Also, the constant fluctuations in the way self-conceived nations relate to one another, politically and culturally, render national images susceptible to instability and historical evolution.<sup>6</sup> The interrelatedness of *auto* and *hetero-image* is further illustrated by the peculiar fact that many national movements did not originate in 'their own' nations, but abroad, often in major urban and intellectual centres where ideas on the political and cultural cultivation of identity – e.g. the construction of national literary canons, or the composition of national operas – spread among the intelligentsia and expatriates from all over Europe, and were modified to suit the aspirations of their recipients.<sup>7</sup> The first Icelandic literary and philological societies, cradles of national

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<sup>1</sup> Werner and Espagne, "Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Zu einem neuen interdisziplinären Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.", in *Francia: Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte* 13:1 (1985) pp.502-510. In later years Michael Werner distanced himself from this approach and developed the idea of *histoire croisée* (or *Verflechtungsgeschichte*), which I will not elaborate on since its practical application is problematic and has yielded only limited results, which do not appear to add any fundamental insights to those already acquired through the study of transfers. See Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity", in *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006) pp.30-50.

<sup>2</sup> Notably his work on national historiographies. See Berger (ed.), *Writing the Nation. A Global Perspective* (Basingstoke 2007), and also: idem. and Chris Lorenz (eds.), *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories* (Basingstoke 2009).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Thiesse (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Joep Leerssen, "Imagology: History and Method" in idem. and Manfred Beller (eds.), *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters* (Amsterdam-New York 2007) pp.17-32, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most potent illustrations of this phenomenon is the image of 'the German', who has, throughout the ages, been depicted consecutively as an uncultivated farmer, a civilised poet and philosopher (*Dichter und Denker*), and a militaristic technocrat. See Manfred Beller, "Germans", in idem, pp.159-166.

<sup>7</sup> Leerssen applies the image of a virus or an epidemic to illustrate this process of intellectual interaction, inflicting one recipient after the other and modifying itself in the course of its diffusion. I find this

thought, were founded in Copenhagen – often at the instigation of non-Icelanders like the linguist Rasmus Rask (Chapter 3.3) –, and Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the national movement and national father figure, spent most of his life not in the country he sought to free from the Danish, but in that same Danish city that had witnessed the birth of his political cause.

It is this international network, supported by crosspollination in urban centres and through intellectual correspondences, that was largely overlooked by Miroslav Hroch, but is now being mapped – quite literary – by academic initiatives like the Amsterdam-based international *Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms* (SPIN), brainchild of Joep Leerssen, which aspires to create a complete impression of who was corresponding with whom, which books were translated in what languages and who may have read them, in order to reconstruct how the dissemination of Romantic national thought may have unfolded in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The results generated by the project so far are impressive, and have helped to elevate the study of nationalism beyond internalism and to establish the view of nationalism as an undeniably *international* phenomenon. Departing from this global perspective, I will dedicate considerable attention to the reception and nationalistic renderings of Old Norse mythology *outside* of Iceland as well, bearing in mind the perpetual interaction of *auto* and *hetero*-images.

Paradoxical though it may seem, this international process of crosspollination, seemingly unhindered by boundaries of any kind, gave rise to a collection of clearly demarcated and relatively closed units, or social systems, each equipped with its own inner logic, semiotic system<sup>2</sup> and national discourse. These discourses, often separated from the rest by language barriers – functioning as filtering membranes – are self-referential and generate hegemonic myths about the nation that are, on an intersubjective level, considered intrinsically ‘true’ by a majority of those participating in that specific discourse. This internal process of sense-making, through which external input is modified, filtered and domesticated to suit the self-sustaining national discourse, and cultural insularity – or cultural *alterity* vis-à-vis others – is staged and strengthened, is in systems theory referred to as *autopoiesis* (literally: ‘self-creation’).<sup>3</sup> Stories generate new stories, myths generate complex mythologies and drift apart from each other, and thus the perpetual process of *autopoiesis* – or in this case: *mythopoiesis* – forms the creative engine behind the construction of ‘islands of the mind’; a concept introduced in John R. Gillis’s seminal study on how humans have ‘imagined’ the Atlantic world into existence, but which has contributed to our understanding of isomania and insularity – in a metaphorical, non-geographical sense – as a crucial concept in western thought as well.<sup>4</sup> The fact that islands often function as metaphors for perfection is hardly surprising, when one considers that, in most national discourses, foreign influences are blamed for the deplorable state the nation is believed to be in; a state which becomes

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metaphorisation problematic on the grounds of its normative undertones, which one could consider ‘symptomatic’ of Leerssen’s approach to the *problem* of nationalism. See Leerssen, “Viral Nationalism: Romantic Intellectuals on the Move in Nineteenth-Century Europe”, in *Nations and Nationalism* 17:2 (2011) pp.257-271.

<sup>1</sup> See the project’s website, <http://www.spinnet.eu> (last visited: 2 October 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Or, in the words of Ernst Cassirer, a unique and symbolic ‘inner form’, which triggers the formation (*Bildung*) and configuration (*Gestaltung*) of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) according to its own unique laws. According to Cassirer, mythology constitutes the fundamental symbolic thought form, to which all other symbolic forms can trace their origin. See Sebastian Luft, “Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Between Reason and Relativism; a Critical Appraisal”, in *Idealistic Studies*, 34:1 (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Originally developed as a model to explain complex biological systems (like cells), systems theory has turned fiercely interdisciplinary and was first applied to the study of social systems by Niklas Luhmann. See Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York 1990).

<sup>4</sup> John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind. How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York – Basingstoke 2004).



painfully clear when the present is contrasted to an idealised golden age hidden in the past.<sup>1</sup> And what kind of community could possibly be more free from foreign influence than an island?

Like any self-sustaining entity, the survival and strength of any such social system or self-perceived cultural ‘island’ depends on physical and material factors that determine the opportunities for cultural membranes to develop, e.g. the degree of geographical isolation – natural boundaries like seas or mountain ranges –, the level of internal social-economic and infrastructural integration, demography, as well as the community’s proximity to, and level of identification with competing models of self-fashioning, to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> These parameters will, in concordance with internal developments, determine how successful a national discourse will become, and whether it will or will not – following to some extent Hroch’s three stages of development – turn into a fully-fledged social system; an intrinsically ‘real’ and ‘sensed’, rather than merely a cognitively ‘imagined’ community. Given the geographical isolation and the linguistic, cultural and genetic homogeneity of its tiny population, a more ontological approach<sup>3</sup> to the phenomenon of the Icelandic nation, as proposed by the Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup in her vision of *sensed communities*,<sup>4</sup> deserves further scrutiny. According to Hastrup, who in her three monographs on Icelandic society approaches her object of study as a ‘world’ in its own right – underlining her hypothesis that Icelandicness is an intersubjective ‘real’ entity –, Anderson claims that:

[o]ne cannot know, only imagine that [...] a community exists. Of course, it is a matter of scale, and from some perspective one could almost claim that in Iceland it is possible to know almost everyone, if not personally then at least vicariously. Kinship and friendship link people to almost any region of the country. [...] Granted that in Iceland, the corporeal field of any one individual seems to expand to the limits of the nation, I would argue that in Iceland, at least, the community is *sensed*.<sup>5</sup>

This controversial claim may at first seem awkward when encountered in the context of modern nationalism research and its modernist approach. However, when opting for a more anthropological and sociological point of departure, while bearing in mind the social implications of Luhmann’s aforementioned systems theory, Hastrup’s leap *beyond* imagination seems legitimised. Approaching small-scaled communities like the Icelandic one as ‘real’ sociological systems does not automatically imply a return to the backward essentialist notion of never-changing national characters. Quite the contrary; national discourses are dynamic, fashioned by historical developments, and can comprise of multiple conflicting views and ideas on what the nation is or should be. In the present research, I will focus on widely varying ideas on Iceland’s role in supranational models of identity, like the

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<sup>1</sup> Smith (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Comparing social systems to islands may be somewhat misleading in the sense that actual islands cannot overlap, whereas social systems and identity discourses (e.g. regional, national and supranational) can and *do* overlap continuously.

<sup>3</sup> Ontological in this case not in the essentialist or primordialist sense, but rather in the sense of Bruno Latour’s ‘relational ontology’, as explained in his *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory* (Oxford 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, *A Place Apart. An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World* (Oxford 1998) pp.195-197. This evocative work has been criticised – justifiably – for misrepresenting contemporary Iceland (which it claims to describe) by neglecting basically all cultural and social developments that have shaped Icelandic society in recent history. Paradoxically, this makes the book all the more relevant for the purposes of my historical survey. See the review by Richard F. Tomasson, in *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55:3 (1999) pp.482-483.

<sup>5</sup> Hastrup (1998) pp.195-196, emphasis original. I will elaborate on these and similar ideas on Icelandic identity in Chapter 1.2.2.

Nordic, Scandinavian, the European or the Germanic ones, all expressed in the same autopoietic discourse on Icelandicness, which functions as an ideological palimpsest. The sensed community is by no means *monolithic*, but rather determines the discursive boundaries within which discussions and polemics on the nature of that same community can unfold, and within which the participants in an on-going process of self-fashioning<sup>1</sup> – no matter how much they may differ from each other in opinion – feel ‘at home’, since this is the only arena, the only semantic system, in which their arguments can actually *make sense*. A turn towards systems theory does therefore not entail a denial of the influence of the individual, since “[h]istories are collectively created from individual memories.”<sup>2</sup> Or, to put it differently, the sensed community evolves from, and is upheld by the ceaseless and multifaceted interaction between the individual and the collective.<sup>3</sup>

The centrality of membranes in systems theory, demarcating the system from the ‘rest’, is echoed in anthropological and sociological theories on the significance of boundaries in the process of constructing communities. In her work on the ‘Icelandic world’, Hastrup draws on the theoretical research conducted on this field, notably by Fredrik Barth and A.P. Cohen.<sup>4</sup> Theirs is an approach characterised by functionalism, and a focus on the ethno-generic powers of interface between self-perceived groups. Instead of lingering with questions of primordialism or modernism, the anthropological school of identity studies offers a wider scope that opens new and refreshing ways to transcend some of the deadlocks hijacking many of the debates on national identity. Not surprisingly, Anthony Smith’s synthetic position in the primordialist-modernist controversy, and his concept of *ethnie*, have been inspired by the anthropological theories of Barth. Both scholars have concerned themselves with the idea that collective recognition – by members of the group concerned – of certain cultural traits as essential to the group’s identity, forms the very foundation of ethnicity. Thus, the actual ‘existence’ of a group lies in the sensual experience and intersubjective recognition of a collective identity by its constituents. From the sociological perspective, identities are – even when founded on mythologised historical falsehoods and forgeries – factual entities; “[f]or what people believe is true as a force, even if it is not true.”<sup>5</sup> It is this paradoxical ‘realness’ of the imagined that may come across as problematic to scholars without a background in anthropology:

People manifestly *believe* in the notion of community, either as ideal or reality, and sometimes as both simultaneously. Now, as the American sociologist W.I. Thomas observed, if people believe a thing to be real, then it is real in its consequences for them. This duality of the concept is at the heart of the conceptual confusion to which it gives rise. The reality of ‘community spirit’, the sense of belonging which people exhibit to a small-scale social and cultural entity which is bigger than the ‘family’ but yet less impersonal than the bureaucracy

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<sup>1</sup> A term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago 2005 [1980]), and which can be applied to individuals (who construct their identities by means of a set of socially acceptable standards) and communities alike.

<sup>2</sup> Hastrup (1998) p.114.

<sup>3</sup> The intricate relations between systems and individual actions, structures and personal intentions, are the subject of numerous debates and veracious controversies among scholars of historiographical and sociological theory. Following Hastrup’s pragmatic and synthetic approach to this controversy, I hope to avoid being dragged into the debate altogether. For a more sociological approach to the debate, see Latour (2005), and also Rudolf Stichweh, “Systems Theory as an Alternative to Action Theory? The Rise of ‘Communication’ as a Theoretical Option”, in *Acta Sociologica* 43:5 (2000) pp.6-13.

<sup>4</sup> See Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (London 1969), and Cohen (1985).

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland. Myth and History* (New Haven and London 2008) p.xix.

or work organization, has sat uneasily alongside the attempts of sociologists and anthropologists to locate a structural dimension to *communitas*.<sup>1</sup>

This conclusion rings true for the field of historical nationalism studies as well, and should warn historians against the overtly normative or ideological underpinnings and mission statements of deconstructivism. As explained in the above, social realities *cannot* be undone or deconstructed simply by pointing out the misunderstandings and historically incorrect assumptions they are founded on. Even if this seems ‘the right thing to do’, considering all the suffering and injustice that national discourses and their mechanisms of exclusion have inflicted in modern history,<sup>2</sup> one should nevertheless remain critical. In fact, from a more social psychological perspective, the dynamics of ‘national characters’ serve as a mobilising force related to processes of – both personal and collective – *becoming*, that moves people emotionally to contribute to the evolution and improvement of their ‘social world.’<sup>3</sup> I do not present these results of sociological and psychological research in order to somehow justify nationalism, or to downplay the damaging effects of national thought on modern history, simply by compensating them with positive examples of social mobilisation. All I am attempting here, is to reach a more balanced understanding of how collective identities function, which should result in a more objective, multifaceted and experiential approach to the matter. Only then can the case study of the present research, being the role of mythological narratives in modern Icelandic identity, yield any fruitful results.

In refuting normativism, awareness of the fiercely rhetorical and antithetical nature of national *auto*-images should not be lost. The cliché of ‘knowing what one is by establishing what one is *not*’, is aptly illustrated by the classical designation of ‘the German’ as someone who, first and foremost, *does not* speak French.<sup>4</sup> The ideological identification of modern Germans with their supposed Germanic predecessors (*Germanenideologie*) is, as a model of national identity, essentially dichotomous. So much so, that a vague historical concept like *Germanen* could not possibly acquire any positive, but only negative meaning, by being contrasted to the Romans and later antagonistic peoples associated with them (the French).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, processes of self-definition often unfold along the lines of a *via negativa*. The mechanics of cultural polarisation and contrastation, without which the articulation of *auto*-images loses all its significance, determine – and are in turn determined by – the nature of the community’s cultural membrane and its interface with ‘the other.’ Self-demarcation and the maintenance of alterity takes place in the form of constant external and internal – or internalised – dialogues,<sup>6</sup> fuelled by sets of binary oppositions or counter-concepts like North versus South,<sup>7</sup> city versus countryside, mountains versus flatlands, utopia versus dystopia, normality versus ‘otherworldliness’, periphery versus centre. All these normatively charged labels are operationalised and become subject to perpetual reinterpretation and

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hamilton, in his foreword to Cohen (1985), p.8. Italics original.

<sup>2</sup> Once again, I mention Saïd (1978) as the key representative of this normative bias. Another one is Thiesse (2005) p.141, who stresses that the *de-essentialisation* of the nation may hold the key to a better understanding of current issues and *a brighter future*.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins, *Self and Nation. Categorization, Contestation and Mobilization* (London 2001) pp.100-130.

<sup>4</sup> On the anti-French element of German self-images, see Ruth Florack, *Tiefsinnige Deutsche, frivole Franzosen. Nationale Stereotype in deutscher und französischer Literatur* (Stuttgart 2001). In the light of this paragraph’s argument, this remark is only half sarcastic.

<sup>5</sup> Bödl (2000) p.7. See also Leerssen (2006b) p.17.

<sup>6</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept the ‘dialogical self’, applied to the study of national identity by Barry A. Brown and Christopher Conway (eds.), *Bakhtin and the Nation* (Lewisburg 2000).

<sup>7</sup> On the cultural construction of ‘northernness’, see Andreas Fülberth and Albert Meier (eds.), *Nördlichkeit-Romantik-Erhobenheit. Apperzeptionen der Nord/Süd-Differenz (1750-2000)* (Frankfurt am Main 2007).

resemantisation in the polemic process of self-perception and of coming to terms with ‘the other.’ In order to acquire a more profound understanding of how this dialectic evolution of *auto* and *hetero*-images unfolds, some of these counter-concepts, central to the national discourse under scrutiny, may serve as a heuristic device to the historian. What did Icelanders say or write about their – externally perceived – ‘northernness’, their Europeaness, their lack of urban culture, and their peripheral or *central* position vis-à-vis the rest of the world? How do these polemic utterances relate to their ideas on national identity? And how are these ideas reflected or expressed in their renditions of Norse mythology?

Many of the theories of nationalism studies, discussed in the above, are based on observations made in big national communities, consisting of millions upon millions of participants. It is therefore not surprising that the peculiar identity dynamics of smaller nations are often overlooked. Small, peripheral, and often marginalised communities are, in many cases, not justified by the self-evident, age-old political institutions and infrastructures in which the identities of their larger neighbours are cemented. In the case of small nations, the confrontation with the ‘significant other’ is usually an unequal one, and the ensuing national discourses are often formulated along the lines of an archetypal David and Goliath opposition.<sup>1</sup> Because smaller communities are more likely to fall victim to foreign political and cultural domination, there is typically an element of existential fear and uncertainty embedded in their national narratives. These anxieties and minority complexes greatly influenced the development of cultural nationalisms in these communities. The realisation – either correct or not – that one’s newly discovered national character or national language was balancing on the verge of disappearing, triggered a collective sense of emergency, which is best compared to the phenomenon the sociologist Stanley Cohen has called ‘moral panic’.<sup>2</sup> The first people to signal this danger, and to bring it to the attention of a wider public, were the philologists, the scholars and the cultural entrepreneurs – or *moral* entrepreneurs, as they are referred to in sociological studies – of the early nineteenth century, who combined their academic endeavours with initiatives to salvage everything – language, dialects, folktales etc. – that could be salvaged, before it would be too late.<sup>3</sup> This salvage operation was presented as a pressing matter, a race against the clock, and the sense of urgency that accompanied it constitutes, in my opinion, the turning point at which pre-existing cultural identities (*ethnie*) were transformed into systematic, programmatic ideologies, or *nationalisms*. Their cultural and linguistic activism, aimed at preserving a – presumably – declining national identity, was crystallised in intellectual societies, reading groups and literary initiatives, which disseminated their view of the nation in periodicals and new editions of canonised, national literature. Especially in nations with little global impact, this cultural and linguistic element was actively cultivated and emphasised in order to compensate for the lack of official

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<sup>1</sup> Iceland was never a Danish colony in the conventional sense, which is why the use of postcolonial theory in Icelandic historiography has been considered controversial. In her fruitful examination of colonial and postcolonial dynamics in Iceland’s national discourse, Anne-Sofie Gremaud proposes that Michael Herzfeld’s concept of crypto-colonialism offers a more useful framework of analysis, which allows us to think of Iceland not as a colony, but as a community depending – both materially and symbolically – on an ‘intrusive colonial power’; Anne-Sofie Gremaud, “Crypto-Colonial Iceland”, on her weblog: <https://annsofiagremaud.wordpress.com/crypto-colonial-iceland/> (posted: 21<sup>st</sup> February 2013, last accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> October 2016). Compare Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Belonging and the Icelandic Others: Situating Icelandic Identity in a Postcolonial Context”, in idem and Lars Jensen (eds.), *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region. Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities* (Surrey 2012) pp.57-71.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London 1972). Cohen’s study is not concerned with Romantic nationalism or small nations at all, and focusses on modern popular media in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the theoretical concepts developed in this analysis are applicable to other fields of research as well.

<sup>3</sup> The principal ‘moral entrepreneur’ of Icelandic cultural nationalism was the Danish philologist Rasmus Kristian Rask; see Chapter 3.3.

institutions and a comparatively small number of inhabitants (see Chapter 6.3). In small societies, cultivating the cultural and linguistic alterity vis-à-vis the significant other(s) served as a means to justify the national demand for autonomy and self-preservation.<sup>1</sup> In the next section, I will elaborate on the specifically Icelandic aspects of the debates outlined in the above.

### 1.2.2 Icelandic Perspectives

When in the summer of 1809 the notorious Danish maverick and prisoner of war in England Jørgen Jørgensen declared himself “all Iceland’s protector and supreme commander on sea and land” in Reykjavík, thus ‘liberating’ Iceland from the Danish who had monopolised trade with the island since the seventeenth century, he met with painfully little enthusiasm from the native inhabitants. His theatrical proclamation of Iceland’s independence – backed by an English trader who despised the Danish trade monopoly – did not enflame the hoped for national efflorescence, nor did it evoke any anti-Danish sense of Icelandicness. Jørgensen set about designing a flag and a seal for the new country, thus providing the islanders with a complete identity kit of their own. But the people remained utterly non-responsive, indifferent, even when their ‘independence’ and the farce of Jørgensen’s reign ended after only two months with his arrest by British forces, and Danish rule was duly restored. The long-term effects of this short-lived experience of national independence – on the way Icelanders perceived themselves, and their place in the Danish colonial system – still requires further research.<sup>2</sup> As later Icelandic historians would proclaim, the nation was at that time ‘fast asleep’.<sup>3</sup> The question remains of course, *what* – if anything – it was that was so ‘fast asleep’ at that time, but ‘awake’ in previous ages and, presumably, also afterwards. What are the origins of Icelandic identity, and how do earlier forms of collective identity relate to modern, *national* conceptions of Icelandicness?

In order to demonstrate exactly *how* problematic, the issue of Icelandic nationalism really is, the historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson made the controversial claim that Bjarni Jónsson, the eighteenth-century rector of the Latin School of Skálholt, could be considered the first Icelandic nationalist. Unlike his more famous contemporary Eggert Ólafsson, who is more commonly associated with the advent of Icelandic nationalism (see Chapter 2.2.1), Bjarni considered the Icelandic language too unpractical, too different from the other Scandinavian languages – and Danish in particular – to be of any use in the advancement of Iceland’s cause. In his list of recommendations concerning the island’s future (1771), this archaic language is considered a hindrance to Iceland’s development, and Bjarni suggests that it would serve the common good best if his fellow countrymen would follow the example of Norway and the Faroe Islands, where the native languages had been largely supplanted by Danish. The suggestion to abolish Iceland’s native language in favour of the tongue of the ‘oppressor’ may not come across as very nationalistic at all, and labelling the man behind it ‘Iceland’s first nationalist’ sounds counterintuitive. Linguistic puritanism constitutes a pivotal element of Icelandic nationalism, and the purity of the language was already celebrated by

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<sup>1</sup> On the specific role of cultural or ethno-linguistic nationalism in small nations, see also Petra Broomans, Goffe Jensma, Hans Vandevoorde and Maarten van Ginderachter, “Introduction”, in idem (eds.), *The Beloved Mother tongue. Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Leuven-Paris-Dudley 2008) pp.ix-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Agnarsdóttir has hypothesised that the British may have actually played an important part in kindling the “idea of the ‘the bad Danes’, such a necessary and potent weapon in the struggle for national independence in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”; Anna Agnarsdóttir, “In Search of ‘A Distinct and Peculiar Race of People’. The Mackenzie Expedition to Iceland, 1810”, in idem, Mary N. Harris and Csaba Lévai, *Global Encounters: European Identities* (Pisa 2010) pp.235-46, 243.

<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis 2003) p.199.

the Humanist Arngrímur Jónsson (see Chapter 2.2.2) around the year 1600. Ironic though Guðmundur's suggestion may seem at first glance, a comparison between Bjarni and the French patriots who, in the wake of the French Revolution, sought to forge one uniform, unilingual and indivisible French nation out of the multi-ethnic state they inherited, is certainly tenable. Bjarni too wanted the best for his fatherland, and in his view this could be achieved by strengthening the national and linguistic unity of the multi-ethnic Danish realm as a whole.<sup>1</sup> This interesting example reminds us of the fact that national identity is by no means a one-dimensional matter; in the present study, I will analyse a series of partially competing, partially overlapping models of Icelandic identity, ranging from the Pan-Scandinavian to the strictly insular. Identity takes shape on multiple levels, and in the following chapters I will demonstrate how complex the *multilevel identities* of my Icelandic protagonists really were. A wide range of national attitudes has been expressed in the Icelandic cultivations of Old Norse mythology, produced in the context of Iceland's national 'awakening' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When translating the international debates of nationalism studies to the single case study of Iceland, there are several terminological obstacles to overcome beforehand. Some of the key-concepts in the study of nationalism and national identity do not have Icelandic equivalents that correspond seamlessly. These terminological dissonances can cause serious misunderstandings and confusion when attempting to embed Iceland's historiographical debates in their international context. First of all, the distinction between 'people' (singular) and 'nation' is a problematic one, since both terms are translated as *þjóð* in Icelandic. 'Nation state' is therefore commonly translated as *þjóðríki*. The Icelandic term for 'nationalism', *þjóðernishyggja*, literally translates as attention to or focus on (*hyggja*) national identity, or nationality (*þjóðerni*). When referring to the Icelandic 'people', for instance to the first settlers to colonise the island and their immediate offspring, the double meaning of the term *þjóð* may lead to the false assumption that the Icelanders already formed a nation, and conceived of themselves as such, at the very first stages of Icelandic history.<sup>2</sup> This is in fact the basic tenor of Iceland's traditional national discourse, as expressed in the Romantic poetry of the nineteenth, and political speeches of the twentieth century. In his poetic evocation of the *landnám*, Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920; see Chapter 8.1.2) praises the island's colonisation as his nation's 'childhood days' (*bernsku-tíð*), and associates this period with the freshness and promise of spring, the memory of which can "wake up hearts century after century / which were previously dead and glacier cold!"<sup>3</sup> Already at this very earliest of stages, the Icelanders formed – in Matthías's mind – a monolithic and indivisible nation, characterised by one single language, one spirit, and one blood.<sup>4</sup> The most concise expression of this teleological, deterministic idea of the nation's spontaneous generation was expressed in 1944, on the occasion of the establishment of the Republic of Iceland; in the words of the beloved poet and member of parliament Jóhannes úr Kötlum (1899-1972), the Norse settlers quite simply "found an island and became a nation / out there on the golden seas."<sup>5</sup> In his influential characterisation of the Icelandic people, the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason

<sup>1</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Language, Identity and Political Integration. Iceland in the Age of Enlightenment", in H. Gustafsson and H. Sanders (eds.), *Vid gränsen. Integration och identiteter i det förnationella Norden*, (Gothenburg 2006) pp.230-247, 237-9. Compare idem., "Severing the Ties – Iceland's Journey from a Union with Denmark to a Nation-State", in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 31 (2006) pp.237-254.

<sup>2</sup> On the Icelandic translation of these key-concepts, see Gunnar Karlsson, "Syrpa um þjóðernisumræðu", in *Skírnir* 178 (2004), pp 153–201, 155-160.

<sup>3</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Íslands landnám*, in idem., *Ljóð. Úrval* (Reykjavík 1980) p.105; þú kveikir vorsins yndi, ljós og frið,/og getur vakið hjörtun öld af öld,/sem áður voru dauð og jökulköld!

<sup>4</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Íslands minni*, in idem. (see previous note) p.109.

<sup>5</sup> Jóhannes úr Kötlum, *Ljóðasafn V* (Reykjavík 1974) p.111; fundu ey og urðu þjóð/úti í gullnum sænum.

(1873-1944) also maintains that the nation ‘found itself’ as soon as it settled on the land where it was supposed to flourish, and remained clearly distinct from all other nations due to its isolation and the purity of its blood, unmixed with that of other races since the settlement.<sup>1</sup> This glorified national past served as a blueprint for an anticipated national future, part of the ideological objective to “rebecome what they never were”.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, this ideological discourse is no longer taken seriously in modern Icelandic academia. But discussions on the origin of a distinctly Icelandic identity continue, and in order to properly embed the topic of this study in its national context, I will provide a concise outline of the history of the concept of national identity in Icelandic historiography.

“Dating the nation is, of course, a question of defining the nation.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike any other European people, the Icelanders have a relatively clear image of where their ancestors originated, based on the remarkably well-documented beginnings of Icelandic history in the ninth century. Little is known about the way these first settlers would have referred to themselves, but since the majority of these *landnámsmenn* originated from Western Norway, Scandinavian historians – and especially the Norwegians – have long referred to them as Norwegian.<sup>4</sup> This cultural appropriation of Iceland’s origins accommodated the interpretation of Icelandic culture as an Atlantic offshoot of Norwegian history itself, albeit an exotic one. In the course of the late nineteenth century, Icelandic nationalists began debunking this Norway-centric interpretation of their own past. The first Icelanders to qualify as professional historians, having received their training at the University of Copenhagen around 1900, had a rather philological approach to the subject of Icelandic history. Inspired by Iceland’s national struggle for independence, this generation of historians – of which Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð (1860-1929) is the paradigmatic example – considered the Icelandic sagas as historically accurate descriptions of the national ‘golden age’, *before* the loss of independence to the Norwegian king in 1262-64. Proponents of this approach to the sagas, known as *free-prose* theory – a term introduced by Andreas Heusler in 1913 (see Chapter 7.1) – saw the ancient narratives as historical accounts rather than literary creations, and propagated the idea that the sagas described the earliest stages of the history of an actual nation (*þjóð*) with its own distinctive national identity, already recognised by Scandinavians as essentially different from other Nordic nations.<sup>5</sup> According to Bogi, the defining transition from a collection of Nordic settlers to an Icelandic nation occurred in the year 930, when the Alþingi was formed and Icelanders were united under the legislative powers of those free men gathering on Þingvellir (fig. 7). The idea that an early form of constitutional patriotism<sup>6</sup> – Jürgen Habermas’s *Verfassungspatriotismus* – is evidenced by the medieval sources, and instantaneously gave rise to a monolithic national community, has long since been discredited

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<sup>1</sup> Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Íslendingar. Nokkur drög að þjóðarlýsingu* (Reykjavík 1933) pp.214-5. On the role of the settlement in Iceland’s cultural memory, see especially Marion Lerner, *Landnahme-Mythos, kulturelles Gedächtnis und nationale Identität. Isländische Reisevereine im frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Paine, “Israel: Jewish identity and competition over ‘tradition’”, in E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity* (London 1989) p.131.

<sup>3</sup> Benedikte Brincker, “When did the Danish nation emerge? A review of Danish historians’ attempts to date the Danish nation”, in *National Identities* 11:4 (2009) pp.353-365, 354.

<sup>4</sup> For the Norwegian – though rather pro-Icelandic – overview of this historiographical debate, see Hallvard Magerøy, *Norsk-íslandske problem, Omstidde spørsmål i Nordens historie* vol. III (Oslo 1965). See also Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð, “Töldu Íslendingar sig á dögum þjóðveldisins vera Norðmenn?”, in *Afmælisrit til Dr. Phil. Kr. Kalunds, Bókavarðar við Safn Árna Magnússonar 19. Ágúst 1914* (Copenhagen 1914) pp.16-33.

<sup>5</sup> Melsteð (1914).

<sup>6</sup> Although the terms are often used interchangeably, patriotism and nationalism do not signify the same phenomenon; whereas the first one denotes an emotional attachment to one’s country, its language, values, culture, legal system and/or institutions, the second one implies an abstract, organic notion of nationhood, a sense of superiority over other nations, and the urge to increase the nation’s prestige politically and/or culturally.

by historians.<sup>1</sup> However, in the light of Iceland's contemporary cultural and political endeavours, this emphasis on the interconnectedness of national greatness, political and legislative independence, and the absence of foreign intervention is no coincidence.

Iceland's leading historian of the early twentieth century, Jón Jónsson Aðils (1869-1920) also connected the genesis of the Icelandic nation to the establishment of the Alþingi. It was not yet considered problematic or anachronistic to apply the uncontested concept of 'nation' to tenth-century Iceland, since it was generally believed that the nation was an organic entity and the most natural model of organisation for human communities throughout all of history. Unlike most Icelandic nationalistic historians and philologists of his time, Jón Aðils – who became the first professor of history at the newly founded University of Iceland in 1911 – was not exclusively interested in the golden age of the Commonwealth (*Þjóðveldið*), but wrote extensively on the effects of the restrictive Danish trade monopoly on early modern Icelandic society as well. In his more popular works, notably his public lectures collected in *Íslenzkt þjóðerni* ('Icelandic National Identity'; 1903) and *Gullöld Íslendinga* ('Golden Age of the Icelanders'; 1906), he presented the uniqueness of Icelandic identity as a result of the crosspollination between Celtic and Nordic culture (and the mixing of their two races), unfolding between the Vikings and their British and Irish slaves and wives; a rather daring view in Jón's time, when the image of the Celts was overwhelmingly negative and the superior Nordic character of the *landnámsmenn* was accentuated.<sup>2</sup> The public lectures collected in these volumes were financed by the Alþingi – re-established in Reykjavík in 1845 –, in order to present the Icelandic people with a historical and cultural justification for the nation's development towards independence. This mission does not remain implicit in Jón's work; quite literally, he refers to history as a weapon in the modern cultural struggle among nations.<sup>3</sup> This pragmatic historicism, which echoed the political Romanticism of Fichte,<sup>4</sup> rendered Jón arguably the most influential Icelandic historian of all times, and his public lectures continued to be used in Icelandic schools until the 1970s (see Chapter 7.2). His interpretation of the past is echoed in the popular textbooks published by Jónas Jónsson 'from Hrifla' (*frá Hriflu*; 1885-1968), which have shaped the historical awareness of Icelanders throughout the twentieth century (and beyond).

In the course of the early twentieth century the rather uncritical use of Old Norse-Icelandic literature as historical source material became problematic, as the *freeprose* conception of saga-origins began to be contested by influential scholars like Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1850-1919) – the first rector of the University of Iceland – and later Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974); proponents of the *bookprose* theory and belonging to what would become known simply as the *Icelandic School* of philology. Contrary to the freeproseists, they did not believe that the saga-narratives had been transmitted orally and intact from the Saga Age (*söguöld*) until the time of their entrustment to medieval parchment, but supported the idea that the sagas were genuine gems of medieval literary genius; fictional masterpieces of a later medieval date rather than accurate historical accounts from the Viking

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from Bogi's discredited freeprose-convictions, his assumption that the establishment of a *þing* automatically engenders a collective identity is not supported by historical sources on similar legislative developments elsewhere in the Nordic world. See e.g. Karlsson (1994) p.108. A very thorough examination of the medieval self-image of the Icelanders vis-à-vis the rest of the world is offered by Sverrir Jakobsson, in his PhD thesis *Við og veröldin. Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100-1400* (Reykjavík 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jón Jónsson, *Íslenzkt Þjóðerni. Alþýðufyrirlestrar* (Reykjavík 1903) pp.3-54. Jón Jónsson did not adopt the family name Aðils until 1917. See also Chapter 7.2.

<sup>3</sup> Idem. See also Lerner (2009) pp.81-92, and Sigríður Matthíassdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900-1930* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Sigríður Matthíassdóttir, "Réttlætning þjóðernis: samanburður á alþýðufyrirlestrum Jóns Aðils og hugmyndum Johanns Gottlieb Fichte", in *Skírnir* 169 (1995) pp.36-64.



Age.<sup>1</sup> Due to their involvement in the editing and publication of the most influential and authoritative saga-editions – notably those of *Hið íslenska fornritafélag* – bookprovisists established the hegemonic paradigm in twentieth-century Icelandic philology. The idea that the sagas should be read as medieval fictional literature rendered Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð's theories on the early origin of Icelandic national identity, evidenced by bits and scraps of saga-literature, outdated; any historical value the sagas still possessed concerned the time in which they were written (primarily the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), rather than the earlier Saga Age.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Sigurður argued, the origin of Icelandic national self-awareness should be situated in the cultural and linguistic alienation from the other Nordic peoples during the Middle Ages. In his authoritative *Íslensk menning* (1942), he maintained that Icelanders referred to their own language as 'Danish' (*ḁnnsk tunga*) or 'Nordic' (*norraent mál*<sup>3</sup>) until sometime in the Middle Ages, when they discovered that the other Nordic languages had evolved into new forms, leaving the reluctant Icelanders no choice but to start referring to their own language as 'Icelandic'. It was at this point, Sigurður argued, that a hitherto strictly geographical term (Iceland) became the carrier of communal sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, beyond the walls of the academic world and in the popular writings of historians like Björn Þorsteinsson, Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð's freeprose conception of a very early origin of Icelandic identity remained more or less uncontested.

In the 1960s the primordialist interpretation of Icelandicness was challenged by Sigurður Línadal, who placed the medieval development of Iceland in its proper historical and European context. Instead of with 'sovereign states', the loyalty of medieval peoples lay primarily with supra-national institutions like the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. This meant that, unlike modern nationalism – which aspires to political statehood and institutional independence for every nation – medieval communities did not feel the urge to let their communal sentiments coincide with political constructions. With this claim, Sigurður 'solved' one of the major problems in Icelandic historiography, namely the Norwegian take-over of political control over Iceland without the use of any military force (1262-64). Surely, if Iceland would have been a nation in the modern sense of the word, it would not have tolerated this tyrannical violation of its national sovereignty. Previously, Jón Jónsson Aðils had addressed this dilemma psychologically by arguing that the communal national spirit, which had been strong in the Saga Age, had fallen victim to the 'passions of the individual' in the turbulent *Sturlungaöld* (ca.1220-1264), eventually leading to the unheroic demise of the Icelandic Free State.<sup>5</sup> Sigurður's explanation did not undermine the idea of a medieval Icelandic 'nation' itself, but rather its attachment to institutional and political independence; just like European peoples could subject themselves to the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Emperor without ceasing to be 'nations', so too could the Icelanders subject themselves to the rule of the Norwegian king without losing their sense of nationhood.<sup>6</sup> There would have been no paradox in the medieval Icelandic mind. With this insight Sigurður nuanced the rather crude and anachronistic – political – conceptions of early Icelandic nationhood, and arguably anticipated the modernism of Ernest Gellner.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge – New York 2010) pp.39-41. The philological ideas of Björn M. Ólsen and Sigurður Nordal will be further scrutinised in Chapters 7.1 and 10.1 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> On the modern re-evaluation of the historical value of saga-literature, see Byock (1994).

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of 'Nordic' identity and language, see Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Emergence of *Norðlönd* in Old Norse Medieval Texts, ca. 1100-1400", in Sumarliði Ísleifsson (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011) pp.25-40.

<sup>4</sup> Nordal (1942) I pp.97-98.

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson (1903) pp.103-104.

<sup>6</sup> Sigurður Línadal, "Útanríkisstefna Íslendinga á 13. öld og aðdragandi sáttmálans 1262-64", in *Úlfjótur* 17 (1964) pp.18-33.

The current discourse on Icelandic national identity and its origins is largely centred around the same key-concepts and theoretical fault lines as those of the international debates outlined in Chapter 1.2.1. Smith's distinction between the pre-modern *ethnie* and the modern nation has inspired Gunnar Karlsson to distinguish between a people (*þjóð*) with a 'national consciousness' (*þjóðernisvitund*), and its modern version, transformed by the modern ideology of nationalism (*þjóðernishyggja*) into a 'political nation' (*pólítísk þjóð*).<sup>1</sup> In order to demonstrate the distinction between national thought – that is, a collective awareness of a distinctive *ethnic* identity – on the one hand, and nationalism on the other, Gunnar Karlsson refers to the aforementioned – and politically rather insignificant – Jørgen Jørgensen episode of 1809; the Icelanders formed, at that time, a people with a “clear ethnic identity but no sense of political nationalism.”<sup>2</sup> In line with Sigurður Línadal's revision of national identity, his model offers an explanation for the apparent lack of national zeal in Icelandic society – in the thirteenth century as well as in 1809 – without consequently reducing national identity itself to a product of modern industrial society alone. Like Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð before him, Gunnar Karlsson turned to the sagas, although this time – in line with book-prose theory – not as historical sources on the Saga Age society they describe, but rather on twelfth to fourteenth-century Icelandic society in which their authors lived. The conclusions Bogi drew from saga-passages in which the Icelanders are addressed as significantly 'different' from the other Nordic peoples were not 'wrong', Gunnar argued; they only pertain to a later medieval stage of Icelandic development rather than the Saga Age. In his view, Bogi's “nationalism had not led him astray.”<sup>3</sup> The origin of Icelandic national consciousness can be discerned in several important writings from the twelfth century, primarily the anonymous 'First Grammatical Treatise' (*Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*) – in which Icelandic is considered an autonomous language distinct from the other Nordic languages and in need of its own separate alphabet – as well as two works of early historiography: the 'Book of Icelanders' (*Íslendingabók*) by Ari Þorgilsson 'the Wise' (1067–1148) and the 'Book of Settlements' (*Landnámabók*), possibly from the same author. According to Gunnar, these works provided the medieval Icelanders with Smith's 'basic characteristics' of an *ethnie*, namely a shared 'myth of descent' (*Landnámabók*)<sup>4</sup> and a shared history (*Íslendingabók*), as well as a common notion of – cultural and/or linguistic – alterity (*Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*).<sup>5</sup>

The idea that a distinctly Icelandic identity emerged in the course of the twelfth century is a popular one in Icelandic historiography.<sup>6</sup> Especially the notion of Icelandic as a separate language is often considered instrumental in the development of an ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> Karlsson (1999), and idem (2004) pp. 155-163.

<sup>2</sup> Karlsson (2003) p.199. See also idem., “Íslensk þjóðernisvitund á óþjóðlegum öldum”, in *Skírnir* 173 (1999) pp.141-178.

<sup>3</sup> Karlsson (1994) p.113.

<sup>4</sup> The key ingredient in all medieval narratives relating to the origin of the Icelandic people is the justified escape from the tyranny of king Harald Fairhair. Gwyn Jones lists three reasons for this: “first, an external tyrant is an emotional necessity to small *nations* [italics added] struggling for their independence; second, a search for 'holy freedom's laws' is a respectable reason for leaving one country for another; and third, for one's ancestors to have come out to Iceland after even a fictional opposition to Harald seems to have conferred the same kind of backward-looking prestige in one context as coming over with the Conqueror or the *Mayflower* [italics original] in another.” Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford 2001 [1968]) p.279, footnote 1. On the role of the *landnám* myth in Icelandic national culture, see also Verena Jessica Höfig, *Finding a Founding Father: Memory, Identity, and the Icelandic landnám* (University of California, Berkeley 2014, unpublished PhD thesis).

<sup>5</sup> Karlsson (1994) pp.112-113.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Sverrir Jakobsson, “Sjálfsmyndir miðalda og uppruni Íslendinga”, in Jóhannsson, Óttarsson Proppé and Jakobsson (2003) pp.17-38.

community that has, throughout its history, defined itself through the purity of its language.<sup>1</sup> The Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup, who in her studies of Icelandic society has suggested to replace Anderson's 'imagined community' with the more experience-based concept of 'sensed community' (see Chapter 1.2.1), also considers the 'First Grammatical Treatise' of crucial importance to the development of Icelandic identity.<sup>2</sup> According to Hastrup, Icelanders have nurtured a relatively stable image of Icelandicness throughout the ages, marked by a strong sense of historical continuity. She interprets this sense of continuity as a result of an "overcommunication of mediaeval glory and virtue", which came to determine the very definition of the term Icelandic itself.<sup>3</sup> However, this newly formulated identity of the twelfth century did not automatically eliminate all other layers of 'supra-national' identity. According to Hastrup, the multi-layered 'ethnic identification' of medieval Icelanders consisted of three different stages – conceived by Gunnar Karlsson as concentric circles<sup>4</sup> – which she abstracted from codified Icelandic law (*Grágás*). The first stage, or Gunnar's outermost circle, was marked by the distinction between the Nordic peoples – those who speak the Nordic language, or *ðönsk tunga* – and the rest of mankind. In the second stage, the 'people of the Kingdom of Norway' – Norwegians and Icelanders – were contrasted with the other Nordic peoples. Thirdly, the innermost circle or third stage of ethnic identification was determined by the distinction between Icelanders and Norwegians. It was this third stage that developed in the twelfth century, without necessarily erasing the other two.<sup>5</sup> This multi-layered and dynamic conception of ethnic identity, based on the process of othering, is one that I will return to more than once in the course of the present study, since it can shed light on the multitude of Edda-interpretations in modern Icelandic history. A critical note concerning the negligence of inner-Icelandic modes of identification and differentiation – e.g. regional and family identities – and, on the other side of the spectrum, the association with large-scale identity concepts like 'Christendom' may be justified, although these levels of identity formation are less 'ethnic' or linguistic in nature than the ones described in Hastrup's model. Regional divisions for instance, which acquired acute political significance in the civil war-like circumstances of the Age of the Sturlungs, divided families internally as well as the community as a whole. These affiliations can therefore not be considered 'ethnic', but rather political. Interestingly, the identification with the Norwegians, suggested in Hastrup's stage two, appears to have been based primarily on the political circumstance of both 'peoples' sharing the same king. Gunnar Karlsson clearly states that this is a different Norwegian connection than the one propagated by traditional Norwegian historians; the early Icelanders could not possibly have considered themselves Norwegians, since Norway did not yet exist as a political unity in the ninth century; the 'Norwegians' migrating to Iceland would

<sup>1</sup> On the linguistic element in Icelandic identity, see e.g. Baldur Jónsson, "Inngangur", in idem (ed.), *Þjóð og tunga. Ritgerðir og ræður frá tímum sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar* (Reykjavík 2006) pp.13-32, Betty Wahl, *Isländisch: Sprachplanung und Sprachpurismus* (Heidelberg 2008), and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "From Linguistic Patriotism to Cultural Nationalism: Language and Identity in Iceland", in Ann Katherine Isaacs (ed.), *Languages and Identities in Historical Perspective* (Pisa 2005) pp.55-68.

<sup>2</sup> "In turn, this linguistic specificity could be used to mark a separate nation." Hastrup (1998) p.84. See also idem, "Establishing an Ethnicity. The Emergence of "Icelanders" in the Early Middle Ages", in David Parkin (ed.), *Semantic Anthropology* (London 1982) pp. 69-82.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, "Uchronia and the two histories of Iceland, 1400-1800", in idem (ed.), *Other Histories* (London-New York) pp.102-120, 106-7, 101. Hastrup has been reprimanded for leaving out the historical dimension from her anthropological observations, presenting the Icelandic world as one big timeless present without paying much attention to external, modern influences on its development. However, in this context, she makes a valid point which is often overlooked by modernist historians of nationalism, namely that a collective sense of cultural continuity can predate the political nationalism and Romantic historicism of modernity.

<sup>4</sup> Karlsson (1994) p.112.

<sup>5</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, "Defining a Society. The Icelandic Free State Between Two Worlds", in *Scandinavian Studies* 56 (1984) pp.237-39.

have more likely identified themselves with the smaller region or community they originated from. With all of these regionalities merging in the Icelandic melting pot, the second generation may very well have been ‘forced’ to refer to themselves as Icelanders, due to the lack of more accurate descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

Another protagonist in the contemporary debate on the origin of Icelandic national identity is the historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, who has interpreted and ‘Icelandicised’ the key concepts of nationalism studies rather differently than Gunnar Karlsson. Like Gellner and the modernists, Guðmundur considers the nation (*þjóð*) a product of cultural and social developments in modernity, rather than merely a political re-interpretation of a pre-existing ethnic identity. In his study on the origin and the limits of the Icelandic nation state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea of a pre-modern ‘national’ or ethnic identity encompassing all Icelanders is contested, and the myth of the Icelandic Golden Age (*Gullöld Íslendinga*) is presented as a modern philological invention, honoured and maintained by public figures and politicians. National sentiments, Guðmundur claims, were imported from abroad and linked to other foreign phenomena like liberalism – linked to the political idea of *national* freedom, which he distinguishes from the ideal of *individual* freedom<sup>2</sup>– and the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The Icelandic development of national awareness in the nineteenth century was part of an international, Europe-wide development, and would not have taken place if it would not have been for the importation of foreign ideas. Consequently, Guðmundur’s translation of the key-concepts of nationalism studies differs remarkably from that of Gunnar Karlsson; the – in his interpretation – rather vague pre-existing notion of Icelandicness (Smith’s *ethnie*, Gunnar’s *þjóð*), whether imagined or not, is translated as *þjóðflokkasamfélag* (which could in turn be translated as ‘people’s community’), from which the *þjóð* (the nation, in the meaning of Gunnar’s modern *pólítísk þjóð*) arose as a result of nationalism (*þjóðernishyggja*).<sup>3</sup> This way, Guðmundur avoids the problematic and anachronistic application of the word *þjóð* – associated both with ‘people’ and ‘nation’ – to pre-modern society, and makes it impossible to speak for instance about ‘the medieval Icelandic nation.’ As a result, the historical continuity traditionally implied by these terms is debunked.

In accordance with Gellner’s notion that it is nationalism that engenders the nation rather than the other way around,<sup>4</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson asserts that the Icelanders were more or less taught to become Icelanders by the political leaders of the campaign for independence (*sjálfstæðisbarátta*),<sup>5</sup> e.g. through the organisation and funding of popular public lectures – like those of Jón Aðils – in order to educate the masses, and through the cultural exploitation of symbols of former greatness, such as Þingvellir (see fig. 7).<sup>6</sup> In its very nature, modern Icelandic nationalism is conceived by Guðmundur as an interesting blend of two seemingly opposing ideologies, namely liberalism – with its emphasis on freedom – and the conservatism of Iceland’s rural population, spurred by the sudden arrival of the Industrial Revolution and the major societal transformations that followed in its wake.

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<sup>1</sup> Karlsson (1994) p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Hálfðanarson (2007a) p.75. Interestingly, the tone of the book itself is – as Páll Björnsson rightly pointed out in his review– still remarkably ‘nationalistic’ for a modernistic discourse in the tradition of Gellner, Anderson and Hobsbawm; he refers to ‘us’ or ‘we’ the Icelanders, and does not refrain from describing Jón Sigurðsson as a heroic figure. See Páll Björnsson, “Íslenska þjóðríkið. Uppruni og endimörk” (review), in *Saga* 40 (2002) pp.262-269, 267.

<sup>3</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Hvað gerir Íslendinga að þjóð?”, in *Skírnir* 70 (1996) pp.7-31, 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner (1983) pp.1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Hálfðanarson (2007a) pp.133-4.

<sup>6</sup> On Þingvellir as *lieu de mémoire* and stage for national festivities, see idem, pp.173-189, and Hálfðanarson (2000a), as well as Simon Halink, “The Icelandic mythscape: sagas, landscapes and national identity”, in *National Identities* 16:3 (2014) pp.209-223.

The conservative Icelandic farmer, prone on protecting its traditional rights and way of life, has played a major role in the development of the island's national movement, and Guðmundur even makes the claim that the modern welfare state is a direct result of modern Icelanders' conservative ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Unlike most modernists, he is not hostile towards the phenomenon of nationalism *per se*; in a metaphor, he describes nationalism simply as the bus in which the Icelandic people entered the modern age – quite unlike other comparable pre-national peoples (*þjóðflokkasamfélög*) like the Bretons, who, instead, entered modernity by becoming French.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Icelandic nationalism was not so much a necessity resulting from a pre-existing Icelandic *ethnie*, but rather a choice made by a small group of Icelanders, a historical coincidence, unfolding in the face of modernity.<sup>3</sup> This is an important distinction, since it offers an explanation for the failure of Jørgen Jørgensen's 'revolution' of 1809; as an *ethnie*, Iceland's cultural identity was not yet linked to the political aspirations associated with modern nationalism, and the islanders' well-developed collective self-image did not (yet) depend on dreams of political autonomy or independence.

Following this line of argumentation, Gunnar Karlsson is criticised by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson for not sufficiently explaining the radical transformation from *ethnie* to the modern nation, and for his exaggerated emphasis on pre-modern Icelandic identity.<sup>4</sup> In turn, Guðmundur could be reproached for practically ignoring all of pre-nineteenth-century history, from the First Grammatical Treatise to the linguistic and literary patriotism of Humanists like Arngrímur Jónsson<sup>5</sup> and the apologetics of Eggert Ólafsson's enlightened utilitarianism.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, more attention has been dedicated to the interaction between foreign images or stereotypes and Icelandic self-images, which has resulted in several imagological studies like Sumarliði Ísleifsson's *Ísland framandi land* (Reykjavík 1996), Karen Oslund's *Iceland Imagined* (Seattle and London 2011), and the international research project *Iceland and Images of the North* (INOR).<sup>7</sup> With the serious study of cultural transfer as the imagological engine behind identity formation, Icelandic historiography has come a long way since the primordialism of Bogi Thorarensen Melsteð and Sigurður Nordal. In the light of the international nexus in nationalism studies, it is essential to reassess earlier claims concerning the origins of Icelandic identity. The polemic tone of the debates – reflected both in the Warwick Debate<sup>8</sup> and the apparent 'binary opposition' between the views of Gunnar Karlsson and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson<sup>9</sup> – may be tempered considerably by the application

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<sup>1</sup> Hálfðanarson (2007a) p.55.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p.39.

<sup>3</sup> Pinpointing the exact time in history when Icelanders began to conceive of themselves as a nation and aspire to national autonomy remains a controversial subject among Icelandic modernists; Birgir Hermannsson has argued that this occurred around the year 1830 (Hermannsson 2005, p.10), which is considered too late by others. See Lerner (2009) p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Hálfðanarson (2007a) p.34.

<sup>5</sup> On Icelandic self-images in the scholarly (Latin) writings of Humanism, see the work of Gottskálk Þ. Jónsson, e.g. "Puritas nostræ lingvæ. Upphaf íslenskrar málhreinsunar í latneskum húmanisma", in *Skírnir* 77 (2003) pp.37-67.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Karin Schaer, ... *dette hidindtil saa lidet, dog mangesteds urigtig bekiendte Land. Die Umdeutung des Islandbildes in Eggert Ólafssons Reise igiennem Island und ihr Einfluss auf die Konstruktion einer isländischen Identität im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main 2007).

<sup>7</sup> This project issued two edited volumes: Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011), and Sverrir Jakobsson (ed.), *Images of the North. Histories – Identities – Ideas* (Amsterdam – New York 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Between Gellner and Smith; see especially *Nations and Nationalism 2* (1996), pp.357-370.

<sup>9</sup> The academic disagreement between the two should not be exaggerated and is certainly not insurmountable, as their collaboration on the history of the University of Iceland, published on the occasion of the university's first centenary celebration, clearly demonstrates. See Gunnar Karlsson (ed.), *Aldarsaga Háskóla Íslands 1911-2011* (Reykjavík 2011).

of plain common sense. Conflicting opinions that may at first glance appear mutually exclusive can actually be reconciled once the common grounds between them are explored; both Gunnar and Guðmundur agree that, in the course of the nineteenth century, Icelanders' collective notions of Icelandicness underwent a dramatic transformation under the influence of modern political nationalism. Also, both scholars agree that before the advent of nationalism, there must have been *other* collective patterns of identity, however diffuse, unarticulated and mutually contradicting they may have been<sup>1</sup>, and that equating these pre-modern identity models with the modern notion of national identity – as Bogi could still do – is naïve and anachronistic. Their different choices in the translation of the discipline's key concepts into Icelandic reflects their respective emphasis on either continuity or discontinuity, but the basic parameters of their lines of argumentation are very similar. The fact that the philological historicism inherent to Icelandic nationalism – even the most pragmatic and future-oriented of Iceland's nineteenth-century nationalists, Jón Sigurðsson, combined his political activities with philological research – received its inspiration from national historicisms abroad and was by no means an internal affair, has been acknowledged by virtually all Icelandic historians. The paradox of a radically new paradigm (Romanticism), transforming the interpretation of *ancient* heritage into something entirely *new* (nationalism) is a complex one, and efforts to come to terms with it easily lead to polarisation and oversimplification. Although Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson does not engage with the problematic nationalism debate directly in his seminal study on Icelandic Romanticism and its re-interpretation of the medieval texts, the title of his work, *Arfur og umbylting* ('Heritage and Upheaval')<sup>2</sup> is illustrative of the ambiguity in nineteenth century Icelandic culture. It is this ambiguity, the paradox of a cultural and political revolution based on innovative readings of ancient texts – like the Eddas – that will be central to the present study.

Although the element of pride in being 'different', as a people, which can be discerned in apologetic writings on Iceland from Icelandic writers inspired by Humanism and the Enlightenment – written in defence against foreign misconceptions – cannot possibly be labelled 'nationalism', but should also not be ignored; the positive reappraisal of medieval Icelandic literature with the objective of improving Iceland's reputation in the world is older than the Romantic philology of the nineteenth century. In the case of Iceland, this tendency to find cultural pride in a rich heritage may well have originated from the island's geographical isolation and the stigma of being considered different and uncivilised, leading to more articulated cultural differentiation than usual in pre-modern times. As discussed in the above, collective identities are never one-dimensional or monolithic, not even after the introduction of political nationalism in the nineteenth century. A multi-layered and dynamic conception of collective self-images, like the one provided by Hastrup's model, will bring us further in our efforts to fathom not only the contested origins, but also the development of Icelandic identity in modernity.

### ***1.3 Romanticism and National Mythology***

After having conceptualised the central themes of national identity and mythology, I will now focus on the ways in which these two phenomena dovetailed in the historical, cultural and intellectual context of Romanticism. In this chapter, I do not intend to formulate a universal

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar 'reconciliation' between Gellner and Smith, see Leerssen (2006a), where he describes these pre-existing ethnicities as "a mangrove swamp of inchoate and competing identitarian patterns, which were not only given a fresh symbolical function in nationalist terms, but also filtered, selected, realigned and reconfigured in the process, sometimes to the point of transmutation or invention" (pp.563-4).

<sup>2</sup> Egilsson (1999).

definition of this notoriously problematic term.<sup>1</sup> However, considering the centrality of the concept of Romanticism and romantic ideas throughout my research, I will attempt to problematise them here in order to come to a practical working definition for my specific field of research, which – I admit – may differ strongly from equally adequate definitions elsewhere.

As a historical phenomenon, Romanticism is frequently characterised in polemic terms, as a reactionary counter-movement (e.g. Isaiah Berlin's 'counter-Enlightenment') responding to a Cartesian 'Entzauberung der Welt' (Max Weber) situated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, roughly coinciding with the transitional age or *Sattelzeit* as identified by Reinhart Koselleck, in which many concepts (*Begriffe*) underwent a fundamental semantic transformation.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell describes this modernisation or *Entzauberung* process – and its effects on the role of myth in society – as follows:

[F]or the democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research, have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed. In the fateful, epoch-announcing words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Dead are all the gods." One knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming to maturity. The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to full waking consciousness; and modern man emerged from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon, or like the sun at dawn from the womb of mother night. It is not only that there is no hiding place for the gods from the searching telescope and microscope; there is no such society any more as the gods once supported.<sup>3</sup>

The traumatic impact of the French and Industrial Revolutions (Eric Hobsbawm's 'Dual Revolution') and the Napoleonic era on European culture is still considered central to any attempt to fathom the paradoxical and elusive nature of Romanticism.<sup>4</sup> In times of political upheaval and cultural disruption, as the "*structural* bases of boundary become blurred, so the symbolic bases are strengthened through 'flourishes and decorations', 'aesthetic frills' and so forth."<sup>5</sup> Political Romanticism, or Romantic nationalism, can be interpreted as such a symbolic language, an opposing force to the modernisation process described by Campbell, inclined to reassert boundaries (real or constructed) which were felt to be 'under threat'. As such, it is a cultural manifestation of the 'character displacement' or 'reverse cline', observed by Richard Dawkins in the animal kingdom (see Chapter 1.2.1). The Romantic politicisation of cultural identity was linked with the mental construction of poetic spaces and national golden ages<sup>6</sup> and dovetailed with the 'discovery' of history (Hegel), language (Herder and Humboldt) and culture (Herder). The idea of authenticity became a leading principle in the endeavours of the intellectuals involved in the Romantic project, formed the legitimisation of nations and societies, and was instrumentalised to purify and ultimately homogenise national

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<sup>1</sup> "To the contention that 'he who seeks to define Romanticism is entering a hazardous occupation' a rider could be added to the effect that he who has some understanding of the meaning of Romanticism ceases to expect or to seek a neat dictionary definition." Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism* (London 1976) p.62.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, 'Einleitung', in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* vol.1 (Stuttgart 1979) XV.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell (1968) p.387.

<sup>4</sup> The notorious paradox of Romanticism has led to equally paradoxical concepts (e.g. 'anti-Romantic Romanticism') to describe and explain these ambivalent tendencies.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1985) p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Smith (1999) pp.179-200.

culture.<sup>1</sup> The modern cult of the authentic and the original has its origins in Romanticism; political Romanticism authenticated the nation by constructing a sense of continuity in the nation's history – from its primordial beginnings in a murky past up to the national revival of the present – and the organic notion of 'national naturalness'.<sup>2</sup> Since I will be using Romanticism as a historical category – albeit a problematic one – throughout the research, the problem of historical categorisation deserves to be touched upon. Can Romanticism, understood as a historical phenomenon, be demarcated and temporalised adequately to serve as a useful historical category? And if so, what would this category look like?

Throughout the history of cultural historiography, the demarcation of larger than life historical categories – such as Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment or Romanticism – has formed the core problem of every historiographical endeavour. Too tightly formulated categories may render the intricate richness of historical developments invisible, and blind us for wide fields of human history.<sup>3</sup> Too monolithic a notion of what the term Romanticism should comprise can blur our view on the internal ambivalence and multifaceted historical evolution of the romantic movement from revolutionary activism and individualism to reactionary nationalism and religious traditionalism, for instance.<sup>4</sup> However, *too little* demarcation may mean categorical overstretch and semantic inflation, and may render any historiographical category entirely useless, as Johan Huizinga already demonstrated in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Especially a term like Romanticism, equally applicable to both a candlelit dinner and nineteenth-century national revivals, seems highly susceptible to this tendency. Nevertheless, since the timespan covered by this research far exceeds the timeframe traditionally associated with Romanticism as a historical epoch (roughly between 1770 and 1848),<sup>6</sup> a more abstract and intangible notion of the romantic will be more instrumental in the course of this research. The distinction between 'Romanticism' (*die Romantik*) and 'the romantic' (*das Romantische*) as outlined by Rüdiger Safranski, who separates the demarcated historical era from its central characteristics or its ahistorical 'state of mind' (*Geistesgestaltung*), which cannot be restricted to one specific epoch and which continue to manifest itself to this day, is of the essence.<sup>7</sup> Safranski's 'common sense-approach' to the matter does away with many of the problems related to the historiographical demarcation of subdivisions of Romanticism, like Proto, Neo, or Late Romanticism. When de-historicised, romantic motives can also be discovered in pre-Romantic art and culture (for instance in mysticism, or medieval courtly poetry), and in constantly reoccurring themes or *topoi* in Western culture (like for instance the *topos* of authenticity, or the Sublime).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Romantic themes first occurring in Iceland in the early nineteenth century (e.g. the glorification of Viking Age heroism) permeated much of Iceland's nationalistic discourse all the way to the declaration of independence in 1944, and

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Zimmer (1998) p.642.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's critique on the distorting effects of the concept of Reformation. Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadores. Iberianizing the Atlantic 1550-1700* (Stanford 2006) p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre* (Munich 2007) pp.172-192. This development can be compared to Miroslav Hroch's three-phase model for the analysis of national movements.

<sup>5</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Cultuur-Historische Verkenningen* (Haarlem 1929) p.66.

<sup>6</sup> Aiden Day, *Romanticism* (London 1996) p.1. However, many other temporisations of Romanticism are possible, depending on the region and the cultural discipline under scrutiny. For a more Icelandic angle on Romanticism, see Egilsson (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Safranski, (2007) p.12. The concept of 'the Romantic' enables Safranski to consider the '68-movement to be yet another expression of the same Romantic spirit (idem., pp.370-394).

<sup>8</sup> Compare Johan Huizinga's theory of recurring themes, as outlined by Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire. Popular and Unpopular Religion 1350-1600* (London – Ohio 1993) 144. This recurrence of themes which often refer back to their previous historical manifestations, can be compared to the so-called *Droste-effect* in visual arts.



even up to the present day. Also, Þórbergur Þórðarson's *Sálmurinn um blómið* ('The hymn about the flower') from 1954-1955, is in its protest against the Weberian *Entzauberungsprozeß* and its subjective and pantheistic, anti-utilitarian view of nature deeply and unmistakably Romantic. Keeping in mind Lilian R. Furst's remark on the impossibility of defining Romanticism,<sup>1</sup> a set of central, mutually interconnected *topoi* which make up this de-historicised Romanticism can be discerned. The *longue durée* persistence of Romantic *topoi* has been scrutinised by Joep Leerssen, who claims that the 'long tail' of Romantic nationalism evolved into *banal* nationalism in the course of the twentieth century (see Chapter 9.1), which still forms the "background noise of the contemporary nation".<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, Icelandic Romanticism has been neatly pinned down to the era between the first issue of the journal *Fjölnir* (1835; see Chapter 4.2), and the first and only issue of the avant-garde journal *Verðandi* (1882; see Chapter 8.1).<sup>3</sup> In my opinion this chronological framework is based on too limited an interpretation of Romanticism, and therefore, I will analyse the phenomenon from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century until its metamorphosis into banal nationalism in the early twentieth.

First of all, the aforementioned anti-cartesian nature of the romantic and its preference of subjectivity and internal or 'aesthetic truth' over more rational and utilitarian (enlightened) modes of approaching the problem of truth, can be identified as one of Romanticism's central hallmarks.<sup>4</sup> An analysis of the intricate and paradoxical relationship between Romanticism and Enlightenment falls outside the scope of this exploration, but the equation of Romanticism with 'counter-Enlightenment' is a misleading oversimplification, as demonstrated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who proposed an interpretation of Romanticism not as a rebellion against, but rather as resulting *from* the Enlightenment with which it shares its most fundamental presuppositions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Romanticism is itself a product of the technological and ideological modernisation process it so often seeks to oppose in its exaltation of subjectivity, the imaginary, and its idealisation of the pre-industrial world. This does not mean however that the enlightened presuppositions on which the Romantics based their various world-views were not *interpreted* in a radically new and seemingly 'counter-enlightened' manner. For instance, the concept of truth became a matter of aesthetic and ethical debate, connected to the subjectivity of the inner world where 'the Sublime' (*das Erhabene*, and therefore the 'true'<sup>6</sup>) could be experienced, was juxtaposed to the objectified *univers de la précision* and the principle of reality engendered by a scientific world-view. The Rousseauian mystification and pantheistic idealisation of the uncultivated, untamed, wild and inhospitable *unendliche Landschaft* lies at the heart of any attempt to come to an understanding of Romanticism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Furst (1976) p.62.

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.30.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Kristján Jóhann Jónsson, *Heimborgari og þjóðskáld. Um þversagnakennt hlutverk Gríms Thomsen í íslenskri menningu* (Reykjavík 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Johan Huizinga characterised Romanticism as "in so many respects the consciousness-raiser of our aesthetic appreciation" ("in zooveel opzichten de bewustmaker van onze aesthetische waardeering"); Huizinga (1958) p.168.

<sup>5</sup> In his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). See Kristin Gjesdal, "Between Enlightenment and Romanticism: Some Problems and Challenges in Gadamer's Hermeneutics", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46:2 (2008) pp.285-306.

<sup>6</sup> "The essential claim of the Sublime is that man can, in feeling and speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement." Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime. Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore 1976) p.3.

<sup>7</sup> On the Romantic experience of landscape, see Chapter 4.2.

This complex correlation and interdependence of Romanticism and Enlightenment can be discerned in the two historical modes of approaching the study of mythology, which are irrevocably intertwined. On the one hand, there is the academic, classical approach, which attempted to translate and explain the ancient texts and compare them to the hegemonic canon of classical literature.<sup>1</sup> This is what Mats Malm, in his study on seventeenth century Edda-scholarship, referred to as the *pragmatic* approach.<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposed to this, is what Malm classifies as the *metaphysical* approach, which originated in a later stage of Edda-scholarship and is characterised by a high level of creativity and subjective or intuitive interpretation of the primary sources.<sup>3</sup> The myths are presented as containing something more than meets the eye, higher truths even, which are not translatable or easily grasped intellectually. This metaphysical presentation of mythology is considered a quintessentially romantic phenomenon, and paved the way for creative reinterpretations of Old Norse mythology on religious, philosophical, political, poetic, anthropological and many other levels. Since the work of most scholars and writers who engaged themselves with the Eddas contains elements of both approaches,<sup>4</sup> the focus of this research cannot rest exclusively on this second, more creative mode of Edda-reception. Throughout this research, the *interaction* between the two – often occurring within the oeuvre of one single author – will be an object of scrutiny, through which the dynamics of Romantic philology can be examined. For this purpose, the analysis of prefaces and introductions to – and paratexts of – Edda-editions appearing between 1820 and 1918 will be of importance.<sup>5</sup> How were Romantic *topoi* like authenticity and sublimity incorporated in this academic and artistic discourse?

Like the Sublime, which in the radical reinterpretation of concepts in the *Sattelzeit* became an aesthetic category more essential than beauty or symmetry in its associations with both holiness and fear,<sup>6</sup> the *topos* of authenticity may be considered of great importance to any field of romantic expression. In accordance with the Platonic trinity of beauty, goodness and truth, which became a central theme in German classical thought and idealism, virtue could only be found in what is authentic or ‘true’. The organicity with which cultural phenomena like language, literature or music were approached, all stemming from a primordial *Volksgeist*, allowed for distinctions between authentic or natural and unnatural or contaminated culture to be drawn.<sup>7</sup> The sense that the authentic is constantly under threat is a very common one among the romantics, and has inspired them to leave the city behind and collect, record and idealise the more authentic rural cultures of the periphery, threatened by a subordinating industrial, urban centre.<sup>8</sup> In the aesthetic truth of rural folk-culture, the perennial nature of a people could be sensed, and the mythical origins of the *Volk*, veiled by the mists of times, was rendered *subjectively* tangible. A key feature of everything authentic is that its origins are almost by definition shrouded in mystery and mystically situated beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Ole Worm’s *Literatura runica* (1636) is a good example of this.

<sup>2</sup> Mats Malm, *Minervas apple. Om diktsyn, tolkning och bildspråk inom nordisk göticism* (Stockholm 1996) pp.29-32, 289-290. His distinction between pragmatic and metaphysical scholarship is adopted by the research project “Eddornas sinnebildspråk”; Clunies Ross and Lönnroth (1999) pp.6-8.

<sup>3</sup> Malm (1996) pp.118-146, 292-293.

<sup>4</sup> Notably in the work of Jacob Grimm, where any distinction between the ‘actual meaning’ of the Eddas and the various ways in which meaning could be *imposed* on them is entirely absent. Böldl (2000) p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Especially the author’s reaction to Snorri Sturluson’s euhemeristic theory concerning the origin of the gods is indicative of his stance in the pragmatic-metaphysical ‘divide’. See Chapter 3.4.

<sup>6</sup> Safranski describes Romanticism as the continuation of religion with aesthetic means. Safranski (2007) p.13.

<sup>7</sup> The contaminating force is often the ‘significant other’, like the ‘urban’ French in German national thought and the Danes in Iceland.

<sup>8</sup> Smith (1998) pp.61-63.

the realm of chronological history.<sup>1</sup> Pantheistic mystification of nature led to the authentication of culture and communities naturally shaped by their landscape, whose national pasts were equally mystical and authentic as the nature they sprang from and with which it formed an organic unity. For a *Volksgeist* to be primordial and authentic, a mystification of its history through the historiographical construction of glorious golden ages and mythical origins in times immemorial was essential.<sup>2</sup> According to Frank Ankersmit, the essentialist notion of authenticity is per definition at odds with (historical) contextualisation, which inevitably leads to equivocation and a normative devaluation of the object deemed authentic.<sup>3</sup> Unhistorical narrative, like mythology, was therefore often considered more appropriate to convey (national) authenticity than historical narrative, since myths and fairy tales lack any form of spatial and temporal context, which might jeopardise its claims on authenticity.

Romantic historicism offered a radical new way of experiencing time and the very texture of history itself; what once was could be once more. National history was experienced as the expression of *Volksgeist*, and since *Volksgeist* was eternal and never-changing, the main themes of national history remained unaltered and kept reoccurring in cycles of historical development. This cyclical view of history represented an intellectual alternative to classical, linear and teleological modes of historiography, and can be interpreted as a mythologisation of history. Around 1800, German scholars like Friedrich Schlegel connected the Eddas to the ancient religious and mythological systems of India and Persia, and uncovered in them a cyclic world-view that would be considered one of the essential characteristics of mythology in general.<sup>4</sup> This insight revolutionised the way Western scholars interpreted their own history, and facilitated the construction of a mythical past which would be susceptible to reinterpretation as a blueprint for the (national) future.<sup>5</sup>

In this world-view, the distant, pagan times of the ancestors were often not considered as distant or eerily enigmatic as they may have appeared in more traditional historiographies. Sir James Hall's aforementioned attempt to present gothic architecture as a continuation of the pagan practice of tree worship is an indication of just this embrace of the pagan, primordial past. Even in Romantic theology, pagan mythology was no longer necessarily the demonic adversary; Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) innovative concept of religion was so spacious, that it also included poetry, the fine arts, and even mythology. In the light of the Romantic Sublime, it was no longer "nötig, das Christliche gegen das Heidnische schroff abzugrenzen. Es kam vielmehr darauf an, den religiösen Kern auch in den alten Mythen und ihren Systemen, der Mythologie, freizulegen."<sup>6</sup> By eradicating the traditional defence wall between pagan and Christian, nineteenth century theoreticians did much to emancipate the ancient myths, and justified their mobilisation as a colourful *Gedankenkleid*, in which poets could wrap "ihre anderweitig gewonnenen Gedanken [...], um eine bessere Wirkung beim Publikum zu erzielen. Gedacht war an den Gebrauch von Symbolen, Bildern und anschaulichen Erzählungen, wodurch die abstrakten Ideen die kollektive Phantasie

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting 20th century equivalent of this phenomenon is the mythical figure of Robert Johnson, who is considered by many to be the most authentic blues musician ever to have lived. One could argue that he owes much of this status to the lack of biographical knowledge on him, which renders everything about him susceptible to mystification, and engendered the Faustian myth of his pact with the devil.

<sup>2</sup> Smith (1999) pp.65-68.

<sup>3</sup> Or, to put it another way: "Context destroys authenticity." Frank Ankersmit, *De Sublieme Historische Ervaring* (Groningen 2007) p.306.

<sup>4</sup> Böldl (2000) pp.186-217.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Gerd Wolfgang Weber, *Mythos und Geschichte. Essay zur Geschichtsmythologie Skandinaviens in Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Trieste 2001) pp.153-190.

<sup>6</sup> Safranski (2007) p.151.

beschäftigen und sie im Geiste von Vernunft und Freiheit besser würden beflügeln können.”<sup>1</sup> Towards the close of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) elevated myth to the purest form of poetic expression, since it provides a way of “Denken in sichtbaren und fühlbaren Vorgängen”:

... nicht in Gedanken ist das eigentlich Dichterische: dies zeigt sich im Mythos; dem nicht ein Gedanke zu Grunde liegt, wie man gewöhnlich meint, sondern der selbst ein Denken ist, aber nicht in Begriffen, ich meine ein Weltbild, welches nicht in Worten zu umspannen ist, sondern in Vorgängen.<sup>2</sup>

Lacking any historical starting point – e.g. a specific author or historical ‘inventor’ of myths –, mythological narratives appear to somehow naturally originate from the ‘people’ as a whole, thus forming the most unspoiled expression of the *Volksgeist* at hand. Herder considered myths, like popular balads and fairy tales, “das Archiv des Volkes, der Schatz ihrer Wissenschaft und Religion, ihrer Theogonien und Cosmogonien, der Thaten ihrer Väter, und der Begebenheiten ihrer Geschichte, Abdruck ihres Herzens, Bild ihres häuslichen Lebens in Freude und Leid, beym Brautbett und Grabe.”<sup>3</sup> The notion that national regeneration could only occur through the cultivation of this ancestral treasure trove, inspired the Grimm brothers to construct a ‘national mythology’ from old fairy tales and appropriated Nordic sources,<sup>4</sup> which would in turn inspire German artists like Wagner to create quintessentially *German* art. This project of constructing national mythologies and (consequently) national art occurred all over Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The mystification of national historiography and the Romantic ‘historical culture’ it generated can be characterised by keywords like *couleur locale*, dramatisation and imagination; not coincidentally all terms associated with the arts.<sup>6</sup> The Romantic concept of aesthetic truth permeated all endeavours to recreate (or rather invent<sup>7</sup>) a glorified and uninterrupted national past, of which the nation at present was (in a historicist sense) a direct result and which was always of crucial importance to modern national agendas. The golden age of times immemorial was ‘recreated’ to serve as a blueprint for an anticipated *new* golden age. The example of mythical founding fathers was there to inspire political action in the now. It is this paradoxical glorification of the past and an equally heroic future that endows romantic nationalism with its Janus-faced, seemingly timeless character, which could be described as archaic modernity.<sup>8</sup>

The mythologisation of history enabled its actualisation and the ideological mobilisation of nationalistic forces longing (*Sehnsucht*) to ‘return’ to the authentic,

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.154.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, taken from his preparatory notes for *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, quoted in Decker (2012) p.283.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Von Aehnlichkeit der mittlern englischen und deutschen Dichtkunst, nebst Verschiedenem, das daraus folget”, in *Deutsches Museum* (Nov. 1777) pp.421-435, 432.

<sup>4</sup> Still, the nativist historicism of the Grimms should not be confused with Herder’s more universal ideas on national identities.

<sup>5</sup> On the evolution of national operas, see Lajosi (2005) p.67.

<sup>6</sup> Piet Blaas, “De verjongende barbaren. Enkele historische ficties van de Romantiek”, in Jo Tollebeek, Frank Ankersmit and Wessel Krul (eds.), *Romantiek en Historische Cultuur* (Groningen 1996) 47-54, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

<sup>8</sup> On the confluence of tradition and modernity, see Cohen (1985) p.99. On the Janus-faced character of nationalism, see Tom Nairn, *The Break up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London 1977). That the backward and forward-looking face of nationalism did not always peacefully coexist, is in the Icelandic case demonstrated by the polemic tensions between historicists (championed by Jónas Hallgrímsson and the *Fjölnismenn*) and modernists, led by Jón Sigurðsson.

uncontaminated sources of the *Volk*.<sup>1</sup> The gap that separated the golden age from the new national revival was often described in nostalgic terms of decline, decay and (foreign) suppression.<sup>2</sup> Nostalgic contemplations on the deteriorated physical remnants of a once glorious age (notably ruins of evocative gothic churches, as immortalised in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich) and the melancholic cult of *vanitas* did much to charge the treatment of historical themes emotionally. It was the tragic conception of ‘the last man’, the victim of history, that triggered the Europe-wide admiration of the rediscovered ‘Celtic Homer’ Ossian and his ‘authentic’ epic – in fact a forgery by James Macpherson – in which the ancient culture of the Bards is eradicated by that of the invading Romans.<sup>3</sup> The Romantic hero was a *tragic hero per se*, and since the national past was portrayed as heroic, it was also tragic.

In its quest for authenticity and the Sublime, that the Romantic ‘cultivation of culture’<sup>4</sup> was particularly sensitive to the timeless and otherworldly nature of folktales and mythology. In their aesthetic qualities, these mythopoeic narratives could convey more essential, decontextualised and timeless truths (in the Romantic, aesthetic sense) than other, more chronological narratives. Romantic historical culture can be characterised as a mythologisation (and thus authentication) of the national.<sup>5</sup> The shift in historical awareness, situated around 1800 and coinciding with the advent of this new historical culture, has been identified as the starting point of our modern concept of history.<sup>6</sup> This presumptuous claim has been heavily contested for all the right reasons,<sup>7</sup> but the fact that a revolution in Western thinking about the past *did* take place can hardly be denied. The historicist assumption that the present is characterised by the history it is built on turned history into a mirror for the present and paved the way for the ‘rebirth’ of ancient themes in architecture and the arts, leading to eclectic neo-styles and the Pre-Raphaelite art.<sup>8</sup> This artistic actualisation of the past (or at least the Romantic interpretation of that past) took different guises in a wide range of European national historical cultures which were interconnected, and “carried by an overlapping network of actors”<sup>9</sup> primarily consisting of internationally minded cultural omnivores and intellectuals like politicians, poets, lawmakers, historians and priests. Even though Romanticism in all its plurality can clearly be characterised as a pan-European phenomenon, this research will mainly focus on the German and consequent Scandinavian variations on the aforementioned Romantic themes. According to Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, the basic tenets of Icelandic nationalism can all be traced back to German Romantic sentiments of the period after the Napoleonic Wars “when the echoes of Fichte’s and Hegel’s writings reached the Icelandic student community in Copenhagen.”<sup>10</sup> Romanticism was by no means solely a ‘German affair’,<sup>11</sup> nor was it anti-French per definition,<sup>1</sup> but it was German

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<sup>1</sup> Smith (1999) pp.67-68.

<sup>2</sup> Or, in the case of Iceland, simply as the ‘silent centuries’ (ca. 1400-1800). See Kirsten Hastrup, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400-1800* (Oxford 1990) pp.35-42.

<sup>3</sup> Trevor-Roper (2008) pp.106-137.

<sup>4</sup> Comprising “the nationalists’ scholarly, creative and political-propagandist concern with language, with folktales, history, myths and legends, proverbs, ancient tribal/legal antiquity, mythology, antique heirlooms, etc.” Leerssen (2006a) p.568.

<sup>5</sup> Blaas (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Die Herausbildung des modernen Geschichtsbegriffs’, in Brunner-Conze-Koselleck (1979) pp.647-718.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Ankersmit (2007) p.413.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Raedts, *De ontdekking van de Middeleeuwen. Geschiedenis van een illusie* (Amsterdam 2011) pp.33-77.

<sup>9</sup> Leerssen (2006a) p.567.

<sup>10</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Iceland: a Peaceful Secession”, in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 25:1-2 (2000) 87-100.

<sup>11</sup> Safranski (2007).

Romanticism – as promulgated by e.g. Hegel, Schlegel and Fichte – that was most influential in the University of Copenhagen and other Nordic centres of intellectual activity, for reasons that will be elaborated upon in Chapter Three.

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<sup>1</sup> As presumed for instance by Oscar J. Falnes, “New England Interest in Scandinavian Culture and the Norsemen”, in *The New England Quarterly* 10:2 (1937) pp.211-242, 211.



## 2. Introducing Iceland's 'Pagan' Heritage

### 2.1 How Primary are the Primary Sources?

Icelandic national identity is exceptional in the extent to which it has rooted itself in an ancient literary heritage; a strong pride in their language and their ancient literature already characterised the Icelanders' self-perception – as well as their status among non-Icelanders – long before modern nationalism evolved in the nineteenth century. But what does this ancient literature – and especially its mythological branch – consist of? Contrary to what the title of this subchapter may lead to believe, this prologue is not intended as an academic contribution to the ongoing debate on the origin and contested 'paganness' or of the Old Norse sources. Rather than concentrating on the original medieval manuscripts, the present study intends to scrutinise the wide variety of modern lenses through which this corpus of texts has been studied, interpreted and reevaluated. Not the actual Old Norse world-view and its religious practices, but the modern interpretations of their presumed literary remnants will take the centre stage in this mnemo-historical research. However, in order to comprehend where this variety of spectacles originated from, and to grasp the specialised philological debates and controversies in modern times, a general introduction to the theme of Old Norse-Icelandic mythology<sup>1</sup> and its place in Icelandic cultural history before 1800 is certainly in place. Two interrelated themes, concerning the *paganness* and the *Icelandicness* of the eddic sources, would become ideologically highly charged subjects in nineteenth-century debates on the origin, date, and significance of the Eddas. Therefore, this introduction to the medieval corpus<sup>2</sup> is constructed in a manner that will facilitate an optimal understanding of these later key controversies, as scrutinised in the main body of this study.

In short, this prologue will provide the reader with a compact but adequate outline of the medieval, pre- and early modern sources and their reception, as well as a description of their distribution in Iceland and abroad. Additionally, the complex issue of pre- and early modern 'Icelandic identity' will be considered in the third paragraph of this prologue. This concise exposition of the main themes figuring in this historiographical debate will, again, not aspire to originality or revolutionary new insights in the development of Icelandic identity in the era before the 'national age'.<sup>3</sup> It will merely assist the reader in framing the debates on national identity historically, and in connecting the Icelandic case study to the more abstract and theoretical discourse of nationalism studies, as outlined in the introduction.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the terms (Old) Norse, pre-Christian, or Nordic paganism can in fact have a distorting effect, since they create the illusion of one monolithic world-view. Rather, these terms refer – just like the neologism Hinduism – to a wide variety of religious world-views, beliefs and practices, spread out over many centuries, different social classes, and determined by local and often very isolated cultures. On this variety of pre-Christian religions in the North, see Luke John Murphy, *Between Unity and Diversity. Articulating Pre-Christian Nordic Religion and its Spaces in the Late Iron Age* (Aarhus 2017). On the particular characteristics of Norse paganism in Iceland, see especially Böðvar Guðmundsson and Heimir Pálsson, *Norraenir guðir í nýju landi. Íslensk heiðni og goðsögur* (Reykjavík 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I will restrict myself to the *Icelandic* sources on Old Norse mythology, since their continental counterparts (notably Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* and Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*) do not appear to have had any noteworthy influence on modern Icelandic attitudes towards their pagan past.

<sup>3</sup> Karlsson (1999).



An important question to ask before beginning the seemingly straightforward task of outlining the sources of Old Norse mythology chronologically, is: where do the original ‘pagan’ sources end, and where does the process of their reinterpretation or reevaluation set in? When writing on the *reception* of a certain mythological system or discourse, the very concept of reception presupposes the existence of something that *is received*, clearly demarcated from the process of its historical reception. In the case of historical events or a certain book or piece of art, this distinction between the original and its reception may be less problematic, since there can be little doubt about how to define ‘the original’. But in the case of Old Norse-Icelandic mythology, the two appear to be intrinsically entangled and inseparable. The corpus of mythological texts did not take shape until approximately two centuries after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity (ca. 1000 AD) and appears to be infused with Christian morality and classical concepts inherent to medieval scholarship. Although it may seem reasonable to argue for Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* as the starting point of the ‘post-pagan’ reception of Old Norse mythology<sup>1</sup>, too strong a sense of demarcation between pagan and post-pagan might distort or oversimplify our understanding of those syncretic processes of cultural transfer and interaction between paganism and Christianity, taking place in the centuries before and after the Christianisation of Northern Europe. As we have seen in the introductory chapters, “[m]yth has always already passed over into the process of reception, and it remains in that process no matter what violence is applied in order to break its bonds and to establish its final form.”<sup>2</sup> Especially in the case of Iceland, where this process of conversion unfolded in a rather unique pattern, this resulted in an unprecedented outburst of creative transculturation.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1.1 An Icelandic *Sonderweg*?

One thing that will strike most people immersing themselves in Icelandic historiography, is the all-pervading emphasis on the *uniqueness* of Icelandic culture and history, often expressed in the most elaborate collections of superlatives. Gunnar Karlsson, in the introduction to his one-volume history of Iceland, adheres to this singularity-topos with the words:

Iceland is unique among European societies in being populated as late as the Viking Age and in being provided with copious sources about its origin, written as well as archaeological. It is also unique in existing without any central power for centuries after Christianity had brought the country the art of writing on parchment in the Latin alphabet. Therefore Iceland produced an abundant literature about a society that had to do without a monarch or anyone with the force and authority to determine who was right and who was wrong. The Icelandic sagas are not only excellent literature but also a rare treasure of sources about a stateless society.<sup>4</sup>

Despite of sceptical attempts to deconstruct (or at least refine) this hegemonic discourse on Icelandic history, one cannot help but concluding that indeed, the historical facts speak for themselves. The unique political and cultural circumstances in which the island society took shape have played a key role in determining Icelandic attitudes towards their pre-Christian mythology, which in turn facilitated the oral and literary transmission of pre-Christian narratives that would not have endured in other European societies.

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<sup>1</sup> Clunies Ross and Lönnroth (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Blumenberg (1990) pp. 270-1.

<sup>3</sup> On the creative forces at work in the medieval reception and writing of the myths, see especially the contributions to the edited volume *Writing down the Myths*, edited by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Turnhout 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Karlsson (2003) pp.1-2.

To achieve a better understanding of this, we have to focus our attention on the official conversion of Iceland, which took place on the Alþingi of either 999 or 1000 AD.<sup>1</sup> Pressured by the Norwegian king Ólafr Tryggvason, who sought to increase his political grip on the isolated community by forcing Iceland into his Christian sphere of influence, the Icelanders appear to have been utterly divided amongst themselves on matters of religion and political allegiance. According to the anthropologist Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, the division between pagans and Christians was so profound that one could actually speak of *two* parallel Icelandic nations at that time, facing each other in Þingvellir, where they declared themselves ‘out of law’ with the opposing party and prepared for battle.<sup>2</sup> If we are to believe the medieval sources (notably Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók*, the anonymous *Kristni saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*), a full-blown civil war was prevented by the religious compromise proposed by one man, who happened to be not only a pagan himself (like the majority of the Icelanders), but also the *lögsögumaður* (‘lawspeaker’: the highest legal office in the assembly) that summer. This Þorgeir Þorkelsson, *goði* (chieftain and priest) of Ljósavatn in northern Iceland, managed to soothe the soaring emotions of those gathered around him, and proclaimed that he would solve this difficult matter after a day and a night of contemplation or meditation under a fur cloak or blanket.<sup>3</sup> After having re-emerged from the cloak, he decided in favour of Christianity, albeit on a number of rather unique conditions in favour of the pagan party; in the privacy of their homes, everyone would be allowed to continue pagan worship, and the pagan costumes of consuming horsemeat and exposing infants (infanticide) would remain legal. This highly unusual solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem was accepted by both parties, and Þorgeir himself cast the statues of his pagan gods into a waterfall, thus publicly renouncing the old faith in favour of Christianity – encouraging the rest of Iceland to do the same – and giving the waterfall (Goðafoss: ‘Waterfall of the Gods’) its name.<sup>4</sup> Even though this supposed leniency towards paganism was, in the following decades, undone by the growing power of the church which effectively banned the pagan practices allowed by Þorgeir, the story of Iceland’s *peaceful* and diplomatic Christianisation remained a powerful one.<sup>5</sup>

As Iceland gravitated towards mainstream Christian culture in the centuries following its conversion, pre-Christian mythology moved from a system of religious and social significance to the sphere of formal literature.<sup>6</sup> Icelandic Christianity acquired a distinctive national character, as the churches and their clergy were closely connected to the homes of

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<sup>1</sup> On the exact date of Iceland’s Christianisation, see Ólafía Einarsdóttir, *Studier i kronologisk metode i tidlig islansk historie-skrivning* (Stockholm 1964) pp.72-82, 103-4.

<sup>2</sup> Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak. A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland* (Reykjavík 1999 [1978]) pp.79-90. I will not elaborate here on the problem of applying the concept of ‘nation’ to pre-modern circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> To this day, the Icelandic expression ‘að leggjast undir feld’ (‘to lay under a blanket’) means: to think something over before making a decision, to ‘sleep on it’. For Aðalsteinsson’s interpretation of this action as a pagan ritual, see *idem*, pp.103-123. See also a collection of his essays on this topic, *Hið Mystíska X* (Reykjavík 2009). Recently, Terry Gunnell has argued that this ritual was merely cosmetic, and performed in order to imbue a political decision that was already made with a sense of divine justification. Gunnell, “Ansgar’s Conversion of Iceland”, in Agatha Ney and Henrik Williams (eds.), *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia* (Gävle 2009) pp.346-353.

<sup>4</sup> Þorgeir Þorkelsson appears to be the only historical figure ever to have received admiration from both Christians (for making Iceland Christian) and neo-pagans (for safeguarding ‘their’ religious heritage through his compromise). An absolute *unicum*, since Christian and neo-pagan canonisations are usually mutually exclusive. For this reason alone, a mnemonic study of Þorgeir in Iceland’s cultural memory should be fascinating to say the least.

<sup>5</sup> A more banal explanation for Þorgeir’s extraordinary compromise could be that he was bribed by the Christian faction. See Karlsson (2003) p.36.

<sup>6</sup> Greenway (1977) pp.10-11.

Iceland's most prominent farmer families who acted as their patrons and beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup> This proximity to the Icelandic way of life, and the interdependence between clergy and well-to-do Icelanders, has to a large extent determined the reception of the pagan past in medieval literature, primarily composed in monastic settings. The Icelanders were Christian now, but their glorified ancestors, who were to become the protagonists of saga literature and who served as indispensable reminders of a family's or region's participation in the settlement (*landnám*) of Iceland, had been pagans. Iceland's isolation and relative autonomy from centralised ecclesial power in Europe – as well as a lack of trained clergy in the initial phase of Icelandic Christianity<sup>2</sup> – facilitated the perpetuation and literary cultivation of their stories, as well as the secularised use of the mythological themes that had been so pivotal to their pre-Christian world-view. Due to these unique circumstances, the echoes of Iceland's pagan past were 'prolonged'.<sup>3</sup>

This ambivalence in coming to terms with a pagan but revered age of heroism, has characterised much of Iceland's medieval literature and historiography. Sverrir Jakobsson has recently compared medieval Icelandic images of Islam to images of paganism, and demonstrated that in both cases the heroism and loyalty displayed in refusals to convert to Christianity could meet with considerable sympathy from medieval Icelandic writers and historians, despite of their Christian identity.<sup>4</sup> This admiration of pagan heroism was not considered at odds with their own Christian world-view, the primary marker of medieval Western identity, and rendered a lively interest in eddic mythology one of the most distinctive features of Old Norse-Icelandic literature.<sup>5</sup> What exactly triggered the unprecedented outburst of Iceland's literary creativity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries remains a matter of debate. Some have attributed it to the influence of Celtic culture, others to the increasing contacts with continental Europe, or simply to the adventurous and original spirit of those Norwegians leaving their native shores to become the first Icelanders; naturally, it was not the "sleepy-heads who uprooted and went to look for land for themselves."<sup>6</sup> The most simple explanation for Iceland's medieval rise to cultural greatness has been provided by Sigurður Nordal, the most influential Icelandic philologist of the twentieth century (see Chapter 10.1), who attributed it to the overabundance of two essential ingredients; time and vellum.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of the present study, solving this historical mystery is not necessary. What is pivotal however, is to fathom the various ways in which Old Norse mythological topoi have perpetuated in medieval, 'Christian' manuscripts.

To achieve a clearer understanding of this cultural perpetuation, it is important to distinguish between two separate modes of discussing and interpreting Old Norse mythology, which often appear intertwined but are nevertheless distinguishable. In his study on the European reception of the Eddas between Enlightenment and national Romanticism, Klaus Bödl differentiates between these two branches of the same tree by linking them to two

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<sup>1</sup> Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland* (London 1975) p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London 2001) pp.303-307.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* vol. 1: *The Myths* (Odense 1994). The survival of these pagan myths also led to some very interesting expressions of religious hybridity; the skáld Eilífr Guðrúnarson (late tenth century) for instance composed a devotional poem, in which he located Christ's throne in the South, near to the well of Urðr: the Norse goddess of fate. See Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (Reykjavík 2007 [1988]) p.111-2.

<sup>4</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "Íslam og andstæður í íslensku miðaldasamfélagi", in *Saga* 50:2 (2012) pp.11-33.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Simek, "The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of Two Cultures", in *Gripla* XX (2009) pp.183-198.

<sup>6</sup> Fredrik Paasche in *Landet med de mørke skibene* (1938) p.307, quoted in Strömbäck (1975) p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Sigurður Nordal, "The Presidential Address 1952: Time and Vellum. Some Remarks on the Economic conditions of the Early Icelandic Literature", in *M.H.R.A. Annual Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association* (1952) pp.15ff.

different questions, or approaches to the primary material. One focuses on the *original meaning* of the mythological narratives, while the other attempts to render the Eddas *meaningful* to a contemporary audience through the process of (creative) reinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> A comparable observation is made by Mats Malm, who distinguishes between a *pragmatic* and a *metaphysical* approach to eddic mythology (see Chapter 1.3). In the following, I will provide a concise overview of the medieval source material as well as its post-medieval reception in Iceland and beyond, bearing in mind this important distinction.

### 2.1.2 Skaldic and Eddic Poetry

Although the actual ‘paganness’ of much of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry remains heavily contested, the poems commonly referred to as *skaldic* and *eddic* are generally acknowledged as the most authentic (albeit not ‘uncontaminated’) literary sources available to us on Old Norse pagan world-views. Avoiding the risk of getting entangled in a net of academic argumentation, I will refrain from going into the technicalities of this debate, but rather keep to the basic definitions of these poetic genres, which flourished more or less simultaneously but differed primarily in the choice of contents, meter and style. The genre known as skaldic verse – from the Old Norse word *skáld*, ‘court poet’ – most likely originated in the early ninth century, when the poems of the ‘first skáld’ Bragi Boddason were composed. In the Viking Age, when most of continental Europe had been firmly Christianised, these verses were still permeated with pagan world-views and infused with allusions to mythological themes that made up the fabric of every-day courtly parlance in early medieval Scandinavia.<sup>2</sup> Bragi Boddason himself, a Norwegian celebrating the heroic deeds of his masters – several kings of Sweden – in his verses, is known to us through later writers – primarily Snorri Sturluson –, and may in subsequent generations even have become identified with the Old Norse god of poetry Bragi, son of the supreme god Óðinn, whose name was etymologically linked to an Old Norse word for poetry, *bragr*.<sup>3</sup>

Skaldic poetry was characteristically composed in the alliterative *dróttkvætt* meter, marked by its immense complexity and rigidity which laid great demands on the creative inventivity of the skaldic poets. Showing off their poetic skills, these self-confident poets did not wish to remain anonymous, but rather sought to spread their fame by attaching their names to their sophisticated verses. Thematically, this genre was primarily concerned with the glorification of heroic deeds in battle – either by their masters’ or the skáld’s own hands – and slandering rivals as artistically as possible. To the untrained reader, much of the contents is obscured by the frequently used *kennings*, or fixed metaphors, which are impossible to comprehend if one is unfamiliar with the mythological figures or Old Norse customs they refer to. In order to understand what is meant by the expression ‘daughters of Ægir’, one has to know that Ægir was the god of the seas, and the waves were, in the language of the poets, commonly likened to his tempestuous daughters. The exact meaning of many of these kennings deludes us due to our fragmented knowledge of Old Norse mythology. Kennings were often instrumentalizations of mythological themes for artistic purposes, which appealed to the listeners’ intellectual capacities. The poets most proficient in these poetic games received gold and honours from their masters, and some of their names would, together with fragments of their work, survive in Icelandic manuscripts. The most prolific of all historical skálds was arguably Egill Skallagrímsson, the Icelandic warrior-poet from the tenth century

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<sup>1</sup> Böldl (2000) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> See Hendrik Albertus Molenaar, *Oðinns gift. Betekenis en werking van de Skandinavische mythologie* (Leiden 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Bragi is married to Iðunn, goddess of eternal youth. See *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* of the *Prose Edda*, and *Lokasenna* and *Sigrdrífumál* of the *Poetic Edda*.

devoted to Óðinn, whose saga (presumably written by Snorri Sturluson) is today amongst the most beloved and most read of all Icelandic sagas.

Not only in their kennings do skaldic poems reveal information on Old Norse world-views and mythology. In their preference for martial subjects and violent themes, the skálds often offered elaborate descriptions of the weaponry of their poems' protagonists, not least of their shields, which often carried elaborate paintings of mythological scenes. In Bragi Boddason's poem *Ragnarsdrápa* for instance, known to us due to its fragmental preservation in Snorri's *Edda*, the poet describes the decorations on a shield he had received as a gift, which include Þórr's attempt to catch the Midgard Serpent (*Jörmungandr*), the perpetual battle between Högni and Heðinn, and Gefjun's ploughing of Zealand from Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Although these minute descriptions may be somewhat exaggerated as far as the actual appearance of the shields is concerned, they do stand out as some of the most authentic accounts of Old Norse mythological world-views available to us. It was from verses like these that later medieval writers drew their inspiration and knowledge of their ancestors' ancient pantheon.

More explicitly mythological in nature is the genre generally known as 'Eddic' (or 'Eddaic') poetry, named after the medieval compilation of poems known as the *Poetic Edda*. Contrary to skaldic poetry, eddic verse is characterised by a relatively simple metre and style, and its composers are generally unknown to us. It is alliterative and stanzaic, and composed mostly (but not exclusively) in the so-called *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre'), which would later be revived in the poetry of nineteenth-century Romanticism as the Icelandic metre *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup> Whereas skaldic poetry can be related to historical events and personalities (the glorified nobleman or king, or the skáld himself), eddic poetry is concerned with the dealings of mythical creatures (giants, gods) and legendary heroes from a very distant prehistoric past, taking place in equally murky, unspecified lands. This renders eddic poetry virtually undatable, although scholarly attempts to somehow pinpoint the verses in historical time and space are as myriad as they are controversial.<sup>3</sup> It is exactly this great uncertainty that has facilitated the prominence of national sentiments in modern philological debates on the origins of eddic literature, as will be demonstrated in the central chapters of this study.

The *Poetic Edda* (Icelandic: *Eddukvæði*), also referred to as the *Elder Edda* or (misleadingly) *Sæmundar Edda* ('the *Edda* of Sæmundr'), has been preserved primarily in the *Codex Regius* manuscript (Icelandic: *Konungsbók*), which presumably dates from the 1270s. Even though the existence of this compilation of ancient poetry was suspected on the basis of quotations in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, no one was aware of its whereabouts until 1643, when the *Codex Regius* was discovered by Brynjólfur Sveinsson (1605-1675), the Lutheran bishop of Skálholt. He immediately attributed it to the famous Icelandic scholar Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056-1133), or Sæmundr *fróði* ('the Learned'), of whom no works have survived but whose reputation as one of the greatest minds ever to have lived on the island had persevered. Although this attribution has been disproved by modern philologists, the collection has been referred to as the *Sæmundar Edda* until fairly recent times. Interestingly, the manuscript itself did not carry the name *Edda* at all. The word poses an etymological challenge and appears in the manuscript on only one occasion, in the meaning of 'great-grandmother' (*Rígsþula*, verse 2). Alternative explanations have suggested an Old Norse word for poetry or 'wits' (*óðr*), Sanskrit *Veda*, and the Icelandic place name 'Oddi'<sup>4</sup> as

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<sup>1</sup> See *Hymiskviða* (*Poetic Edda*), *Skáldskaparmál* and *Gylfaginning* (both from the *Prose Edda*) respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 4.1.1.

<sup>3</sup> Kristjánsson (2007) pp.26-30; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Eddukvæði* (Reykjavík 1999) pp.xv-xxiii.

<sup>4</sup> This was an important centre of learning in the Middle Ages, where Sæmundr fróði had lived and Snorri Sturluson received his education. This theory was popularised by Eiríkr Magnússon in 1895. See Anatoly Liberman, "Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies", in *Alvíssmál* 6 (1996) pp.63-98.

plausible origins of the mysterious word. The generally accepted view is however, that the term derived from the Latin *edo* ('I edit', 'I compose'), analogous to the derivation of Old Norse *kredda* ('superstition') from Latin *credo* ('creed').<sup>1</sup> *Edda* first appeared as the title of Snorri's *Prose Edda* in the Uppsala Manuscript from around 1300, which simply states: "This book is called Edda. Snorri Sturluson composed it."<sup>2</sup> Since the newly rediscovered *Poetic Edda* was conceived as Snorri's original source of inspiration, it too became known as *Edda*; the 'Elder' one, in this case.

The works included in the *Poetic Edda* can be divided into two categories: mythological poems and heroic lays.<sup>3</sup> The consensus among scholars is that these verses were composed by many different poets, spanning the period between roughly the second half of the ninth century AD and ca. 1100, or maybe even well into the thirteenth century. Many of them were transmitted orally for centuries, in the form of songs or even more elaborate theatrical performances.<sup>4</sup> Related to the problem of dating the poems, is that of locating their creation geographically. For obvious reasons, material predating the second half of the ninth century cannot have been composed on Iceland, which was still uninhabited at that time. The heroic lays (*hetjukvæði*) which make up the second half of the anthology reveal strong connections to the epic narrative traditions of continental (Germanic) Europe, recounting the fates of mortal heroes like Sigurðr *Fáfnisbani* ('Slayer of Fáfnir'; the Siegfried of the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*) and Jörmunrekkr, King of the Goths. The histories of the *Völsungar* and the Burgundian *Niflungar*, including the dealings of king Atli (Attila the Hun), are primarily based on historical events unfolding in the Migration Period (ca.400-700 AD), but have undergone a process of mythologisation in their Old Norse renderings. Even though they are not as explicitly mythological in contents as the preceding mythological poems, the heroic lays are populated by gods and Valkyries, contrary to their continental counterparts like the *Nibelungenlied*.

The mythological poems (*goðakvæði*) of the *Poetic Edda* are very different in character, and are not concerned with the fates of mortal men and women. They do not consist of prayers or devotional texts directed to the gods, and are in some cases even blatantly insulting in their treatment of the *Æsir* and *Vanir*.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, the thirteen verses generally included in modern editions of the Poetic Edda present the dealings and genealogies of gods and other mythical creatures (like dwarfs and giants) in a detached fashion, providing us with some (contested) insights into the complex world-views of the pagan North. Among the most revealing poems in this respect are the *Völuspá* ('The Prophecy of the Seeress') and *Hávamál* ('The Sayings of the High One'), which elaborate on Old Norse outlooks on cosmogony, theogony, and codes of conduct. In the *Hávamál*, the narrator (the 'High One': Óðinn himself) concerns himself with subjects as diverse as the origin of the sacred runes (his gift to mankind after having obtained their wisdom as a result of nine nights hanging from a windy tree in an act of self-sacrifice) to topics as practical and mundane as the negative effects of drinking too much.<sup>6</sup> Together, these stanzas provide the

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Faulkes, *Six Papers on the Prose Edda: Edda* (Viking Society Web Publications, 2007) p.6.

<sup>2</sup> "Bók þessi heitir Edda, hann hefir saman setta Snorri Sturlusonr (...)".

<sup>3</sup> Although the *Codex Regius* offers the most complete rendering of this medieval compilation, not all works generally considered part of the *Poetic Edda* – on the basis of their contents and style – are included in its 45 vellum pages. These can be found in other medieval Icelandic manuscripts, such as *Flateyjarbók* (ca.1387-1394) and *Hauksbók* (ca.1302-1310) among others, and are equally referred to as 'eddic poetry'. On later (early modern) additions to the eddic corpus, see Chapter 2.2.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry", in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden-Oxford-Victoria 2005) pp.82-100, 95-97.

<sup>5</sup> The two families of gods and goddesses that make up the Old Norse pantheon. See e.g. *Lokasenna* ('Loki's Flyting').

<sup>6</sup> *Hávamál*, stanzas 138-139 and 11-14 respectively.

modern reader with an all-encompassing world-view and an outlook on life and death that has very practical consequences for our conduct in this life:

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
the self must also die;  
I know one thing which never dies:  
the reputation of each dead man.<sup>1</sup>

Less pragmatic in its outlook is the chronological account of the ‘Seeress’ or ‘Sybil’ (*völva* or *vala* in Icelandic) of the *Völuspá*, spanning the entire history of the universe and the nine worlds that make up the world-ash (*Yggdrasil*) from their very beginnings in the ‘Yawning Void’ (*Ginnungagap*) to their future demise in the cataclysmic events collectively known as *Ragnarök* (‘Fate of the Gods’), after which a new world will arise. The soteriological dimension of this work has raised serious questions concerning the authenticity of its ‘pagan’ or pre-Christian contents.<sup>2</sup> The centuries in which most of the Eddic poems are thought to have been composed were a period of cultural transition in Northern Europe, in which syncretic processes may have facilitated the incorporation of Christian concepts into the Old Norse world-view. Obvious examples of this cultural transfer are the idea of an apocalyptic end-time (*Ragnarök*; a concept otherwise rarely encountered in non-Abrahamic faith-systems) and *Askr* and *Embla*; the first human couple created by Óðinn and his brothers *Vili* and *Vé*, and indisputably modelled after the example of Adam and Eve.<sup>3</sup> In the *Hauksbók* version of the poem, the Seeress even refers to a ‘great godhead’ (*hinn ríki*), coming from above to govern the utopian new world that will rise from the waters of destruction after *Ragnarök*.<sup>4</sup>

The ongoing debate on the actual ‘paganness’ of Eddic poetry is heavily polarised, and gravitates between the minimisation and amplification (occasionally *ad absurdum*) of Christian influences. Since an analysis of the arguments constituting this debate falls outside the parameters of the present study<sup>5</sup>, I will confine myself to the common-sense observation

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<sup>1</sup> *Hávamál*, stanza 77, in Carolyne Larrington’s translation of the *Poetic Edda* (New York 1999) p.24.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of early *Völuspá* scholarship, see Annette Lassen, “The Early Scholarly Reception of *Völuspá* from Snorri Sturluson to Árni Magnússon”, in idem and Terry Gunnell (eds.), *The Nordic Apocalypse. Approaches to *Völuspá* and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout 2013).

<sup>3</sup> “Wir haben in der nordischen Menschenschöpfung ein lehrreiches Beispiel dafür, wie heimische und fremde Vorstellungen sich miteinander vermischten.” Wolfgang Golther, *Germanische Mythologie* (Essen 2004) p.418. An example of pagan influence on Christian poetry is the Old Norse-Icelandic visionary poem *Sólarljóð* (‘Song of the Sun’, ca.1200), which is composed in the traditional metric style of the *Poetic Edda* and contains words of advice comparable to those of the *Hávamál*, as well as references to eddic themes, but which is undeniably Christian in contents. See for Grímur Thomsen’s ideas on this poem’s syncretic character Chapter 6.1.2.

<sup>4</sup> See stanza 64. It seems logical to identify this ‘great godhead’ with the Christian God, in which case the entire story of *Ragnarök* can be interpreted as an allegorical account of the apocalypse of paganism and the coming of Christianity. However, the absence of this controversial stanza in the *Codex Regius* (and in all other renderings of the *Völuspá*) suggests later implementation, and urges the reader to refrain from bold assertions. See Sigurðsson (1999) pp.3-4. Despite the optimism implied by this prophecy, Helga Kress has made the rather unconvincing claim that the “powerful image of the Sybil sinking into the Earth” at the end of the poem should be interpreted as a symbol of the apocalypse of (pre-Christian) ‘women’s culture’, as a consequence of Christian patriarchy. See Helga Kress, “Searching for Herself: Female Experience and Female Tradition in Icelandic Literature”, in Daisy Neijmann (ed.), *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln 2006) pp.503-551, 509.

<sup>5</sup> Carol J. Clover (*The Medieval Saga*; Ithaca 1982) and Kees Samplonius (“Background and Scope of *Völuspá*”, in Terry Gunnell and Annette Lassen (eds.), *The Nordic Apocalypse. Approaches to *Völuspá* and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout 2013) pp.113-145) may be reckoned among those who emphasise the Christian influence on eddic poetry, whereas Ursula Dronke (*Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*; Aldershot 1996) is generally more sympathetic to the idea of their pagan originality, without of course denying Christian influence altogether.

that the perpetuation of pagan themes in a Christian context is per definition not a static phenomenon, and that a process of cultural assimilation is very likely to have affected the actual contents and style of the texts. The controversial sixty-fourth stanza of *Hauksbók's Völuspá* forms a good (albeit belated) illustration of this broader cultural development, and may be interpreted as an attempt to justify the continuation of pagan narratives in 'Christian manuscripts'.<sup>1</sup> Changing attitudes towards the old gods as a result of Iceland's cultural Christianisation may be held accountable for a wholly new genre of medieval poetry, the *rímur* ('rhymes'), originating in the fourteenth century and frequently ridiculing deities and themes from Eddic and skaldic poetry. This characteristic disrespect towards the gods may have been prefigured in the Eddic corpus itself (e.g. *Lokasenna*), and may even have constituted an element of the pre-Christian world-view: some of Iceland's earliest settlers are related to have disregarded the gods, believing only in their own strength.<sup>2</sup> The roots of the *rímur's* traditional irreverence might therefore very well reach back to the cultural ambivalence and religious plurality of pre-Christian Scandinavia itself.

### 2.1.3 Snorri Sturluson: Building a Norse Olympus

Few medieval Icelanders still figure as prominently in the modern Icelandic imagination as Snorri Sturluson (1179 -1241), arguably the island's most influential writer, chieftain, mythographer, and historian in a turbulent age when the autonomous Icelandic 'Commonwealth' was nearing its dramatic close. His fame should be attributed primarily to his literary heritage, in which some scholars have discerned the earliest signs of a self-confident 'Nordic cultural identity'.<sup>3</sup> In a recent publication, Tim Machan states that Snorri is of such immense importance both in and beyond Iceland, that he "would have to have been invented if he had not lived."<sup>4</sup> He is the first Icelander known to us by name to write elaborate interpretations of the Old Norse myths and to practice the study of their form and contents.<sup>5</sup> A skáld himself, and highly skilled in the technicalities of Old Norse prosody, Snorri appears to have been genuinely concerned about the declining understanding of the old myths – indispensable in upholding traditional stylistic devices like the *kennings* – among his countrymen. His attempt to preserve this knowledge for future generations resulted in the *Prose Edda* (ca.1220), also known as the *Younger* or *Snorra Edda* ('Snorri's Edda'), which cemented his later reputation as the unrivalled 'Homer of the North'.<sup>6</sup> Although his importance in the transmission of Old Norse mythology remains uncontested, Snorri's agency is occasionally overstated, turning him into the original *inventor* of Old Norse mythology rather than its creative chronicler.<sup>7</sup> Exactly *how* Snorri transformed the stories he confided to vellum remains a matter of debate, analogous to the one concerning the 'paganness' of the

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Annette Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament. En teksthistorisk studie* (Copenhagen 2011) pp.318-377.

<sup>2</sup> Aðalsteinsson (1999) p.26.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Arnold, *Thor. Myth to Marvel* (London – New York 2011) p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Tim William Machan, "Snorri's Edda, Mythology, and Anglo-Saxon Studies", in *Modern Philology* 113 (2016) pp.295-309, 309.

<sup>5</sup> For a structural, comparative analysis of Snorri's mythography and that of Finnur Magnússon, see Chapter 3.4.6.

<sup>6</sup> This reputation is not confined to the borders of Iceland; see the recent German translation (by Regina Jucknies) of Óskar Guðmundsson's biography (Reykjavík 2009), *Snorri Sturluson. Homer des Nordens* (Cologne – Weimar – Vienna 2011).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Nancy Marie Brown's popular study *Song of the Vikings. Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths* (Basingstoke 2012), which suggests an image of Snorri as the source of everything eddic.



*Poetic Edda*.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present study, it suffices to establish that his larger-than-life reputation as the preserver and defender of ‘authentic’ Old Norse culture made him a beloved subject for later generations of Icelandic poets and nationalists, seeking to attach eddic themes to the very land and history of Iceland itself through this historical figure.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Snorri Sturluson, one wonders whether an investigation into his remarkably well-recorded life story can reveal anything at all about the writings he left to posterity. The incongruence between Snorri the scrupulous politician and Snorri the literary virtuoso, has eluded many of his later commentators and led Sigurður Nordal to the assertion that Snorri’s literary achievements should be interpreted not in *correlation with*, but rather as an aesthetic *compensation for* his ruthless political and private life.<sup>3</sup> This paradoxical figure was born at Hvammr in 1179, into one of Iceland’s most powerful families, after which the turbulent mid-thirteenth century would become known as the *Sturlungaöld* (‘Age of the Sturlungs’, ca.1220-1264).<sup>4</sup> He received his education in Oddi, a respected centre of learning in medieval Iceland – associated with the great sage Sæmundr the Wise (*fróði*) –, after his father Sturla Þórðarson<sup>5</sup> laid the care for his young son’s upbringing in the hands of Jón Loftsson, who resided there. His rise to political prominence commenced when he inherited the estate of Borg á Mýrum as well as a chieftainship (*goðorð*) after the death of his father-in-law. His shrewdness in political matters gained him a significant accumulation of subsequent estates and chieftainships, and in 1206 he moved to the settlement of Reykholt, where he would stay for the remainder of his life, fathering children with several women. Under his aegis, this settlement would develop into a prominent centre of learning in Iceland, where a vast collection of classical and medieval texts was accumulated.<sup>6</sup> Between 1215 and 1218, and again from 1222 to 1231, Snorri held the office of *lögsögumaður* (‘lawspeaker’: the highest legal office in the Alþingi), partially due to his fame as a poet.

During his time in mainland Scandinavia, he became involved in Norwegian politics, which led to the composition of his ‘History of the Kings of Norway’, or *Heimskringla* (‘The Circle of the World’, ca.1230), reaching back to mythical prehistory (*Ynglinga saga*) and containing the famous saga of Saint Óláfr. However, the political climate in Norway turned explosive as conflicts between King Hákon IV (Hákonarson)<sup>7</sup> and the powerful *Jarl* (‘Earl’) and co-regent Skúli Bárðarson escalated into civil war. The King’s growing disappointment in Snorri’s failing attempts to establish a Norwegian political powerbase on Iceland, contributed to his distrust towards the skáld, who was now residing at Skúli’s court. When news of the battle of Örlygsstaðir (1238; one of the bloodiest battles ever waged on Icelandic soil) reached Snorri in Norway, his request to return home was bluntly denied by a suspicious

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise analysis of Snorri’s sources and his treatment thereof, as well as the influence of Honorius’s *Elucidarius* on the didactic structure of the *Prose Edda*, see Rudolf Simek, “The use and abuse of Old Norse religion. Its beginnings in high medieval Iceland”, in Andréén and Jennbert (2006) pp.377-380.

<sup>2</sup> On Snorri’s cultural afterlife, see especially Chapter 8.1.2, as well as my forthcoming publication “Hero or Traitor? The Cultural Canonisation of Snorri Sturluson in Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Beyond”, in Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason (eds.), *Great Immortality: Studies on European Cultural Sainthood* (Leiden, forthcoming). See also Helgason (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík 1973). This controversial view is contested in Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda. The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto – Buffalo – London 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The events of this age, as well as Snorri’s life, are chronicled in the collection of sagas known as the *Sturlunga saga*, written by various authors in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – compiled around 1300 – the best known of whom was Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284), Snorri’s own nephew and pupil.

<sup>5</sup> Not to be confused with his more famous namesake and grandson, the author Sturla Þórðarson.

<sup>6</sup> On the role of Reykholt in the ‘Nordic Renaissance’ of the thirteenth century, see Bergsveinn Birgisson (ed.), *Den norröna renässansen. Reykholt, Norden och Europa 1150-1300* (Reykholt 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this study, I will maintain the Old Norse versions of historical personal names, instead of using their modern Scandinavian equivalents (e.g. ‘Håkon’, in contemporary Norwegian).

Hákon. However, Jarl Skúli did give him permission to leave and even organised his passage to Iceland, in violation of the King's explicit orders. After Snorri's return to his by this time politically heavily divided island, Hákon defeated and killed Skúli (1240) and eventually ordered Snorri's political rivals in Iceland to prepare his assassination. In the autumn of 1241, Snorri's home in Reykholt was surrounded by a band of about seventy men, who found their way into Snorri's cellar where the skáld was hiding. Tragically, Snorri was completely taken by surprise, as he had not been able to decipher a secret warning he had received, written in the runic alphabet. His rather unheroic last words are reported to have been "Eigi skal höggva!" ('Do not strike!'), after which he was struck. His defiant actions had not only sealed his own fate, but that of the Icelandic Commonwealth as well; his controversial return to Iceland (marking the beginning of the *Sturlungaöld*) set in motion a vicious cycle of political conflict that continued after Snorri's death and would eventually lead to Iceland's loss of independence and submission to the Norwegian crown in 1262-4.<sup>1</sup>

Taking into consideration the full breadth of Snorri's political career, it is difficult to imagine how this man could have simultaneously created the most impressive literary oeuvre of medieval Scandinavia. However, determining what this oeuvre consists of exactly remains a matter of lively debate; many of his main works were only first attributed to him centuries after his death, and on the basis of rather scanty assumptions. The oldest surviving manuscript of the *Prose Edda* dates from ca. 1300, roughly a generation after Snorri's death, and only one manuscript (*Uppsalaþók*) actually attributes the entire work to him in a blunt statement: "This book is called Edda, it has been compiled by Snorri Sturluson". The *Prose Edda* consists of four separate sections, the last one of which (*Háttatal*; List of verse forms) constitutes arguably the least contested attribution to Snorri, since it elaborately praises both King Hákon and Earl Skúli. But none of the extant manuscripts, other than *Uppsalaþók*, connects any section of the work to the name of Snorri – or to anyone else for that matter –, which may make it problematic to refer to the work as *Snorra Edda* (Snorri's Edda).<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, most scholars seem to take the attribution in *Uppsalaþók* seriously, and since a critical assessment of the medieval sources themselves does not fit the scope of the present study, I will follow the general consensus on Snorri's authorship. Firmly rooted in the skaldic tradition, he eloquently demonstrates his knowledge of the Old Norse myths in the *Ynglinga saga* – the first section of the *Heimskringla*, in which the origin of the Norwegian (and Swedish) royal house is traced back to the Æsir themselves – and, most prominently, in his *Prose Edda*. This work consists a prologue (*Formáli*), *Gylfaginning* ('The Tricking of Gylfi'; see fig. 1<sup>3</sup>), *Skáldskaparmál* ('The Language of Poetry'), and the aforementioned highly technical treatise *Háttatal*. As a whole, the book was intended as a textbook for aspiring new poets, who had to learn not only about the old gods – in order to understand and apply the kennings – but also about the prosodic techniques and verse-forms of their skaldic predecessors. Beyond these obvious didactic functions, Snorri's presentation of Old Norse mythology is believed to have served several higher cultural purposes as well. This becomes obvious in his elaborate introduction to the material, in which he introduced the idea of *euhemerism*; the theory that interprets myths as reflections of historical events, and their gods as deified versions of historical persons.<sup>4</sup> In his interpretation, the Æsir – etymologically

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<sup>1</sup> In 1397, sovereignty over the island moved to Denmark, where it would remain until the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> As to his other great masterwork – and the cornerstone of his fame in Norway –, *Heimskringla*, things become even more murky; there appears to be no medieval attribution to Snorri whatsoever, and the idea of Snorri as its author seems to originate from the introduction to a Danish translation of several of the Kings' sagas dating from 1551.

<sup>3</sup> All images referred to in the text can be found in the section *Images*, after the Concluding Remarks.

<sup>4</sup> This method of rational interpretation is named after the Greek mythographer Euhemerus (fourth century B.C.), who first explained the origin of myth in this fashion at the court of king Cassander of Macedon.

derived from ‘Asia’ – were no divine beings, but rather a successful dynasty of chieftains and kings, descending from King Priam of Troy, who reigned during the Trojan War of Homeric epic. Priam’s daughter Tróán brought forth a son called Trór (Thor/Pórr) who was raised in Thrace and married Sibil (Sif). They initiated a biblically styled genealogy of northwards-wandering heroes, culminating after a long sequence of names in Vóden (Óðinn), who reached *Saxland* (Germany), where his son Vegdeg (Baldr) founded the royal lineage of the Franks and their relatives the Völsungs. Vóden moved on to Denmark, where he founded the Skjöldung dynasty of Denmark, and then further to Sweden and Norway, providing each of them with an ‘Asian’ royal family of their own. His Swedish descendants were called the Ynglings, after Vóden’s son Yngvi – associated with the god Freyr – and their story forms the starting point of his *Heimskringla*. Everywhere the Æsir went, they were glorified by the local inhabitants, which eventually led their deification over the course of generations. This deification of mortal men and women may have been wrong from the perspective of medieval Christianity, but the myths that had evolved around their earthly deeds contained a kernel of historical truth, providing evidence for the heroic and dignified origins of the Nordic nations in ancient Troy.

Snorri’s euhemerism, the first recorded attempt to rationalise eddic mythology, can be said to have served a twofold purpose. By connecting the old gods of the North to the heroes of Troy, the eddic tradition was normalised and embedded in the broader framework of mainstream European classical and Christian culture.<sup>1</sup> This emancipation of Old Norse narrative entailed the cultural promotion of Scandinavia’s rulers in Snorri’s own age, who could now fashion themselves as the descendants of Trojan heroes, not unlike the Romans had done through Virgil’s *Aeneid*.<sup>2</sup> This ‘contrastive association’ (Anne Holtmark; see Chapter 1.1) with Greek antiquity enabled northern scholars and poets to hold on to their Old Norse literary traditions, without alienating themselves from the normative hegemonic model of Western/Christian identity. Furthermore, by denying the divinity of the eddic gods euhemeristically, Snorri protected himself in advance against possible orthodox Christian allegations concerning the pagan contents of his work. It served as a form of intellectual justification, after which the Christian reader could continue reading the myths of the pre-Christian North without any further scruples.<sup>3</sup> Anthony Faulkes has argued that Snorri’s attitude towards the pagan myths was characterised by an “almost humanistic detachment” and a profound “respect for antiquity”; things that “make him in fact much more like the Latin mythographers of the Middle Ages.”<sup>4</sup> It was this same detached ‘respect for antiquity’ that had inspired Icelandic poets of the twelfth century to:

... make unrestrained use of “pagan” kennings. This must be the result of antiquarian interests: the oldest known poets were taken as models. Christianity was firmly established and uttering names of heathen gods was not going to imperil one’s immortal soul.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the correlation between Snorri’s *Edda* and European literature, see Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (ed.), *Snorres Edda i europeisk og islandsk kultur* (Reykholt 2009). Interestingly, Snorri’s attempt to normalise Nordic culture with his *Edda* would be largely ignored by Icelandic nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who fostered the image of eddic literature setting Iceland *apart* from mainstream European culture, accentuating its specificity.

<sup>2</sup> Snorri was not the first North-European to instrumentalise the old gods in this manner; his genealogies are obviously inspired by Anglo-Saxon precursors, as preserved in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Faulkes, “Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to Snorra Edda”, in R.J. Glendinning and Heraldur Bessason (eds.), *Edda: a Collection of Essays* (Winnipeg 1985) pp.283-314, 284-285.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Faulkes, *Edda: Prologue and “Gylfaginning”* (Oxford 1982) p.xxii. See also Machan (2016) p.306.

<sup>5</sup> Kristjánsson (2007) p.109.

Here we have a clear example of the secular functionalisation of myth, that Johan Huizinga associated with the process of *in-* and *exclusion*, practised by limited groups that understand the myths’ “language, or at least knows it, they form a closed culture group of a very ancient type” (see Chapter 1.1). The *Prose Edda* and Snorri’s attitude towards the myths should be interpreted in this light; they may no longer have been of any religious significance, but they still functioned as “cognitive tools to think and live by”.<sup>1</sup> Snorri’s pagan sympathies may have been linked to his admiration for the freedom-loving Norwegian yeomen – from whom the Icelanders descended –, who were prone to hold on to their ancestral ways when Christianity was, as an instrument of political and spiritual control, brutally imposed upon them by royal decree.<sup>2</sup> Rather than mistaking Snorri for a covert pagan, we should consider his relationship with the pagan world-view not from a religious, but rather from a political – that is: Icelandic, anti-royalist – perspective.

Exactly how much poetic liberty Snorri allowed for himself in the application of these cognitive tools remains a matter of debate; especially the elements in his *Edda* that are not attested in any other source – such as the primeval cow *Auðumbla* for instance, central to Snorri’s rendition of the creation myth (see Chapter 3.4.4) – have given rise to the idea of Snorri as a *myth-maker*, a Tolkien *avant la lettre*, rather than a detached, uninvolved, and accurate transmitter of ancient stories.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 1.1, I have demonstrated that the distinction between *authentic* and *applied* mythology is, to a large extent, an artificial one. Hence, it is problematic to consider the *Prose Edda* more authentic than later creative renditions of Norse mythology – as for instance Benedikt Gröndal’s take on the god Óðr (see Chapter 6.3.4) –, only because it was written before 1400. Snorri was just as much a *bricoleur* (see Chapter 1.1) as most mythographers before and after him, and his *Edda* is first and foremost a *bricolage*; an early expression of those same ‘eddic politics’ that form the central theme of the present study. And of course, the myths are subject to change in the process.<sup>4</sup> Snorri’s *Edda* should be seen as a thirteenth-century, anachronistic attempt to construct a monolithic and carefully structured ‘Norse Olympus’ (Gabriel Turville-Petre)<sup>5</sup>; a rationalised, coherent presentation of a neatly structured universe, in which humans, gods, dwarfs and elves each occupy their own clearly defined niche. Snorri’s imposed uniformity has greatly influenced later conceptions of, and approaches to Old Norse religion to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

The study of the instrumental value or cultural functions of Snorri’s *Edda* has in recent years become one of the focal points of eddic philology. Kevin J. Wanner has analysed the *Prose Edda* through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and concluded that Snorri mobilised his learning and literary abilities in the context of his political ambitions – which would nullify Sigurður Nordal’s uneasy and anachronistic antithesis between the political and the literary Snorri –, thus maximally ‘capitalising’ on his privileged position as an Oddi-trained Icelandic intellectual.<sup>7</sup> Skaldic poetry was predominantly practiced by

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* vol. 2: *The Reception of Norse Myths in Iceland* (Odense 1998) p.23.

<sup>2</sup> On this politically inspired pagan sympathy, see especially Kristjánsson (2007) pp.172-3. On the trope of the ‘noble heathen’, see also Chapter 8.1.1.

<sup>3</sup> In his intertextual analysis of *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*, Bruce Lincoln interprets *Auðumbla* as a product of Snorri’s own imagination, and containing a subversive, anti-Norwegian message, reserved for a select group of people in the position to actually connect this myth to the saga of Hálfðan the Black in *Heimskringla*. See Lincoln (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Machan (2016) p.306.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London 1964) p.23.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy (2017) p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Wanner (2008).

Icelanders, but served as a marker of status and distinction at the courts of all of mainland Scandinavia, making it relatively easy for talented Icelanders – who had more or less monopolised this popular cultural export – to achieve success anywhere in the Nordic world. In Itamar Even-Zohar’s model of culture (outlined in Chapter 1.1), their presence at the royal court of Norway represent both aspects of culture simultaneously; they were ‘culture-as-goods’ (“a set and stock of evaluable goods, the possession of which signifies wealth, high status, and prestige”) in that their very presence enhances the king’s status, as well as ‘culture-as-tools’ (“a set of operating tools for the organization of life, on both the collective and the individual levels”), since their cultural production could be used to establish the king’s reputation.<sup>1</sup>

As Wanner convincingly demonstrates, Snorri’s direct motivation for composing his *Edda* was the decline of interest and demand for traditional skaldic poetry in the thirteenth century: King Hákon himself was a fervent admirer of secular French literature in translation, who never seems to have demonstrated a great fondness of the Old Norse tradition. In order to obtain the king’s interest, Snorri glorified both him and Jarl Skúli in his sophisticated demonstration of skaldic verse forms (*Háttatal*). The *Prose Edda* can therefore be considered a very calculated attempt to safeguard Iceland’s (and Snorri’s) cultural capital and privileged position in Northern Europe.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Snorri outsmarted oblivion, and rendered a corpus of narratives and poetic forms, at risk of being forgotten, ‘time-resistant’.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of social status in Snorri’s political and literary endeavours is also reflected in the skáld’s choice of subjects and themes, which renders an image of Old Norse mythology that deviates considerably from the actual paganism as practiced by his Icelandic ancestors. The most prominent of these deviations may be the prominence of Óðinn, *hinn hávi* (‘the High One’), whose cult appears to have been relatively insignificant in pagan Iceland.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Óðinn, the god of magic, warfare, runes and wisdom, was popular among the aristocracy of Old Norse society, most of Iceland’s original settlers (*landnámsmenn*) had a more agrarian background and hence preferred more pragmatic gods that were concerned with fertility (Freyr/Freyja) and weather conditions (Þórr). This can be deduced from the fact that there are no Icelandic place names referring to Óðinn –whereas the names Þórr and Freyr occur frequently in Icelandic toponymy<sup>5</sup> –, and that his cult does not loom large in the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and other sources on Iceland’s pre-conversion inhabitants.

However, since Icelandic skálds were employed by royalty and aristocracy in mainland Scandinavia, the contents of their compositions gravitated towards more aristocratic themes and a more prominent position for the ‘Allfather’ (*Alföðr*; Óðinn). The powerful and internationally-orientated Sturlung family seems to have had a special association with the god, maybe primarily in its function as a marker of international aristocracy. Snorri’s booth at

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<sup>1</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “The Role of Literature in the Making of the Nations of Europe”, in *Applied Semiotics* 1:1 (1996) pp.39-59, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Another Bourdieu-inspired analysis of Snorri’s work is provided by Torfi H. Tulinius, “Pierre Bourdieu and Snorri Sturluson. Chieftains, sociology and the development of literature in medieval Iceland?”, in Jørgensen (2009) pp.47-72.

<sup>3</sup> See Jan and Aleida Assmann’s concept of *Zeitresistenz*; Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive”, in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin 2008) pp.97-107, 97. See also Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason, *National Poets, Cultural Saints: Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe* (Leiden-Boston 2017) p.71.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Gunnell, “Hve há var hinn hávi? Hlutverk Óðins í íslensku samfélagi fyrir kristnitöku”, in Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson and Helga Björnsdóttir (eds.), *Þjóðarspejill 2010: Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI (Þjóðfræði)* (Reykjavík 2010a) pp. 294-303.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Turville-Petre, “The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland”, in idem., *Nine Norse Studies* (London 1972) pp.1-19, 8.

Pingvellir was called *Valhöll* ('Valhalla')<sup>1</sup>, and in *Sturlunga saga* we can read how Snorri's father, Sturla Þórðarson, was once assaulted by a woman with a knife who claimed she wanted to make him look more like 'his hero' Óðinn, the one-eyed god.<sup>2</sup> Although no longer a deity to be worshipped, the god still fulfilled a social function as an indicator of high status in Christian medieval Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective it is interesting that one of the only two *Íslendingasögur* in which the cult of Óðinn does figure more prominently, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*<sup>4</sup>, is one of only very few sagas of which we may actually know who wrote it; although not uncontested, there is general consensus that it was authored by Snorri Sturluson, himself a descendant of its extraordinary ruthless protagonist Egill Skallagrímsson (ca. 910-990).<sup>5</sup> The saga follows the lives of the Norwegian Úlfr or Kveldúlfr ('Evening Wolf') and his sons Þórólfr and Skalla-Grímr ('Bald Grímr'). Following a feud with King Haraldr *hárfagri* ('Fairhair'), Kveldúlfr and Skalla-Grímr fled Norway, and headed towards Iceland. Kveldúlfr died during the voyage, but Skalla-Grímr reached the island and settled down in Borg á Mýrum – one of Snorri's many estates a few centuries later – where his son Egill was born and raised. Unlike most Icelanders, Egill and his father were devoted to the cult of Óðinn, and as a warrior-skáld, was well-versed in runic magic and skaldic poetry, Egill maintained a very personal bond with the Allfather. This is expressed most strikingly in his emotional poem *Sonatorrek* ('The Loss of Sons'), which Snorri included in his saga and in which Egill laments the death of his two sons Gunnar and Böðvarr. After having locked himself up in his bed-chamber with the intention to starve himself to death, his daughter convinced him to, instead, express his grief in verses and carve them on a rune-staff. In the poem, Egill struggles to find words capable of expressing his sadness, and turns to the gods in his despair. He would attack the sea-deities Ægir and Rán for taking Böðvarr's life through drowning, if only he were younger and had more followers on his side (stanzas 5-12). Towards the end of the poem, he addresses 'his' god, Óðinn, with whom he had always been on good terms until he took his sons. Nevertheless, the poet realises that the god of poetry had blessed him with the gift of skaldic verse to compensate for his cruelty (stanzas 22-24). On this note, the poem concludes with Egill's reconciliation with his painful fate.<sup>6</sup> *Sonatorrek* constitutes the most personal expression of Old Norse religious sentiment to have survived, thanks to Snorri's preoccupation with his 'Odinic' ancestor. Arguably, *Egils saga* can be interpreted in the light of the Sturlungs' self-styled aristocratic association with the figure of Óðinn.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2.1.4 Other Medieval Sources

Apart from the two Eddas and *Ynglinga saga*, medieval Icelandic literature has brought forth several alternative sources that may offer some clues concerning the nature of Old Norse pagan world-views. In this section, I will offer a very concise outline of pagan themes in the legendary *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of ancient times'), the *Íslendingasögur*, the popular chivalric (*riddarasögur*) and more scholarly works on history (*Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*) and geography. Taken together, these sources reveal an image of Old Norse

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 64 of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*.

<sup>2</sup> *Sturlunga saga*, published by Örnólfur Thorsson et al. (2 vols., Reykjavík 1988) p.91. Sturla only received a cut to his cheek, for which he was compensated by Jón Loftsson who offered to educate and raise Snorri at Oddi.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Lassen (2011b) pp.129-132.

<sup>4</sup> The other one is *Hallfreðar saga*.

<sup>5</sup> Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni. Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.167-218.

<sup>6</sup> On the religious dimensions of this poem, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Religious Ideas in *Sonatorrek*", in *Saga-Book* 25 (1999) pp.159-178.

<sup>7</sup> On Snorri's contested authorship of *Egils saga*, see especially Tulinius (2004).

mythology that deviates profoundly from the one suggested by the creative compilers of the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson.

The heroic *fornaldarsögur*, most of which were confined to vellum in Iceland between ca. 1250 and 1400, differ in character from the better known *Íslendingasögur* in that they do not take place in Iceland, but primarily in mythologised pre-Christian Scandinavian settings, long before the settlement of Iceland. The stories are imbued with mythological characters like giants and elves, which makes it difficult to determine their value as historical sources on ancient Scandinavia. Although generally these sagas are nowadays considered mainly as products of Iceland's late-medieval desire for entertainment, some of them are undoubtedly rooted in ancient narrative traditions of Scandinavia and Germanic Europe. Therefore, the *Völsunga saga* could contribute significantly to our understanding of the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda*, which is gravely affected by the so-called 'great lacuna' of eight missing pages in the *Codex Regius*.<sup>1</sup> These missing verses most likely narrated the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Brynhildr, which has only been preserved in the prose rendering and four poetic stanzas of the *Völsunga saga*, and which would have otherwise been lost. In the *Völsunga saga*, as in other *fornaldarsögur*, the supernatural plays an essential part, making the genre as a whole an interesting showcase of medieval Icelandic attitudes towards pre-Christian deities and beliefs. Not unlike the Eddas, these sagas demonstrate a special (albeit ambivalent) preference for the supreme god Óðinn, who frequently acts as a wise messenger or advisor to the saga's protagonists.<sup>2</sup> However, as a product of late-medieval culture, the genre also displays less reverential images of the god; in *Örvar-Odds saga* he is portrayed as the antagonist of the 'noble heathen' hero, and occasionally he even appears in a demonic guise, as the lord of the underworld (e.g. *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*).<sup>3</sup> Also Snorri's euhemerism left its mark on the Christian treatment of Óðinn as a literary character in the *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>4</sup>

Another genre that surpassed the *Íslendingasögur* in popularity in late-medieval Iceland were the *riddarasögur*, which were either translations of European (predominantly French) romances or indigenous Icelandic creations inspired by these chivalric narratives. Unsurprisingly, Old Norse mythological themes hardly appear in them, due to their setting in non-Scandinavian courtly surroundings. The Icelandic *riddarasögur* only refer to Óðinn twice; once as the name of an antagonist's spear, and once as the teacher of magicians.<sup>5</sup>

More enlightening on the topic of pre-Christian religion on Iceland is the corpus of texts commonly referred to as the *Íslendingasögur*, which contains the stories of the first generations of Icelanders unfolding primarily in the period between ca. 930 and 1056 AD, known simply as the Saga Age (*söguöld*). On the importance of these epic accounts of their ancestors' lives to modern Icelanders, Jónas Kristjánsson wrote revealingly:

They have meant much to Icelanders of later generations, medieval and modern, and they merit all the attention we Icelanders of the present can devote to them. The best of the kings' sagas and of the eddaic poems are also great works of art – and one would not like to have to judge the relative merits of any of this literature – but these are not as close to our hearts as

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<sup>1</sup> The mystery of the missing verses has aroused the imagination of later writers like J.R.R. Tolkien, who 'recomposed' them in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* (first published posthumously in 2009), and the popular Icelandic writer of crime fiction Arnaldur Indriðason, who took the mysterious absence of these eight pages as the starting point for his novel *Konungsbók* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough examination of Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur*, see Gunnhild Røthe, *I Odins tid. Norrøn religion i fornaldersagaene* (Hafersfjord 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp.94-102.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.14-16.

<sup>5</sup> Annette Lassen, "Óðinn in Old Norse Texts other than *The Elder Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, and *Ynglinga saga*", in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005) pp.91-108, 95.

the sagas of Icelanders are: their settings are foreign and their characters alien. We still have the physical background of the *Íslendinga sögur* before our eyes, landscape and place-names are still there. We can even trace our ancestry to the great men of valour and wisdom, though seldom to the scoundrels, who people the sagas.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of the present research, it suffices to point out that the historicity of these sagas, written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but describing events that took place two to three centuries earlier, has been a highly controversial issue throughout the modern history of Icelandic philology.<sup>2</sup> Any statements concerning pagan worship and world-views contained in them should therefore be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism. Nevertheless, some of the sagas provide us with the most vivid and detailed descriptions of pagan practices and rituals, for which there are no solid grounds on which to dismiss them as deliberate medieval fabrications. An interesting example of a saga in which descriptions of pagan practices loom large is *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, the protagonist of which (Hrafnkell) was a devotee of Freyr and hence known as *Freysgoði* ('priest of Freyr'). Although the saga does not contain many allusions to the supernatural itself, it offers elaborate descriptions of Hrafnkell's devotion to the god of prosperity and virility, which he expressed in the building of a large temple and the performance of sacrificial ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> The earnest nature of his dedication comes to light when one of his shepherds (Einarr) turns out to have ridden Hrafnkell's favourite horse, Freyfaxi, in order to fetch some renegade sheep. Since Hrafnkell had dedicated this horse to Freyr and sworn a solemn oath to kill everyone who rode the stallion, he reluctantly executes his shepherd with an axe in order to uphold his loyalty to the god.

Although descriptions like these can contribute to our understanding of pre-conversion Icelandic society, the moral embedded in these narratives is often of a distinctly Christian nature: Hrafnkell, after having endured his fair share of misfortune and humiliation (including the destruction of his cherished temple), loses faith in the gods<sup>4</sup> and instead acknowledges the importance of loyal subordinates, making him a more peaceful and respected man. In the famous *Laxdæla saga*, the epic cycle of violent vengeance and feud does not come to a definitive halt until its main instigator, the beautiful Guðrún, converts to Christianity and becomes Iceland's first nun. Also in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, arguably the most beloved of the *Íslendingasögur*, the message conveyed is undeniably anti-pagan. Its wise protagonist Njáll Þorgeirsson, who after some deliberation decides to convert to the new faith, is juxtaposed to his fair but restless friend Gunnar Hámundarson (of Hlíðarendi), one of Iceland's most celebrated saga heroes, who remains a pagan and suffers a violent death as a result of the fatalistic blood feud his pagan sense of honour obliges him to follow through (see Chapter 4.2.3). The Christian intentions of the anonymous saga authors become most obvious when Christian values and forgiveness enter the narrative, often abruptly ending generations of violence and bringing peace to everyone involved.<sup>5</sup> A good example in case is Síðu-Hallr's grand gesture (as depicted in *Njáls saga*) of forgiving the slayers of his son without demanding the traditional wergild to compensate for his loss. Whereas this behaviour would have been interpreted as moral weakness in Old Norse paganism, the author of *Njáls saga* fashioned it as an act of Christian peacefulness which not only generated great

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<sup>1</sup> Kristjánsson (2007) p.203.

<sup>2</sup> The debate is critically outlined by Jesse L. Byock, "Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas", in Wawn (1994a) pp.163-187.

<sup>3</sup> The religious dimensions of this saga are discussed by Einar Pálsson, *Stefið: heiðinn siður og Hrafnkels saga* (Reykjavík 1988).

<sup>4</sup> 'Atheism', or faith in one's own strength alone, was not an uncommon feature in pre-Christian society. See Aðalsteinsson (1999) p.26.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.61.



astonishment among all those gathered at Þingvellir, but also left Síðu-Hallr with a collected sum of money amounting to four times the usual amount of wergild.<sup>1</sup> The historical correctness of this account is impossible to verify, but the passage is bound to have had a great impact on its readers in medieval Iceland. However, the Christian intonation of the sagas did not prevent their pagan protagonists (like Gunnar) from becoming celebrated folk heroes. These ethically advanced ‘noble heathens’, who in some instances anticipated the arrival of the new faith, form a popular topos in medieval literature and are juxtaposed to unethical pagans – like Egill Skallagrímsson – and even questionable Christians. In this way, the pagan ancestors could be appropriated by a culture that had become Christian, and the negative elements of pre-Christian society could be counterbalanced with positive and heroic characteristics.<sup>2</sup> This ambiguity in Icelandic renderings of the pagan past has characterised the reception of Iceland’s ‘pagan sources’ throughout the centuries.

Like the *Íslendingasögur*, the twelfth century accounts of the settlement of Iceland and the lives of its first inhabitants and their descendants into the twelfth century (*Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*), as well as the history of Icelandic Christianity (*Kristni saga*), give a clear indication of the prominence of Þórr, Freyr, and Njörðr over the supreme god Óðinn in Icelandic paganism.<sup>3</sup> One of the stories contained in *Landnámabók* is that of Ingólfr Arnarson, traditionally considered to be the first permanent settler of Iceland (around ca. 870 AD), who on his way to the island threw his high seat pillars (symbols of his chieftainly status) overboard and vowed to settle down wherever the gods would make them wash ashore. Eventually his slaves, who had been searching the Icelandic coasts for three years, recovered the pillars in a ‘smoky bay’ (*Reykjavík*) that would, many centuries later, become the island’s capital.<sup>4</sup> These works of early historiography offer a rather dispassionate account of pagan practices, including sacrificial ceremonies and pagan oaths sworn on the Alþingi, notably on the gods Freyr, Njörðr and the mysterious ‘almighty god’ (*Hinn almátteki áss*), commonly identified as Þórr.<sup>5</sup>

A rather different image of eddic themes is that rendered by the kings’ sagas (*konungasögur*), in which the missionary activities of the Norwegian monarchs Óláfr Tryggvason (ca. 963-1000) and Saint Óláfr Haraldsson (995-1030) provide the setting for encounters with the pagan world. In these sagas, primarily *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and the separate saga of Saint Óláfr in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, special significance is attributed to Óðinn, who appears in disguise and in devious ways attempts to distract the royal protagonists from their holy mission. In one instance, the god introduces himself as *Gestr* (‘Guest’) and starts an animated conversation with Saint Óláfr on the lives and deeds of former kings. When the guest’s description of the ideal king resembles that of the king of the gods (Óðinn) himself, the saintly king realises who he is dealing with, and wants to hit the evil and unclean spirit on the head with his book of hours.<sup>6</sup> These obvious examples of demonisation are highly functional in this genre, in which the noble intentions of the Christian hero are met with attempted obstructions by a satanic opposition. Óðinn is hence remodelled as the archetypal adversary, the supernatural antagonist; a topos indispensable to

<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.93.

<sup>2</sup> Lars Lönnroth, “The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas”, in *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969) pp.1-29. The same topos has characterised European medieval images of pre-Christian classical heroes, like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

<sup>3</sup> Lassen (2005) pp.92-94.

<sup>4</sup> Since 1957, Reykjavík’s municipal coat of arms (or seal) contains these two pillars, set against a background of waves, in commemoration of the city’s and nation’s ‘founding father’.

<sup>5</sup> Since the term ‘almighty’ is not encountered in any other source on Old Norse paganism, it has been suggested that this is actually a Christian invention, intended as “a noble pagan anticipation of the new religion that was to come.” John Lindow, *Norse Mythology. A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (New York 2002) p.56.

<sup>6</sup> Lassen (2005) pp.96.

any form of (semi-) hagiographical literature. Despite this negative treatment of the god, some of his pagan devotees are described as ethical and noble heathens.<sup>1</sup>

In line with Snorri's rationalising euhemerism, later medieval Icelandic texts have sought to come to terms with eddic themes in a more rational fashion. In an Old Norse 'little compendium' (*Gripla*) from the fifteenth century, the primordial void before the beginning of creation (*Ginnungagap*) is located geographically, somewhere between Greenland and Vínland (the Old Norse name for the area in North America discovered by the Vikings around 1000 AD). According to this text, this area lies, like *Ginnungagap*, between the icy coldness of the north and the warmth of the south, it "flows from the sea called Mare oceanum, and surrounds the whole earth."<sup>2</sup> Similar mythologically inspired geographies would persevere until as late as the seventeenth century, when bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson used the term *Ginnungagap* to refer, most likely, to the Davis Strait. According to Kirsten Hastrup, the concentric cosmology that characterised the pre-Christian world-view, with the world of men (*Miðgarðr*) at its centre continuously under attack from evil forces from 'outside' (*Útgarðr*) and death and fate from 'above' and 'below', did not perish with the coming of Christianity. Also, the image of the universe as a multi-layered creation, the vertical *axis mundi* of the world-ash *Yggdrasill* with its roots in the underworld and the divine realm of the gods in its crest, may have been absorbed by Christian culture to influence Icelandic folklore up until modern times.<sup>3</sup> Parallel and overlapping worlds, inhabited by supernatural creatures like elves and trolls (the giants of eddic mythology), figure prominently in the Icelandic imagination. In the shape of fairy tales and folklore, many superstitions and beliefs of pre-Christian origin may have survived in modified forms, and retained their psychological function as popular systems of sense-making and coping.<sup>4</sup> When Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson began their Grimmian project of collecting these oral traditions in the mid-nineteenth century (see Chapter 5.1), they came across references to astronomical phenomena and movements in the sky fashioned in mythological terms. Even though it is impossible to establish where and when these mythologised observations originated, the mere fact that they were circulating in nineteenth century oral culture can be considered indicative of Iceland's unique mythological heritage.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Late and Post-Medieval Edda-Receptions

### 2.2.1 Icelandic Continuity?

According to Rudolf Simek, scholars "tend to think of Old Norse religion within a time continuum that books everything up to the Reformation, or the end of the Middle Ages anyway, as 'sources' and everything afterwards as 'reception'."<sup>6</sup> This artificial fault line, which renders a distorted image of the medieval sources as 'truly pagan' narratives, looms large in Icelandic historiography and is commonly situated around the year 1400, around which time Iceland's great literary efflorescence came to an end. This symbolic date gained

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Translated in A.M. Reeves, N.L. Beamish and R.B. Anderson, *The Norse Discovery of America* (London – Stockholm 1906) p.238.

<sup>3</sup> Hastrup (1998) p.29. This vertical representation of creation may in part have been influenced by the Christian concept of heaven and hell, with the world in between.

<sup>4</sup> Haukur Ingi Jónasson, *In a Land of a Living God. The Healing Imagination and the Icelandic Heritage* (New York 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary version of this archeoastronomical reading of mythology, see especially Gísli Sigurðsson, "Snorri's Edda: The Sky Described in Mythological Terms", in Timothy R. Tangherlini (ed.), *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Intersections, and Institutions* (Berkeley - Los Angeles 2014) pp.184-198.

<sup>6</sup> Simek (2006) p.377.

official and legal validity in 1941, when the Icelandic parliament – in an attempt to nationalise the nation’s literary heritage – acquired the copyright for all Icelandic texts predating 1400 (see Chapter 7.1.3). Not only Iceland’s literary activity, but its cultural and social life as a whole are generally depicted in terms of degeneration and decline where the taciturn ‘silent centuries’ between 1400 and 1800 are concerned. The glory days of the Commonwealth belonged to the past, and foreign domination restricted the commercial endeavours of the islanders. This painful contrast with the glorious past may have constituted a very palpable element in Icelandic life: “[T]his decline was recognised by people themselves; it was part of the ethnography in the period. The *non-distinctness* of Icelandic society was, so to speak, part of contemporary experience.”<sup>1</sup>

The decline of Iceland’s literary greatness did, however, not entail the retreat of literature and poetry from cultural and everyday life. The old gods and their mythical deeds, as recorded by Snorri Sturluson, remained part and parcel of oral culture and even generated new mythological tales. Bearing in mind the central topic of this study – being the Icelandic ‘reinterpretation’ of eddic material from ca. 1830 onwards –, it is of importance to note that Iceland never had to ‘rediscover’ Old Norse mythology, in contrast to all other nations that would in modern history find inspiration in the Eddas. As emphasised by Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, eddic material “remained an active force in literary criticism and poetic creation throughout the entire period between Snorri and Mallet, although its influence was largely limited to Iceland”.<sup>2</sup> It is this presumed continuity in Iceland’s occupation with its pre-Christian religious heritage that I will briefly assess in this chapter, before considering the (re)discovery of the old gods in the rest of Scandinavia and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The most noteworthy expressions of eddic creativity in early modern Iceland are to be found in the so-called *rímur* (‘rhymes’, singular: *ríma*), a popular genre of long narrative poems, which emerged in the fourteenth century, as the classical skaldic tradition was becoming increasingly incomprehensible and fell out of fashion. The subject matter of these metrically highly complex poems was commonly derived from foreign romance, courtly and epic poetry, the *Íslendingasögur*, and historical or contemporary events in Iceland, like the raid of the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*) by Algerian pirates in 1627 (*Ræningjarímur*). Although eddic themes themselves rarely form the focal point of these versifications, their rich imagery and metaphorical eloquence were kept alive in the *rímur*’s stanzas, since poets used their fixed formulas (kennings) to fit their stories into the rigid metrical templates they had committed themselves to. The few *rímur* cycles that do give elaborate accounts of pre-Christian myths provide us with a good impression of late medieval and early modern Icelandic attitudes towards the old gods. Two of these are *Þrymlur* (fifteenth century), and *Lokrur* (ca.1400), which are retellings of the eddic poem *Þrymskviða* (in which Þórr reclaims his hammer *Mjólnir* from the giant Þrymr) and Þórr’s adventurous expedition to the land of Útgarða-Loki, as narrated in the *Gylfaginning* of Snorri’s Edda, respectively. Although the *rímur*-poets did not alter the basic plot of their eddic sources, they did add extra mythological information to make the stories more internally complete, and in *Þrymlur* many of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hastrup (1990) p.3. Italics added.

<sup>2</sup> Clunies Ross and Lönnroth (1999) p.6. Paul-Henri Mallet’s works on Old Norse history and literature are here presented as the starting point of the European ‘Nordic renaissance’ movement from the 1750s onwards (see Chapter 2.2.2). See also Sverrir Tómasson, “Nýsköpun eða endurtekning? Íslensk skáldmennt og Snorra Edda fram til 1609”, in Tómasson (1996) pp.1-64.

<sup>3</sup> On the problem of continuity in the context of Icelandic saga-reception, see Sigurður Nordal, *Samhengið í íslenskum bókmenntum* (Reykjavík 1924), and Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times”, in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden-Oxford-Victoria 2005) pp.64-81.

mythological motives are exaggerated and presented in an almost ‘burlesque’ vein.<sup>1</sup> The deeper significance of the mythological passages of the *Völsunga saga* is lost in *Völsungs rímur* (fourteenth century), and the overall intonation of the rímur tradition is rather irreverential and even parodical, where the old gods are concerned. Possible precursors of this poetic irreverence can be found in some of the eddic verses, notably *Lokasenna* (*Poetic Edda*) themselves. In none of these mythological rímur “can any religious function be discerned. The old mythological world has been integrated into the world of fantasy.”<sup>2</sup>

More original in its treatment of the eddic sources is a rímur-cycle from the fifteenth century, *Skíðaríma* (‘the ríma of Skíði’), in which the poem’s protagonist Skíði, an ordinary vagabond from Iceland, is in a dream escorted to Valhöll – which is, in accordance with Snorri’s prologue, situated in Asia – by Þórr. The great popularity of this unique story is testified by its frequent appearance in later Icelandic literature.<sup>3</sup> In the poem, Skíði is welcomed by Óðinn and all of the greatest fallen heroes (the *einherjar*) assembled in Valhöll, and asked to settle a dispute between two kings. Even though he does not succeed in this, he is rewarded with the offer to choose a bride from amongst all the women in the great hall. Once he has made his choice and the gods have given their approval, Skíði thoughtlessly makes the Christian sign of the cross, which infuriates the gods. As a result, a battle ensues in Valhöll, in which all the gods and legendary heroes lose their dignity and respectability. In its surreal and comical rendition of the divine, it has even been likened to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which is probably not an unfair comparison.<sup>4</sup> Skíði manages to escape from the godly chaos and wakes up back in Iceland, where the presence of some of the objects he received in Valhöll seems to indicate that the whole story was more than just a dream.

This piece of poetic disrespect for the gods may not be considered a reliable source in the study of pre-Christian religion, but it is quite revealing where Icelandic attitudes towards Old Norse mythology are concerned. Although the old gods had lost their respectability due to their replacement by Christianity, their world still functioned as a source of poetic inspiration for many generations of Icelandic versifiers. A good illustration of this ambivalent position can be found in Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness’s epic novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (‘Independent People’, 1934-35), in which the protagonist Bjartur of Summerhouses, a stubborn farmer and poet of the early twentieth century, composes a poem about a rock, containing an allusion to the ancient *Norns*; female deities who were believed to determine the fate of gods and men. After having listened to it, Bjartur’s son replies that he did not understand the meaning of these mythological beings. This triggers an irritated reaction from the short-tempered farmer: “That’s no concern of yours; they’re only a couple of verses about a rock. I don’t believe in any Norns and never have. [...] But that of course doesn’t prevent me from saying whatever suits me best in poetry.”<sup>5</sup> This clear distinction between religious belief *in*, and literary instrumentalisations *of* mythological persona and themes, as expressed by Bjartur, can be considered essential to the survival of pagan motives into the modern Icelandic imagination. They could therefore remain ‘classical’ in Jan Assman’s definition of the term (see Chapter 1.2.1), despite Snorri’s failure to save the original skaldic tradition from extinction.

<sup>1</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, “Rímur og miðaldarómantík: Um úrvinnslu goðsagnaminna og goðsagnamynstra í íslenskum rómönsum á síðmiðöldum”, in Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (eds.), *Heiðin minni. Greinar um fornar bókmenntir* (Reykjavík 1999) pp.221-240, 239.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Theo Homan, *Skíðaríma* (Amsterdam 1975) p.14.

<sup>4</sup> The comparison was made by Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, a modern Icelandic composer and the current *Allsherjargóði* (High Priest) of the Icelandic *Ásatrú* community (see Chapter 10.4), in Steindór Andersen and Hilmarsson, *Stafnbúi* (Reykjavík 2012) p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Halldór Laxness, *Independent People*, translated by J.A. Thompson (Westport 1976) p.387.

The *rímur* rose to great popularity soon after their first appearance in the late Middle Ages, and would remain uncontested as Iceland's favourite indigenous genre of poetry until the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The most-read poet in Iceland in the time of the Romantic national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson was the *rímur*-versifier Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798-1846), who is probably best known for his *Núma rímur* ('the *rímur* of Núma') on the life and deeds of the legendary second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius. Even though Jónas despised the whole genre and, through his published assaults on Breiðfjörð and the poetic tradition he represented, elevated this aversion to a marker of good taste and literary refinement (see Chapter 4.2.2), some Romantic poets have continued to compose some of their poetry in the ancient *rímur* mould.<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of this study, most of the references to Iceland's longest-standing literary tradition will be in relation to its negative connotations and discarded position ensuing from the nineteenth-century discourse of national renewal.<sup>3</sup>

A new phase in the post-medieval reception of Old Norse mythology was inaugurated by a reworked edition of the *Prose Edda*, written by Magnús Ólafsson, priest of Laufás (1573-1636), which appeared in 1609 and became known as the *Laufás Edda*. He created this innovative edition at the instigation of Iceland's foremost humanistic scholar, Arngrímur Jónsson (1568-1648), who sought to improve the reputation of his homeland and its literary heritage both in Iceland and abroad. Magnús edited Snorri's work to suit the needs of his own age – which means that he left out the technical *Háttatal* almost entirely –, but with similar didactic motives in mind; he reorganised its contents by dividing it into two parts, with the first one containing *Gylfaginning* and the narrative sections of *Skáldskaparmál*, and the second part containing a list of kennings and *heiti* (poetic synonyms) from *Skáldskaparmál*, in alphabetical order. This systematisation facilitated the practical use of the *Laufás Edda* as a handbook for modern *rímur* poets, and may have contributed to the rise of mythological allusions in that genre from the early seventeenth century onwards. In the wake of this influential work, new Edda-manuscripts appeared throughout the following centuries, some of them (notably the *Edda oblonga* (seventeenth century) and the *Melsteðs Edda* (eighteenth century) containing the earliest Icelandic graphic depictions of eddic personages and motives (see fig. 2). Although one might question the aesthetic value of these rather crude drawings, they are of great historical importance, since they represent not only the first, but also the only post-medieval visual representations of this material by Icelandic artists until the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

With the rediscovery of the *Codex Regius* in 1643, the knowledge of Old Norse mythology increased substantially. Editions of the *Poetic* or *Sæmundar Edda*, consisting primarily of these rediscovered poems, also contained (until the late nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>) the poem *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* ('Óðinn's raven-magic'), also known simply as *Forspjallsljóð* ('Prelude poem'), which is not transmitted in the medieval sources. This short but problematic, profoundly mystical piece of eddic poetry was commonly presented as the

<sup>1</sup> The *rímur*-tradition never died out entirely, and would continue to produce extraordinary creations like Þórarinn Eldjárn's *Disneyrímur* (1978), in which Walt Disney's career is represented in all the traditional metrical splendor and archaic complexity characteristic of the genre.

<sup>2</sup> Notably Einar Benediktsson (see Chapter 7.2.2).

<sup>3</sup> Recent years have seen an increase in scholarly and popular interest in the *rímur*, which has resulted in a certain level of cultural emancipation and interesting recording and cataloguing initiatives, like that of *Kvæðamannafélagið* ('the poets' society') *Iðunn*: <http://rimur.is> (last accessed July 2013).

<sup>4</sup> On the visual representations of Old Norse myth in manuscripts and early print sources, see Patricia Ann Baer, *An Old Norse Image Hoard: From the Analog Past to the Digital Present* (Victoria 2013, unpublished PhD thesis).

<sup>5</sup> In his authoritative 1867 edition of the *Poetic Edda* Sophus Bugge dismissed the poem as a later, antiquarian addition to the corpus, after which it stopped being included in the standard editions. See Annette Lassen, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins (Forspjallsljóð)* (London 2011) pp.10-13.

thematic introduction to the poem *Baldrs draumar* ('Baldr's dreams'), and conveys a narrative so bewildering and cryptic in nature, that the seventeenth-century scholar and poet Eiríkur Hallson of Höfði, after ten years of intense scrutiny, had to throw all his writings on the poem away and admit that he "still understood little or nothing of it."<sup>1</sup> The poem recounts an otherwise unknown story, in which Iðunn, goddess of youth, falls from the world-ash (*Yggdrasil*) and receives a wolf skin to wear, after which an alarmed Óðinn instructs three gods (led by Heimdallr) to descend to the underworld in order to retrieve Iðunn and to obtain information on all sorts of cosmological and soteriological matters from a mysterious, unidentified woman. She, however, does not answer their questions but starts to weep instead, whereupon the gods return to *Ásgarðr* (the world of the Æsir-gods) without Iðunn, where they inform the gods and goddesses about their failed mission during a feast. Ever since its supposed exposure as 'unauthentic', postdating the 'original' eddic poems, it has been dated to the fourteenth century, the seventeenth century, and anywhere in between, based on linguistic and metrical analyses. If this late or post-medieval dating of the archaized text – which has been contested by Annette Lassen<sup>2</sup> – is indeed correct, were these discarded verses intended as a hoax, or are they indicative of a different *function* of eddic mythology, beyond that of a static reservoir of poetic archaisms? It is the poem's apparently 'sincere heathen-ness' that has bedazzled scholars and could, temptingly, be interpreted as a marker of its pagan authenticity.<sup>3</sup>

It is at this point that the aforementioned distinction between the pragmatic utilisation of mythological themes and a more metaphysical strand of eddic creativity (see Chapter 1.3) becomes important. Separately from the formal literary traditions scrutinised so far, certain aspects of Old Norse mythology remained, in modified form, essential to the popular imagination and supernatural world-view of common Icelanders well into the early modern age. This is evidenced for instance by references to the old gods in an Icelandic collection of 47 magic spells and curses, *Galdrabók* ('Book of magic'), compiled between the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth century by several compilers. In this and other Icelandic *grimoires*, or manuals for occult practices, entities and formulae from Latin and Judeo-Christian culture are fused with Old Norse runic invocations and indigenous magical staves (*galdrastafir*, or *sigils*, often used to protect, heal or strengthen its carrier), and pre-Christian entities like trolls, *fylgjur* (fetches, or 'followers') and spirits of the land (*vættir*) are presented as real forces to be reckoned with. The role of the gods themselves is ambiguous; Óðinn is referred to as 'Lord of trolls', and Þórr's hammer (*Mjöltnir*) is stylised as a protective sigil in the shape of a swastika.<sup>4</sup> Although officially condemned by the church, these occult practices persevered, and rendered harsh Icelandic life more bearable to their adherents. The actual persecution of those accused of witchcraft or heretical behaviour was not carried out in Iceland until after the Reformation, mainly in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

One of the provocative characters accused of these practices was the rímur-poet, self-taught scholar and artisan Jón lærði ('the Learned') Guðmundsson (1574-1658), whose educated writings on Old Norse mythology transcend the realm of popular superstition, and constitute an interesting attempt to re-signify the ancient narratives metaphysically. Rumoured to have, on one occasion, made a 'Turkish' pirate ship approaching Iceland disappear by uttering a magical poem, his reputation as a *kraptaskáld* ('magic poet') may

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Lassen, "Hrafnagaldur Óðins /Forspjallsljóð: et antikvarisk digt?", in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature* (proceedings of the 13th International Saga Conference, 2006) pp.551–560.

<sup>3</sup> On the problematic interpretation of the 'heathen-ness' of texts in order to date them, see Simek (2006) p.377.

<sup>4</sup> Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson, *Galdrar á Íslandi* (Reykjavík 1992).

<sup>5</sup> On the role of magic (*galdur*) in early modern Icelandic society, see Hastrup (1990) pp.198-212.

have been well-earned.<sup>1</sup> Dissatisfied with the advent of Protestantism, Guðmundsson remained an admirer of Catholicism and fashioned the (in his perception) devastating effects of the Icelandic Reformation in eddic terms in his controversial autobiographical poem *Fjölmóður* ('A man of many moods', 1649), applying the metaphor of *Ragnarök* to the destruction of Catholic life. This poetic and rhetorical actualisation of a mythological theme, by projecting it on an actual historical event, may arguably be considered the first example of its kind in Icelandic literature, and the historical starting point of a long tradition of ideological Edda-reinterpretation, the later expressions of which will be scrutinised in the present study.

After having been convicted of sorcery and consequently outlawed at the Alþingi of 1637, Jón lærði found refuge in the desolation of eastern Iceland under the protection of bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson – the discoverer of the *Codex Regius* –, where he would stay for the remainder of his life. There, he committed himself to the study of pre-Christian religion and the edification of eddic material in the light of his own Christian convictions. At the instigation of the industrious bishop, he wrote his most notable works on the subject, *Samantektir um skilning á Eddu* ('Compilations on understanding the Edda', 1641) and *Að fornu í þeirri gömlu norrænu kölluðust rúnir bæði ristingar og skrifelsi* ('In ancient times in Old Norse runes were called both carvings and writings', ca. 1642), being a copy of the *Prose Edda* with additions and notes, and a commentary on the *Brynhildarljóð* ('Lay of Brynhildur') from the *Völsunga saga* respectively.<sup>2</sup> In these writings, Jón refuted Snorri's euhemerism and the idea that the Æsir hailed from Asia. Instead, he interpreted much of Old Norse mythology as a reversed version, or even a pagan travesty of the Christian faith, which led to a range of remarkable and inventive reinterpretations of eddic themes, providing them with new layers of metaphysical significance. In his reading of the sources, the negatively portrayed fire giant Surtr ('the black one'), described as leading the forces of destruction from his fire world (*Múspellheimr*) during *Ragnarök*, is radically reinterpreted as an angelic messenger, bringing a heavenly light to the world that is too bright for the pagans (the Æsir) to endure. Consequently, Surtr's companions are no longer demons of destruction, but rather angels in disguise.<sup>3</sup> Having thus reversed the entire normative order of the eddic world, the home of the gods, *Ásgarðr*, becomes hell, or a deceitful illusion at best. Parallel to Holy Scripture, the frost giant Ýmir (the first living being, out of whose body parts the gods would construct the world and the skies) is identified with Adam<sup>4</sup>, and the immense bloodstream released from his body when he was slain by Óðinn and his two brothers, and in which almost all of his offspring was drowned, corresponds to Noah's flood. This negative discourse on the gods has profound implications for his interpretation of the post-*Ragnarök* world as described in *Völuspá*, in which a new earth has emerged from the waters and the old gods are replaced by new. At this point, Jón's Christian utopianism prevails, and the new divine halls succeeding those of the old gods are likened to the Heavenly Jerusalem. *Breiðablik*, the splendid hall of the god Baldr which replaces Óðinn's *Valhöll*, is even equated with the very concept of *utopia* (literally: 'no place') itself; a heavenly stead, lit by the moon.<sup>5</sup> In this mystical sublimation of Old Norse mythology, Jón attempts to fuse

<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.201-203.

<sup>2</sup> The most erudite investigation into many aspects of these works has been conducted by Einar G. Pétursson, *Eddurit Jóns Guðmundssonar lærða* (2 vols.; Reykjavík 1998). See also Viðar Hreinsson, *Jón lærði og náttúrunar náttúrunnar* (Reykjavík 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Viðar Hreinsson, "Tvær heimsmyndir á 17. öld. Snorra Edda í túlkun Jóns Guðmundssonar lærða (1574-1658)", in Tómasson (1996) pp.117-163, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Here Jón lærði followed the popular belief that humans were much taller or even giant-like in biblical antiquity. Idem, p.145.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.148.

Christian millennialism and eschatology with eddic narrative, and consequently, to elevate the literary heritage of Iceland beyond the level of mere ‘pagan’ superstition. In this respect, the mythological world-view of the North is in no way inferior to that of the Greeks or the Romans, to which he frequently draws comparisons in order to clarify the taciturn sources. Arguably the first literary example of this Icelandic tendency to affiliate the Eddas with classical mythology is found in the poem *Ýmisríma* (‘Ríma of Ýmir’) by Eiríkur Hallsson (1614-1698), in which the Old Norse cosmogony is presented as a metaphorical reflection on natural phenomena, in which the four dwarfs Austri, Vestri, Norðri and Suðri<sup>1</sup> are rationalised and interpreted as personifications of the four cardinal winds. The emancipatory ‘classicisation’ of the eddic corpus through the application of classical templates of mythography – similar to the Roman and medieval practice of *Interpretatio Romana*<sup>2</sup> – would remain a pivotal aspect of Nordic intellectual discourse well into the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from Jón lærði, another pre-Enlightenment Icelandic commentator of the Eddas worth mentioning in this outline is Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá (1574-1655), who in his *Nokkuð lítið samtak um rúnir* (‘A concise treatise on the runes’) and some commentaries on the *Völuspá* took a less metaphysical stance than the *kraptaskáld* Jón. It is remarkable that none of Iceland’s most prolific scholars of the seventeenth century – notably Arngrímur Jónsson and Árni Magnússon – seem to have concerned themselves with Old Norse mythology in a profound manner. In the eighteenth century, Iceland’s most influential naturalist, poet and scholar Eggert Ólafsson (1726-1768) did much to further the cause of enlightened rationality through his scientific observations and rational accounts of Icelandic nature in his travelogues.<sup>4</sup> In some of his poetic writings, he preferred introducing deities from the classical pantheon rather than those from the Old Norse tradition. This was considered abnormal by most of his Icelandic contemporaries, who would generally have been familiar with the mythological kennings applied in *rímur*-poetry, but not with any foreign mythological system. In an introduction to his collected poems – which appeared posthumously in 1832 – Eggert excuses himself by referring to poets in other countries who also apply ‘kennings and methods of the Romans’ in their own respective languages, but warns Icelandic poets not to follow this example too enthusiastically, for it might affect Iceland’s indigenous poetic tradition.<sup>5</sup>

More relevant to the reception of eddic poetry in Scandinavia was Eggert’s brother, Jón Ólafsson of Svefneyjar (1731-1811), who in 1782 won an essay contest initiated by the University of Copenhagen with a treatise on Old Norse poetry, published in 1786 under the title *Om Nordens gamle Digtekonst, dens Grundregler, Versarter, Sprog og Foredragsmaade* (‘On the old poetry of the North, its basic principles, metres, language and ways of performance’). The importance of this work lies in the fact that it contributed to the revival of eddic metres (notably the *fornyrðislag*, ‘old word metre’) in contemporary Icelandic literature. Unlike Snorri – whose list of Old Norse metres (*Háttatal*) he relies on in his treatise –, Jón Ólafsson preferred eddic verse to skaldic poetry and propagated the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> These are described in *Gylfaginning* of the *Prose Edda* as holding up the firmament (an enormous dome constructed from the giant Ýmir’s skull) at four points, corresponding to the four cardinal points.

<sup>2</sup> Lassen (2011b) pp.92-95.

<sup>3</sup> See Clarence E. Glad, “The Greco-Roman Heritage and Image Construction in Iceland 1830-1918”, in Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011) pp.67-114.

<sup>4</sup> Schaer (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Eggert Ólafsson, *Kvæði Eggerts Ólafssonar. Útgefin eptir þeim beztu handritum er feingizt gátu* (Copenhagen 1832).



its stylistic simplicity indicated its proximity to mankind's most primordial poetic language.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the *fornyrðislag* made its convincing comeback in Icelandic culture, being applied in Jón Þorláksson's translation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's *Messias*, as well as in Benedikt Gröndal Jónsson's translation of Alexander Pope's *The Temple of Fame*. From the seventeenth century onwards, the history of Icelandic Edda-receptions can no longer be considered separately from foreign influences and receptions. As Danish and Swedish interests in Old Norse history and mythology increased, Icelandic philologists could begin contemplating international careers, far beyond the rugged shores of the island that had safeguarded *Scandinavia's* literary treasures for centuries.

### 2.2.2 The Beginnings of an International Career

In the opening paragraph of her historical study into German translations of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Julia Zernack expresses her amazement about the cultural process that jettisoned the medieval heritage of a peripheral subarctic island, to the intellectual centre stage of modern German discourse in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A Canadian journalist expressed a very similar sense of astonishment with the words: "It's the smallest of nations, an island stuck off in the ocean by itself, yet somehow its profile in the world is much larger than its 320,000 population. It's as if Lichtenstein [*sic.*] had muscled itself onto the world stage."<sup>3</sup> Also in the opinion of Tom Shippey, the very successful international career of Iceland's Eddas and sagas can be considered remarkable:

One of the more surprising cultural expansions of the modern era has been the rediscovery of the pre-Christian mythology of the northern world and its associated pantheon: once all but completely forgotten, then known only to a small circle of Scandinavian scholars, now familiar across the Western world, and beyond, in the form of comic books, mass-market films like Kenneth Branagh's *Thor* (2011) and its sequel(s), and fantasy bestsellers like Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001).<sup>4</sup>

How did this come about? What was it, that would eventually render this nearly forgotten cultural heritage of Iceland so attractive to other nations like Germany, the Scandinavian countries, England, and even the United States? In the following, I will provide a concise overview of the 'international career' of Iceland's medieval literature – and the Eddas in particular –, from its origins in seventeenth-century humanism to the early nineteenth century. By no means will this outline be anywhere near exhaustive; it only serves to provide the reader with the necessary background knowledge of what happened when Eddas and sagas were received in new, non-Icelandic cultural contexts. This foreign reception and appropriation of Icelandic literature would, from the early nineteenth century onwards, become an important factor in Icelanders' own reinterpretations of their pagan heritage.

The first accounts of Iceland's Old Norse literature to reach a European audience of significance were provided by Arngrímur Jónsson's humanistic descriptions of Iceland in

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<sup>1</sup> On this work's place in the Icelandic Enlightenment, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, "Varðhaldsenglar Eddu. Eddufræði í skáldskap og bókmenntaumræðu á upplýsingaröld", in Tómasson (1996) pp.221-259.

<sup>2</sup> Zernack (1994) p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Redekop, "Our own Icelandic Saga", in the *Winnipeg Free Press* (20 November 2012), online version: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/ourcityourworld/iceland/our-own-icelandic-saga-180565841.html> (last accessed: 23 December 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Tom Shippey, "Germanic mythology", in Joep Leerssen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (electronic version; Amsterdam: Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, [www.romanticnationalism.net](http://www.romanticnationalism.net)), article version 1.1.1.1/b (last modified 27 January 2016; last accessed 19 January 2017).

Latin, *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* (1593) and *Crymogæa* (1609). In these works, intended to improve Iceland's rather poor reputation among foreign intellectuals, he promoted Icelandic language and culture as ancient and respectable; a treasure trove for all historians working on Nordic history. Arngrímur collected the medieval manuscripts containing the stories and poetry of ancient Scandinavia, and inspired Danish scholars to direct their attention to them. Due to his intellectual endeavours, many of the Icelandic manuscripts were shipped off to Copenhagen, which consequently developed into an intellectual centre for the study of Nordic antiquity. This development was of great importance to Denmark, which was in desperate need of historical precedents for its emerging empire, and for historical proof of superiority over the rivalling Swedes.<sup>1</sup> In the light of these national rivalries, Old Norse-Icelandic evolved – from the 1500s onwards – into a useful tool for fashioning cultural identities:

As to [...] the revival of the ancient and popular culture of the North, there is first of all a dual quality that needs to be underlined. On the one hand, it is used, virtually from the beginning, as an instrument of *nation-building*, i.e. as an inclusive as well as an exclusive measure in an attempt to define the cultural and historical identity of a particular nation. In other words, it is intended to unite the inhabitants within the nation's borders, but at the same time to draw a line against those who are outside these borders.<sup>2</sup>

Arngrímur Jónsson's attempt to emancipate the heritage of his country, and to improve the island's reputation, should be considered in the light of this proto-nationalistic humanism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it was at the instigation of Arngrímur that Magnús Ólafsson's wrote his popular *Laufás Edda*, which would serve as the model for the first ever printed edition of the *Prose Edda* (in Latin): the *Edda Islandorum* (Copenhagen, 1665), to which I will return later.

Inspired by Arngrímur's and Magnús Ólafsson's work, the Danish physician and antiquarian Ole Worm (Latinised form: Olaus Wormius, 1588-1655) began his own enquiries into Northern Europe's earliest literature, and especially the runes. In his monumental collection of 'runic literature', *Runir seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (1636), Worm did not only include actual runic inscriptions from Denmark and beyond, but also Latin translations and 'runic' transcriptions of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, since he believed that *all* ancient Scandinavian literature had originally been written in the runic alphabet.<sup>4</sup> Rooted in the scholarly tradition of Latin humanism, his philological research ventilated the idea that the runes – which he believed were derived from ancient Hebraic script – were essential not only to our understanding of ancient Danish literature, but also of the very origin of language itself. In Worm's conviction, it had been the Danes who carved the first runes, and who created an exceptional civilisation characterised by bravery and heroic fearlessness. These pre-Christian virtues he found embodied in the legendary figure of Ragnarr Loðbrók, whose

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<sup>1</sup> These Humanistic developments have been considered crucial to the development of European nationalism; see Peter Springborg, "Antiqvæ historiæ lepores – om renæssancen i den islandske håndskriftproduktion i 1600-tallet", in *Årsbok för Samfundet Sverige-Island i Lund-Malmö* 8 (1977) pp.53-89, 59-60.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Fjågesund, *The Dream of the North. A Cultural History to 1920* (Amsterdam – New York 2014) p.21 (italics original).

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough analysis of Arngrímur's motives, see Kim P. Middel, "Arngrímur Jónsson and the Mapping of Iceland", in Lotte Jensen (ed.), *The Roots of Nationalism. National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815* (Amsterdam 2016) pp.109-133.

<sup>4</sup> This assertion should be considered in the light of Europe's contemporary obsession with the mystical Egyptian hieroglyphs, which remained undeciphered and were believed to contain higher esoteric knowledge. By stressing the importance of the equally mysterious runes, Worm could emphasise the sophistication and deep wisdom of Old Norse (Danish) culture. See Mats Malm, "The Nordic demand for Medieval Icelandic manuscripts", in Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (ed.), *The Manuscripts of Iceland* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.101-107, 102.

violent death in a pit of snakes and transition to Valhöll are described in the heroic poem *Krákumál* ('the Lay of Kráka'), which Magnús Ólafsson had brought to Worm's attention.<sup>1</sup> The image of this hero surrounded by Óðinn's Valkyries, drinking from the skulls of his slain enemies<sup>2</sup> and stoically declaring that he would die laughing, would determine popular conceptions of Old Norse antiquity for centuries.

The Danish scholar Thomas Bartholin the Younger (1659-1690) would further elaborate on the topos of the 'Noble Heathen' initiated by Worm, in his influential work *Antiquitatum Danicarum de Causis Contemptae a Danis adhuc Gentilibus Mortis* ('Danish Antiquities concerning the Reasons for the Danes' Disdain for Death', 1689). As the title suggests, Bartholin emphasised the macho image of fearless Vikings in order to emancipate Nordic culture vis-à-vis the classical South. Instead of confining himself to Old Norse accounts (like *Krákumál*) he looked for evidence in Roman descriptions of the northern peoples as well. Although the Roman poet Lucan had ridiculed the belief system of the Celts and Germans, Bartholin believed that his writings evidenced the heroic character of the Scandinavians, who echoed the example of their feasting gods in their love for drinking bouts in this life.<sup>3</sup> By consequently referring to the heroic ancestors of all Scandinavians as Danes, Bartholin very consciously monopolised and appropriated all of Old Norse legacy for Denmark, effectively neglecting the contribution of other Scandinavians to the glorious past of the North. There can be little doubt that this thinly veiled political message was directed towards Denmark's 'significant other', the rival contender in Scandinavia's political arena.

According to the medieval chronicler Adam of Bremen, the heathen temple of Uppsala in Sweden (now *Gamla*, 'Old' Uppsala) functioned as an important centre of Norse paganism throughout Scandinavia (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ca.1073-1076), and Snorri Sturluson attested in the *Ynglinga saga* of his *Heimskringla* that – a euhemerised – Freyr himself founded the sanctuary and initiated the practice of ritual sacrifice there (fig. 4). Already before the early modern exodus of medieval manuscripts from Iceland, the pagan legacy of Sweden enticed the imagination of the scholar Olaus Magnus (Olof Månsson, 1490-1557), whose authoritative *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* ('History of the Northern Peoples', 1555) determined foreign conceptions of little-known Scandinavia for generations. In this work, Magnus refers to the ancient Swedes as *Geats* (Goths), and to the runes as the alphabet of the Geats. Next to descriptions of ancient folklore and fantastical creatures, he identifies the deities Oden (Odin), his wife Frigg, and primarily Tor (Thor) as the three main gods of this noble people. The numerous wood carvings accompanying the text provided the reader with some of the first modern visual impressions of these gods, depicted in the typical style and dress of Greek and Roman gods. His work would have a paradigmatic sway over Swedish intellectual culture for well over a century to come.

Sweden had risen to political and cultural dominance as a result of its military successes in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), during which the kingdom fashioned itself as the champion of northern Protestantism. In order to legitimise Sweden's superiority over the other Nordic countries historically, philologists and scholars were mobilised to study the Old Norse manuscripts in search of former national greatness. As King Gustavus Adolphus's mentor and advisor, Johannes Bureus (Johan Bure, 1568-1652) exerted considerable influence on Swedish intellectual life in the early seventeenth century. He is considered the father of Swedish philology, and combined his interest in runes with his fascination with

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold (2007) p.82.

<sup>2</sup> The tenacious misconception that Vikings drank from their enemies' skulls is based on Worm's mistranslation of the words 'ór bjúgvíðum hausa' ('from the curved branches of skulls', a *kenning* for horns) as 'ex craniis eorum quos ceciderunt' ('from the skulls of those whom they had slain').

<sup>3</sup> Arnold (2007) p.85.

Kabbalistic esotericism and the mystical writings of the Rosicrucians. In the runes, he discerned a complex system of symbols concealing mystical knowledge, which he systematised in his 'Gothic Kabbala' (or *Kabala Upsalica*), outlined in his *Adulruna rediviva*.<sup>1</sup> Placed in certain arrangements, like the rune-cross, the runes could (just like the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in the Kabbalah) offer a key to unlock the mysteries of the universe. Bureus interpreted the gods Thor, Odin and Freya as manifestations of the Holy Trinity, Thor being the Father, or supreme being:

Thor was God the Father, or Lumen, the Themis lex divina and the Thora lex judeorum, and even Jupiter Mandragora. Othin was the Son, or the Verbum Dei, the sapientia of the Pythagoreans, Mars, and Hercules, Freya was identical with the Holy Spirit, or the foecunditas universi, the bonitas divina, the Diana of the Ephesians.<sup>2</sup>

The comparison with both Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek and Roman traditions<sup>3</sup> furnished Bureus's metaphysical Gothicism (Swedish: *Göticism*) with universal value, and the served to emancipate Nordic culture spiritually and intellectually. Bureus's work inspired later Gothicists to interpret the Eddas as a Hyperborean theology, in which the shining god Baldur was a manifestation of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The nationalisation of Kabbalistic mysticism led to an esoterically inspired political messianism, which speculated that the 'Lion of the North' prophesied by Paracelsus to conquer Europe, crush an emperor and save the righteous, could be the King of Sweden himself.<sup>5</sup> Less cataclysmic was Bureus's influence on Georg Stiernhielm (1598-1672), who championed a more cultural Gothicism by demonstrating that Swedish was the closest relative to the ancient Nordic language, which was the most original, primordial language, from which all other languages evolved.

By tying Swedish history and culture to the very origin of mankind, the Gothicism movement was characterised by protochronism and national bombasticism.<sup>6</sup> The ancestral Swedes, the Goths, who had once forced even the mighty Roman Empire to its knees, were not only the instigators of Scandinavian culture, but of all civilisation in general. Since Sweden only plays a marginal part in the sagas and other Old Icelandic texts, Swedish philologists paid particular attention to the less historical, more legendary and mythological genres of the corpus. In one of the *fornaldarsögur*, *Gautreks saga* ('the Saga of Gautrek')<sup>7</sup>, Swedes are parodically depicted as backward and ignorant, tending towards suicide as a result of their miserable fear to lose any of their accumulated wealth. Ironically, it was this unflattering passage that would enflame Swedish enthusiasm, since it was reminiscent of Plato's description of the inhabitants of Atlantis, who tended to commit suicide when they were satisfied and felt they had fulfilled their lives.<sup>8</sup> Atlantis was never destroyed by the waves, but lay in Sweden. The most prolific and eccentric defender of this

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Thomas Karlsson, *Adulruna und die gotische Kabbala* (Rudolstadt 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Bureus, quoted in Susanna Åkerman, *Rose Cross over the Baltic. The Spread of Rosicrucianism in Northern Europe* (Leiden-Boston-Cologne 1998) p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Bureus went even beyond these and claimed that Thor was identical with the Egyptian god Thoth and the Persian Zoroaster ('Tor-As'). Karlsson (2007) p.41.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, pp.56-60.

<sup>6</sup> The idea that all mankind and human culture originated in the North has been a recurrent theme in early modern thought. See Stefan Donecker, "There and Back Again. The North as Origin and Destination in Early Modern Migration Narratives" (2006), available online at <http://www.akademia.is/imagesofthenorth> (last visited: 24 July 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Not coincidentally the first saga to be translated into Swedish, in 1664.

<sup>8</sup> According to Mats Malm, the difference in motivation behind the suicides could not be greater, but that did not hinder the Gothicists in their interpretation. Malm (2004) p.104.

idea was Olof Rudbeck (1630-1702), who in his exhaustive treatise *Atland eller Manheim* (1679-1702) proclaimed that Adam spoke Swedish, from which Latin and Hebrew later evolved. Rudbeck subverted Snorri's euhemerism *ad absurdum* by situating Homer's accounts of the Trojan War not in ancient Greece and Turkey, but in Sweden, claiming that 'Thebes' actually referred to Täby – near Uppsala – and 'Peloponnesus' to Pelle på näset. Furthermore, the elephants, which Plato claimed lived in Atlantis, were not to be understood literally, but rather as a *kenning* for – Swedish – wolfs. Thus, the rationalisation of Snorri's prologue and the stylistic devices from his manual for aspiring poets in the *Prose Edda* were transformed into historiographical methodology.<sup>1</sup> Rudbeck's patriotic (and to our modern minds absurd) rewriting of European history is best considered in the light of John L. Greenway's words:

However bizarre and disparate these later reconstitutions of northern origins may appear today, humanists, rationalists, and romantics alike were able to discover and legitimize their own identity in the Nordic past and see themselves as descendants of a heroic genesis "when it shone in the North", as Oehenschläger put it.<sup>2</sup>

The publication of the first printed edition of the *Prose Edda*, in Latin (*Edda Islandorum*, Copenhagen 1665), marked the (re)introduction of much of Old Norse mythology in the non-Icelandic, Nordic and European imagination. The historian and legal scholar behind this edition, Peder Hansen Resen (1625-1688), had a rather different take on his sources than the pragmatic academics Worm and Torfason did. His approach was more metaphysical in nature, and in the introduction to his Edda-edition he expressed his hope that the higher mystical messages contained in it would reach the intuitive reader, even though they could never be satisfactorily expressed in words. Resen's interest in the spiritual and moral value of the texts is also reflected in the presentation of the poem *Hávamál* as *Ethica Odini* ('Odin's Ethics').<sup>3</sup> This way of approaching mythology was innovative, and would in due course "come to characterise analytical discourse on the mysterious 'otherness' of the eddas."<sup>4</sup> Mats Malm's aforementioned distinction between two strands of Edda-reception (the *pragmatic* and the *metaphysical* one) is clearly illustrated by this example.

Beyond Scandinavia, the rediscovery of Tacitus's ethnographical *De origine et situ Germanorum*, (commonly referred to as the *Germania*) in 1455, in which the Germanic tribes are described and positively contrasted to the Romans, aroused the minds of German humanists who were for the first time presented with a respectable document about their own virtuous ancestors. In the course of the sixteenth century, this dichotomous humanistic discourse was appropriated by the Protestant Reformation, up to the point that pre-Christian religion could be presented as a noble precursor of Protestantism and juxtaposed to the papist decadence and superstition of the South.<sup>5</sup> In Amsterdam, the first systematic manual of Germanic mythology, *De diis germanis, sive veteri Germanorum, Gallorum, Britanorum, Vandalorum religione* by the humanist Elias Schedius was published in 1643, which constituted essentially a classical description of the gods with a new nomenclature.<sup>6</sup> Since Schedius did not have the Eddas to his disposal (and for some reason ignored the writings of Olaus Magnus), his work is based primarily on the writings of classical authors and his own creative etymological speculations, and are consequently of little academic value.

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.106.

<sup>2</sup> Greenway (1977) p.9.

<sup>3</sup> Resen did, however, not translate the texts himself. Lassen (2001b) pp.26-27.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold (2007) p.83.

<sup>5</sup> Böldl (2000) pp.42-68.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.1.

Nevertheless, it was the first handbook of its kind, and contributed to the intellectual emancipation of – a Hellenised version of – Germanic culture.

In Denmark, the collection of Icelandic antiquities had around 1700 become a national affair, which was spearheaded by the Icelandic secretary of the Royal Archives and professor of Danish Antiquities – as well as Bartholin's former assistant – Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), whose famous collection would later become known as the Arnamagnæan Collection (*Den Arnamagnæanske Håndskriftsamling*). Árni spent much of his life in Copenhagen, and utilised his political connections in Denmark to help Icelanders, who would consequently express their gratitude in manuscripts. His collection evolved into the largest of its kind, although much of it was lost when Magnússon's house burned down in the Copenhagen fire of 1728.<sup>1</sup> The fund he established in his last will made financial resources available to independent Icelandic scholars from 1770, and contributed to Copenhagen's status as the centre of Old Norse-Icelandic studies. One of Magnússon's compatriots and fellow-manuscript-collectors was Þormóður Torfason (Latinised form: Thormodus Torfæus, 1636-1719), the official Royal Norwegian historian to the Danish King, who was based in Kopervik, Norway, which at that time was part of the Danish realm. In his much-acclaimed *Historia Rerum Norvegicarum* (1711), the most extensive history of ancient and medieval Norway since Snorri's *Heimskringla*, Torfason eloquently fused his study of the Icelandic sagas with the Latin historiographical tradition of continental Europe. His interpretation of the sagas as reliable historical sources, placing them in the larger context of Scandinavian history, was unprecedented and brought Old Norse-Icelandic literature to the serious attention of readers well beyond the borders of the Dano-Norwegian territories.

However, true recognition of the splendour and value of the Eddas would arise in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the Age of Enlightenment, Tacitus's *Germania* became a popular subject of learned discussion, on climate theory for instance. Montesquieu believed that the Germanic societies described by the Roman historian represented the ideal constitutional form of human society, and that this was due to the ideal moderate climatic circumstances of Central Europe, which determined the *esprit* of a people's laws and their character. The peoples of the North had remained free due to their courage and honesty, resulting from life in a colder climate (*De l'esprit des lois*, 1748).<sup>2</sup> The theory of climatic determinism soon became connected to the idea of race, e.g. in the lectures of Kant (*Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen*, 1775), who like Montesquieu had a normative approach and identified the light blond Europeans of the North as the 'first race'.<sup>3</sup> But where should this glorified and elusive 'North' – which constituted first and foremost a metaphysical principle, rather than a real geographical category – actually be situated? Throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the answer to this question would probably have been Scotland and the lands of the Celts, rather than Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The full extent of the damage inflicted by the fire will never be known, since Magnússon never created an exhaustive inventory of his collection. See Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, "Árni Magnússon", in Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds.), *The Manuscripts of Iceland* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.85-99, 98.

<sup>2</sup> On the British discourse linking constitutional liberty to Gothic antiquity, see Samuel Kliger, *The Goths in England. A study in seventeenth and eighteenth century thought* (Amsterdam 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Beller, "Climate", in idem. and Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters* (Amsterdam-New York 2007) pp.298-304. See also Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, "The Theory of Climate and the North in Anglophone Literatures" in Sverrir Jakobsson (ed.), *Images of the North. Histories – Identities – Ideas* (Amsterdam – New York 2009) pp.25-50. On the influence of Montesquieu on Icelandic Romanticism, see Chapter 4.1.

<sup>4</sup> For much of the same period, Russia was considered Nordic – rather than Eastern – as well. On the historical development of the 'myth of the North', see for instance Julia Zernack "Der 'Mythos vom Norden' und die Krise der Moderne. Skandinavische Literatur im Programm des Eugen Diederichs Verlag", in Justus H.

This predilection for everything Celtic is easily linked to the ‘poems of Ossian’, which had mesmerised European intellectuals *en masse* since their first publication in 1760. Not yet exposed as forgeries, these ancient bardic poems from Scotland, ‘rediscovered and translated’ – that is: forged – by James Macpherson, were quickly translated into many languages and caused a Europe-wide ‘Ossian vogue’ and ‘Celtic revival’ that would affect characters as divergent as Goethe, Napoleon, Voltaire, and Thomas Jefferson. Ossian was conceived as the Nordic equivalent of Homer, and the poetry ascribed to him soon acquired a ‘classical’ status, not inferior to that of the Greek epics. No other work of literature has contributed more to the cultural and spiritual emancipation of the North, which could now confidently turn to its own past without having to justify this by drawing comparisons to ancient Greece or Rome.<sup>1</sup> The starting point of the literary historicism that would come to characterise Europe’s Romantic nationalisms, is therefore not unjustifiably identified with the publication of Macpherson’s poems of a lonely bard, wandering the misty cliffs of the rugged Highlands.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, it was this forgery that would imbue Europe with a sense of ‘Nordic authenticity’.

This positive re-evaluation of the North paved the way for the decisive publication, which signalled the ultimate break-through of the Old Norse in European culture. In line with the enlightened Germanophilia of Montesquieu, but more interested in matters of religion and world-view, was Paul Henri Mallet (1730-1807), a francophone Swiss author who was appointed professor of literature in Copenhagen in 1752. In 1756, he published his *Introduction à l’histoire du Danemarch où l’on traite de la religion, des moeurs, des lois, et des usages des anciens Danois*, which was followed one year later by *Monuments de la mythologie et de la poesie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves*, in which he elaborated on the heroic character of the Scandinavian people, which he considered the embodiment of the free Nordic spirit that Montesquieu had admired in the *Germania*. In Mallet’s conception of the North, the terms Celtic and Scandinavian, or ‘druidic’ and ‘Gothic’, were still confused and used without clear demarcation – as can be deduced from the subtitle of his second book. But in his chapters on religion, it was very much *Nordic* mythology he was concerned with, and which he attempted to assimilate with Christian ideas in order to highlight its noble character; the ancient Scandinavians originally believed in one Supreme God – even if this faith was later corrupted as it evolved into polytheism –, in an immortal soul, and in a just universe with either punishment or rewards for the souls of the deceased.<sup>3</sup>

But despite this association with Christianity, Mallet repeated and popularised Bartholin’s image of the laughing Viking with his contempt for death, fearless in battle because he knew he would join Óðinn in Valhöll if he would die bravely. In these works, he provided Europe with the first – rather defective – French translations of sagas – highlighting this fatalistic character – and eddic literature. These books became immense successes throughout Europe, and contributed to the supranational cultural revival referred to as the ‘Nordic Renaissance’.<sup>4</sup> His writings would eventually consolidate “many of what were to

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Ulbrecht and Meike G. Werner (eds.), *Romantik, Revolution und Reform. Der Eugen Diederichs Verlag im Epochenkontext 1900-1949* (Göttingen 1999) pp.208-223.

<sup>1</sup> On the beginnings of this Nordic renaissance in Britain, see especially Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in Britain: 1750-1820* (Trieste 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The emancipation of pre-Christian Nordic and Germanic culture by presenting it as a form of proto-Christianity became common practice, and facilitated the idea of ‘noble heathens’ (see Chapter 8.1.1). On Jacob Grimm’s ‘Christianisation’ of Germanic mythology, see Chapter 2.2.3.

<sup>4</sup> This term was first coined by the Swedish literary historian Anton Blanck, in his seminal study *Den nordiska renässansen i sjuttonhundratalets litteratur. En undersökning av den “götiska” poesiens allmänna och inhemska förutsättningar* (Stockholm 1911). His limited definition of the term, primarily confined to the Gothic

become the cliché images of the Norse or Viking world: valkyries, Norns, fatalism, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Mallet was a cultural broker in the fullest sense of the term, introducing contemporary French philosophy (Montesquieu) to the Nordic world, while simultaneously introducing Europe at large with the cultural heritage of the North. His emphasis on the ‘Sublime’ – especially strong in the second edition of his *Monuments* – fitted very well with the Ossian hype that captivated Europe at that time.<sup>2</sup> And by comparing Tacitus’s Germans with the Scandinavians of old, he strengthened the idea that all ‘Germanic’ peoples were linked in a larger Nordic family, the cradle of which stood not in Germany, but in Scandinavia. Needless to say, the King of Denmark was pleased.

Under the rule of King Frederick V (1723-1766), Copenhagen was transformed into a centre of the arts, welcoming foreign and especially German intellectuals. Instead of being a predominantly Scandinavian centre of learning, the city now evolved into the place where ‘Germany met Scandinavia’.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Mallet’s writings, the Copenhagen-based German intelligentsia became infatuated with the Nordic heritage they encountered there, and began to consider it their own. The poet Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg (1737-1823), who spent twelve years in Copenhagen, believed to have found in eddic verse the most authentic expression of the Nordic genius. Unlike the Scandinavian scholars who had concerned themselves with the Eddas, both pragmatically and metaphysically, Gerstenberg went beyond the point of mere reflection, and made Old Norse mythology a source of inspiration for *new* literary creations. He fashioned himself as a *skald*, a poet in the Old Norse tradition, and replaced some of the traditional poetic topoi from classical mythology with ‘new’ ones from the North. In the opening verse of his poem *Gedicht eines Skalden* (1766, inspired by *Völuspá*), he refers to Braga (Old Norse: Bragi), the god of poetry, who here fulfils the part that would have traditionally been fulfilled by the classical leader of the Muses Apollo. As Christopher Krebs rightfully concludes, this development entailed more than simply a change of names; “this reflected a change of paradigm.”<sup>4</sup> Von Gerstenberg’s turn to the North implied a cultural-political program, a call to German poets to become ‘authentic’, that is: Nordic.

A more lasting effect on German intellectual life would be exercised by the works of Gerstenberg’s close friend in Copenhagen, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803) who had been invited to the Danish court by the king himself, who was greatly impressed by the first part of his *Messias*. Klopstock, inspired by Gerstenberg’s *Gedicht eines Skalden*, also turned his attention to the North, and gathered around him a group of likeminded ‘bards’.<sup>5</sup> In his earlier years, Klopstock had found inspiration primarily in Greek mythology, just like most of his contemporaries. After his ‘conversion’ to Nordic culture, he had quite simply replaced many of the Greek gods with their Old Norse equivalents. However, like Gerstenberg, Klopstock wanted to move beyond merely supplanting names. His emersion in Nordic culture served a very patriotic purpose, as he mobilised Old Norse and Germanic topoi against the cultural hegemony of the South, which he deemed decadent and artificial.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, he set out to re-appropriate the archetypal German hero *par*

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movements of the preromantic era, has been broadened by literary historians like Andrew Wawn and Mats Malm and can now cover the Romantic and post-Romantic eras as well.

<sup>1</sup> Shippey (2016).

<sup>2</sup> It is very likely that Macpherson was actually inspired by Mallet when he wrote his ancient poems. See Shippey (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Krebs (2011) p.171.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.174.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘bard’ can be considered the Celtic equivalent of the Old Norse ‘skald’. Before the nineteenth century, the distinction between Celtic and Germanic culture was less obvious, and deemed less significant, than it would eventually become.

<sup>6</sup> Greenway (1977) p.130.



*excellence*, Arminius (or ‘Hermann’), who had been the subject of German poetry and literature since the Reformation but had lost much of his ‘Germanness’ in the process. Klopstock considered himself a direct descendant of the Cheruscan hero, and thematised his epic destruction of three Roman legions in the Teutoburger Forest (9 AD) in his ‘Hermann Trilogy’, consisting of the plays *Hermanns Schlacht* (1769), *Hermann und die Fürsten* (1784), and *Hermanns Tod* (1787). With his celebration of Hermann as the protector of German culture, Klopstock initiated an antagonistic form of ‘ideological northernism’ which would spread through Germany, and become the central creed of a group of ‘bardic’ poets known as the *Göttinger Hainbund*. His conception of the North would have a profound effect on German literature and nationalism.

As can be deduced from Klopstock’s frequent use of Celtic themes in these works – bards, druids –, his image of the ancient North was strongly influenced by the poems of Ossian. Not only he, but most of his contemporaries would encounter Old Norse mythology and culture first and foremost through the paradigmatic lens of Ossian, especially since Celtic and Germanic culture was still generally considered to be one and the same.<sup>1</sup> Rousseau’s concept of the authentic *bon sauvage* was no longer confined to the uncivilised peoples of the New World, but could be projected on the Ossianic poems and the obscure but tantalising eddic verses as well. This Ossian frame of reference emphasised the exotic ‘otherness’ of eddic poetry, in contrast to the artificiality of the hegemonic pan-European cultural discourse, consequently downplaying the Christian character of many of the eddic verses.<sup>2</sup> Surely, the mythology of a nature-people still undefiled by southern decadence and urban lifestyle, should contain the traces of that natural, primordial religion; the Holy Grail of enlightened idealists and universalists.

The link between mythology and the authentic, organic character of a people or *Volkgeist*<sup>3</sup> was solidified in the writings of arguably the most influential theorist of the late eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Arguing that every nation, and therefore every mythological system, had its own intrinsic value and could not be considered superior or inferior to any other nation or mythological system, the emancipation of Old Norse mythology was completed:

Die bis zum achten Jahrhundert dunkle Geschichte der nordischen Reiche hat vor den Geschichten der meisten europäischen Länder den Vorzug, daß ihr eine Mythologie mit Liedern und Sagen zugrunde liegt, die ihre Philosophie sein kann. Denn in ihr lernen wir den Geist des Volkes kennen, die Begriffe desselben von Göttern und Menschen, die Richtung seiner Neigungen und Leidenschaften in Liebe und Haß, in Erwartungen dies- und jenseits des Grabes – eine Philosophie der Geschichte, wie sie uns außer der Edda nur die griechische Mythologie gewährt.<sup>4</sup>

This primacy of mythology – next to language and folklore – in the formulation of essential national characters immediately posed a problem where Herder’s own national identity was concerned; Germany, it appeared, did not seem to possess a national mythology of its own. Instead of turning their attention to the South, Herder argued, German poets should look for

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<sup>1</sup> This attitude is exemplified by the title of the first German translation of the Edda (by Jacob Schimmelman, 1777): *Isländische Edda. Das ist: Die geheime Gottes-Lehre der ältesten Hyperboräer, der Norder, der Veneten, Gethen, Gothen, Vandalen, der Gallier, der Britten, der Skoten, der Sueven, [et]c. kurz des ganzen alten Kaltiens, oder des Europäischen Skytiens [...]*. See Thomas Krömmelbein, “Jacob Schimmelman und der Beginn der Snorra Edda-Rezeption in Deutschland”, in Hans Fix (ed.), *Snorri Sturluson. Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption* (Berlin 1998).

<sup>2</sup> This exoticising paradigm has influenced the study of the Eddas for centuries. See Samplonius (2013).

<sup>3</sup> A concept inspired by Voltaire’s and Montesquieu’s *esprit*.

<sup>4</sup> Herder, *Zur Philosophie der Geschichte. Eine Auswahl in zwei Bänden* I-II (Berlin 1952) II pp.562-563.

inspiration to a “Mythologie eines benachbarten Volks, auch Deutschen Stammes”, which could serve as “Ersatz” of what which the Germans themselves had lost over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Herder presented the Nordic myths as a counter to Greco-Roman mythology, and thus contributed significantly to the construction of the North as a metaphysical and ideological concept. The idea that German culture should be rejuvenated through an influx of Nordic inspiration was expressed in Herder’s programmatic and aptly titled treatise on the didactic value of poetry, “Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung” (1796), referring to the eddic goddess Iðunn, wife of Bragi (god of poetry), whose apples keep the Æsir eternally young. Herder’s enthusiasm for Old Norse mythology was not shared by all German poets, and Classicism would remain a strong current in German literary history well into the nineteenth century. The Proto-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* movement itself, to which Herder’s ideas are considered foundational, found much of its historical inspiration not in the Eddas, but in the tragedies and epics of ancient Greece. Nevertheless, the German indigenisation of Old Norse mythology, or what Carl Roos has labelled the “dream of the North in German intellectual life”,<sup>2</sup> spearheaded by Klopstock and Herder, would become a pivotal factor in Germany’s quest for national authenticity in the turbulent century to come. And more importantly for the purposes of the present study, this appropriative discourse, resulting from Herder’s identification of the peoples of the North as part of the greater German family tree, would in a process of perpetual cultural transfer have a profound effect on national self-images in the Scandinavian countries, including Iceland.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the study and cultivation Old Norse mythology had acquired a strong foothold beyond Scandinavia. In Britain, the scholarship of the Scandinavian scholars mentioned in the above inspired George Hickes (1642-1715) to write his celebrated treatise on the Nordic language, *Thesaurus linguarum septentrionalium* (1703-1705). But here too, as elsewhere in Europe, a more serious engagement with Norse culture was instigated by the introduction and internalisation of Mallet’s vision of the North. Mallet’s English translator, Bishop Thomas Percy (see Chapter 3.4), gave the right example and published his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* in 1763. Five years later, the poet Thomas Gray (1716-1771) demonstrated an equal fascination with all things Nordic in his poems *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin* (1768).<sup>3</sup> By 1800, themes from Old Norse literature had already inspired poets and writers in Germany, Britain and beyond, whereas the Nordic countries’ interest in their own cultural heritage had remained primarily *academic* in nature. Only after Ossian and Herder entered the Scandinavian scene would the ‘Nordic Renaissance’ eventually return to its geographical roots, and inspire Scandinavian artists, writers and poets as well.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.3 The Grimmian Moment

The Early Modern interest in myth generated an “enormous outburst of scholarship, discovery, speculation, and controversy, long before the impact of such famous contemporaries as Freud or Frazer, Jung or Joyce. Once launched, this interest continued with remarkable energy and originality until about the middle of the nineteenth century.”<sup>5</sup> Although this idea of a continuous line from ca. 1600 until the mid-nineteenth century is not

<sup>1</sup>Johann Gottfried Herder, “Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung”, in *Die Horen* 1796 (1) p.488.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Roos, *Essays om Tysk Litteratur* (1967) p.223, quoted in idem, p.36.

<sup>3</sup>On Norse mythology in English Romanticism, see especially Harding (1995) and Heather O’Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth. A History* (Oxford 2014). See also Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain* (Cambridge 2002 [2000]).

<sup>4</sup>Malm (2004) p.104.

<sup>5</sup>Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (eds.), *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* (Bloomington – London 1972) blurb (without page number).

incorrect, developments in the first decades of the nineteenth century certainly revolutionised the field of myth study. Undoubtedly the most paradigmatic publication to establish mythology as a category of *national* significance was Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, first published in Göttingen in 1835. The influence of this work can hardly be overestimated; everywhere in Europe scholars were following Grimm's lead and applied his template of mythology in order to 'reconstruct' – or in many cases: 'forge' – national mythologies on their own accord. This "New Mythology of the 1830s"<sup>1</sup>, instigated by the ideas contained in the *Deutsche Mythologie*, did not evolve in an ideological vacuum, and must be embedded in the academic, cultural, and political circumstances of the age in order to be fully understood.

Jacob (1785-1863) enrolled in the law department of the University of Marburg in 1802, where he became influenced by the lectures of the legal historian Friedrich Carl von Savigny (1779-1861) who in 1805 took him with him to Paris to serve as his assistant. His love for ancient manuscripts, old German literature, as well as his aversion against French culture and Napoleon's far-reaching reforms in the German lands would have a formative effect on the young Jacob. The first fruits of this lifelong fascination was a collection of fairy-tales and popular stories called *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1815) which he wrote together with his younger brother, Wilhelm (1786-1859). This collection was soon followed by the influential *Deutsche Sagen* (1816-1818), and together these two early collections were to determine the course of oral literature and folklore studies throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> But the brothers also published separately from each other, and in 1819 Jacob established his reputation as a linguist with the publication of the first volume of his *Deutsche Grammatik*. This study revolutionised the field of language studies,<sup>3</sup> and its impact on the humanities has been compared to that of Darwin's *Origin of Species* on the life sciences.<sup>4</sup> This comparison is fitting on more than only the superficial level; both works introduced an *evolutionary* perspective to their respective fields of research, supported by an innovative methodology based on the principle of *comparison*. And, just like Darwin, Grimm<sup>5</sup> produced an exhaustive body of evidence and obscure examples from an incredibly wide range of sources in order to strengthen his claims.<sup>6</sup>

The field of comparative philology, which concerns itself with the historical relatedness of different languages, and with the reconstruction of the pre-supposed, long-lost proto-languages – or *Ursprache* – from which they derived, was already firmly established by the time Grimm published this *magnum opus*. The suspicion of relatedness between separate languages evolved into a scholarly theory in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, primarily in the pioneering works of Sir William Jones, Thomas Young – who first introduced the term *Indo-European* in 1813 – and the German linguist Franz Bopp. However, a treatise as systematic and exhaustive as the one produced by Grimm had not yet been published, and the rhetorical strength it supplied to the Indo-Germanic theory as a whole would prove critical for bringing about a paradigm shift in the humanities.

Arguably the most profound effect of Grimm's taxonomical perspective on language, lies in the implication that no language stands on its own, and that it can only be understood

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<sup>1</sup> Shippey (2005) p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Gunnell, "Clerics as Collectors of Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Iceland", in *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 68 (2012a) pp. 45-66.

<sup>3</sup> On the philological origins of the humanities, see especially James Turner, *Philology. The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton-Oxford 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Shippey (2005) p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, I will refer to Jacob Grimm simply as Grimm, and to his brother as Wilhelm Grimm.

<sup>6</sup> According to Tom Shippey, both scholars undermined one specific Biblical myth with their respective theories of evolution: Darwin dealt a heavy blow to the literal interpretation of the story of creation and Noah's Ark as recounted in the Book of Genesis, whereas Grimm's *Grammatik* evidently vanquished the story of the Tower of Babel (Shippey 2005, p.6).

when embedded in its historical, Indo-European ‘context’ (*Zusammenhang*). Therefore, the *Deutsche Grammatik* is not so much a study of the *German* language – as the title would suggest –, but rather of the Germanic languages, including the extinct and largely incomprehensible variants of Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old High German, and Gothic – among others. This holistic approach enabled Grimm to demonstrate how all modern Germanic languages had evolved from a single root or *Ursprache*, and grown increasingly further apart from each other to the point of mutual incomprehensibility in the course of many centuries and multiple ‘sound-shifts’ (*Lautverschiebungen*). According to ‘Grimm’s law’, these very structural and logical sound-shifts account – much like a linguistic variation of Darwin’s genetic mutations – for the gradual evolution of languages, and a regressive analysis of these shifts could eventually lead the diligent scholar to a defensible reconstruction of extinct root-languages.

For the purposes of the present study, the linguistic intricacies of Grimm’s new philology should not concern us any further. The holistic approach applied to the study of language had consequences for other branches of the humanities as well, not least for the study of folktales, legends, and myths. Like the extinct Germanic root-language, root-versions of ancient narratives made their way through Europe and gave rise to local variations of the same story – e.g. the *Nibelungenlied* in Germany and the *Völsunga saga* in Scandinavia –, evolving into separate bodies of narrative. By presenting popular narratives as an organic entity, something which evolves and develops according to certain laws and independent from the creative intentions of individuals – just like languages –, legends could be interpreted as *natural* expressions of a people (*Volk*), or a collective national spirit (*Volksgeist*): according to Wilhelm Grimm, these stories were “aus der Mitte des ganzen Volkes hervorgegangen”, as the products of a ‘poetic national spirit’, or *dichtenden Volksseele*.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of scientific methodology, ancient ‘authorless’ narratives became organic expressions of nationhood and Sublime mouthpieces of national character; a role they would play with verve in the ensuing age of European nationalisms.

As in the case of the Indo-European language family, the existence of an Indo-European myth family – or “Eurasian myth-tree” (see Chapter 3.4.4) – had already been established before Grimm turned his attention to it. However, no treatise on the topic of comparative mythology would surpass Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835, second edition: 1844, third edition: 1854) in sheer magnitude, erudition and influence. In terms of methodology and theoretical presuppositions, the *Deutsche Mythologie* (DM) is clearly indebted to the *Grammatik*, which had appeared some sixteen years earlier. Much of Grimm’s paradigmatic approach to language, which had established his academic reputation and rendered him a living legend, is simply transposed to the realm of mythology in an attempt to repeat his earlier triumphs in the field of linguistics. After the model of his revolutionary ‘new philology’, a ‘new mythology’ was to evolve from his views on Germanic myth.<sup>2</sup> Jacob Grimm started working on his mythological magnum opus in 1832, and when browsing through the first edition of DM, it is hard to believe that Grimm could, next to his obligations as professor and librarian at the university of Göttingen, have found the time to create this vast mythological universe in all its profundity, its monumental proportions and meticulous systematisation. In the course of only a few years, Grimm achieved in his DM what – according to Fritz Paul – would have taken a mere mortal scholar at least *two* academic lifetimes: one to collect all the material, and the other to analyse and structure it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Grimm, *Die deutsche Heldensage*, R. Steig (Darmstadt 1957 [1829]) p.417.

<sup>2</sup> Shippey (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Paul, “‘Aller sage grund ist nun mythus’. Religionswissenschaft und Mythologie im Werk der Brüder Grimm”, in Dieter Henning and Bernhard Lauer (eds.), *200 Jahre Brüder Grimm. Die Brüder Grimm. Dokumente ihres Lebens und Wirkens* (Kassel 1985) pp.77-90.

Both brothers had already been captivated by the topic of Nordic mythology for a considerable time by then: Wilhelm had published his *Altdänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* more than twenty years earlier, in 1811, and in 1815 they had published their own collection of lays from the Poetic Edda, the *Lieder der alten Edda*, together. But none of these earlier publications can rival DM in terms of thematic extensiveness and theoretical profundity.

The *Deutsche Mythologie* consists of thirty-eight individual chapters, divided over four thematic clusters: 1. the gods and their cults – opening with a chapter on ‘God’ in the monotheistic sense, to which I will return later –, then: 2. humans – heroes and wise women – as well as non-human creatures; 3. Germanic cosmogony (creation narratives) and cosmology, and finally: 4. Germanic beliefs and superstition (*Aberglaube*). Tantalisingly absent in this thematic structure is the whole concept of eschatology, or world-ending, which nonetheless constitutes a crucial element in Nordic mythology. Since Grimm must have been aware of possible similar motifs in Old German texts – the etymological link between the title of the ninth-century poem *Muspilli* and the Old Norse concept of *Múspellr*, or *Múspellsheimr*, is still a matter of debate –, it is not likely that he discarded Ragnarök because he deemed it too ‘Scandinavian’, and hence not ‘German’ enough. It is more likely that he regarded these eschatological narratives as later, Christian interpolations, and thus not appropriate material for an attempted reconstruction of the pre-Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> During Grimm’s lifetime, DM underwent three editions (1835, 1844 and 1854), the third one being an unaltered reprint of the expanded second edition in two volumes. Twelve years after Grimm’s death in 1863, his pupil Elard Hugo Meyer curated an even further expanded fourth edition, now in three volumes, which appeared over the course of four years (1875-1878).<sup>2</sup> The impact of the work reached well beyond the borders of the German-speaking world, where it was soon translated into many different languages.

Just as the *Deutsche Grammatik* encompasses considerably more than only the German language, so the DM constitutes far more than a scholarly rendition of mythological narratives from Germany. Such a rendition would not even be feasible, Grimm maintains, since “[a]uf uns ist keine edda gebracht worden und kein einziger schriftsteller unsrer vorzeit hat es versucht die überreste des heidnischen glaubens zu sammeln.”<sup>3</sup> Even those early-medieval scholars to whom much of the ancient lore would still have been available, refused to write about the matter and were taught in the ‘Roman school’ to turn away from the “erinnerungen des vaterlandes”, and to destroy rather than preserve “die letzten eindrücke des verhassten heidenthums”.<sup>4</sup> Whereas in his *Grammatik* Grimm attempted to elucidate the evolutionary history of a still existing object (the Germanic languages), he now seeks to reconstruct something which is *lost* (German mythology) through the study and comparison of other, better preserved Indo-European mythologies. The underlying assumption is, that, just like all languages in the same family derived from one primeval *Ursprache*, all mythologies are bound together in a genealogical web beginning with a singular *Urmythos*.

What sets DM apart from earlier attempts to systematise and reconstruct the pre-Christian world-views of the Germanic peoples, is that Grimm does not restrict himself to stories about gods, but “examined the totality of Germanic religious experience, from the

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Grimm *does* refer to Ragnarök as proof of the gods’ powerlessness against the forces of fate, which would indicate that the author did attach at least some credibility to the narrative’s pagan origin. See Jacob Grimm *Deutsche Mythologie* (2 vols.), Dieterich’sche Buchhandlung (Göttingen 1844 [1835]) p.816.

<sup>2</sup> The third volume contains supplements and appendices (*Nachträge und Anhang*) from Grimm’s writings.

<sup>3</sup> J. Grimm (1844) p.viii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

creation narratives of the *Prose Edda* to the superstitions of the German peasant.”<sup>1</sup> Understandably, the variety of sources required to achieve this ambitious goal is virtually endless, and Grimm’s exhaustive accumulation of minute references and obscure details has become notorious. The design of DM is encyclopaedic, and the chapters deal with the poetic, historical, archaeological, philological, folkloristic and – comparative – mythological aspects of this broad subject. In his effort to demonstrate the unity or *Zusammenhang* of all the Germanic mythologies, the entries link West Germanic ‘variations’ of gods and concepts to their North Germanic ‘counterparts’, creating the impression that for instance Wotan and Óðinn are, in essence, one and the same deity.<sup>2</sup> Etymology and linguistics form an integral part of this mythography, since language and world-view were – as expressions of the national spirit – closely related in Grimm’s mind, meaning that the study of one of them could lead to new insights into the other. The development of both language and belief-systems was, according to him, characterised by historical *continuity*, meaning that from relatively late or even modern – folkloristic – sources, trustworthy information on much older strata of mythology and religion could be deduced. This emphasis on the direct historical link between contemporary rural culture and ‘authentic’, pre-Christian heritage would come to play a crucial role in the imagination of Romantic nationalists throughout Europe.<sup>3</sup>

In the preface (*Vorrede*) to the second edition of DM (Göttingen 1844), Grimm provides his readers with the most elaborate and programmatic exposition on the ideas underlying this undertaking. It is here that he takes on the criticasters of the first edition, who had criticised Grimm’s choice and treatment of source material. To deny the reality of a German mythology was, in his eyes, as serious an offence as denying the “das hohe alter und die andauer unsrer sprache”, since every nation needed gods as much as it needed language.<sup>4</sup> Although he does not use the term itself, the patriotic language in which he rallies against his opponents creates the impression that he sees them as traitors against the German nation itself. Their attack on his ‘authentic’ and ‘national’ sources goes beyond mere antiquarian rhetoric, and is an insult to the German *Volksseele*. He who fails to recognise that the verses of the ‘Nordic Edda’ breathe a “entlegenste vorzeit” and therefore “ganz anders an unser herz greifen als die im überzwank bewunderte ossianische dichtung”, and he who seeks to reduce the Edda’s entire contents to later Christian and Anglo-Saxon influence, is quite simply blind.<sup>5</sup>

To Grimm – as to other philologists dedicated to the cultural regeneration of their nation –, the eddic poems constituted a benchmark for national authenticity, and a trustworthy tool in the process of separating that which is national and authentic – that is: Germanic – from later Christian, Roman, or Slavic import. Together with his brother Wilhelm, he had already published a German edition of the work in 1815, the year in which Napoleon was definitively defeated at Waterloo. By studying the Edda and comparing it to the remnants of pagan religion in modern culture, the nation could finally come to ‘know itself’ again (see Chapter 3.4). The use of Nordic sources in the quest for German mythology was perfectly justified in the eyes of Grimm and many of his contemporaries, as long as the distinctions between West and North Germanic culture were not overlooked:

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<sup>1</sup> George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany. Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago 2004) p.104.

<sup>2</sup> References to Roman and Greek culture occur primarily where older Germanic concepts – mainly relating to ritual – are concerned.

<sup>3</sup> Joep Leerssen, “Oral Epic: The Nation Finds a Voice”, in Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin (eds.), *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden – Boston 2012) pp.11-26.

<sup>4</sup> J. Grimm (1844) pp.v-vi.

<sup>5</sup> J. Grimm (1844) pp.v-vi.

sie [Nordic mythology] liegt uns nah wie die nordische sprache, deren länger ungestört gebliebne aufrechthaltung reichen blick in die natur der deutschen gestattet, ohne dass beide vollständig in einander aufgiengen, oder dass einzelne tugenden der deutschen sprache und die beiden zusammen überlegne kraft der gothischen könnten geleugnet werden. auch die nordischen götterverhältnisse dürfen die deutschen vielfach läutern und vervollständigen, aber nicht alleinige richtschnur für sie geben, da sich, wie in der sprache, einzelne abweichungen des deutschen von dem nordischen typus ergeben, die jedem derselben bald zum vorzug bald zum nachtheil gereichen. hätte ich den vollen nordischen reichthum der untersuchung zum grunde gelegt, so würde von ihm die deutsche besonderheit gefährlich überwuchert worden sein, die vielmehr aus sich selbst entfaltet werden soll und zwar jenen oft zusagt, in vielem aber auch gegenüber steht.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite these carefully formulated reservations, Grimm *did* envision a larger unity of Germanic mythology, comprising both the North and West Germanic world-view, beyond the borders of the present study: “Die lage der dinge scheint also die zu sein, dass bei fortschreitendem betrieb wir der nordischen grenze entgegen rücken und endlich der punct erscheinen wird, auf dem der wall zu durchstechen ist und beide mythologien zusammenrinnen können in ein grösseres ganzes.”<sup>2</sup> Following Grimm’s taxonomical approach, the degree of separation between German and Nordic mythology depended on how far one was willing to travel back in time; at some point in time, both systems had dovetailed from a common, primeval and pan-Germanic root-mythology, glimpses of which could be discerned by comparing the two. To any German scholar who wanted to penetrate the heart of Germanic national character, Scandinavia and especially the isolated refuge of Iceland – where no Roman contamination of the original sources could ever have occurred – should be considered ‘klassischer Boden’.<sup>3</sup> In their medieval literature, the Icelanders had preserved much of Germanic lore and history which had been irrevocably lost on the European mainland.

It is important to note that, whatever consecutive generations of German nationalists may have done to their intellectual inheritance, neither Grimm nor Herder should be considered racists or proto-Fascists. The cultural nativism they nourished in their writings did not facilitate any notion of German superiority over other nations, or the superiority of any nation for that matter. However, since the term ‘Germany’ lacked any form of clearly demarcated political definition – the ‘German lands’ were divided into well over three hundred independent political entities, such as cities, archbishoprics, and states –, a sense of German unity was difficult to cultivate. Frustrating though this political indeterminacy may have been to German patriots, it also rendered the preposition ‘German’ incredibly flexible and elastic, which facilitated a high degree of cultural expansivism. Where there are no boundaries, the cultural prestige of a neighbouring people is more easily appropriated. The still “potentially explosive” terminology<sup>4</sup> employed in establishing German national character – *deutsch* (German), *germanisch* (Germanic), *nordisch* (Nordic), etc. – was highly fluid, and scholars like the Grimms would mobilise this convenient vagueness to their advantage. To Jacob Grimm, ‘Germanic’ and ‘German’ were by no means interchangeable synonyms: Old Norse could and should, both linguistically and culturally, be classified as Germanic, but certainly not as German. However, by emphasising the cultural bonds between the German lands and their Germanic neighbours, he accentuated the divide between the Romanic South and the Germanic North, while, simultaneously, moving the boundaries of Germany’s

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.viii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gustav Neckel, “Island als klassischer Boden”, in *Mitteilungen der Islandfreunde* 18:1 (1930) pp.4-7.

<sup>4</sup> Shippey (2005) p.11.

cultural prestige far beyond the borders of what many people – especially in the North – were willing to consider German. It can be argued that, implicitly, Grimm addressed the prickly Schleswig-Holstein question (Danish: Slesvig-Holsten), over which Denmark and Prussia fought two wars in the nineteenth century, by simply counting this hotly disputed terrain to the German cultural area rather than the Danish one.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Wilhelm Grimm included a collection of *Altdänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* (1811) in his growing corpus of retrieved German folk narratives, which he regarded as an organic component of the larger German tradition. The national self-aggrandisement showcased in these works provided academic foundations to the political aspirations of Romantic nationalism, and could be used as a rhetorical tool in the process of establishing the geographical extent of a unified Germany.

The encyclopaedic appearance and scholarly erudition of DM cannot conceal the fact that the work constitutes, in many respects, a highly charged ideological manifesto. Grimm's political and religious preferences are nowhere clearly articulated or expressed directly, but they surely do slumber implicitly between the lines and in the whole layout and texture of the study. These may seem harmless enough on the surface, but closer inspection leads to the far-reaching implications of Grimm's systematisation. Considering the eclectic and incoherent nature of the sources, forcing the complete Germanic world-view as 'reconstructed' by Grimm in one single all-pervading system is academically questionable to say the least, and most likely even intentionally distortive. In order to create the illusion of cohesion and organic structure, Grimm modelled his Germanic pantheon on that of the ancient Greeks, forcing a strict classical hierarchy on what was in fact a geographically and chronologically diffuse, untamable hotchpotch of fragmentary pieces. Applying Greek hierarchy to the Germanic gods was more than simply a clever artifice for the sake of much needed orderliness; it was primarily informed by the aesthetic ideals of Neoclassicism, which propagated the superiority of Greek over Roman culture. This cultural movement originated from the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the archaeologist and historian who in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764) for the first time systematised the history of the arts in historical categories, and thereby laid the foundations of what would become known as antiquarian scholarship. He blamed the decline of 'good taste' in painting and sculpture in the ancient world on the increase of Roman influence, which eventually came to overshadow Hellas and to distort and corrupt the classical perfection of the ancient Greeks. In the modern age, in which the 'good taste' which had originated under the skies of ancient Greece was becoming more prevalent throughout Europe, artists and architects should turn their backs on Rome to find inspiration in Greece, the cradle of all that was good and beautiful.

Winckelmann's ideas grew incredibly influential in Germany, and triggered a wave of German art and literature inspired by the heritage of Greece in the decades around 1800: Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Hölderlin and Heinrich Heine are but a few of Winckelmann's most prominent adherents. As the Prussian capital Berlin was fashioning itself as a new 'Athens by the Spree', the use of Greek templates in the representation of Germanic culture appears to have been the most patriotic thing to do.<sup>2</sup> Association with the Olympians can be considered a vehicle of emancipation for the neglected and nearly-forgotten indigenous gods, and an attempt to render the Germanic, national myths as 'classical' as their Greek counterparts.<sup>3</sup> It was, in short, a way to increase the 'cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance J. Grimm (1844) p.xiii, and Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford 2013) pp.169-171.

<sup>2</sup> On the implementation of these Hellenistic aesthetics in Scandinavia, see Chapter 5.2.

<sup>3</sup> 'Classical' in the sense of Jan Assmann's definition of the term: as a model for innumerable and wildly varying texts and cultural expressions. (Bödl 2000, p. 4).



capital' and national prestige of the fatherland. Grimm's determination to present the reader with a clearly structured world-view, with a pantheon based on Greek templates, has influenced his interpretation of the sources to the point of utter distortion. Since Wuotan/Wodan/Óðinn was the great progenitor of the Æsir and the *Allfather*, Grimm assigned to him the archetypal role of 'father of the gods': a benevolent and good creator-god, whose powers border on omnipotence and who is not an uncommon figure in classical mythologies. Forcing the often terrible and cruel Allfather in this narrow bodice of the fatherly benefactor required a rigorous rewriting of the god's characteristics, and a thoroughly selective treatment of the sources. Grimm's Wuotan is the god of wisdom, a profound philosopher, creator of all beauty, the source of poetry and the decider of battles. But his darker side, his deceptive character and his human-like weaknesses, are largely ignored.<sup>1</sup>

Grimm's brand of German – and decidedly anti-French – patriotism was inseparably tied into his religious world-view, just like any "evaluation of myth goes together with a specific understanding of religion and, accordingly, with a specific conception of man."<sup>2</sup> Grimm's views were profoundly Lutheran and anti-Catholic, and constituted an anachronistic and polemical discourse in which the Romans – the same ones who had put an end to the 'good taste' of the Greeks, and who had forced the Germans to forget their indigenous mythology – came to signify everything that was considered Catholic, Southern – as opposed to Nordic –, decadent, degenerated, French, *un-authentic* and *anti-national*. Germanic culture on the other hand, could – just like Greek civilisation – be fashioned as historical prefigurations of Protestant truth, values and society.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Grimm avoided any reference to an 'organised priestly class' in pre-Christian Germany, since that would be considered too Catholic.<sup>4</sup> It may seem paradoxical to defend Protestantism against the perversion of Roman Catholicism through the cultivation of *pagan* culture, but in the national ideology of Grimm this was not an issue whatsoever; as a good Christian, Grimm was convinced of God's omnipotence, and he considered the whole of human history as a steady unfolding of His divine plan for mankind. As an earlier stage in God's plan, Germanic heathenism was not barbaric or spiritual darkness – for what benevolent God would let mankind, created in His own image, toil around in darkness? –, but rather a more concealed rendition of His universal truths. The totality of Grimm's Germanic world-view is presented in a comprehensive, structured hierarchy, descending from the Supreme Being and the worship thereof, through the world of the gods and goddesses and the realm of man to the dwelling places of the non-human creatures that 'people' the mythical imagination.<sup>5</sup> The gods constitute in this rationalisation simply the "vervielfachung der einen, höchsten unersaslichen gottheit" who is Himself not to be depicted: "die gottheit wirklich abzubilden fällt rein unmöglich, darum hat bereits der decalog des AT. [Old Testament] solche bilder untersagt."<sup>6</sup> With this rather creative take on the ten commandments, Grimm washed Germanic culture clean of any moral flaw it may have possessed in the eyes of a Christian audience. Pre-Christian polytheism, which at least abstained – in good Protestant fashion – from depicting the Almighty, was to be preferred to Catholicism, with its blatant offences against this divine prohibition. Grimm's theological justification of Germanic mythology is a continuation of the aforementioned defense against his critics, now by metaphysical means. But it did not

<sup>1</sup> J. Grimm (1844) pp.120-150.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Foreword", in Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (eds.), *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* (Bloomington – London 1972) pp.xiii-xxvii, xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Böldl (2000) pp.42-63.

<sup>4</sup> Shippey (2005) p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Grimm (1844) p.xliv.

merely ‘justify’ an appropriate level of admiration for the pagan past: it almost rendered it a national and theological *duty*. The contrast with the traditional Christian stance against pagan- and polytheism can hardly be overestimated. Grimm’s synchronisation of Protestant theology and Germanic mythology facilitated a new, overtly Romantic and pantheistic attitude towards the ancient gods, characterised by a strong reverence for the awe-inspiring and the *Sublime* in nature.

Among those who did not think much of the irrational Romantic practices of his contemporaries was Friedrich David Gräter (1768-1830), a much-respected pioneer of Scandinavian philology in Germany. According to the Grimmian model, the solid foundation of any legend (*Sage*) is always mythology, and where historical events have all but disappeared in the mists of oblivion, they are linked to legendary narratives and replace those parts of the legend’s mythological foundations which are weakest and about to disappear. The epic (*Epos*) is interpreted as a congruence of myth (*Mythus*) and history (*Geschichte*).<sup>1</sup> Gräter’s view on these matters was radically different, and was firmly rooted in the ancient theory of euhemerism, which had been popular among Nordic mythographers since the days of Snorri Sturluson (see Chapter 2.1.3). Rather than myth, *history* constituted the foundation of all other narrative genres, including mythology and legend. This idea was disseminated in his popular periodicals *Bragur* (eight volumes) and *Idunna und Hermode*, and his anthology *Nordische Blumen* of 1789, through which many German readers were first acquainted with Nordic poetry. In one of his writings, “Der Donnergott und der Asiate Thor”, published in *Bragur*, he largely reiterates Snorri’s account of the travels of a band of people from the East – Asians, or ‘Æsir’ –, including the mighty king Odin, who travelled to Scandinavia and paid visits to numerous German chieftains along the way. Due to deliberate deception, the naïve locals were tricked into believing that they were not humans, but gods, worthy of ritual worship. Thus, the cult of the Æsir was initiated in Germany and Scandinavia.<sup>2</sup> By the time this piece was published, euhemerism was already on its retour, since scholars had already established that a historical invasion of ‘Asian gods’ in Europe could hardly account for the great similarities between Indo-European mythologies from Iceland to India. It was incompatible with the new etiological models, based on the comparative study of myth (see Chapter 3.4.4). After Gräter published a negative review of Wilhelm Grimm’s *Altdänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* (1811), the Grimm brothers reacted with a highly polemical rejection of Gräter and his ridiculous, outdated theories. They were never soft on their intellectual opponents, and their sarcastic reckonings with euhemerists and other antiquarian views associated with the Enlightenment were largely assigned to oblivion. Through polemics, the Grimmian paradigm was firmly established in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

In the decades after the publication of the first edition of DM, there followed a veritable flood wave of publications – both academic and popular – on the topic of German(ic) mythology: a field of research which was an “öde geglaubten felde”<sup>3</sup> before Grimm presented his ‘new mythology’. The downright mythomania, or “epidemieartigen beschäftigung mit mythologischen Fragen im neunzehnten Jahrhundert”<sup>4</sup> ensuing from this paradigm shift, produced a range of studies that would stand the test of time and remain required – albeit somewhat outdated – reading for mythologists up to the present day. Among the most eminent German philologist directly affected by the success of DM was Karl Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> J. Grimm (1835) p.iii.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich David Gräter, “Der Donnergott und der Asiate Thor. Ein Bruchstück aus Werdomars Jugendträumen”, in *Bragur* 8 (1812), pp.1-22.

<sup>3</sup> J. Grimm (1844) p.v.

<sup>4</sup> Beate Kellner, *Grimms Mythen. Studien zum Mythosbegriff und seiner Anwendung in Jacob Grimms Deutscher Mythologie* (Frankfurt a. M. 1994) p.1.

Simrock (1802-1876), who published his very diplomatically titled *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie mit Einschluß der nordischen* in 1855. In the introduction to this work, Simrock places himself firmly in the Grimmian tradition by proclaiming that mythology is more than merely stories about gods and goddesses, and that he who wants glimpse a reflection of “das Bewusstsein des Volks in der vorhistorischen Zeit” therein will have to penetrate to a deeper level of myth-interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

In the preface to the second edition of the *Deutsche Mythologie*, Grimm argues that his use of the more complete Nordic sources in a comparative context is by no means only of benefit to the Germans; in his view, the Scandinavians received much in return. His presentation of a unified Germanic mythology did not only supply the Germans with a mythology of their own, it also offered Grimm’s colleagues in the North a deepened and more complete understanding of their own mythological heritage. According to Grimm, the Scandinavian and Continental sources complement and enhance each other:

Den nordischen alterthumsforschern, hoffe ich, wird mein verfahren gerade willkommen sein: wie wir ihnen für empfangnes gern wieder geben, sollen sie nicht allein geben sondern auch empfangen. unsere denkmäler sind ärmlicher aber älter, die ihrigen jünger und reiner; zweierlei festzuhalten, daran war es hier gelegen: dass die nordische mythologie echt sei, folglich auch die deutsche, und dass die deutsche alt sei, folglich auch die nordische.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Scandinavian reception of his work were overall not in line with Grimm’s positive expectations; whereas the Germans were nowhere in their reconstruction of a German mythology without the fullness of the Scandinavian sources, the Scandinavians did not seem too dependent on Germanic remnants from the mainland to prove that their mythology was an ancient one. Since neither Wilhelm nor Jacob Grimm was terribly proficient in Old Norse, they heavily depended on their correspondences with prominent Scandinavian scholars such as Rasmus Christian Rask and Finnur Magnússon (see Chapters 3.3 and 3.4) for their interpretation of Scandinavian texts. But the relationship between the brothers and their Nordic colleagues was often rather lukewarm, and occasionally deteriorated into – justifiable – accusations of plagiarism: ‘Grimm’s law’ for instance was actually first discovered and discussed by Rask, and is now sometimes more correctly referred to as ‘Rask’s Grimm’s rule’. Jacob Grimm’s questionable reputation in Nordic academia did little to enthuse Scandinavian scholars for his appropriative interpretation of the term Germanic<sup>3</sup>, which – in spite of his resolution to differentiate between ‘German’ and ‘Germanic’ – effectively amounted to a cultural Germanification of everything Scandinavian. Paradoxically, Scandinavian nationalists – scholars, poets and artists alike – who actively undermined German claims on Nordic culture, tended to formulate their national arguments along the lines of that very same Herderian philosophy that had facilitated Grimm’s appropriation of the North.

Although the *Deutsche Mythologie* constitutes an attempt to reconstruct the pre-Christian religion of ancient *Germany*, its effects on the mythic imagination were by no means restricted to the German-speaking lands. The work was translated into a wide variety of European languages, and inspired intellectuals everywhere to undertake similar quests for their respective nations’ own native religions. In doing so, these Romantic scholars developed their own vernacular mythologies, in which folklore functions as the key to an aboriginal, authentic and national substratum. Grimm’s reputation abroad as the leading authority on salvaging the national spirit from the mists of great antiquity even led to his name becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Joseph Simrock, *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie mit Einschluß der nordischen* (Bonn 1855) p.1.

<sup>2</sup> J. Grimm (1844) p.viii.

<sup>3</sup> Shippey (2005) p.11.

an epitaph; every aspiring nation was in need of a Grimm of its own to salvage and canonise the very essence of the national spirit. Many scholars and amateurs in other countries were not merely inspired by Grimm's example, their endeavours were often actively endorsed by him, as the 'distinguished veteran scholar' (see Chapter 5.1) maintained an impressive network of correspondences. The Finnish folktale-collector Elias Lönnrot, the Breton philologist Théodore-Henri Hersart de la Villemarqué, as well as the Slavic scholars Josef Dobrovský and Vuk Stefanović Karadžić profited – along with many others – considerably from their positive association with Grimm.

From the translators' programmatic introductions to foreign adaptations of DM, it becomes clear that Grimm's template for the national appropriation of Nordic culture was not only relevant to Germany. The British educationist and translator James Steven Stallybrass (1826-1888) gave his voluminous translation of the work – based on the three-volume fourth edition, and complemented with a fourth volume of supplements (1882-1888) – the name *Teutonic Mythology*, thus avoiding the terms 'German' and 'Germanic' and their potentially unfavourable political connotations. The term 'Teutonic' can be seen as an English variation of the continental terms *nordisch* and *germanisch*, but without the overt association with German nationalism, and undetermined enough for the translator to make it include Anglo-Saxon. Stallybrass opens his introduction with a quote, not from the German master himself, but from the Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), who – in his epochal work on heroes and hero-worship – explained the relevance of Old Norse mythology to modern Britain as follows:

I think Scandinavian Paganism, to us here, is more interesting than any other. It is, for one thing, the latest; it continued in these regions of Europe till the eleventh century; 800 years ago the Norwegians were still worshippers of Odin. It is interesting also as the creed of our fathers; the men whose blood still runs in our veins, whom doubtless we still resemble in so many ways. (...) There is another point of interest in these Scandinavian mythologies, that they have been preserved so well.<sup>1</sup>

According to Carlyle, it was a great blessing that the mythology of the Scandinavians – so akin to the "creed of our fathers; the men whose blood still runs in our veins, whom doubtless we still resemble in so many ways" – had been recorded so meticulously on that "strange island of Iceland": that barren "chaotic battle-field of Frost and Fire; – where of all places we least looked for Literature or written memorials".<sup>2</sup> Like Herder before him, Carlyle advocated the cultivation of Old Norse myth – on the basis of its completeness – in order to achieve a better understanding of one's own ancestral mythology. Stallybrass subscribes to this notion, and credits Grimm with having revealed the organic unity of all 'Teutonic' mythologies:

What Mr. Carlyle says of the Scandinavian will of course apply to all Teutonic tradition, so far as it can be recovered; and it was the task of Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie* to supplement the Scandinavian mythology (of which, thanks to the *Icelanders*, we happen to know most) with all that can be gleaned from other sources, High-Dutch and Low-Dutch, and build it up into a whole. And indeed to prove that it *was* one connected whole; for, strange as it seems for us, forty years ago it was still considered necessary to prove it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London 1841) p.25; James Steven Stallybrass, "Translator's Preface", in Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology by Jacob Grimm* (vol. 1; London 1882) p.v.

<sup>2</sup> Carlyle (1841) p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Stallybrass (1882) p.v (italics added).

Especially this last sentence gives us some idea of the impact of Grimm's ideas, and the enormous transformation this new paradigm of Germanic unity provoked throughout Europe. Grimm did not succeed in duplicating the academic triumph of his *Deutsche Grammatik* in the field of comparative mythology, simply by transposing his tested methodology from one to the other. *Deutsche Mythologie* did not become the *Origin of Species* of comparative mythology, and the study of myth never evolved into an academic discipline in its own right.<sup>1</sup> However, in the course of the nineteenth century, Grimm's mythological legacy acquired a life of its own everywhere, from Britain to Norway, and even far beyond the borders of the 'Germanic world' in Estonia and Latvia, where his model was implemented to reconstruct the nation's indigenous religion and mythology. The Grimmian paradigm shift would have a profound effect on the European conceptions of Iceland – that "klassischer Boden" for everyone interested in native mythologies – not least in Scandinavia.

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2016).

### 3. Back to the ‘Ocean of Poetry’: Nordic Romanticism (1800-1847)

#### 3.1 Determining a Point of Departure

Since every historical development is prefigured and conditioned by previous developments, solutions to the problem of ‘where to start?’ are per definition somewhat unsatisfactory. As the title of this study may lead to suspect, the period around 1820 is conceived as a breaking point; an era of *rediscovery* of long lost or neglected sources of cultural identity throughout Europe. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, this *topos* of romantic rediscovery of ancient texts does not apply seamlessly to the Icelandic case study, considering the cultural significance of Eddas and sagas in Icelandic society throughout its post-medieval development.<sup>1</sup> However, this does not imply that there was no philological revolution taking place amongst the Icelandic intelligentsia, in the way they interpreted the familiar narratives they had known since their youth. As the revealing title of Kristinn Andr sson’s study on the *Fj lnismenn* and their times suggests, the objects of scrutiny and interpretation did not change; they were just seen through ‘new eyes’ (*n y augu*).<sup>2</sup> But where did this new pair of eyes come from? And how did the old set get replaced by the new one? Metaphors like these may have an oversimplifying effect on our understanding of cultural developments, but they *do* convey some of the sense of innovation and ‘newness’ that Icelandic scholars and poets experienced in their activities at that time; a newness that later Icelandic historians would identify with ‘national awakening’ after centuries of darkness and silence (see Chapter 1.2.2). As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, every set of new eyes, every breakthrough of a ‘new epoch’ of cultural history, automatically entails a temporary blindness for the beauty of the preceding one.<sup>3</sup>

When the Danish linguist Rasmus Christian Rask (1787-1832), after having travelled the island far and wide, expressed his fears about the immanent extinction of Icelandic as a spoken language – sometime within the next three centuries – due to Danish cultural hegemony, his words did not fall on deaf ears.<sup>4</sup> The awareness of a language and – consequently – culture ‘under threat’ would not remain confined to the realm of academic speculation, but gave rise to a collective sense of *urgency*; a salvage paradigm, which engendered the kind of cultural activism that would prove fundamental in the development of Icelandic nationalism. Rask was himself involved in the foundation of the Icelandic literary society (*Hi  islenzka b kmenntafjelag*, 1816), and inspired his Icelandic colleagues with his culture-political, or ‘programmatic’ philology. It is in this philological revolution of the early nineteenth century that Iceland’s modern cultural nationalism begins. The starting point of the present study is situated in the midst of these developments, when Finnur Magn sson (1781-1847), the first protagonist of this research, composed his ground-breaking studies on eddic mythology in the 1820s. These writings have been referred to as the first ‘Romantic’

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<sup>1</sup> Clunies Ross and L nnroth (1999) p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Kristinn E. Andr sson, *N y augu. T mar Fj lnismanna* (Reykjav k 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (Haarlem 1949 [1919]) p.332. See especially Chapter 4.2.2, on the rejection of the r mur tradition by the *Fj lnismenn*.

<sup>4</sup> Rasmus Christian Rask, “Brjef fr  Rask”, in *T marit hins islenzka b kmentaf lags* IX (1888) pp. 54-100.

treatment of Old Norse mythology by an Icelander,<sup>1</sup> and would remain immensely influential throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On what grounds can Finnur's significant work be interpreted as a break with the past? How does it incorporate modern European 'Romantic' conceptions of mythology, and where does it continue indigenous Icelandic strands of Edda-interpretation? And most importantly; how does this new Edda-reception relate to Finnur Magnússon's own ideas on Icelandic identity? Following Hroch's three-phased model, this first chronological chapter may be perceived as an analysis of the initial, intellectual stage of the evolution of Iceland's national movement, as well as the institutionalisation and formal crystallisation of these expressions of national sentiment, characteristic of Hroch's second phase. As I have demonstrated in the introduction, these stages do not represent clear cut, consecutive steps towards the realisation of the nation state. I will avoid this teleological fallacy in the following assessment of Icelandic cultural history, and analyse the developments under scrutiny in their own contemporary political and cultural contexts.

The setting of the early national movement was, to a great extent, urban Copenhagen, rather than Iceland. In order to understand the 'philological revolution' of the early 1800s, some background information on the intellectual climate of this significant hub or centre of cultural transfer in Northern Europe is pivotal. Denmark did not emerge from the Napoleonic Wars unscarred, and the two battles of Copenhagen – in 1801 and 1807 respectively – left the city all but completely devastated. In the Treaty of Kiel (1814) the Dano-Norwegian union was dissolved, and Norway's ancient dependencies of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland were assigned to Denmark. Liberal and national movements emerged and vocalised their demands in the July Revolution of 1830, and in 1848 absolutism was – in the revolutionary spirit of that year – abolished. Despite the hardships of Hobsbawm's 'dual revolution' and the poverty following Denmark's defeat in the Napoleonic Wars, these early decades of the nineteenth century are paradoxically referred to as the 'Golden Age' of Danish intellectual history. It was in this intellectual climate that Søren Kierkegaard<sup>2</sup> composed his philosophical oeuvre, Hans Christian Andersen wrote his internationally acclaimed stories and Adam Oehlenschläger (1779-1850) introduced Romanticism to Denmark through his influential poetry. The priest Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), a paradigmatic figure of Danish Romanticism, found personal spiritual inspiration in the Old Norse myths and sought to reinvigorate Danish Protestantism through his writings.<sup>3</sup> His metaphysical treatment of eddic material will of course be of concern to the present study, in as far as these ideas were perceived by Icelanders. Also, the cultural transfer of – predominantly – German philosophy and philological theory, as well as literary influences from the other Nordic countries and the rest of Europe, will be taken into account. The – often rather innovative – adaptation of Hegelian philosophy and aesthetics in this Nordic setting, for instance, will be scrutinised in relation to emerging philological theories concerning the Old Norse corpus.

The uncontested focal point of this elaborate description of Danish cultural life in the decades after 1800 is the community of Icelandic 'expatriots' residing in Copenhagen, mainly for academic reasons. Kierkegaard described the city of his days, with its almost 127.000 inhabitants considered by many a boring small town, as "the most favourable habitat I could wish for. Big enough to be a major city, small enough that there is no market price on human

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<sup>1</sup> Wawn (2002) p.189.

<sup>2</sup> In the edited volume *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries. The Culture of Golden Age Denmark* (Jon Stewart (ed.); Berlin – New York 2003) the work of Kierkegaard is presented in the context of the debates and cultural developments of his time, so that the intellectual landscape of Golden Age Denmark becomes visible.

<sup>3</sup> On Grundtvig's immense importance to the development of modern Danish national identity, see Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, "Grundtvig og danskheden", in O. Feldbæk (ed.), *Dansk identitetshistorie: Folkets Danmark 1848-1940*, Vol. 3 (Copenhagen 1991) pp.9-188.

beings.”<sup>1</sup> From the Icelandic perspective, the Danish metropolis could by no means be described as a ‘small town’. As this chapter, will demonstrate, my protagonists’ experiences with this non-Icelandic world often had a profound effect on the way they perceived their own native island and its cultural heritage. How did these Icelanders position themselves in the intellectual climate of this Danish ‘Golden Age’? And how did their exposure to international ideas and cosmopolitan philosophies influence their respective senses of Icelandicness? The Icelandic reception of foreign appropriations of Old Norse culture and eddic mythology, as described in the previous chapter, has contributed significantly to the construction of new Icelandic conceptions of the cultural heritage they were so familiar with. Simultaneously, political developments in Denmark – like the highly problematic Slesvig Holstein Question, which caused two Schleswig Wars in the 1850s and 60s and propelled the concept of national identity to the centre stage of political argumentation – were followed with great interest, and contributed to the political rhetoric of the Icelandic national movement.<sup>2</sup> The outcome of these political and military developments – resulting in the loss of one-third of Danish territory in 1864<sup>3</sup> – served as an encouragement and inspiration to Icelandic nationalists.

Of course, the Icelandic intellectuals travelling to Copenhagen were by no means *tabulae rasae* upon arrival. With them, they took their specifically Icelandic conceptions of Old Norse-Icelandic literature that they had encountered in their upbringing at home and in the Icelandic educational system. What did these ideas consist of? And how did they influence the protagonists’ later ideas on Old Norse mythology? Many of these protagonists frequented the only gymnasium on the island, situated initially (since 1805) in Bessastaðir near Reykjavík and since 1846 in the capital itself (*Lærði skólinn í Reykjavík*). The training received by the students of this highest Icelandic institution of education will be considered, especially where the treatment of the Eddas is concerned. How did the classicism of Bessastaðir, where Latin was the main topic of interest, combine with the study of the Old Norse corpus? And how did the inspirational teaching practices of for instance Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791-1852) influence the young mind of Jónas Hallgrímsson, among others?<sup>4</sup> The period under scrutiny in Chapters three and four witnessed many watershed developments in Icelandic politics and culture. Some of these key-events are, after the abolishment of the Alþingi by royal decree in 1800 and the aforementioned ‘failed’ coup by Jørgen Jørgensen in 1809, the re-establishment of the Alþingi in Reykjavík in 1845 and the abolition of Danish absolutism in 1848.

### 3.2 *The Island in the City: Copenhagen*

#### 3.2.1 Denmark around 1800

It may seem counterintuitive to start an analysis of Icelandic cultural history not in Iceland, but rather in the cultural and political centre of the colonial power in charge of this remote Atlantic dependency. However, it was in the vibrant cultural melting pot of Denmark that those aforementioned ‘new eyes’ appear to have evolved, in the midst of the intellectual

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Stadier på Livets Vei* (Copenhagen 1845).

<sup>2</sup> On the influence of the Schleswig Holstein Question on Icelandic national aspirations, see Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, *Endurreisn Alþingis og þjóðfundurinn* (Reykjavík 1993) pp.123-426.

<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, this territorial reduction was not necessarily conceived in negative terms; it rid Denmark of a considerable German minority and facilitated the “much-desired overlap between state and nation.” (Brincker 2009, p.363). In this case, the ideals of nationalism helped in healing the wounds of military defeat.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed impression of the school in Bessastaðir and its curriculum, see Dick Ringler, *Bard of Iceland. Jónas Hallgrímsson. Poet and Scientist* (Madison 2002) pp.15-21.



developments collectively referred to as the Danish Golden Age. Although the more traditional Icelandic modes of Edda-interpretation – outlined in Chapter 2 – will by no means be excluded from the following investigation, it was the transculturation and the intellectual syncretism unfolding in Copenhagen that defined the innovative and Romantic treatment of Old Norse mythology amongst Icelanders. And it was here that a new kind of national awareness occurred in the community of Icelandic expats. Steeped in the enlightened spirit of Frederick V, Mallet, Klopstock and Von Gerstenberg, but also in the tradition of Árni Magnússon and his Copenhagen-based Arnamagnæan collection of medieval Icelandic manuscripts, these expatriots were inspired to redefine what it meant to be an Icelander: “It was in Copenhagen that students from Iceland became Europeans.”<sup>1</sup> But who were these Icelanders coming to Copenhagen? What purposes did they have in mind when they arrived? Where did they stay, and how did they interact with the other inhabitants and amongst themselves?

In the course of the eighteenth century, the basic requirements for Icelanders who aspired to official posts in the Danish administrative system shifted from material to intellectual ones. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries these positions had been divided among the wealthiest young Icelanders, but as the system grew more complex in the 1700s, higher educational demands became the norm.<sup>2</sup> Until 1736, when the University of Copenhagen first introduced a degree in law, significant numbers of Icelanders frequented the courses there and returned to Iceland without any official degree. But this had changed in the second half of that century, when two thirds of all Icelanders holding official posts had obtained an academic degree.<sup>3</sup> Since obtaining one of these posts was the primary motivation for practically all Icelanders pursuing academic education, the faculty of law was – especially after 1847, when Reykjavík opened its own theological seminary – by far the most frequented one. Denmark encouraged the education of its future civil servants and sheriffs in Iceland by granting the islanders special privileges, like financial support and free lodging at students’ hostels.<sup>4</sup> These favourable conditions made academic training in Copenhagen not only an attractive, but also a realistic alternative to life as a farmer or fisherman.

Many of the Icelanders that passed the exams that allowed them entry into the university were accommodated in *Regensen*; the old residence hall often referred to simply as *Garður* or *Gamli garður* (the Old Residence) by its Icelandic inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> In this characteristic building, situated in the very heart of the old city, Icelandic students shared a room with one of their fellow-countrymen (often a friend or classmate from their Bessastaðir days) and stuck together, “avoiding contact with the Danes who lived there and forming their own hermetically sealed society.”<sup>6</sup> For most of them the Danish capital, approximately two hundred times more populous than Reykjavík, formed their first experience of the chaotic and overwhelming world beyond Iceland, and homesickness as well as a shared sense of existential uprootedness created the strong ties holding this ‘sealed society’ together. Those who could move beyond this initial culture shock, were inspired by the great diversity of subjects offered in the curriculum of the university to explore new worlds beyond the study of law, and often found themselves immersed in the natural sciences, historiography, or – more importantly in the context of the present study – philology; despite the destruction caused by the fire of 1728, the Arnamagnæan Collection remained the most prestigious

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<sup>1</sup> Sverrir Kristjánsson and Tómas Guðmundsson, *Með vorskiptum. Íslenzkir örlagaþættir* (Reykjavík 1970) p.154.

<sup>2</sup> Karlsson (2000) p.155.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.258.

<sup>5</sup> Ringler (2002) pp.27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.28.

collection of Icelandic manuscripts in the world and, together with Árni Magnússon's testamentary foundation for the financial support of individual researchers (after 1770), continued to secure Copenhagen's position as the centre of Old Norse-Icelandic studies.<sup>1</sup>

'Hermetically sealed' though it may have been socially, *intellectually*, this community of Icelandic students was remarkably dynamic and internationally minded. These students functioned as *cultural brokers* or *cultural agents*; the select society of intellectual polymaths defined by Hroch as the essential initiators of the first stage of national movements.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the intellectual climate of the city challenge their own traditional conceptions of Icelandic culture and identity, it also inspired them to reformulate what being an Icelander encompassed and to enlighten those masses of Icelandic farmers and fishermen who had neither the time nor the money to immerse themselves in intellectual development.<sup>3</sup> It was this urge to share the fruits of their academic endeavours that would inspire them to establish periodicals and journals, in which complex scholarly subjects were treated in understandable terms for every interested Icelander to grasp. Thus, the Icelanders in Copenhagen fulfilled the role of *intermediaries*, creative mediators, both between Iceland and the wider realm of European intellectual culture, and between the educated elite and the 'common folks' of Iceland, who never left their island and made up most of their own people. Before zooming in on the separate protagonists of this chapter and the individual ways in which they have interpreted and mediated the ideas they encountered in Copenhagen, I will provide some further information on the cultural context in which this interaction occurred.

The intellectual climate of the Danish capital was especially unique because of its geographical function as the bridge between Scandinavia and Germany. The immense influence of Copenhagen's German circle has led to the somewhat derogatory description of Denmark as the 'Danish end of Germany'.<sup>4</sup> Although this overstatement clearly ignores the originality of Danish thinkers at that time, it is nevertheless revealing that German was still the preferred language of the city's higher circles.<sup>5</sup> The 'Nordic Renaissance', pioneered by Klopstock, Gräter, Von Gerstenberg and Herder, had taken root in the German imagination and found expression in widely divergent cultural phenomena, ranging from Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Das Eismeer* (1823-4), to Baron Carl von Reichenbach's decision to name the hypothetical 'life force' animating all things *odic force*, in honour of the Nordic god (1845).<sup>6</sup> In his growing corpus of retrieved German folk songs, Wilhelm Grimm included a collection of *Alddänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* (1811), which he regarded as an organic component of the larger German tradition. In the same spirit of national appropriation, his brother Jacob claimed Old Norse mythology for Germany by labelling his collection of translated myths *Deutsche Mythologie* (see Chapter 2.2.3).<sup>7</sup> This cultural and intellectual infatuation with the North did not go unnoticed in Danish academia, and would

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<sup>1</sup> On 'Icelandic Copenhagen', see Guðjón Friðriksson and Jón Þ. Þór, *Kaupmannahöfn sem höfuðborg Íslands* (Reykjavík 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1.2.1.

<sup>3</sup> Andrésson (1973) p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Krebs (2011) p.171.

<sup>5</sup> On this interaction between Danish and German culture in Copenhagen, see especially Nikolaj Bijleveld, "Germans making Danes. Germans and the German Language in Copenhagen and the Construction of Danish Culture 1750-1880", in Petra Broomans and Goffe Jensma (eds.), *Battles and Borders. Perspectives on Cultural Transmission and Literature in Minor Language Areas* (Groningen 2015) pp.40-57.

<sup>6</sup> On the eighteenth and nineteenth century treatment of Old Norse mythology in Germany, see Klaus Bödl, "'Götterdämmerung'. Eddufræði í Þýskalandi á 18. og 19. öld og áhrif þeirra á Richard Wagner", in *Skírnir* 170 (1996) pp. 357-388.

<sup>7</sup> Leerssen (2004) p.235. On the influence of Jacob Grimm's theories of mythology in Northern Europe, and on the quarrel between Friedrich David Gräter and the brothers Grimm, see Chapter 2.2.3.

have a profound effect on the development of Danish Romanticism and the role of mythology in the Scandinavian imagination.

The University of Copenhagen, after having suffered severe damage during the battle of 1801, had recuperated swiftly in the first decades of the nineteenth century. It undertook extensive rebuilding projects that would last throughout the century, and opened its new main building in 1836. Within the university's walls, the great thinkers of the Golden Age discussed the influential philosophical currents of their time and juxtaposed their own ideas therewith. Most influential among these intellectual currents was Hegelianism, which received a very lively reception in the Nordic countries and in Copenhagen specifically ever since Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860) first introduced it in Denmark in 1824.<sup>1</sup> It was in Copenhagen, and in the writings of Danish Hegelians like Heiberg, that Icelandic intellectuals first encountered Hegel's ideas on the aesthetic development of the *Weltgeist* through consecutive stages of cultural and literary evolution. Hegel's normative approach to Old Norse literature and the Icelandic reactions it engendered will be the subject of Chapter 6.1.2.

### 3.2.2 Danish Romanticism

It has been argued that, unlike most national Romanticisms, Danish Romanticism has a very tangible starting point in history, namely the 1801 battle of Copenhagen.<sup>2</sup> Although this claim may easily be exposed as a historiographical oversimplification, the fact remains that after the Napoleonic Wars the concept of 'North', representing a remote refuge from the political turmoil of mainland Europe, became a positive factor in European imagination.<sup>3</sup> The wars had been especially traumatic for Denmark and Sweden, and marked the final stage of their long term 'devolution' from early modern superpowers to politically harmless small-states. This decline in international significance engendered a more introspective and defensive mode of self-fashioning, in which the heroic past served as a medicine against the painful present.<sup>4</sup> This retreat from the international arena of world politics and towards the idyllic and pastoral sources of Nordic culture was further encouraged by Herder's and Fichte's national ideologies, as well as by the internationally acclaimed poems of the 'Nordic bard' Ossian, which reached the pinnacle of their influence in Europe in the early 1800s.<sup>5</sup> The Ossian hype provoked a cultural promotion of the North, which served as a compensation for the loss of political influence. The reception of this literary forgery, as well as Thomas Gray's poem *The Bard* (1757) in the Nordic countries, cannot be considered separately from these political and cultural developments. In these foreign works, Danish scholars encountered the primitivism of the 'Nordic genius', that was in no way inferior to that of the ancient Greeks, epitomised by Homer.<sup>6</sup> One of those sentimental Danish souls affected by the ancient songs of the Scottish bard was Adam Oehlenschläger, to whom the introduction of Romanticism in Denmark is commonly attributed. When in 1800 the University of Copenhagen issued an essay competition on the question whether it would be beneficial for modern Nordic literature

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive overview of Danish Hegelianism, see Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*. Tome I: *The Heiberg Period: 1824-1836* (Copenhagen 2007). See also Chapter 6.1.2.

<sup>2</sup> Tine Damsholt, "Being moved.", in *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 29 (2000) pp.24-48, p.24.

<sup>3</sup> Tuchtenhagen (2007) pp.130-131.

<sup>4</sup> Danish antiquity also became a political instrument in the ongoing territorial disputes with Germany. See Inge Adriansen, "'Jyllands formodete tyskthed i oldtiden' – den dansk-tyske strid om Sønderjyllands urbefolkning", in Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Angantyr. The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Aarhus 1996) pp. 120-146.

<sup>5</sup> Greenway (1977) pp.99-138.

<sup>6</sup> Bo G. Jansson, "Nordens poetiska reception av Europas reception av det nordiska", in Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Angantyr. The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Aarhus 1996) pp. 192-208, pp.196-199.

to replace Greek mythological themes with Old Norse ones, Oehlenschläger referred in his affirmative essay to the sublime greatness of Ossian's poetry, and the innovative creativity of the Nordic genius. In his mind, the ancient Bardic, Old Norse, and modern Nordic cultures were clearly linked, and components of the same primordial genius. Although his essay was only awarded the *second* prize – the first prize actually went to an essay arguing *against* the cultivation of Nordic myth –, the ideas contained in it would have a lasting effect on Danish and Scandinavian culture. Oehlenschläger had been introduced to the Eddas by the poet Edvard Storm, the principal of his high school, and would find in them a treasure trove of literary themes and poetic inspiration when read through the lens of Ossian and Goethe. In 1802, he attended the lectures of the Norwegian-born Danish philosopher Henrik Steffens, who introduced German Romanticism – primarily Schlegel – to Danish intellectual life and had a great effect on Oehlenschläger and his contemporaries. In his first great historical tragedy, *Hakon Jarls Død* (1803), the poet thematises the death of jarl Hákon Sigurðsson (Norwegian: Håkon Sigurdsson; ca. 935-995), ruler of Norway, and one of the legendary defenders of Old Norse paganism against the advancement of Christianity. The theme of the decline and fall of a once proud civilisation, so prominent in the poems of Ossian, forms the tragic keynote of the entire work; with Hákon's violent demise, so too fade the gods of old. In the howling winds, a stutter of Valhalla's gods and goddesses can be discerned: "Our time is over! Soon we sink."<sup>1</sup> After the gods have put their faith in the jarl's strength, and the god Hermod tells him that fair Freia weeps tears of gold at the thought of a crucified criminal becoming overlord of the North (eighth strophe), Hakon meets his fate and dies heroically. The poem concludes nostalgically that the old gods left the old North never to return, and that in a landscape dominated by churches and monasteries, only the occasional standing stone serves as a reminder of those "ancient extinguished flames".<sup>2</sup>

Eddic themes permeate Oehlenschläger's entire oeuvre, and form the poet's preferred mode of expressing the transcendental idealism of his time.<sup>3</sup> Some of his works constitute poetic re-renderings of eddic myths, like *Thors Reise til Jotunheim* and *Baldur hin Gode*, both published in his *Nordiske digte* of 1807, in the preface of which he identified the 'peculiarly national' ('det ejendommeligt nationale') as the poet's most important subject. This national peculiarity was, in the case of Denmark and the Nordic countries, most splendidly exemplified by the pagan heritage of the ancestors. In his poem *Guldhornene* ('The Golden Horns', 1802), inspired by the mysterious disappearance of two ancient drinking horns from the Danish National Museum, he glorified the times when "it shone from the North" ("da det straalte i Norden") and when "Heaven was on Earth" ("da Himlen var paa Jorden"), to which the antiquarians from the seventeenth century yearned when the ancient gods, with their 'star-flashing eyes' ('Med Stjerneglans i Öie') granted them the first golden horn. Also in his tragedy *Palnatøke* (1809) about the legendary Danish hero Pálmatóki –like Hakon a staunch defender of the ancient faith – the decline of paganism is equated with the end of Nordic greatness. The old faith is described as the 'strong Light of Truth' ('det Staerke Sandheds Lys') that once taught the Saxons, Obotrites and British alike what to believe, and that shone from Uppsala, Trondheim and Lejre. But Odin's ancient teaching was coming to an end, and "The North dies, the worst Death of all."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the demise is never quite complete, and some of that ancient glory can still be experienced today. This primordial greatness could, according to Oehlenschläger, still be experienced in Danish nature.

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<sup>1</sup> "Vor Tid er vorbi! Snart synke vi."

<sup>2</sup> "Oldtidens slukte Luer."

<sup>3</sup> Greenway (1977) p.1.

<sup>4</sup> "Og Norden døer, den værste Død af alle." Adam Oehlenschläger, *Poetiske skrifter* Vol. 4 (Copenhagen 1929) p.30.

His identification of eddic mythology and the Danish nation reaches a climax in the poem *Der er et yndigt land* ('There is a lovely country', 1819), which was adopted as the civil national anthem of Denmark in 1835. In this work the heroic Viking past and the 'armour-suited warriors' ('harniskklædte Kæmper') of old are glorified (second strophe). But now, Denmark had become a bastion of peace, which "is still lovely, because the sea waves so blue frolic, and the foliage stands so green" ("endnu er skønt, thi blå sig søen bælder, og løvet står så grønt", third strophe). The idea of modern Denmark as a 'more peaceful version' of the Old Norse kingdom is expressed mythologically, in the image of 'Freyja's hall' ('Frejas sal'), with which Denmark itself is identified (first strophe) and which forms the peaceful and love-centred alternative to Odin's violent Valhalla.<sup>1</sup> This theme, of modern Nordic nations being the pacified versions of their heroic and violent predecessors, is a recurring theme in Nordic Romanticism.<sup>2</sup> Oehlenschläger was recognised as a great Nordic genius himself during his lifetime, and in the early reception of his work we find a tendency to equate his poetry with those other literary works that he himself had identified as 'national literature'. Thus, the aforementioned Hegelian Johan Ludvig Heiberg offered a series of lectures at the University of Kiel, in which he compared the qualities of the Eddas to those of Oehlenschläger's poems.<sup>3</sup> Both bodies of poetry could, in the spirit of Herder, be considered offshoots of the same organic *Volks poesie*, and were therefore equally relevant to modern Northerners.

### 3.2.3 N.F.S. Grundtvig

The second towering figure of Danish Romanticism who would have a profound effect on the reception of Old Norse mythology was N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), a philosopher and a Lutheran priest. Like Oehlenschläger, he had attended the 1802 lectures of Henrik Steffens, and like him, he combined modern philosophy – Fichte's and Schlegel's idealism – with his love for Old Norse mythology. However, the eccentric scale on which Grundtvig planned his ideological project of Edda-reinterpretation went beyond anything his predecessors could have imagined; "If Oehlenschläger was the guardian of the old religion, Grundtvig was its evangelist, and he saw no contradiction between this vocation and his undeniably profound Christian faith; rather, he regarded the two as mutually stimulating or, even more than this for the dulled northern psyche, mutually essential."<sup>4</sup> Due to Grundtvig's paramount importance to for the development of Danish national identity,<sup>5</sup> his systematic psychologisation of mythology has attracted much scholarly attention in Denmark and beyond.<sup>6</sup> Like Oehlenschläger, he had found inspiration in the legends of the pagan Danish hero Pálmatóki (*Palnatoke*, 1804) and thematised the fatalistic trope of pagan decline in the North. The most seminal of all his works on the subject of mythology, *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-*

<sup>1</sup> According to the *Poetic Edda*, half of those who have fallen in battle go to Freyja, whereas the other half goes to Óðinn (*Grímnismál*).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Chapter 6.3, on Benedikt Gröndal's poem *Brisingamen*, in which the goddess Freyja again plays a prominent role in the modern transformation of the North.

<sup>3</sup> These lectures were published in German, under the title *Nordische Mythologie. Aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen* (Schleswig 1827).

<sup>4</sup> Arnold (2011) p.112.

<sup>5</sup> Lundgreen-Nielsen (1991). In a recent anthology on Grundtvig's role in Denmark's nation-building process, edited by John A. Hall, Ove Korsgaard and Ove K. Pedersen (*Building the Nation. N.F.S. Grundtvig and Danish National Identity*; London – Ithaca 2015), the philological dimension of Grundtvig's work is largely neglected.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the key publications are: Lars Lönnroth, "The Academy of Odin: Grundtvig's Political Instrumentalization of Old Norse Mythology" (1988), in idem., *The Academy of Odin. Selected papers on Old Norse literature* (Odense 2011); Sune Auken, *Sagas spejl. Mytologi, historie og kristendom hos N.F.S. Grundtvig* (Copenhagen 2004); Jens Peter Ægidius, *Bragesnak. Nordiske myter og mytefortælling i danske tradition (indtil 1910)* Vol.1 (Odense 1985).

*Sprog, historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst* ('The Mythology or Symbolic Language of the North, an historical and poetic overview and explanation'; 1832), constituted a profoundly reworked rendering of his earlier thoughts on the subject, expressed in his *Nordens Mytologi* from 1808.<sup>1</sup> His emphasis on the psychological internalisation of mythological themes formed the great innovation of his work on the Eddas, and makes Grundtvig an intellectual forerunner of Carl Gustav Jung with his interpretation of mythology as a subjective symbolic language.<sup>2</sup>

In Grundtvig's elaborate conception of Old Norse mythology as a Nordic symbolic language, or picture-language, through which universal truths could be revealed, the approach to the Old Norse sources is not very academic, and, as stated by Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, his "synthetic understanding, 'the *vision*,' has priority over the sources, which he rejects as late and spurious if they do not fit in with his interpretation. [...] Grundtvig does not, as he alleges in the introduction to *Nordens Mytologi* [1808], see edda in edda's own light."<sup>3</sup> The subjectivism of his creative, metaphysical reinterpretation can be considered the defining element of *Romantic* mythography, as opposed to more pragmatic or source-based interpretations.<sup>4</sup> His selection of sources depended on their usefulness within the context of his theories, and the enthusiasm a myth provoked in him formed the only decisive criterion in determining its authenticity. Intuitively, this method of 'research' would lead him to the very heart of the pagan message. He envisioned his model of experiencing the myths as an inspiration for his fellow-countrymen, that could serve as a program for national regeneration if incorporated in the national educational system with which Grundtvig was deeply concerned.

One of the central mythological themes in his work is the perpetual struggle between Thor (Þórr) and the giants (*jötnar*), in which Thor represents the liberating force of nature through which man can come to a full cultivation of all that which he is potentially capable of. It is the quintessence of Romantic self-expression and self-development, against the restricting cultural boundaries and social conventions that obstruct this subjective development. Censorship, restricting culture, death and 'Rome' – signifying elitist, Latinate and southern culture – is in this mythological analogy represented by Loke (Loki); the problematic entity and shape-shifter placed somewhere between the world of the giants and that of the gods. It is noteworthy that, unlike previous promoters of Nordic culture – like Klopstock – Grundtvig did *not* seek to elevate Nordic literature to the 'classical' status of Greek and Roman literature. Rather, he sought to expel this second category from Danish culture altogether. Since Grundtvig envisioned his mythological project as a program for all people comprising the nation (*folket*), the elitism of modern high culture – which he also discerned in Oehlenschläger – disgusted him. But as a convinced democrat, he did not simply believe that everything Loki stood for was to be destroyed. In his problematic adagio "Freedom for Loki as well as for Thor" he summarised the democratic ideal of freedom for everyone and every world-view, no matter how perverted or debased they may be: a strong cry against the repressive political censorship of late absolutism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The 'original' and the 'reworked' edition can hardly be considered the same work, as Grundtvig had changed many of his views on the myths in the twenty-four years between these works. Of special influence was the publication of *Beowulf*, the contents of which Grundtvig was unfamiliar with in 1808, but which is transformed his concept of mythology as a symbolic language in the second edition. See Shippey (2005) p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Chase (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, *N. F. S. Grundtvig: Skæbne og Forsyn: Dyufirt i Grundtvigs nordisk-romantiske dramatik* (Copenhagen 1965) p.20. Translated in Chase (2000) p.67.

<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between these two modes of Edda reception, see Chapter 1.3.

<sup>5</sup> Lundgreen-Nielsen (1994) pp.41-68, pp.65-66.

In its very essence Grundtvig's mythological philosophy can be characterised as antagonistic; adjusted to his dualistic, polarised world-view, much of the complexity of Snorri's elaborate systematisation of Old Norse mythology (see Chapter 2.1.3) is lost. According to Grundtvig, it was not only elitist 'southern' culture (Rome/Loki) which had to be opposed, but especially Denmark's archenemy Prussia, and German, or 'Teutonic' culture in general. Grundtvig was well aware of the Germans' infatuation with Old Norse mythology, but he considered their Teutonic renderings thereof distorted and degenerate; the Germans were in fact Loki in disguise and posed a very real threat to Denmark. The most authentic renderings of the old myths could be found in the work of his compatriot Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1150-1208); a Danish alternative to the Icelandic sources of which he was very critical. Although Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, in which many of the eddic themes appear in different guises, was generally considered contaminated and inferior to the more overtly pagan (and thus more *authentic*) Eddas, Grundtvig argued that Saxo wrote at a time when the Icelandic sources were largely unknown in Denmark, from which he concluded that he must have drawn from another authentic, more Danish source of pre-Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he considered both Icelanders and Danes as the protectors of the original Old Norse tradition, who should join forces in "some form of holy alliance" against the "fierce attacks of German scholars."<sup>2</sup> To Grundtvig, Norse mythology was clearly an instrument of cultural *differentiation* (the fifth function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1), to be used for voicing a Nordic identity *in opposition to* the Germans. His belief that the Eddas should be mobilised in an on-going cultural struggle with foreign intruders is reflected in the title he envisioned for a new version of the *Prose Edda*, namely *Snorri's Edda for Everyday Use* (1847-48). Although this work was never completed, the underlying idea that Snorri's rich imagery could contribute to the glorious resurrection of Scandinavia was echoed in all his writings on mythology.

Even though his envisioned national re-education of Denmark was never accomplished and his mythological project has even been characterised as a 'failed experiment'<sup>3</sup>, the impact of his work on Danish culture, religion and national identity can hardly be exaggerated. The great paradox of his dedication to 'pagan' mythology *and* Christianity simultaneously has been controversial and hotly debated.<sup>4</sup> The key to understanding this counterintuitive symbiosis lies in Grundtvig's interpretation of the term 'Allfather' (*Alföðr*), originally a *heiti* (alternative name) of the god Óðinn,<sup>5</sup> but in Grundtvig's intuitive interpretation a reference to the one God whose name had been forgotten by the inhabitants of the North, but who remained the focus of worship in a Nordic tradition of pre-Christian, primordial monotheism. This 'natural religion', through which the Nordic peoples had found their way back to God, was therefore essentially compatible with the Christian faith and perfectly suitable to modern, Christian Danes.<sup>6</sup> Paganism was not synonymous with idolatry. Spiritual truth was in his eyes not restricted to the Bible, as some of his more orthodox Lutheran colleagues had the people believe; the Bible was in his opinion merely 'a book', and he questioned the theologians' traditional prerogative to distil

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Ewald's operatic poem *Balders Død* (1778), the first Danish theater piece inspired by themes from Danish antiquity, was based on Saxo's rendering of the Balder (Baldur) myth rather than the Eddas.

<sup>2</sup> Lundgreen-Nielsen (1994), p.49.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, pp.60-63.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Auken (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Attested in the eddic works *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Grímnismál*.

<sup>6</sup> The 'monotheistic potential' of Old Norse and Germanic mythology was not Grundtvig's discovery; the humanist Philipp Clüver (1580-1622) already argued that the name of the Germanic deity *Teuto* (actually *Tuisto*, attested in Tacitus's *Germania*) was etymologically related to the Greek *theos* and Latin *deus*, from which he concluded that the ancient Germans were actually praising God. See Krebs (2011) p.139.

what they considered ‘Christianity’ from its pages.<sup>1</sup> These controversial reformist ideas led to him being fined and a seven-year prohibition to preach. Controversial though his theological standpoints may have been to his contemporaries, they can be considered typical for the kind of Protestant universalism as promulgated by Fichte and introduced to Denmark by mediators like Steffens. The peculiar symbiosis of universalism – with its typical *inclusivism* – and nationalism, which is more naturally associated with *exclusivism*, can be considered the defining trademark of Fichte’s as well as Grundtvig’s world-view. Old Norse mythology is both an aesthetic expression of *universal* truths, as well as the symbolic language of the quintessentially *Nordic* (or national) psyche. It is this paradoxical position between universalism and nationalism that has rendered mythology a controversial topic in Romantic discourses.

### 3.2.4 Pan-Scandinavian and Nordic Tendencies

As the nation rose to prominence as the primary organic entity in which to compartmentalise and organise humanity, alternative supra-national models of collective identity emerged as well. In the writings of Romantic nationalists like Grundtvig an awareness of Nordic identity is discernible, for instance in his aforementioned call for some sort of ‘holy alliance’ between Icelanders and Danes against the Germans. The national aspirations of Danes, Icelanders, Swedes and Norwegians would often lead to political tensions in the course of the nineteenth century, but the awareness of a shared heritage, culture, and linguistic origin (Old Norse) connecting the peoples of the North would remain an important element in Scandinavian culture. The concept of northernness transformed as a result of the late-eighteenth century cult of the Sublime<sup>2</sup>, and turned the remoteness and desolation of the North into a positive cultural topos that all the self-fashioned descendants of the Vikings could relate to. The cultural construction of the North(ern lands; in the continental Scandinavian languages referred to simply as *Norden*) dovetailed with the development of philological historicism and the Romantic reappraisal of Early Modern Scandinavian interpretations of Old Norse-Icelandic literature<sup>3</sup> (see Chapter 2.2.2). Despite regional variations in the treatment of these sources (e.g. Grundtvig’s preference for Saxo Grammaticus over Snorri, and the continental Scandinavian predilection for the mythical *fornaldarsögur*) the idea that the origins of Nordic culture lay hidden in the Old Norse texts was a common one in all of the *Norden*.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the concept of *Norden* the old Latin term *Scandinavia* (derived from Scania (Skåne): a region in the south of Sweden<sup>5</sup>) entered general usage in the eighteenth century, signifying originally the cultural-linguistic region consisting of Norway, Sweden and Denmark (including its ‘Nordic’ dependencies of Iceland and the Faroe Islands<sup>6</sup>). The ambiguous terminology and overlapping categories applied to the vague and elastic concept of Nordic identity engendered much confusion on matters of exclusion and inclusion. Were the non-Germanic inhabitants of Northern Europe Nordic? And the Baltic states, or Germany? And beyond the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> See Grundtvig’s pamphlet *Kirkens Gienmæle* (1825).

<sup>2</sup> Clunies Ross (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, “Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Norden”, in idem (reds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo-Stockholm 1997) pp.1-24.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of ‘Nordic’ interpretations of history in Scandinavia, see Samuel Edquist and Lars Hermanson (reds.), *Tankar om Ursprung. Fortiden och Medeltiden i Nordisk Historieanvändning* (Stockholm 2009).

<sup>5</sup> An etymological connection to the name of the Old Norse mountain goddess Skaði (*Skaðin-awj*, ‘island of Skaði’, that is: Skåne) is often suggested, but remains highly contested. See John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge 2005) p.63.

<sup>6</sup> The definition of the term Scandinavia depends on whether one conceives it as a cultural-linguistic or (as is often the case in Anglo-Saxon usage) a geographical concept, in which case non-Germanic Finland and even Greenland can be included as well. Since I will focus on the concept primarily as an ideological cultural-linguistic concept, I will leave this more inclusive interpretation of the term out of consideration.



categorisation: how did the ideal of Nordic or Scandinavian integration and cooperation relate to the separate national aspirations of each of the participating nations? Comparative research has demonstrated that, on official occasions and jubilees, a delicate balance between national, Nordic and international/European discourses had to be struck.<sup>1</sup> Nordic and Scandinavian ideologies and national aspirations were not necessarily mutually exclusive, as the case of Grundtvig has already demonstrated. But, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 6.1, this precarious balance between nationalism and supra-nationalism could prove problematic within a discursive context of national exclusivity.

The primary vehicle – and generator – of Nordic identity was *culture*, just like European nationalisms had been generated through a specific cultivation of culture as well (see Chapter 1.2.1). The initiators of the ‘Nordic project’ were primarily poets and artists, not politicians. In fact, one could argue that the movement gained momentum *in spite of* politics, or in reaction to the political animosity between the various nations. The paradigmatic event in the development of pan-Scandinavianism took place in 1829, when the Swedish poet, bishop and scholar Esaias Tegnér – lauded throughout Europe for his long poem *Frithjof’s saga* (1820-5)<sup>2</sup> which became an instant success and would determine British<sup>3</sup> and German ideas on the ancient North – hailed Adam Oehlenschläger with laurels, crowning him ‘the Nordic poet-king’. On this occasion, which took place in Lund Cathedral, Tegnér proclaimed that the ‘days of discord’ between Denmark and Sweden were over (“Söndringens tid är forbi”); words that would become an important slogan for the pan-Scandinavian movement. Nordic poetry could serve as a reconciliation between two peoples of the same kin, only divided by politics. The idea that culture could function as a bridge, overcoming and transcending political differences, was a new concept and is indicative of the elevated, semi-religious status of the arts in the Romantic discourse.<sup>4</sup>

It is no coincidence that the two protagonists of this celebratory, semi-spontaneous event in Lund both found their primary inspiration in the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas (especially the *fornaldarsögur*) and Eddas. One specifically fertile symbol of the pan-Scandinavian ideal was found in the figure of Gefjon (Old Norse: Gefjun), a goddess associated with ploughing, virginity, and several legendary Danish and Swedish kings. She is attested in the *Poetic Edda* (*Lokasenna*), the *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*) and in Snorri’s *Heimskringla* (chapter five of *Ynglinga saga*), and is credited with having ploughed the Danish island of Zealand (Sjælland) away from what is now Sweden, creating the ‘gap’ that became lake Mälaren. Not only does this myth portray one of only very few eddic events that are actually locatable in *space* (if not in time), tying its content to the cultural heartland of Scandinavia (Denmark and Skåne); its subject matter could also be considered transnational, in that it represented the *physical* (and therefore spiritual) union of Sweden and Denmark, despite the insignificant political rivalry. Danish Zealand had been created out of Swedish soil, and lake Mälaren in Sweden could serve as a physical reminder of the primordial (or mythical) unity of the two nations. Gefjon, driving her oxen sons that pull the ploughs, became a popular allegory of Scandinavian unity and the ‘mother’ of Sweden, Denmark and Norway in the Romantic poem *Gefjon, skaldedikt i fyra sanger* (‘Gefion, a Poem in Four Cantos’; 1814) by the Swedish poet Eleonora Charlotta

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<sup>1</sup> Pieter Dhondt, *National, Nordic or European? Nineteenth-Century University Jubilees and Nordic Cooperation* (Leiden 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Based on the medieval Icelandic legendary saga *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* from ca. 1300, which takes place primarily in eighth-century Norway.

<sup>3</sup> Wawn (2002) pp.117-141.

<sup>4</sup> A status comparable to Christianity in pre-modern Europe (or rather ‘Christendom’), which could on occasion serve as a unifying force transcending political differences. In Romanticism, the arts and the cult of the Sublime did indeed take over many of these traditional functions of religion. See Chapter 1.3.

d'Albedyhll. Much later, in 1908, the 'Gefion Fountain' designed by Anders Bundgaard – a monumental testimony to the pan-Scandinavian ideal – was revealed in Copenhagen, which is situated on Zealand.

However, this example of pragmatic mythography centring around the unifying figure of Gefjon can be counterbalanced by other examples of allegorisation, in which eddic characters are used to *undermine* the idea of Scandinavian unity by accentuating national and political differences. Grundtvig's polemical poem *Thryms-Kvide* (1815) – a comical rendering of the eddic poem *Þrymskviða* which deals with the theft of Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir by the giant Þrymr – is a political work in which the nationalistic poet expresses his feelings about the treaty of Kiel (1814), which had led to the Danish cession of Norway to Sweden. In this plot, Norway is represented by Thor, whereas beautiful Freya allegorises Denmark; a national identification solidified in the aforementioned poem of Oehlenschläger. Sweden, the great evil-doer in the political drama of 1814, is represented by the malicious thief Thrym, who steals the hammer that symbolises the ancient union of Denmark and Norway, and the national strength resulting from it.<sup>1</sup> In this case, mythological allegorisation is used as a rhetorical instrument to polarise, and to essentialise the primordial animosity between the two Scandinavian superpowers. Not only do Thor and Thrym 'dislike' each other, they do not even belong to the same species; the one is a (fundamentally good) *god* whereas the other one is a (fundamentally evil) *giant*. Therefore, they represent two metaphysical counter-concepts that are mutually exclusive, and that will never be reconciled by any ideal of Nordic cooperation. Any sympathy between them is categorically impossible. Mythology is used by Grundtvig as a 'way of expressing' (Barthes) his deterministic ideas concerning Danoswedish relations. In this nationalistic context, the division is no longer considered 'merely politics', to be transcended by the unifying arts, but rather an expression of deeper universal and unshakable truths. Old Norse mythology was instrumentalised both to *solidify* (centripetal discourse) and to *undermine* (centrifugal discourse) the sense of Scandinavian unity.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the political archenemies of Denmark and Sweden, the Romantic treatment of eddic mythology also found expression in the bone of contention between the two: Norway. Here the appropriation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature could be justified with the argument that the Icelanders were actually Norwegians who had migrated to the distant island taking Norwegian culture with them and preserving it there. In this discourse the sagas and Eddas could be interpreted as branches in the larger tree of *Norwegian* literature.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Danish ideas on the birth place of Old Norse culture concentrated on South Scandinavia (Denmark,<sup>4</sup> Skåne), Nineteenth-century Norwegian scholars like Peter Andreas Munch and Rudolf Keyser – both belonging to 'Den norske historiske skolen' – argued that this cradle should be located in Norway, and that the ancestors of the Norwegians did not migrate northwards but originated in the High North, from where they spread out over Norway (*innvandringsteorien*,

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<sup>1</sup> Lundgreen-Nielsen (1994) p.56.

<sup>2</sup> In her monograph on historians and nationalism in East-Central Europe, Monika Baár differentiates between 'oppositional' and 'emancipatory' tendencies in the national discourses of her protagonists. My use of the terms 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' should be interpreted along the same lines. Baár emphasises that the differences between these two strands should not be over-polarised, and that the 'oppositional' tendencies "did not necessarily contain a sovereign nation-state; it more often entailed a limited degree of independence." The same applies to the centrifugal Icelandic discourses under scrutiny in the present study. Baár (2010) pp.294-5.

<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Snorri Sturluson (Norwegian: Snorre Sturlason), chronicler of the history of the Norwegian kings (*Heimskringla*) who spent much of his time in Norway, was portrayed as a semi-Norwegian by nationalistic historians.

<sup>4</sup> An argument in favor of Denmark was that the Old Norse language was itself referred to as *dönsk tunga* (Danish tongue) everywhere in medieval Scandinavia. See Magerøy (1965) pp.52-53.

‘the immigration theory’).<sup>1</sup> This could explain why the Norwegian-Icelandic renderings of the myths differed so fundamentally from Saxo Grammaticus’s Danish versions: they represented two independent narrative traditions that had had little to do with each other.

Beyond the walls of the universities the cultural identification with Old Norse mythology went so far that in 1862 the highest mountain range in Norway was given its official name *Jotunheimen* (from Old Norse *Jötunheimr*; ‘Home of the Giants’), derived from Old Norse mythology, by the poet Aasmund Olavsson Vinje. This practice of mythologising imposing national landscapes should be considered in the context of the Romantic ‘cult of the Sublime’ and the construction of sublime Nordic landscape-images.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, it can also be interpreted as a statement of cultural supremacy vis-à-vis southern Scandinavia – and especially Denmark –, where the landscape was characterised by an ‘uninspiring’ and ‘unheroic’ flatness, unworthy of the epic greatness of Old Norse culture.<sup>3</sup> Nordic landscapes expressed aesthetic truths, that went beyond the rational considerations of linguists and philologists. The same semi-religious enthusiasm for the wild and untamed was expressed in Sweden<sup>4</sup>, where the ‘Gothicism’ of the early modern age (see Chapter 2.2.2) experienced a Romantic revival (*nygöticismen*) in the works of Tegnér and his followers.<sup>5</sup> The Nordic renaissance and its ideological interpretation of eddic mythology did not remain constrained to the Romantic nationalisms of Scandinavia or even Britain and the German-speaking lands; it also inspired Polish and Baltic nationalists to fashion their respective nations as quintessentially Nordic.<sup>6</sup>

It was through this intellectual cacophony of overlapping, conflicting and quarrelling ideologies and discourses on ‘their’ heritage, that the Icelandic community in Copenhagen had to navigate its way. Located in the primary centre of learning in Northern Europe, these expats followed with enthusiasm what was going on in other parts of the Nordic world and beyond, and learned from it. Cultural and political developments in Norway and Slesvig Holstein, both areas with a problematic ethnic situation, motivated Icelandic intellectuals to rethink the state of affairs on their own island. In the 1820s the first protagonist of this study, Finnur Magnússon, would be the first Icelandic voice to be heard in this Romantic struggle over who ‘owns’ the Eddas. And this Icelandic voice had, apart from the fact that the manuscripts had actually been *written* on Iceland, one incomparably strong argument in its favour: its language. Paradoxically, it would be a Dane who provided the Icelandic nationalists with the rhetorical gunpowder they needed to cultivate this argument.

### ***3.3 Icelandic Culture in Denmark***

#### **3.3.1 Linguistic Activism and Literary Societies**

The Herderian notion that national languages constitute the most pristine expressions of national character was echoed throughout Europe, and formed the motivation for regional linguistic activists to initiate literary societies and periodicals, in order to preserve and cultivate the (often endangered) vernaculars of their forefathers. In the Romantic discourse, language often became *the* defining factor in distinguishing between nations, and the most

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.84-92, and Ottar Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. Århundre* (Oslo 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Tuchtenhagen (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 4.1.1, and Mitchell (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Zimmer (1998) p.644, 647.

<sup>5</sup> Mjöberg (1967).

<sup>6</sup> On the Estonian case, see Mart Kuldkepp, “National Epic and Nordic Identity. The Reception of *The Poetic Edda* in Estonia”, in A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig, and Lisbeth H. Torfing (eds.), *The 15th International Saga Conference. Sagas and the Use of the Past* (Aarhus 2012) p.193. For the case of Poland, see Baár (2010) pp.174-8.

logical and tangible basis for national categorisation. The entanglement of identity and language, or *ethnolinguism*, became a pivotal constituent of modern national identity, especially there where the ‘original’ vernacular was in danger of being overshadowed by a more powerful rival.<sup>1</sup> This diagnosis could lead to a collective existential fear, or a sudden ‘moral panic’ (Stanley Cohen; see Chapter 2.1.1), which would then inspire cultural entrepreneurs to salvage and rescue the threatened language and – by extension – national culture. Already in the late eighteenth century, Copenhagen became the stage for a linguistic feud resulting from the equation of language and national loyalty. German had by that time become the preferred language of the urban elite, causing tensions in the higher strata of Danish society. The situation escalated when the Romantic opera *Holger Danske* (1789), about the legendary Danish hero Holger, was conceived as an insulting caricaturisation of the Danish heroism that Holger embodied. The circumstances surrounding the provocative German translation and performance of the same opera in Kiel made matters even worse, and became the focal point of the ethnically charged debates in Denmark. They enraged the Danish writer Peter Andreas Heiberg, who parodied the controversial opera in his *Holger Tydske* (‘German Holger’) and proclaimed that “all those whose mother tongue is German prefer to be seen as subjects of the Holy Roman Empire rather than Denmark and they despise the Danish language and everything that is Danish contrary to all duty and obligation.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of this ‘German feud’, ethnolinguism became an integral element of the Danish self-image, which would only intensify in the course of the Dano-German conflicts of the nineteenth century.

It is in this milieu of linguistic nationalism that Rasmus Christian Rask (1787-1832), the acclaimed Danish linguist and philologist who is said to have mastered some twenty-five languages and dialects, began his academic career. Rask, who travelled far and wide and was in contact with many of the leading minds of the ‘philological revolution’ of the early 1800s, published his first work on Icelandic grammar in 1811, and consequently acquired the reputation that would lead to his appointment as editor of the Icelandic Lexicon at the Arnamagnæan Institute of Copenhagen in 1814. Between 1813 and 1815 he resided on Iceland, where he perfected his knowledge of the Icelandic language and culture, and came to the startling conclusion that, if no action would be undertaken, the Icelandic language would disappear entirely in the course of the coming two centuries, to be replaced by Danish. This worrying development had already left deep marks on the linguistic landscape of the Icelandic capital.<sup>3</sup> The decline of the Icelandic language would be more than just ‘a pity’ for the Icelanders themselves: it would prove an irreversible disaster for all native speakers of the surviving Nordic languages in Scandinavia. In the preface to his Swedish *Anvisning till Isländskan eller Nordiska Fornspråket* (‘A Guide to the Icelandic or the Ancient Nordic Language’; 1818), he places his linguistic activities firmly in the context of the ‘national awakenings’ of the Nordic nations:

In a time, in which the self-awareness of the Nordic nations and the interest in their forefathers, their literature, history and mythology has awoken so strongly, there is certainly no need for long justifications for an attempt to describe the language of the ancestors, with its entire specific structure and arrangement, in other words, *an Icelandic grammar*; an

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Language, Culture, and National Identity”, in *Social Research* 63:4 (1996) pp.1065-1080. Not all national discourses were linguistic in nature: often religious distinctions or a shared political past were deemed more significant than language. See Anderson (2006) pp.135-9.

<sup>2</sup> Heiberg, quoted and translated in Brincker (2009) p359.

<sup>3</sup> Rask (1888).

attempt that, may it succeed, is, in the light of all the foregoing, of the greatest benefit and importance.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the Icelandic language for all the peoples of the North is also reflected in his use of the term *Icelandic*, which he does not only apply to the language spoken on the island that gave the language its name, but also to the vernacular that was once spoken by *all* the inhabitants of the Nordic world; already in the title of the treatise he uses Icelandic and Old Norse interchangeably. There was no doubt to Rask's mind that it was this ancient language that set Iceland apart from the rest, and that this was the islanders' greatest treasure:

Every Icelander who is not entirely ignorant of the world will recognise that the ancient Norse tongue is the chief basis of Iceland's renown; for were it not for the poetry, the sagas and the language, the mother of all the languages of Scandinavia, hardly any man in foreign lands would know of the country and its people, nor have any interest in them, any more than in any other savage people or desert.<sup>2</sup>

Rask's unprecedented equation of *Nordic* and *Icelandic* language and culture ('literature, history and *mythology*') made his endeavour to preserve the language of Iceland a universal, pan-Scandinavian concern.<sup>3</sup> And a pressing one at that. By presenting his readers with an image of a primeval language in distress, he created the 'sense of urgency' that required vigour and immediate linguistic activism.<sup>4</sup> It is this element of endangerment, the prospect of immanent annihilation, that would serve as a solid cornerstone for the cultural revival of everything Icelandic in the decades following Rask's diagnosis. The processes of Danification and modernisation had brought Iceland and the Icelanders to the point of their 'to be or not to be', from which only the development of a strong collective self-consciousness could offer redemption.<sup>5</sup> When under threat of annihilation, those elements that distinguish the endangered culture from the rest become important symbols that acquire national significance.<sup>6</sup> The image of Iceland as the last bastion of 'authentic' Nordic culture resonated with Danish glorifications of ancient Scandinavia: a Nordic alternative to the classical culture of Hellas. Like the ancient Greeks, the medieval Icelanders had inhabited mountainous terrains and valleys in which they developed their elaborate political systems (the *Alþingi* could be likened to the Amphictyonic council of the Olympic games) and

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<sup>1</sup> Rasmus Christian Rask, *Anvisning till Isländskan eller Nordiska Fornspråket* (Stockholm 1818) p.v. Italics original.

<sup>2</sup> Rasmus Christian Rask, "Boðsbréf Rasks til Íslendinga og Íslands vina í Kaupmannahöfn, að halda fund og taka sig saman til að koma á fót hin íslenska Bókmentafélagi. Kaupmannahöfn 1. Janúar 1816", in Jón Sigurðsson (ed.), *Hið íslenska bókmentafélag. Stofnun félagsins og athafnir um fyrstu fimmtíu árin 1816-1866* (Copenhagen 1867) pp.62-5, 62. Quoted and translated by Clarence E. Glad and Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, in the unpublished grant proposal and description of the project *Icelandic Philology and National Culture 1780-1918* (Reykjavík 2013), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Hjalmar Lindroth, "Þegar íslenzkan var álitin moðurmál Norðurlandamálanna", in *Skírnir* 111 (1937) pp.109-19, 117-8; Jón Pétur Ragnarsson, *Entstehung und Entwicklung des Nationalbewusstseins in Island* (Tübingen 1959) pp.85-7.

<sup>4</sup> It may be pointed out that this pessimistic interpretation of Iceland's linguistic situation is not attested in any contemporary Icelandic sources, and that his fatalistic predictions do not reflect the actual position of Icelandic in Icelandic society.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1985) p.104.

<sup>6</sup> Edensor (2002) p.53; Zimmer (1998) p.648.

comparable epic literatures.<sup>1</sup> Surely, the *last* surviving remnant of this once flourishing culture, defying the progress of time on a peripheral island, deserved to be preserved.<sup>2</sup>

In his attempts to initiate a distinctly *Nordic* school of philology, Rask found himself at odds with the ‘founding father’ of philological historicism himself: Johann Gottfried von Herder. It was not a Romantic belief in a metaphysical *Volksgeist* that inspired him in his work on comparative linguistics and philology. In fact, nowhere in his elaborate correspondences does he refer to Herder or any of his writings. That is in itself remarkable, but can be explained through his rationalistic character and his pre-Romantic conception of patriotism, in which the king, and not some *Volksgeist*, functioned as the father and therefore binding element of the people.<sup>3</sup> As a patriot, Rask valued Denmark’s political *and* academic independence from Germany, which is reflected in his Nordic rather than (Herderian) Germanic perspective on philology and linguistic relations. He equally despised the cultural inclusivism of Jacob Grimm, whom he (rightfully) accused of plagiarising some of his own linguistic theories.<sup>4</sup> Both on the personal and on the academic level, his relations with the Danish proponents of Romantic nationalism were problematic. He labelled the most prominent of these, Grundtvig, an ‘irrational mystic’<sup>5</sup> and publicly attacked his treatment of Old Norse mythology with such ferocity that Grundtvig decided to shelve his envisioned translation of the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>6</sup> Rask rejected the Romantic cultivation of Old Norse culture that he observed around him, mainly on academic grounds; philological correctness and erudition were more important to him than the values of artistic inspiration and recreation, inspired – in Rask’s view – by a lack of actual knowledge, that characterise Romantic nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

As the afore-quoted fragment from his *Anvisning till Isländskan eller Nordiska Fornspråket* demonstrates, Rask considered mythology an integral constituent of the renewed national self-awareness of the Nordic peoples. He is, together with Jacob Grimm among others, credited with transforming the (comparative) study of mythology into a serious academic discipline.<sup>8</sup> As a philologist, he delivered several editions of the Eddas; first in 1808 together with his professor, Rasmus Nyerup (*Prose Edda*), and then in 1818 both the *Prose* and the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>9</sup> The 1808 edition constituted the first translation of the work accessible to non-specialists, which cannot be said about Peder Hansen Resen’s *Edda*

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<sup>1</sup> Falnes (1937) pp.218-9; August Boltz, *Island und Hellas* (Darmstadt 1892); Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, “Barbarians of the North become the Hellenians of the North”, in Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (ed.), *Northbound. Travels, Encounters, and Constructions 1700-1830* (Aarhus 2007) pp.111-128.

<sup>2</sup> On the ‘last of’-trope in national discourses see Leerssen (2006a) p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Niels Ege, “Editor’s Introduction”, in Rasmus Rask, *Investigation of the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language* (Amsterdam 2013) p.xxxiv.

<sup>4</sup> The theory commonly known as ‘Grimm’s law’, concerning the ‘first Germanic sound shift’, was actually first described by Rask. Nowadays the law is often referred to as ‘Rask’s Grimm’s rule’. See Elmer H. Antonsen, “Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm: Their Relationship in the Investigation of Germanic Vocalism”, in *Scandinavian Studies* 34:3 (1962) pp.183-94.

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Johan Bülow, 1 January 1813. See *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> This ‘newspaper feud’ took place in 1810, after Grundtvig had announced his envisioned translation and published several rather obscure specimen stanzas. See Lundgreen-Nielsen (1994) p.47.

<sup>7</sup> In that respect, Rask had more in common with the antiquarians of the eighteenth century than with the other protagonists of this study. See Alderik Blom, “Rasmus Rask and Romanticism”, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft* 23 (2013) pp.241-74.

<sup>8</sup> Lincoln (2000) p.87-88.

<sup>9</sup> Rasmus Christian Rask, *Snorra-Edda: ásamt skáldu og þar með fylgjandi ritgjörðum* (Stockholm 1818), and *idem.* (together with Arvid August Afzelius) *Edda Saemundar Hinns Froda: Collectio Carminum Veterum Scaldorum Saemundiana* (Stockholm 1818).

*Islandorum* (1665), which remained the standard edition until 1808.<sup>1</sup> Its accessibility did however not do damage to the high academic standard of the edition. The two Edda-editions of 1818, published in Stockholm, were heralded as the first *complete* editions of the works. In the introduction to his *Prose Edda* Rask remains a scholar and does not place the mythological narratives in a larger, ideological system of interpretation. However, the very fact that the writings of the Grimm brothers are entirely discarded in his scholarship can in itself be considered an ideological statement. Initially Rask and Wilhelm Grimm had corresponded about the possibility to prepare a German edition of the *Poetic Edda* together: Rask would provide the brothers with his Danish translation of the verses and his knowledge of the Old Norse-Icelandic language, which the Grimms lacked. The cooperation proved unsuccessful, due to Rask's aforementioned disapproval of the brothers' appropriative approach to Nordic culture – described as Germanic or even German (*deutsch*), whereas Rask preferred the term Gothic. Also, the interests of the Romantic Wilhelm Grimm (Germanic history and literature) and those of the 'anti-Romantic' Rask (linguistics) were too dissimilar to be bridged in a joint publication. In 1812 Rask informed him that he wished no longer to participate in the project.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside his research activities, Rask became the first president of the Copenhagen branch of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* in 1816. The Icelandic priest and teacher, and co-founder of the society, Árni Helgason (1777-1869) became the president of the Reykjavík branch.<sup>3</sup> Even though Rask very quickly gave up the presidency of the society in order to travel (only to return as its president in 1827), his conviction that Icelandic language and culture should be cultivated and safeguarded for posterity, not only for the Icelanders' sake, would remain its central philosophy. As the previous chapters have served to demonstrate, Rask can by no means be considered the initiator of Iceland's philological self-awareness and ethnolinguism. These can be traced back to the enlightened writings of Eggert Ólafsson, Árni Magnússon, and the Humanism of Arngrímur Jónsson, and according to some, even to the 'First Grammatical Treatise' from the twelfth century, in which Iceland's linguistic alterity is recognised for the first time (see Chapter 1.2.2). However, it would not be too bold a statement that nineteenth-century *modern* Icelandic nationalism received much of its intellectual substance from foreign initiatives like Rask's *bókmenntafélag*. After Rask's definitive departure in 1831, one year prior to his death, the presidencies of both branches of the society would remain exclusively in Icelandic hands. In the course of the century (from the 1830s onwards<sup>4</sup>), as Icelandic nationalism became a more centrifugal and political force, the modern philological ideas from 'the centre' (Denmark) could be imported, appropriated, and serve as intellectual arguments *against* the centre, the 'significant other' in Iceland's national discourse, and in favour of a more autonomous periphery (Iceland).<sup>5</sup> In other words: the 'aggressive assertivity' of the Icelanders, which is *per definition* imbedded in emancipatory identity discourses (like cultural nationalism), resulted to a certain extent from the foreign recognition of the significance of Icelandic culture to the world.<sup>6</sup> It may not be surprising that this foreign (Danish) element in the Icelandic revival would often be 'side-

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the adjective *Islandorum* (Icelandic) would disappear altogether in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; a possible indication of the *de-Icelandification* of the material in this period.

<sup>2</sup> Gryt Ant Piebenga, *Een studie over het werk van Rasmus Rask, in het bijzonder over zijn Frisisk Sproglære* (Groningen 1971) pp.195-7.

<sup>3</sup> The two branches continued their parallel existence until 1912, when they were united under Björn M. Ólsen, president of the Reykjavík branch. See for a history of the society Sigurður Línadal, *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag - Söguágrip* (Reykjavík 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Kristjánsson (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1985) pp.11-15.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, pp.39-40.

lined' in later, internalistic national self-narratives.<sup>1</sup> The institutionalisation of Icelandic philological identity, as initiated by Rask, was largely responsible for the Romantic upsurge in Icelandic philology and Iceland's ascent to the status of *Kulturnation*.

In his letter to the Icelanders (27 February 1815),<sup>2</sup> which contains his call for the establishment of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, Rask provides a structured overview of what the envisioned society should aspire to in his opinion. Even though the literary treasures of old had become celebrated throughout the Nordic world and beyond, the state of intellectual affairs on the island that had preserved the noble language of the ancestors was deplorable; much had changed since the golden age of Old Norse literature, and nowadays the Icelandic language and the literary gems it produced seemed to balance on the edge of oblivion. It could no longer be left to foreigners to appreciate Icelandic culture; the Icelandic nation itself should now begin to cultivate its own heritage and culture, just like other nations had begun to cultivate their own, and to educate and enlighten the Icelandic people.<sup>3</sup> Even, if it was 'a Danish man' who requested it.<sup>4</sup> Given these self-assigned tasks of the society, it has been described as "an embryonic academy for Iceland".<sup>5</sup> Apart from 'reconnecting' the Icelanders with their own cultural heritage, this 'Danish man' also continued to propagate the study of Old Norse culture and literature in his own country, where he founded *Det Nordiske Oldskriftselskab* ('The Old Nordic Literature Society') in 1825, which became a *royal* society (*Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab*) in 1828. This he did in cooperation with the Icelander Finnur Magnússon (see Chapter 3.4) and Rask's fellow-countryman Carl Christian Rafn (1795-1864), who also founded the library of Reykjavík that would later become the National Library of Iceland (*Landsbókasafn Íslands*), and who was a member of the Arnarnagæan Institute. Among the members of the preparatory comity for the establishment of this society was the Icelandic poet, classicist, translator and Edda-expert Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791-1852), who translated the *Prose Edda* and Icelandic sagas into Latin (*Scripta historica Islandorum*) and who, as a teacher at Bessastaðir, had a great influence on Jónas Hallgrímsson and his generation.<sup>6</sup>

*Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* was one of the first Icelandic society of its kind<sup>7</sup>, and is at present the second-oldest still operating society in general in Iceland.<sup>8</sup> But it would not *stay* the only institution of its kind; others followed in its wake, each with its own periodical. Initially the membership of the learned societies was restricted to an intellectual elite residing in Copenhagen. But gradually, they gravitated towards Reykjavík and became more accessible to the Icelandic public in their mission to educate the people.<sup>9</sup> This development can be considered the transitory movement from the first to the second (institutionalisation

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<sup>1</sup> The same tendency to minimise the Danish contribution also occurred in Faroese nationalism. See Kim Simonsen, *Networks in the Making of Faroese Literature*, published on [http://spinnet.eu/images/2010-11/simonsen\\_faroese\\_literature.pdf](http://spinnet.eu/images/2010-11/simonsen_faroese_literature.pdf) (2011; last accessed December 2013) p.1. The same can be said about the (Romantic) Swedish element in Finnish memory.

<sup>2</sup> Rask, "Frumvarp og boðsbréf Rasks til íslendinga., um að stofna félag til að efla bókmentir landsins", in Jón Sigurðsson (ed.), *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag. Stofnan félagsins og athafnir um fyrstu fimmtíu árin 1816-1866* (Copenhagen 1867) pp.57-9.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.57.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.59.

<sup>5</sup> Karlsson (2000) p.200.

<sup>6</sup> Ringler (2002) pp.18-19.

<sup>7</sup> An older example is *Hið íslenska lærdómslistafélag* (the 'Icelandic Learned Arts Society'), which was established as early as 1779, and which was absorbed by *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* in 1818.

<sup>8</sup> The oldest one is the Icelandic Bible Society (*Hið íslenska Biblíufélag*), which was founded one year earlier in 1815.

<sup>9</sup> Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, "Icelandic Societies in the Nineteenth Century. The Founding of Societies before the Advent of Mass Movements", in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 13:4 (1988) pp.371-84.



and education) and eventually the third (mass movements) stage of Miroslav Hroch's model of the evolution of national movements, in which the function of the Icelandic learned societies can be compared to that of the *Matica* in the cultivation of Slavic national identities in Eastern Europe. These societies intended to disseminate useful writings, to support the development of literary activity in the national language, and to strengthen national culture and self-awareness in general. As such, the *Matica*, which were often founded in the urban centres of the 'oppressing' power – the first one, the Serbian *Matica* (1826), in Habsburg Pest – functioned as the intellectual engines of phase one Romantic nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

The activities of these societies served to construct a historical and literary canon and a national historical culture; a nationalised 'classical' discourse, from which a uniform intellectual 'quotation culture' could arise, independent from foreign templates of reference.<sup>2</sup> The Icelandification of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the cultivation of a national historical culture, as initiated by Rask and his society, are examples of this general trend in European history. The 'negotiation of authentic selves', with which Romanticism was so preoccupied, implied the cultural construction of a harmonised and canonised national narrative, to strengthen the social bonds between all those concerned with the national project and to avoid dissonance.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that these projects of national self-negotiation were first initiated in the great cosmopolitan centres of Europe, where the intellectual elites of all different diaspora national movements – participating in the same intellectual discourses and frequenting the same public spaces – were in close contact with each other, and were mutually inspired by each other's strategies and publications.<sup>4</sup> It was in the closest possible proximity to the 'significant other' that the urge to formulate antagonistic self-definitions became most urgent. The transculturation between the different diaspora nationalisms provided their consecutive national projects with a profoundly *supranational* character, which can be demonstrated by the example of the Faroese 'national project' of creating a suitable orthography for the Faroese language, in which V.U. Hammershaimb was assisted by Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the Icelandic national movement.<sup>5</sup>

The primary vehicle for the spread of the societies' national ideologies was the printed journal or periodical, in which the objectives of the society were reflected in the learned and literary contributions of its members. *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* has published its periodical *Skírnir* since 1827, making it the oldest surviving journal in all of Scandinavia. The articles published in *Skírnir* were concerned with topics as divergent as literature, international politics, philosophy, the natural sciences and economics, covering every subject that could contribute to the general education of the Icelandic people. The title *Skírnir* was derived from the Eddas, where the god with the same name (meaning the 'Shining One') functions as Freyr's vassal and messenger, who is sent to the world of the giants (*Jötunheimr*) to woo the attractive giantess Gerðr on Freyr's behalf.<sup>6</sup> It is the image of a shining divine messenger that inspired the editorials to select his name as the title of their

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctures and disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries* Volume III: *The making and remaking of literary institutions* (Amsterdam-Philadelphia 2004) pp. 41-43.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Grever, "Fear of Plurality: Historical Culture and Historiographical Canonization in Western Europe", in Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser (eds.), *Gendering historiography. Beyond national canons* (Chicago 2009) pp.45-62.

<sup>3</sup> Jones (2010) pp.182-3.

<sup>4</sup> On the supranational dimension of the national movements, see Bruce Robbins, "Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism", in idem and Pheng Cheah (eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis 1998) pp.1-19.

<sup>5</sup> Oslund (2011) pp.123-151.

<sup>6</sup> *Skírnismál* in the *Poetic Edda*. For more on this deity, see chapter 34 of *Gylfaginning (Prose Edda)*.

journal. The association with the messenger-god is explained in a short poem, inspired by the first stanza of *Skírnismál*, printed on the journal's title page:

Arise now Skírnir!  
and Skekkill's horse  
run to Iceland with tidings,  
of men and dealings  
say we are worthy of keeping them,  
and request that they be guarded well!<sup>1</sup>

*Skírnir* may have been the first, but would certainly not be the last Icelandic periodical to be named after a character from Old Norse mythology. The list of journals and newspapers with eddic titles published in the century to follow is very long, and includes *Fjölnir*<sup>2</sup> (1835), *Gefn*<sup>3</sup> (1870), *Óðinn* (1905), *Mjöltnir* (1902), *Ægir* (1905), *Pór* (1924) and no less than three *Iðunn*-s (1860, 1884, 1915).<sup>4</sup> Sigurður Gunnarsson, the sole editor and contributor of the oldest of these three *Iðunn*-s (*Iðunn, sögurit um ýmsa menn og viðburði, lýsing landa og þjóða og náttúrunnar*; 'Iðunn, a journal on various people and events, a description of countries and peoples and nature') considered it his task to enlighten his people and to strengthen its general knowledge of world history and foreign lands. In the preface to the first – and only – volume, he explains that he decided to name his journal after the goddess of immortality, since the subject matter of these writings contains something of the immortality of the bygone ages.<sup>5</sup> Applying the name of the Old Norse personification of immortality to subjects that are in themselves not Icelandic or Nordic at all, may be indicated as an act of *universalisation* (the third function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1).

A possible explanation for this preference for Edda-inspired titles (as opposed to titles derived from the *Íslendingasögur*, for instance) lies in the greater symbolic and more abstract value of mythological characters and objects, as well as in the acclaimed *universality* of the (nationalised) myths. The paradoxical nature of nationalism, delicately balancing between internalistic contemplations on national traditions and an outward-looking interest in the modern world (see Chapter 1.2.1), is reflected in the list of wildly divergent topics covered by *Skírnir* and comparable nationalistic periodicals. Eddic motives, with their *national* value as 'ancient literature', and their *universal* character (transcending time and space), were capable of bridging the gap between these two seemingly contradictory faces of Romantic nationalism; they could be considered national *and* universal at the same time.

### 3.3.2 The Experience of Otherness

This new emancipatory discourse on Icelandicness, as disseminated by learned societies and periodicals, would not have been conceivable without the philological historicism and the Ossianic 'Nordic renaissance' of the late eighteenth century, in the context of which claims of

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<sup>1</sup> *Skírnir, Ný tíðindi hins íslenska bókmentafélags* 1 (1827) title page. Skekkill was a legendary Sea King, mentioned in the *foraldarsögur*.

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of this name, see Chapter 4.2.

<sup>3</sup> One of Freyja's alternative names, meaning 'The Giver'.

<sup>4</sup> Iðunn (in other Germanic languages known as Iduna), goddess of rejuvenation, guarder of the apples of eternal youth, and spouse of Bragi (god of literature), became a potent symbol of national awakenings and Nordic rejuvenation throughout Europe, and gave her name to Herder's treatise on the didactic value of poetry (*Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung*; 1796) and the nationalistic Frisian literary journal *Iduna* in the Netherlands (1845-71), among others.

<sup>5</sup> Sigurður Gunnarsson, "Formáli", in *Iðunn* 1 (1860), no page number. This was in and of itself not a very original idea, since the goddess had already given her name to several other periodicals in Denmark, Sweden and Germany (including Herder's *Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung* (1796); see Chapter 2.2.2).

cultural alterity superiority could be made acceptable. Due to these developments, the peripheral culture of a subarctic island could appear on the centre stage of Nordic intellectual life.<sup>1</sup> It was this international cultural prestige that Icelandic nationalists sought to capitalise on, once they began their political quest for greater national autonomy in the first half of the nineteenth century. The experience of existential *uprootedness*, as undergone by the Icelandic diaspora in Denmark, has been identified as the very essence of nineteenth-century Icelandic literature and culture.<sup>2</sup> The same experience of otherness that would later render Copenhagen in many respects the birthplace of the Faroese and Greenlandic national movements, first inspired these Icelanders to idealise the pastoral and natural character of their homeland, as juxtaposed to Denmark’s urbanity and industrial modernity. As Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has emphasised, the politicisation of Iceland’s alterity<sup>3</sup> vis-à-vis other nations did not occur until “this difference was disappearing and their society and culture were developing in the same direction as other western European societies.”<sup>4</sup>

The Copenhagen-based community of Icelanders did not operate in an intellectual vacuum, but rather found itself imbedded in a pan-European network of alterity-construction, concentrated in the cosmopolitan centres of Europe. The crosspollination which occurred in the framework of these ‘interlocking nationalisms’<sup>5</sup> generated a range of identity discourses that varied in their assimilative or contrastive approach towards the ‘significant other’. In order to come to a better understanding of these identity discourses, and how they are related to the interpretation of Old Norse mythology, I will now move on to scrutinise the works of individual Icelanders who have – each in their own fashion – contributed to the construction of cultural Icelandicness. How did they fit into these transnational discourses, and how did they develop their own, specifically Icelandic sound in their contributions? Where did they agree or disagree, both among themselves and vis-à-vis foreign conceptions, and on what ideological grounds did they formulate their opinions? The first one of these protagonists was a runologist, a philologist and an archaeologist, and can be considered the first Icelandic to have applied the aforementioned set of ‘new eyes’ to the interpretation of the Eddas.

### **3.4 The Tainted Heritage of Finnur Magnússon<sup>6</sup>**

#### 3.4.1 ‘Romantic to the Core’

In the course of the first decades of the nineteenth century, it was an Icelandic who became Denmark’s leading authority on the field of eddic scholarship. Since Snorri Sturluson, no other Icelandic had dedicated so much of his intellectual activity to the study and elucidation of Old Norse myth as Finnur Magnússon (Danish: Finn Magnusen; 1781-1847). With his edition of the *Poetic Edda*<sup>7</sup>, and especially his *magnum opus* in four volumes *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse* (‘The Eddic Lore and its Origin’; Copenhagen 1824-6), he revolutionised the philological scene entirely and pioneered what would become characterised as the Romantic, nature-mythological interpretation of the Eddas. According to Andrew Wawn, his scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> Zernack (1994) p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ringler (2002) p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Maurer applies the useful term *Differenzqualität* to signify this contrastive sense of alterity. Maurer, “Die Entdeckung Schottlands”, in A. Fülberth and A. Meier (eds.), *Nördlichkeit – Romantik – Erhabenheit. Apperzeptionen der Nord/Süd-Differenz (1750-2000)* (Frankfurt am Main 2007) pp.143-160, p.157.

<sup>4</sup> Hálfðanarson (2000a) p.12.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 1.2.1.

<sup>6</sup> A revised version of this chapter was published in 2015, under the title “A Tainted Legacy. Finnur Magnússon’s Mythological Studies and Iceland’s National Identity”, in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 40:2 (2015) pp.239-270.

<sup>7</sup> *Den Ældre Edda: En samling af de nordiske folks ældste sagn og sange* (Copenhagen 1821–3).

was “romantic to the core”, and presented Old Norse mythology as the reflection of “primitive responses, sensuous and intense, to the natural forces governing individuals’ lives since the dawn of civilization.”<sup>1</sup> What did this new, Romantic Edda-reception consist of? What were its innovative characteristics? And in what sense did it distinguish itself from traditional modes of Edda-reception, as outlined in the previous chapters?

Despite his solid scholarly reputation in the early nineteenth century, Finnur’s legacy has suffered tremendously from his involvement in the academic controversy revolving around the infamous Runamo rock face in southern Sweden (Blekinge). In 1833, he headed an expedition instigated by the Royal Danish Academy, which set out to investigate the mysterious ‘runes’ engraved in the rock. These runic inscriptions are already attested in Saxo Grammaticus’s twelfth century *Gesta Danorum*, where they are ascribed to the legendary king Harald Wartooth (Haraldr hilditönn) who commissioned the runic monument in commemoration of his father’s great deeds. Already in Saxo’s own time, a Danish delegation sent to Blekinge by king Valdemar I had established that the ancient runes were no longer legible (*Gesta Danorum*, Preface).<sup>2</sup> The research party, led by Finnur, consisted of specialists from various disciplines, like the artist Christian Ferdinand Christensen, the historian Christian Molbech, and the geologist Johan Georg Forchhammer. Even though Finnur had considerable difficulties deciphering the verses in the beginning, he started to harvest results once he ‘discovered’ that the text had to be read from right to left, and consisted of so-called bind runes (ligatures of two or more runes), which complicated the process considerably.<sup>3</sup> Once he had cracked the code, Finnur was convinced; these were indeed ancient runes, and with some perseverance, a full translation of the stanzas would be possible. This conclusion attracted the attention of one of Sweden’s most authoritative scientists, Jöns Jacob Berzelius, who initiated his own expedition to the Runamo rock face in 1836 and came to the staggering conclusion that the mysterious symbols consisted of nothing more than natural cracks in the rock’s surface. Finnur could, in his eyes, not have been more wrong. Naturally, Finnur did not agree, and in 1841 he published his findings and a partial translation of the inscription in order to debunk Berzelius’s theory.<sup>4</sup> But the tables had turned; a third expedition to the site in 1844, headed by the Danish archaeologist Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae, confirmed Berzelius’s findings and eventually caused the demise of Finnur’s international scholarly esteem.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to understand how a trained runologist could have mistaken natural and utterly random patterns on a rock face for actual skaldic poetry, up to the point that he could actually present a translation of the inscription. It seems unlikely that he was deceiving his audience on purpose. The best possible explanation for this bizarre mistake<sup>6</sup> is the psychological phenomenon referred to as *pareidolia*; the tendency to recognise human facial features and characteristics in natural shapes and formations – like the famous ‘man in the moon’ – and to assign human significance to random patterns. It is from this universal

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<sup>1</sup> Wawn (2002) p.189.

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Ole Worm informed his seventeenth century readership that he was still able to discern the word ‘Lund’ in some of the mysterious and withered signs. See Iver Kjær, “Runer og revner i Blekinge og bag voldene. Oldgranskeren Finnur Magnússons berømmelse og nederlag.”, in Bente Scavenius (ed.), *Guldalderhistorier. 20 nærbilleder af perioden 1800-1850* (Copenhagen 1994) pp.126-133.

<sup>3</sup> Finnur Magnússon, *Runamo og runerne* (Copenhagen 1841) pp. 287-320.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, translation: pp. 374ff.

<sup>5</sup> Kjær (1994).

<sup>6</sup> For obvious reasons, I will not elaborate on the very original and mystical claim, voiced by modern devotees of the new age, neo-pagan movement, that nature actually expresses herself in ‘natural runes’, and that Finnur Magnússon and Berzelius were therefore *both* right. See for instance *Lorsque la Nature s'exprime en Runes...* on: <http://lapres-mididesmagiciens.hautetfort.com/archive/2013/01/28/lorsque-la-nature-s-exprime-en-runes.html> (last accessed January 2014).

tendency towards signification that not only Finnur's monumental misinterpretation, but also mythological imagination itself originated. In Finnur's time, runologists could still allow themselves a "romantic blend of archaeology, history, mythology and especially imagination, in their interpretation of the runes." But those times were now coming to an end, "and the only person who preserved his faith in Magnússon's theory after the Runamo affair was the elderly N.F.S. Grundtvig, himself a big fan of Norse mythology."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the Runamo scandal was not the only 'mistake' in Finnur's career. He also managed to connect his name to the false claim that Rhode Island's Dighton Rock petroglyphs – believed by some to have been carved by Viking colonists after their discovery of the New World – were indeed of Old Norse origin. To make matters even worse, his troublesome marriage – which was eventually dissolved in 1840 – and his continuous financial problems did little to improve his quality of life. In desperate attempts to keep his head above water, he sold medieval Icelandic manuscripts off to the British; a practice which rendered him hugely unpopular, and had detrimental effects on his reputation in Iceland.<sup>2</sup>

For the sake of the present study, it is important to remember that during most of his active life he was considered, by fellow Icelanders and foreigners alike, an authority on the field of Old Norse-Icelandic mythology. The poet Benedikt Gröndal, whose father (Sveinbjörn Egilsson) had known Finnur well, describes him as a great scholar, 'renowned in all countries', who corresponded with many of the great minds of his time.<sup>3</sup> Finnur Magnússon, who was born in the old bishopric of Skálholt and whose paternal uncle was the great scientist and enlightened poet Eggert Ólafsson (see Chapter 2.2.1), went to Copenhagen to study law and received financial support from Árni Magnússon's fund for Icelandic scholars. In 1800, he was forced to break off his studies due to his father's illness, after which he worked as a lawyer for over a decade. In 1812, Finnur began studying runology, Old Norse literature and archaeology, and already in 1815, he became professor of literature. In 1819 he began giving lectures on Old Norse literature and mythology. Next to his activities at the university, he held a position at the king's private archive, and he became its head in 1829. Also, he was one of the founding members of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* in Copenhagen, the literary society founded on the instigation of Rasmus Rask, and contributed articles on international and domestic news to its annual journal *Íslensk sagnablöð*. When this journal was succeeded by *Skírnir* in 1827, Finnur became its first editor in chief.

### 3.4.2 Finnur's International Network

The tightly-knit community of Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen, of which Finnur was a prominent constituent, was by no means an isolated body operating in an intellectual vacuum. The lively correspondences with his fellow countrymen, including Jónas Hallgrímsson, Jón Sigurðsson and Bjarni Thorarensen, provide us with an interesting insight into the dissemination and reception of philological ideas among the Icelandic intelligentsia.<sup>4</sup> In Denmark, Finnur was in close contact with Rask, with whom he had become acquainted at the university and whose *Undersøgelse om det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse* ('A Study on the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language'; 1818) he helped to correct and prepare for publication together with Rasmus Nyerup. In cooperation with this same Nyerup, Rask had already published an edition of the *Prose Edda* ten years

<sup>1</sup> Páll Valsson, "En runologs uppgång och fall", in *Scripta Islandica* 48 (1997) pp.39-53, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, "Finnur Magnússon: 150. ártíð", in *Andvari* 116 (1997) pp.76-108, p.90-95.

<sup>3</sup> In his autobiographical work *Dægradvöl*, (first published posthumously in 1923), quoted in Egilsson (1999) p.24.

<sup>4</sup> I will consider the Icelandic reception of Finnur's ideas in the subsequent chapters, dealing with the protagonist in question.

earlier.<sup>1</sup> The interaction with Rask, who is – along with the Grimm brothers and Franz Bopp – considered one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the ‘comparative-historical study of Indo-European languages’,<sup>2</sup> has had a profound effect on Finnur’s own comparative approach to Old Norse mythology.

Finnur Magnússon was one of the Nordic scholars on whom Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm heavily depended in their dealings with Old Norse language and culture.<sup>3</sup> But the correspondence between the Grimms and Finnur was not a very smooth one, and Finnur appears to have shared some of Rask’s reservations concerning their work. In 1829 Wilhelm Grimm sent him a copy of his *Die deutsche Heldensage* and a treatise on runic literature (“Zur Litteratur der Runen”), on which Finnur was considered a great authority. The Icelander’s response can be characterised as grateful but reserved; at no point does he elaborate on the actual contents of the received lecture.<sup>4</sup> After that, the correspondence ceased. Until 1834 that is, when Wilhelm Grimm contacted Finnur again in order to introduce the British scholar Richard Cleasby, an acquaintance of his, who delivered the letter personally when he travelled to Denmark. The letter is concerned with runic matters, and contains the announcement that Jacob is working on his *deutsche Mythology* (published in 1835), of which he would send Finnur a copy after completion.<sup>5</sup> Again, Finnur did not reply until two years later. What made matters problematic between them, was a passage in the third volume of Finnur’s Danish edition of the *Poetic Edda* (1821, p.75), in which he implies that Wilhelm Grimm had used exactly the same argumentation and the same quotes in his chapter on the Willingshauser stone – of his *Ueber deutsche Runen*, 1821 – as he had done, in an unpublished report for the governor of Schleswig-Holstein which the director of the Hessian state archives had allowed Grimm to use.<sup>6</sup> Reference to this report is nowhere to be found in the chapter in question. Nowhere does Finnur explicitly claim that Grimm had plagiarised his work, but the insinuation is explicit enough for Wilhelm Grimm to clarify the matter in a letter from November 1838, in which he promises that the matter would be corrected in the second edition of the work.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this promise could not be kept, since the book never experienced a second edition.

Another German heavyweight that Finnur acquainted was the scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who visited Copenhagen as part of the royal Prussian delegation of 1845 and actually shared a coach with Finnur, the king’s archivist, on this occasion.<sup>8</sup> After this first acquaintance, Finnur wrote at least two letters to von Humboldt (in 1845 and 1846), and even provided him with a sample of volcanic ash, released during the 1845 eruption of Mount Hekla. This sample was subsequently handed over to the scientist C.G. Ehrenberg, who discovered micro-organisms in it.<sup>9</sup> It remains unclear whether von

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<sup>1</sup> T.L. Markey, “Rasmus Kristian Rask. His Life and Work”, in Rask, *A Grammar of the Icelandic or Old Norse Tongue* (Amsterdam 1976) pp.xv-xxxv, p.xx.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.viii.

<sup>3</sup> For an edition of the brothers’ correspondences with Nordic scholars, see Ernst Schmidt, *Briefwechsel der Gebrüder Grimm mit nordischen Gelehrten* (Berlin 1885). Contained therein are three letters from Finnur to Wilhelm (and Jacob) Grimm; see pp.203-211. Two letters from Wilhelm Grimm to Finnur, presumed non-extant by Schmidt, were recovered and published by P.M. Mitchell, “Wilhelm Grimm’s Letters to Finnur Magnússon”, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 52:1 (1953) pp.71-5.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell (1953) p.71.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.72.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.73.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.75.

<sup>8</sup> Helga Skúladóttir and Sigfús A. Schopka, “Landkönnuðurinn og leyndarskjalavörðurinn”, in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (20 July 1996) p.4.

<sup>9</sup> These findings were published in the *Bericht über die zur Bekanntmachung geeigneten Verhandlungen der Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin 1846) pp.149-53.

Humboldt ever replied to any of these letters.<sup>1</sup> But the prominent position Finnur held at the Danish court rendered him a key figure in the international network of academics, and an important point of reference for philologists and non-philologists alike.

This point is further illustrated by his correspondence with Friedrich David Gräter (1768-1830), who is generally considered one of the founding fathers of Old Norse and Scandinavian philology in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Gräter entertained correspondences with prominent German poets and scholars like Christoph Martin Wieland and Herder, and he acquainted the German audience with Old Norse poetry through his translations, published in his popular anthology *Nordische Blumen* (1789) and his periodicals *Bragur* and *Idunna und Hermode*. His empirical methods and aversion against the irrational, Romantic practices of his contemporaries, resulted in an academic feud with the Grimm brothers concerning the nature of Nordic myth.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 2.2.3, I have outlined this dispute in more detail. Eventually, the hegemony of the Grimmian paradigm resulted in a severe underappreciation of Gräter's ground-breaking work, and almost assigned his legacy to complete oblivion.<sup>4</sup> His method of historical rationalisation was rendered obsolete in the course of the 1820s and 30s, when the euhemeristic paradigm was replaced by the Romantic one. Exactly *how* this unprecedented landslide in the history of the study of myth came about, can be illustrated through a closer examination of Finnur's influential writings on the Eddas. How did he position himself intellectually, between the innovative vision of the Grimm brothers and the anti-Romantic theories of Gräter? What did his own etiological theories consist of? And how would these theories eventually reach beyond the academic world and influence the creative writings of poets like Adam Oehlenschläger?

### 3.4.3 A Benchmark for National Authenticity: The *Poetic Edda*

Between 1787 and 1828, the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen published its own edition of the *Poetic Edda* (*Edda Sæmundar hinns Fróða*) in three volumes, containing the original Old Norse-Icelandic text, a Latin translation and extensive annotations and glossary.<sup>5</sup> The project had initially been under the supervision of the learned Icelander Guðmundur Magnússon (Danish: Gudmund Magnæus, 1738-98), and would eventually result in the first integral Latin translation of the eddic poems, making them available to an international readership. In 1818, it was Finnur Magnússon who finished the second volume of this impressive endeavour, and ten years later he published the third and last volume, which was entirely under his redaction. In that same year he completed an exhaustive lexicon of Old Norse mythological themes and characters in Latin (*Priscae veterum borealium mythologiae lexicon*<sup>6</sup>), which appeared in addition to this third volume and helped its readers to come to a better understanding of the cryptic stanzas. It contains elaborate discourses on the theosophy,

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<sup>1</sup> Skúladóttir and Schopka (1996).

<sup>2</sup> For Finnur's letters to Gräter, see J. Jørgensen, *Breve fra Finn Magnusen til F.D. Gräter ved Carl S. Petersen* (Copenhagen 1908).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Anne Heinrichs, "Die Brüder Grimm versus Friedrich David Gräter – ein fatales Zerwürfnis", in *Württembergisch Franken* 70 (1986) pp.19-34. See also Chapter 2.2.3.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrichs (1986).

<sup>5</sup> Full title: *Edda Saemundar hinns Fróða: Edda rhythmica seu antiquior, vulgo Saemundina dicta : ex codice biblioth. Regiae Hafniensis pergameno, nec non diversis legati Arnae-Magnaeani et aliorum membraneis chartaceisque melioris notae manuscriptis : cum interpretatione Latina, lectionibus variis, notis, glossario vocum et ind. Rerum* (Copenhagen 1787, 1818, 1828).

<sup>6</sup> Full title: *Priscae veterum borealium mythologiae lexicon, cuncta illius cosmologica, theosophica & daemonica numina, entia et loca ordine alphabetico indicans, illustrans et e magna parte cum exteris, ista contingentibus, comparans: accedit septentrionalium Gothorum, Scandinavorum aut Danorum gentile calendarium, ex Asia oriuntum, jam primum expositum et cum variis cognatarum gentium fastis, festis et solennibus ritibus vel superstitionibus collatum* (Copenhagen 1828).

practices and ‘demonic’ entities of the pre-Christian religion, and places them in a comparative perspective, including numerous references to Greco-Roman and Indian mythological parallels.<sup>1</sup> By this time, Finnur had become convinced that the ancient religion of the North had originated in Asia, and not in Scandinavia itself, as the euhemeristic model of explanation had implied. Through his Latin writings – and especially his third volume of the Copenhagen Edda<sup>2</sup> – these ideas were disseminated throughout Europe and the world. But they were by no means the first expressions of his Indo-European convictions.

Before his work on the third volume of the Arnarnagnæan Edda and the additional lexicon, Finnur had already finished his translation of the entire *Poetic Edda* – at this point still generally attributed to Sæmundur the Learned – into Danish, which appeared in four volumes between 1821 and 1823.<sup>3</sup> The work is dedicated to the Danish king and the Danish people, and is presented as the “most ancient monument of the Danish language” (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to the first volume (pp.v-xvi), Finnur justifies his mission to render the ancient myths accessible to the modern Danish public through the time-honoured adagio of the ancient Greek philosophers: ‘know thyself’. In order for a modern people to ‘know itself’, knowledge of the wisdom, world-view and religion of the forefathers is indispensable;

Only when one becomes acquainted with his fatherland’s antiquity and its later history, then one can judge to what extent the present is foreign to us, or even what we could consider as our own, as loans, or as forced upon us by others. We thus learn to know the *true national spirit* [*den ægte nationale Aand*] in which our existence is entirely rooted - and consequently conclude that the three main peoples which are generally called Nordic (Danish, Swedish and Norwegians) are originally brothers, who have previously spoken one language and have been of one faith.<sup>5</sup>

The ancient myths can, according to Finnur’s programmatic introduction, not simply be cast aside as antiquarian curiosities, the study of which should be restrained to the universities. Rather, attaining knowledge of the poems should be a national commitment, since they are expressions of the original, uncontaminated national spirit that could assist modern Danes in distinguishing between what *is* and what *is not* essentially Nordic. The Edda serves therefore a benchmark for national authenticity, with which all aspects of modern Danish culture should be calibrated. Such a treasure trove of undefiled national spirit is important, especially in these modern times;

We live in an age in which the scholars of the North also consider our own old stories and ancient culture worthy of their attention, instead of just craving for the exotic. Many among the mighty and wealthy, as well as the enlightened among the people of all classes, share the same spirit, which surely does not deserve to be scorned. At least, it seems, that that which relates to our own country, comes closest to ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.vii-viii.

<sup>2</sup> The three volumes were for instance, along with Resen’s *Edda* of 1665 and Guðmundur Andrússon’s edition of 1683, available for sale in Victorian England. See Wawn (2002) p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Finnur Magnússon, *Den Ældre Edda: En samling af de nordiske folks ældste sagn og sange* (four vls.; Copenhagen 1821-3).

<sup>4</sup> “... som den Danske tunges ældste mindesmaerke.”, idem (vol. one), p.iii. The language of the Edda could be presented as Danish on the ground that Old Norse was, until sometime in the Middle Ages, referred to as the *dønsk tunga* (‘the Danish tongue’). The full identification of this language with modern Danish was, of course, a politically advantageous anachronism.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.v, italics added.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.vi.



According to Finnur, the growth of a national self-awareness, coinciding with a lively interest in the nation's ancient past and literature, indicative of the *Volksgeist* making itself known without distinguishing between the different classes or strata constituting the nation; the national spirit is omnipresent and egalitarian, which implies that the study of Denmark's ancient Nordic heritage should not be reserved for the national elite, but rather be made accessible to all layers of society.

Finnur's envisioned integration of ancient myth and modern national culture went beyond the mere democratic dissemination and study of ancient texts. In the *Ældre Edda*, he also raises the question of contemporary art and culture, and the inspiration they could draw from the Eddas. This matter was already touched upon in one of his earlier writings, *Bidrag til nordisk Archæologie* (1820), in which he had argued that Old Norse mythology was not less suitable for modern artistic expression than the hegemonic traditions of classical antiquity,<sup>1</sup> moving roughly along the same lines of argumentation as Oehlenschläger had done twenty years earlier in his essay on the same topic (see Chapter 3.2.2). That same year (1820), a fierce debate on the relevance of Old Norse myth to modern culture erupted in Denmark's academia. In the preface to the fourth volume of his Danish translation of the *Poetic Edda* (1823), Finnur refers to this heated dispute – the memory of which was still too fresh for an outline of its unfolding to be necessary – and provides his readership with a short overview of the artistic applications of Old Norse mythology in modern times.<sup>2</sup> The first Dane to have incorporated eddic themes in his work, was the sculptor Johannes Wiedewelt (1731-1802), after whom many more followed in Scandinavia. In Germany, it was Gräter who, somewhat later, first recognised the gracious Old Norse myths as a source of inspiration for modern artists. According to Finnur, his appeal was heard by many like-minded artists, like the sculptor Christian Friedrich Tieck and the painter Johann Heinrich Füssli. In the hope that this development would continue, Finnur explicitly calls upon all artists to look upon his translations of the eddic poems as “a rich source of excellent objects for artistic production”.<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that this mission to revitalise Old Norse aesthetics was at least in part inspired by the works of his uncle, Jón Ólafsson of Svefneyjar – brother of Eggert Ólafsson – who had already argued in favour of restoring old eddic metres to Icelandic poetry in the 1780s, and who later had a considerable influence on the education of the young Finnur.

Another interesting feature of Finnur's Danish edition of the *Poetic Edda* is his treatment of the controversial poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins* ('Óðinn's raven-magic'; see Chapter 2.2.1), which was believed by many to be a later addition to the ancient corpus. However, Finnur did “not doubt this poem's authenticity and age at all”<sup>4</sup>, and went to great lengths to demonstrate its authenticity on the basis of its “extremely ancient vocabulary as well as its fragmentary nature, and in particular its genuine mythical spirit plus the fact that it only has very few allusions to stories known otherwise from eddas or sagas.”<sup>5</sup> The problematic title of the poem refers in all likelihood to Óðinn's two ravens *Huginn* and *Muninn* ('Thought' and 'Memory'/'Mind'), even though they are not mentioned in the poem itself. Finnur explains this discrepancy by suggesting that an essential part of the text is missing, and that these missing stanzas would have clarified not only the main title, but also the actual meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> Finnur Magnússon, *Bidrag til Nordisk Archæologie medeelte i Forelæsninger* (Copenhagen 1820) pp.v-viii.

<sup>2</sup> Magnússon (1821-3), vol.4 (1823). Finnur also mentions that this debate soon spilled over into Germany, where it continues still (in 1823).

<sup>3</sup> “...som en rig Kilde til fortrinlige Gjenstande for artistisk Fremstilling.”; *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Magnússon (1821-3), vol 2, pp.209-215, 210.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* See also Lassen (2011a) p.10.

the cryptic verses.<sup>1</sup> In comparison to the notorious difficulties previous exegetes of the poem had encountered, Finnur's smooth treatment of *Hrafnagaldr* is remarkable:

And I will not conceal the truth that the same poem's actual translation with annotations, hardly cost me two days' time. It is by no means to invoke any self-praise that I note this (especially since I have not managed to solve all the difficult problems which arise), but only to make my readers aware of the ease with which so many of the most difficult Edda-passages can be disclosed and explained when one first views our ancestral mythical system from the *right standpoint*.<sup>2</sup>

What this 'right standpoint' of eddic exegesis consisted of according to him, can be illustrated by his explanation of the problematic title. According to Finnur, the ravens Huginn and Muninn were generally considered to have been "sent from the god of heaven, air, and spirit, from whom also the human spirit emanated." Consequently, the actual meaning of 'Óðinn's raven-magic' was therefore something in the spirit of "the Imagination's Magic-Song or the Poem of the Poetic Imagination."<sup>3</sup> This Romantic psychologisation of the poem's mystical contents is indicative of his central theory on Old Norse myths, according to which they were actually ancient natural science, or natural philosophy, in metaphorical disguise.<sup>4</sup> I will return to this thesis later on in this chapter.

It would be too easy to attribute Finnur's 'absolute belief' in the authenticity of *Hrafnagaldr Óðins* to the same Romantic imagination and 'will to believe' that led him to discern actual skaldic poetry on Runamo's rock face, and that persuaded people throughout Europe to believe in the authenticity of the 'ancient bardic verses' of Ossian, or the epic poetry of the Finnish *Kalevala*. Another apocryphal poem, *Gunnarsslagr* ('Gunnar's Melody') – which was still included in the second volume of the Arnamagnæan edition of 1818 – is dismissed by Finnur as a brilliant, but nevertheless easily exposed work of modern imitation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Annette Lassen has recently demonstrated that *Hrafnagaldr* should not be treated with greater scepticism than the other apocryphal poems known to us through later paper editions of the *Poetic Edda*, like *Sólarljóð* ('The Song of the Sun') and *Fjölsvinnsmál* ('The Sayings of Fjölsvinnr').<sup>6</sup> The origin and meaning of the poem continues to puzzle scholars to this day. Finnur's argumentation in favour of its authenticity is in itself sound, and should not be considered through the lens of the later Runamo scandal alone.

#### 3.4.4 Indo-European Origins

Even though Finnur's translation and elucidation of the eddic poems – which I have considered so far – have been of immense importance to the development of eddic philology in the nineteenth century, the paradigmatic quality of his work becomes most evident in the four volumes of his *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse* ('The Eddic Lore and its Origin';

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<sup>1</sup> Magnússon (1821-3), vol 2, p.209, 213. Here Finnur also illustrates the poem's infamous obscurity with the anecdote concerning Eiríkur Hallson, who even after ten years of intense scrutiny admitted that he "still understood little or nothing" of the poem. See Chapter 2.2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.214, anonymous English translation on <http://germanicmythology.com/PoeticEdda/HRGFinnurMagnusson1821.html> (last accessed January 2014), italics added.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.209.

<sup>4</sup> On psychological internalisation as hallmark of the Romantic treatment of myth, see Chase (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. This poem is only extant in several later paper copies of the *Poetic Edda*, and is now generally attributed to the poet Gunnar Pálsson (1712-93). See Sophus Bugge, *Norroen fornkvæði. Islandske samling af folkelige oldtidsdigte om nordens guder og heroer, almindelig kaldet Saemundar Edda hins fróða* (Christiania 1867) p.xlviii.

<sup>6</sup> Lassen (2006).

Copenhagen 1824-6).<sup>1</sup> With this elaborate essay – as well as his elucidated Danish translation of the *Poetic Edda* – Finnur participated in an essay competition organised by the Danish Academy of Sciences (1816), the theme of which was the relationship between the Old Norse religion and the religions of ancient Persia and India; a theme that required a strongly developed comparative mind-set from the competitors. By this time, comparativism was an established methodology in the new field of Indo-European linguistics, firmly rooted in the works of Sir William Jones, Thomas Young – who first introduced the term Indo-European in 1813 – and Franz Bopp. Finnur’s proximity to, and cooperation with Rasmus Rask, Denmark’s most prominent linguist and authority on the Indo-European theory, instilled in him the same curiosity and enthusiasm for the ‘quest for origins’. This tendency towards the study of origins – of language, culture and mythology alike – (*etiology*) is already clearly reflected in the title of Finnur’s *magnum opus*, which is very similar to the title of Rask’s influential *Undersøgelse om det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse* (‘A Study on the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language’; 1818), which Finnur and Nyerup had helped prepare for publication. The study of language did not take place in a vacuum, and allied itself with comparative philology and the study of mythological systems. Rask himself conceived his linguistic expedition to India as a journey to the “source of *our* ancient pagan religion”.<sup>2</sup> The deepest roots of ‘our own’ language and pre-Christian culture were no longer situated in Europe, and required adventurous expeditions to the East in order to be traced. In the same year as Rask’s journey to India, Finnur published a small work on the origins of the Caucasian people, *Udsigt over de kaukasiske Menneskestammers ældste Hjemsted og Udvandringer* (‘A Consideration of the Oldest Homeland and Emigration of the Caucasian Tribe’; 1818)<sup>3</sup>, which served as an introduction to the theme of his university lectures on Old Norse mythology. In this very concise overview, he sought to outline the “causes of the resemblance which the Indo-Persian religious systems show with those of Asia, Africa and of Europe’s oldest nations in general, and with our Nordic system in particular.”<sup>4</sup> Only when situated in this larger framework of comparative mythology could the study of the Eddas be of any merit at all; Old Norse mythology was but one of many branches, which had grown organically from the ‘Eurasian myth-tree’.<sup>5</sup> The study of myth had become comparative, and hence ‘scientific’.

The taxonomical approach to the study myth was popularised by the writings of Georg Friedrich Creuzer, who in 1810 put forward the concept of a primeval religion from the East, or *Urreligion*, from which all modern religions and mythologies had evolved.<sup>6</sup> These inspired scholars to compare the different traditions, in order to trace the development of the family tree of religion back to its primordial roots; the original *Urfassung* of all mythology. The methodological framework for this comparative approach had been laid by linguistic scholars, who first deciphered ancient Sanskrit texts from India in order to explain

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<sup>1</sup> Full title: *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse eller Nøjagtig fremstilling af de gamle nordboers digtninger og meninger om verdens, gudernes, aandernes og menneskenes tilblivelse, natur og skjæbne i udførlig sammenligning saavel med naturens store bog, som med grækere, persere, indere og flere gamle folks mythiske systemer og troesmeninger med indblandede historiske undersøgelser over den gamle verdens mærkværdigste nationers herkomst og ældste forbindelser &c* (Copenhagen 1824-6).

<sup>2</sup> Rask, in a letter to Nyerup (11 June 1818), quoted in Piebenga (1971) p.20. Italics added. Rask never addressed the subject of mythology himself, even though there were developed plans to collaborate with Grundtvig on this subject at the moment of Rask’s premature death; see Shippey (2005) p.10.

<sup>3</sup> Full title: *Udsigt over den kaukasiske Menneskestammes ældste Hjemsted og Udvandringer. Fremstilt i en Indledning til Forelæsninger over den nordiske Mythologie og de dertil hørende eddiske Sange* (Copenhagen 1818).

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Böldl (2000) p.210.

<sup>6</sup> See his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1810-2).

the origins of language. In his *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) Friedrich von Schlegel analyses Indian mythology from a philological and historical perspective, and his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel would later claim that there are many similarities between Óðinn and the Buddha, and that the Old Norse religion might have originated in India.<sup>1</sup> In the first decades of the nineteenth century it was this organic, evolutionary conception of mythology that became the key to unlocking the mysteries of mythology; the very nature of the Danish essay prize question of 1816 indicates that the comparative approach had already secured a solid foothold in European academia.<sup>2</sup>

In his *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse*, Finnur indulges himself with adventurous audacity in the comparison of Persian, Germanic, Jewish, Indian, Greek, Egyptian and even native American<sup>3</sup> traditions. In his endeavour to connect the Old Norse branch of mythology to the primeval *Urmythe*, he describes similarities between western and eastern traditions which are considered rather bold. With his work Finnur aspired to open the world's eyes to that "miraculous myth-tree, that, from the summit of the Asian heaven-mountain, spread its beautiful branches all over the ancient world."<sup>4</sup> One of the binding elements between most of the traditions under scrutiny is the idea of reincarnation, or – related to that – shape-shifting. The recurring theme of gods in Nordic and Greek traditions taking on the shape of animals or humans led to the hypothesis of a connection between the oriental concept of reincarnation and Europe's oldest world-views. Already in 1750, Gottfried Schütze had argued against this hypothesis, since he believed the ancient faith of the Germanic ancestors to have been a noble natural form of proto-Protestantism, and therefore immune to 'adventurous delusions' like reincarnation.<sup>5</sup> But that was before the advent of the Indo-European theory, one of the founding fathers of which – William Jones – had already solidified the mythological relationship between West and East, when he claimed that there could be absolutely no doubt about the fact "that Wod or Oden, whose religion, as the northern historians admit, was introduced into *Scandinavia* by a foreign race, was the same with Buddh, whose rites were probably imported into India nearly at the same time, though received much later by the Chinese, who soften his name into Fo."<sup>6</sup> The identification of Óðinn with the enlightened founder of Buddhism, which was suggested by the linguistic similarities between their names,<sup>7</sup> remained a popular theme in nineteenth century scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

Finnur endorses this theory in his *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse*, and demonstrates that the story of the Buddha is a *myth*, rather than an isolated story based on historical fact. One indication of this is found in the Buddha's connection to the cow; the symbol of Indo-European religiosity *par excellence*. One of his names, Gautama, should – according to Finnur, who bases this claim on earlier research – be translated as 'cow herder'<sup>9</sup>; an etymological assumption that places him firmly in the same myth-tree that also contains the

<sup>1</sup> See his *Indische Bibliothek*, vol.1 (1823) pp.25-3. See also Lassen (2011b) p.44.

<sup>2</sup> On this paradigm shift in the study of mythology, see especially Shippey (2005).

<sup>3</sup> See Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, pp.xii-xv. For the only recently researched American traditions he refers to the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the older brother of Alexander.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.67.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried Schütze, quoted in Bödl (2000) p.212.

<sup>6</sup> William Jones, "The Third Anniversary Discourse (delivered 2 February, 1786, by the President, at the Asiatick Society of Bengal)", in John Shore, *The Works of Sir William Jones. With a Life of the Author, by Lord Teignmouth*, (London 1807) vol. 3, pp. 24-46, 37. Italics original. See also Bödl (2000) p.213.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from the comparison between *Buddh* and *Wod*, the Buddha's personal family name *Gautama* was connected to *Gaut/Gautr*, one of Óðinn's many names, and the Buddha's title *Sakyamuni* to *Sigge* (Óðinn) and even the great eddic hero Sigurðr. See Bödl (2000) p.215-6.

<sup>8</sup> For example: Vilhelm Fridrik Palmblad's *De Buddha et Wodan dissertatio* (1822). See Lassen (2011b) pp.47-9.

<sup>9</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.295.

primordial cow *Auðumbla* from the Prose Edda,<sup>1</sup> the golden calf of the Israelites, the holy bull in Egyptian mythology, Zeus's and Juno's transformation into a bull and a cow, the Minotaur, and Indian cow worship, among others.<sup>2</sup> Finnur saw the Hindu myths about the divine origin of the Ganges reflected in the story of *Auðumbla*, from whose udder four streams of milk originated.<sup>3</sup> Like William Jones, Finnur did not doubt that the figures of Buddha and Óðinn originated from the same mythological source. The idea was not that Buddhism had entered Europe, where it eventually evolved into the religion of Óðinn, but rather that both the Buddha and Óðinn were latter, local expressions of the same divine principle that had been the focal point of the primeval religion preceding both traditions. In his *Bidrag til Nordisk Archæologie* Finnur claims that the many divine names of the Buddha and Óðinn were the remnants of an "ancient primeval people's [*Urfolk*] denomination of the deity, that according to their beliefs incarnated or took human shape on multiple occasions, and that manifested itself on earth as monarch, conqueror or teacher, in order to educate the people and to make them happy."<sup>4</sup> The historical manifestations of this deity, like the Buddha or the historical Óðinn from Snorri's euhemeristic narrative, were all considered earthly manifestations, or *avatars* of one and the same universal divine principle. Only from this point of view could the chaotic and confusing myriad of Odinic myths begin to make any sense at all, in Finnur's eyes. Mythology was to be conceived as a living organism in its own right, evolving in all different directions according to its own internal logic, and never as the work of one single individual. On these grounds, he dismissed the popular belief that the poems of the *Poetic* (or *Sæmundr's*) *Edda* had all been composed by *Sæmundr the Learned*:

That Gudmund Magnæus could imagine that *Sæmund Fróði* or another individual bard, close to him, had composed all the poems of the Elder Edda, which are so very different in content, spirit, language and style, and obviously bear the actual collector's or copier's touch- it seems to me quite unbelievable.<sup>5</sup>

Finnur's attempts to reconstruct the ancient Eurasian myth-tree, connecting pre-Christian Europe to the exotic cultures of the East, did not go unnoticed in Europe and influenced the writings of mythologists everywhere.<sup>6</sup> His ideas and interpretations dovetailed with the Romantic imagination of Oehlenschläger, whose work can be considered exemplary of "the peculiar mixture of scholarship and poetry in the nineteenth century."<sup>7</sup> Oehlenschläger's famous collection of poems called *Nordens Guder* (1819) shows clear traces of Indo-European thought, creatively applied. In order to demonstrate the Indian connection of the Old Norse gods, Freyja's chariot is no longer pulled by two cats – as indicated by the eddic narrative<sup>8</sup> – but by tigers, associated with the Indian origin of her husband Óðr, whom she encounters east of the river Ganges.<sup>9</sup> Óðr, arguably the most obscure of all eddic deities, is presented by Oehlenschläger as an exotic version of the Roman wine god Bacchus, whose chariot was also pulled by tigers. This creative association with exotic cultures is not a direct

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<sup>1</sup> See *Gylfaginning (Prose Edda)*.

<sup>2</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, pp.285-97.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p.295.

<sup>4</sup> Magnússon (1820) p.14. See also Bödl (2000) p.213.

<sup>5</sup> Magnússon (1821-3), vol 2, p.211. Anonymous English translation on <http://germanicmythology.com/PoeticEdda/HRGFinnurMagnusson1821.html> (last accessed January 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Wawn (2002) p.190.

<sup>7</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.183. Nevertheless, Grundtvig's views on Finnur's work – as expressed in the second edition of his *Nordens Mytologi* (1832) – are at times quite ambiguous.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Chapter 24 of *Gylfaginning (Prose Edda)*.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger, *Nordens Guder. Et episk digt* (Copenhagen 1819) pp.195-204. See also Egilsson (1999) pp.196-205.

translation of Finnur's ideas into poetry; Finnur himself spent only limited attention to the relationship between Óðr and Freyja, and compared them to Venus and Adonis rather than to Bacchus.<sup>1</sup> The Indian connection thematised in Oehlenschläger's poem has been considered his own creative invention<sup>2</sup>, but the tendency to connect eddic material to other, mainly Mediterranean and Indian mythological systems was linked to the academic comparativism as promulgated in Finnur Magnússon's lectures, which Oehlenschläger attended.<sup>3</sup> His poetry can be seen as an interesting example of the creative functionalisation of philological theory, which would come to characterise the work of several Icelandic poets as well. Benedikt Gröndal's elaboration on the theme of Freyja and Óðr, and his reception of the works of Finnur and Oehlenschläger, will be analysed in Chapter 6.3.

Finnur's Indo-European interpretation of the Eddas can be interpreted as an attempt to *emancipate* the mythological heritage of the north, since it contributed to a clearer understanding of the myths' often obscure and impenetrable contents. Through comparison with parallel myths from other cultures, Finnur argued, many of the problematic stories first acquired significance. This logical clarification of the myths was important in order to uphold their status of 'high literature', which was under attack from the so-called 'anti-Eddists'<sup>4</sup> who questioned their literary value on the basis of their incomprehensibility. Already in the eighteenth century, German scholars like Johann Christoph Adelung and later Friedrich Rühls had dismissed the Eddas' (euhemerised) historicity as a falsehood, and considered the whole mythological corpus an aesthetically inferior creation, without literary merit.<sup>5</sup> By de-obscuring the myths and placing them in a wholly new model of clarification, these denigrating claims could be debunked on academic grounds. Like the anti-Eddists, Finnur dismissed the euhemeristic theory that had determined interpretations of the Eddas since Snorri Sturluson;

Eventually, they both [Óðinn and Zeus] suffered the same fate in that, over a long period of time, they would be misinterpreted by mankind to such a degree that *Euhemerus* and others would only acknowledge *Zeus* as a king of Crete, and several Nordic authors would see in *Odin* only a prince in Asia or in Scandinavia [...] I for my part, am utterly convinced that both *Odin* and *Zeus* were originally cultivated as the highest deities of heaven and our world.<sup>6</sup>

But unlike the anti-Eddists, Finnur replaced the outdated euhemeristic model with something new so that the Eddas remained 'meaningful' and therefore of great cultural and literary value. By applying the Romantic concept of the omnipotent *Weltseele*, as introduced by Friedrich von Schelling,<sup>7</sup> Finnur could 'reverse' Snorri's theory, and explain euhemerism as a result of the lack of understanding of reincarnation and metamorphosis in medieval Christendom. The god Óðinn had *not* been based on a historical character, but the other way around; historical persons identified as Óðinn had all been manifestations, *avatars*, of the same divine *Weltseele*, which was believed to have penetrated all of creation and "could therefore manifest itself in the most divergent shapes."<sup>8</sup> As the documented expressions of

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<sup>1</sup> Magnússon (1828) p.377-8.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Ida Falbe-Hansen, *Øhlenschlägers nordiske digtning og andre afhandlinger* (Copenhagen 1921) pp.33-5. See also Egilsson (1999) p.198.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that Oehlenschläger attended Finnur's lectures is does not prove that this was where he received his inspiration for Freyja's tigers; the lines of mutual inspiration may be more complex than that, and deserve further research.

<sup>4</sup> A polemical term introduced by Rasmus Nyerup. See Bödl (2000) p.113.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.345, quoted in Lassen (2011b) p.50. Italics original.

<sup>7</sup> See his essay *Von der Weltseele* from 1798.

<sup>8</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.4, p.33. See also Bödl (2000) p.214.

this eternal world-soul, the myths contained universal and metaphysical truths concerning the life force underlying all natural phenomena. According to Finnur, mythology was first and foremost a *systematised* and *metaphorised* philosophy of nature.

### 3.4.5 Natural Mythology

By placing the Eddas in their Indo-European context Finnur clarified the historical origin and nature of Old Norse mythology, but not yet its deeper meaning. What was it exactly, that the omnipresent *Weltseele* was expressing in the world's mythological systems? In the introduction to the first volume of his *Eddalæren* Finnur wrote:

It is certain that, in recent times, it has been attempted to demonstrate our ancestors' barbarity with arguments, the utter falseness of which results from the apparent misinterpretation of our ancient poetic language. The noble ideas (associated with profound grandeur and based on the correct observation of nature) that form the foundation of the eddic teachings, could not but strengthen the high opinion concerning their peculiar spirit [*aandskultur*], that has since primordial times been connected to perfection in the practice of the truly fine arts.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, which is clearly directed *against* those anti-Eddists who sought to critically reassess the cultural value of the Eddas, one discerns a typically Romantic, holistic approach to the arts, to science, and to beauty, which is best summarised in the Romantic creed that all that is 'true, good and beautiful' ('das Wahre, Gute und Schöne') is essentially *one*, and springs from the same sublime source.<sup>2</sup> *True* art, which according to Romantic aesthetics is essentially timeless, shares its roots with natural philosophy – or science – that is essentially *true*. In the view of Friedrich Schlegel, "jede schöne Mythologie" should be understood as a "hieroglyphischer Ausdruck der umgebenden Natur"<sup>3</sup>, or as a mystical piece of art (*Kunstwerk*), created by Mother Nature herself. It is on these Romantic grounds that Finnur can argue in favour of the Eddas' authentic character, and their relevance to the modern age. Like all true, beautiful and good things, they originated from profound contemplations on the sublimity of nature.

Finnur was not the first one to suggest that mythology had started out as a proto-scientific observation, registration, and also poetic explanation of natural phenomena. There are of course the obvious mythological references to natural phenomena, like the 'rainbow bridge' (*Bifröst*) connecting the world of men to the realm of the gods, and the 'shaking of the earth' every time Loki – bound to a rock as punishment for Baldr's death – shivered when poison from a snake's mouth dripped onto his face.<sup>4</sup> In the Enlightenment discourse, mythology could therefore easily be discarded as a primitive and superstitious precursor to the 'serious' sciences of the modern age.<sup>5</sup> Ratio, and unintelligible, mythological obscurantism were quite simply irreconcilable. However, when the utilitarian and mechanical approach to nature began to be considered a defect rather than an accomplishment, and a symptom of our Western estrangement from nature (see Chapter 1.3), naturally the more sentimental, artistic and mystical conception of nature –popularised by the Ossian vogue of

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<sup>1</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.xii.

<sup>2</sup> This idea was derived from Platon's ideal philosophy, and the Greek concept of *kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία) in which beauty and goodness coincide. It was revived in the writings of the German idealists, to whom also Schelling belonged.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Rede über die Mythologie* (1800), in his collected writings: *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe. Erste Abteilung* vol. 2, (Munich, Paderborn, Vienna and Zürich 1967) pp.311-329, 317.

<sup>4</sup> See *Lokasenna* (*Poetic Edda*).

<sup>5</sup> On this enlightened hostility towards mythology, see Hans Poser, "Mythos und Vernunft. Zum Mythenverständnis der Aufklärung", in idem. (ed.), *Philosophie und Mythos. Ein Kolloquium* (Berlin – New York 1979) pp.130-53.

the late 1700s – was ‘rediscovered’ in the natural narrative of the Eddas. In the myths, the Romantic mind could discern that primordial proximity to nature that later generations of Westerners had forgotten and betrayed; a *paradise lost*. Especially in the philosophy of Herder, the natural character of the authorless myths is equated to the organic origin of the *Volk*, which in its very essence transcended history.<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the natural interpretation of myth would find its most influential proponent in Max Müller (1823-1900), editor of the fifty-volume collection of *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford 1879-1910), who argued that all the world’s mythological systems were in fact metaphorised accounts of solar events. According to him, Homer’s *Iliad* was in essence a poetic rendering of the sun’s battle with the clouds, and had therefore little to do with actual history.<sup>2</sup> The gods had initially, in the early stages of human development, been abstract concepts that facilitated the exchange of complex ideas. Even after these abstract concepts had become personified and the gods had become persons, the multitude of Indo-European god-names could still offer an indication of their initial meaning. For instance, the names *Zeus*, *Jupiter*, *Dyaus Pita*, as well as *deva* and *deus/theos* all indicated that the original ‘father god’, the focal point of all traditions, was linguistically connected to ‘light’ or ‘shining’; characteristics of the life-bringing sun and its beams of light.<sup>3</sup> Although Finnur Magnússon and Müller were, academically spoken, no contemporaries – Finnur wrote in the first and Müller in the second half of the nineteenth century – they were both exponents of the Romantic school of myth-interpretation which considered myths the unhistorical, organically evolved and collective expressions of a people’s natural philosophy. Schelling had argued that through mythology the modern sciences could finally find their way back to ‘the ocean of poetry’,<sup>4</sup> and his concept of the *Weltseele*, the animating force behind the evolution of mythological systems, inspired both Finnur and Müller, the latter of whom had even studied under the elderly Schelling in Berlin, and translated the Sanskrit *Upanishads* for him.

Finnur’s nature-myth theory is best illustrated in his speculations concerning the nature of the giants (*jötnar*) and their perpetual conflict with Þórr, the archetypal giant-slayer. The antagonism of giants and gods, a common feature in many mythological systems,<sup>5</sup> was interpreted by Oehlenschläger as the struggle between “two conflicting powers of nature: the creative embellishing power; and the defacing destructive one.”<sup>6</sup> Finnur took this scientification of the eddic narrative a few steps further, and discerned in it a reflection of the most advanced theories concerning the origin of the earth (*geogony*) of his time; a “highly unexpected and baffling correspondence [...] between the ancient cosmogony of the Edda and the results of research by the latest and most learned geologists.”<sup>7</sup> The specific geological theory Finnur believed to have discovered in mythological allegory was that of the so-called *neptunists*, who believed that all of the world’s rock and solid elements had – in an early stage of the earth’s development – originated from the oceans, where the crystallisation of

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman and Richardson (1972) p.227.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Schliemann’s claim to have recovered the site of ancient Troy based on indications from the Homeric writings, was therefore a ridiculous one in Müller’s eyes. See Manfred Flügge, *Heinrich Schliemanns Weg nach Troja: Die Geschichte eines Mythomanen* (München 2001) p.237.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Müller’s mythological scholarship, see Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Friedrich Max Müller. Ein außergewöhnliches Gelehrtenleben im 19. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schelling, *System des transzendenten Idealismus* (Berlin 2014 [1800]) pp.223-4.

<sup>5</sup> Compare for instance the epic war between the Olympian gods and the Titans (Titanomachy) in Greek mythology.

<sup>6</sup> Oehlenschläger, introduction to *Nordens Guder* (1819), quoted in Martin Arnold (2011) p.108.

<sup>7</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.48.



minerals took place.<sup>1</sup> In the eddic creation myth, this process was anthropomorphised in the figure of *Ymir*, the primordial frost-giant and ancestor of all the *jötnar*, who represents the original chaotic state of primordial, raw matter. He is slain by the gods Óðinn, Vili and Vé, who Finnur interprets as the personifications of the creative powers air, warmth and light.<sup>2</sup> They fashion the earth with its mountains from Ymir's flesh and bones, the oceans and rivers from his blood and the firmament from his skull, which is carried on the shoulders of the four dwarves named North, South, East and West (Norðri, Suðri, Austri and Vestri).<sup>3</sup> The great flood caused by the blood gulping from Ymir's slain body, in which many creatures – but no humans – were drowned, is interpreted by Finnur as evidence for the thesis that the Old Norse already knew that, at a certain point in the earth's history, there had been a global deluge, responsible for the disappearance of all those strange species that are now only known from the fossil record; a common explanation for the mysterious disappearance of species in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The Eddas provide their readers with exactly the *same* knowledge as modern geologists do, only in 'different terms'.<sup>5</sup> As Klaus Bödl has pointed out, Finnur did not attempt to translate the eddic creation myth to modern scientific language; "vielmehr wird die neptunische Geogonie Werners in die Bildersprache der Edda rückübersetzt."<sup>6</sup>

But the scientific content of the Eddas is by no means restricted to geology and the origins of the earth, Finnur argued; the myths could also be interpreted as complex accounts of a meteorological, cosmological, and an astronomical nature. He was absolutely convinced that the Old Norse had already observed the movements of the stars, using the same zodiacal system of twelve signs that astronomers of later generations would use. After a thorough exegesis of the poem *Grímnismál* of the *Poetic Edda*, Finnur concludes that part of it is essentially a 'poetic calendar' and that each of the twelve animal signs of the modern zodiac corresponds to one of the gods, as well as to one of their mythical dwelling places in the sky. In his Danish Edda-translation, *Den Ældre Edda*, Finnur provides an overview of these correspondences, which indicates that the astrological sign Lion corresponds to the goddess Freyja and her hall in Ásgarðr, Fólkvángr, and that Gemini should be equated to the god Baldr and his hall Breiðablik.<sup>7</sup> Other heavenly lights, like meteors and the *Aurora Borealis*, are symbolised by the Valkyries, riding in the night sky.<sup>8</sup> According to Finnur, the astronomical knowledge fathomed in these mythological terms was put to very practical use, and "even the Catholic priests and monks" had recognised its merits; "... ordinary citizens in Iceland and other countries could work out a whole almanac, as far as the adopted calculation of time and holydays were concerned, with the help of certain verses, one for each month, which indicates in part the character of the season, and in part the timing of important days."<sup>9</sup> By memorising the versified movements of the mythological characters between their respective celestial dwelling places, the ancient Scandinavians possessed a priceless source of very practical and even essential information. Needless to say, that, when the astronomical context in which they originated is discarded, the myths become inaccessible, useless, and utterly incomprehensible. This was exactly the mistake that the anti-Eddists, and those who

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<sup>1</sup> This theory was first proposed by Abraham Gotlob Werner in the late eighteenth century, and was opposed by the *plutonists*, who believed that rock had been formed in fire (*volcanism*).

<sup>2</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.48.

<sup>3</sup> See *Grímnismál (Poetic Edda)*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See also Bödl (2000) p.237.

<sup>5</sup> Magnússon (1824-6) vol.1, p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Bödl (2000) p.238.

<sup>7</sup> Magnússon (1821-3) vol.1, p.148.

<sup>8</sup> Jón Helgason, "Finnur Magnússon", in idem., *Ritgerðakorn og ræðustúfar* (Reykjavík 1959) p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> Magnússon (1821-3) vol.1, p.149.

considered the Eddas little more than distorted Nordic adaptations of classical and Christian motives – like Finnur’s rival Torkel Baden – had made; any lack of respect for the ancient myths could only possibly result from a lack of understanding on the side of the interpreter.<sup>1</sup>

Finnur’s bald statements concerning ‘the right way’ to approach the ancient myths did not pass unnoticed. Indeed, they resonated throughout Europe. Although his controversial use of a great variety of sources gave rise to debates concerning his scholarly skills, overall, his writings cemented his position as an international authority on eddic mythology.<sup>2</sup> In the long term, Finnur’s urge to move beyond the words and render the mythological world view enshrined in the Eddas tangible to his readership in other, more visual ways had a lasting effect on the way later generations would envision the ‘eddic universe’. The issue of spatialising Old Norse cosmology, with its nine worlds, the world-ash *Yggdrasil*, and the Midgard Serpent encircling the world of men (*Miðgarðr*), was one on which Finnur pondered quite intensely. As Margaret Clunies Ross has demonstrated in a recent article, Finnur initially applied the schematic, classical – Ptolemaic – cartographical device of the *rota*, or wheel map, consisting of several concentric circles – with *Yggdrasil* at its centre – to bring order into the chaos of conflicting Old Norse accounts.<sup>3</sup> A less schematic, more evocative and three-dimensional rendering of the same cosmology eventually appeared in the endpapers of his *Eddalæren* (vol. 4), and depicts – among other things – the World Tree (*verdenstræet*), the streams at its roots, and the rainbow-bridge connecting *Miðgarðr* to the world of the gods (fig. 5).

Even though this visualisation has been criticised for many (valid) reasons, and some of its aspects openly *contradict* the Old Norse sources – like Finnur’s insistence on presenting parts of the tree, clearly described as roots, as branches –, some of Finnur’s strongest opponents did resort to his orderly (over)simplification when clarifying the ancient myths to a general audience. One could argue that they did not have much choice in this matter, since Finnur’s visual rendition was the first of its kind and there were no rivalling alternatives to speak of.<sup>4</sup> Its popularity can be attributed largely to the fact that J.A. Blackwell, who had described Finnur’s ideas as belonging to the ‘most groundless assumptions imaginable’, decided to include the image in his third edition (1847) of Bishop Percy’s immensely influential *Northern Antiquities* (first edition: 1770).<sup>5</sup> After that, it has been copied and imitated innumerable times, providing the modern world with a fixed – and somewhat flawed – impression of what ‘our ancestors’ may have believed in terms of cosmology. Forgotten though his scholarship may have become, one could argue that no single individual has had a more profound influence on our modern *spatial* conception of the Old Norse world view than Finnur, no matter how ‘groundless’ some of his underlying assumptions may have proven to be. Given the nature of the present study, the actual validity of Finnur’s theories should not concern us any further, however. Instead, we will now turn to the matter of national identity and examine how Finnur’s philological activities can be related to his ideas on what it meant to ‘be an Icelander’.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘archaeoastronomical’ interpretation of the myths never became the dominant one in eddic scholarship. Nevertheless, some modern scholars like Gísli Sigurðsson are fervent supporters of this theory. See for instance: Sigurðsson (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt (1885) p.xii.

<sup>3</sup> These *rota* maps, which can be found in the archive of the Society of Antiquaries of London, are analysed in Margaret Clunies Ross, “Images of Norse Cosmology”, in Daniel Anlezark (ed.), *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature in Honour of John McKinnell* (Toronto-Buffalo-London 2011) pp. 53-73, 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.64.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, pp.63-4. Blackwell’s harsh comment on Finnur’s theories can be found in Percy’s *Northern Antiquities* (third edition; 1847) p.506.

### 3.4.6 Finnur as Icelander

It would be an anachronistic fallacy to conclude from Finnur's description of the Eddas as 'monuments of the Danish nation', that he was somehow less interested in his own Icelandic background or the concept of an Icelandic nation. Finnur, who was equally fluent in both languages, considered himself both a Dane and an Icelander and saw no conflict in this 'double identity'.<sup>1</sup> It is important to keep in mind that throughout the nineteenth century, as the Icelandic national movement gained momentum, practically all Icelandic intellectuals involved in it entertained beneficial connections of some sort with Denmark's academic or political institutions, and that even the most fervent nationalist could not envision an Icelandic future in which Denmark would not play a significant part. An abrupt and complete secession from the realm, as propagated by the – Danish! – maverick Jørgen Jørgensen, known in Icelandic as Jörundur *hundadagakonungur* ('dog-days king'), who had declared the island independent and himself its protector (see Chapter 1.2.2), was not considered a serious option or even desirable among the more realistic Icelanders. In 1809, at the time of Jørgensen's short-lived Icelandic adventure, Finnur steadily refused to betray 'his king' by recognising the authority of the usurper, nor his proclamation of Iceland's independence. This display of loyalty to the Danish throne did not go by unnoticed, and granted him access to a prosperous political career at the court in Copenhagen, where he represented the Icelandic people as an integral part of the realm.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, Finnur shared Rask's concerns about the future of the Icelandic language and called upon his fellow Icelanders to initiate a national literary and cultural renaissance. In *Íslensk sagnablöð*, the periodical of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* of which he was one of the co-founders, he encouraged his countrymen to pick up their pens and create Icelandic literature:

Icelanders! Our duty and honour require achievements and excellence from us, if we will live up to our reputation and not let it be known the world over, that our fathers' spirit has left us, and all attempts will fail which do not lead to literature and to general knowledge among ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

The ancient manuscripts, with which he was so well acquainted as a philologist, were more than simply antiquarian artifacts or objects of academic scrutiny; they were the legacy of the forefathers and therefore an *assignment* for modern Icelanders, who had to live up to the literary reputation their people had enjoyed for centuries. In other words; the achievements of modern Icelanders had to be excellent, because the achievements of medieval Icelanders had *also* been excellent. It was the past that determined the standard for the present and the future, and attaining that high standard constituted a matter of national honour.<sup>4</sup>

Finnur himself also moved beyond the mere study of literature, and contributed his poetic share to the renaissance he envisioned. As a student, he had already published a collection of poems in Danish (*Ubetydeligheder*; 'Inconsequentialities', 1800), and throughout his life he would continue to write poetry in both Icelandic and Danish. His Icelandic poems shed some light on Finnur's ideas on Icelandic identity, and in the final years of his life he was one of the very initiators of a new phenomenon in Icelandic poetry, which would become an almost obligatory constituent of every poetic *oeuvre* in the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Helgason (1959) pp. 171–96.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of his political career, see Kristjánsson (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Finnur Magnússon, in his news supplement to the *Íslensk sagnablöð* 7 (1823) pp.1-60, 56.

<sup>4</sup> This ideal confluence of former and future greatness is referred to as the 'double time of the nation'. See Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London 1990).

century; the homage to Jón Sigurðsson.<sup>1</sup> As a young student in Copenhagen, Jón – who would eventually become the undisputed leader of the national movement – had worked for some time as a scribe for Finnur. Many years later, on the occasion of Jón’s departure from Copenhagen to the newly resurrected Alþingi in Reykjavík (1845), Finnur would compose the following verses in honour of his former employee:

By the salty Faxi Bay<sup>2</sup>  
It [*the Alþingi*] resides in Ingólfur’s town<sup>3</sup>  
For the first time for Iceland;  
There sounds the voice of the nation,  
Necessary, wise, strong,  
Progressing, smooth and trustworthy,  
And averting great disaster!

Parliament is resurrected,  
Goodness will prevail  
For beautiful Iceland!  
Here it received a leader  
Who now has to say goodbye:  
Wherever he will go,  
Prosperity will embrace **Jón!**<sup>4</sup>

It is very well possible that Finnur’s ideas on Iceland’s position within the Danish realm had shifted – under the influence of the Fjölnismenn and the growing national movement – since the days of Jørgensen’s *coup d’état*, thirty-six years earlier.<sup>5</sup> But it might also be that, in Finnur’s experience, the discrepancy between being a loyal subject of the Danish king and at the same time subscribing wholeheartedly to Jón Sigurðsson’s program for greater political autonomy – but not necessarily complete independence – was not as significant as it would become to later generations. He may have considered Jón’s patriotic *Realpolitik* a reasonable and healthy alternative to Jørgensen’s radical and irresponsible usurpation.

As these verses – as well as his plea for a national regeneration based on the Old Norse-Icelandic heritage – serve to demonstrate, Finnur was every bit as much a ‘Romantic nationalist’ as Oehlenschläger or Grundtvig were. Just like them, he followed Henrik Steffen’s influential lectures on philosophy and national ideology, in which Schelling’s Romantic interpretation of mythology, along with his concept of the *Weltseele*, were first introduced to the Nordic world. Inspired by these new ideas, Finnur became one of the very first ‘Icelandic representatives of the Romantic movement’.<sup>6</sup> He acquainted himself with the works of prominent Romantic writers, and found in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott a useful template for the literary and poetic activation of the ancient, *national* past. It was due to these works that Finnur became convinced that both ancient and modern national literature

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<sup>1</sup> Finnur wrote three of these poems; two in 1845 and one in 1847. For an overview of poems dedicated to Jón Sigurðsson – until 1877 – see Egilsson (1999) pp.284-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Faxaflói* (‘Faxi Bay’); the bay in which Reykjavík is situated.

<sup>3</sup> Ingólfr Arnarson, the first settler. ‘His town’ refers to Reykjavík.

<sup>4</sup> Finnur Magnússon, *Fulltrúakveðja við burtför alþingismannsisns Jóns Sigurdssonar* (1845), verse three and four (of four), published in *Sagnir. Tímarit um söguleg efni* 6 (1985) p.61. Bold lettering original. For more on Finnur’s ideas on the new parliament, see Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, “Finnur Magnússon og endurreisn alþingis”, in *Ný saga* 13 (2001) pp.87-94.

<sup>5</sup> A change in tone may already be detected in three overtly patriotic poems Finnur published in the third volume of the journal *Árman á Alþingi* (edited by Baldvin Einarsson and Þorgeir Guðmundsson) in 1831.

<sup>6</sup> Torfi K. Stefánsson Hjaltalín, “*guð er sá, sem talar skáldsins raust*”. *Trú og hugmyndafræði frá píetisma til rómantíkur* (Reykjavík 2006) p.356.

sprang “from one and the same trunk.”<sup>1</sup> In that sense, *Waverley* was just as much a product of the primordial Nordic genius as the ‘ancient poems’ of Ossian, the authenticity of which was in Finnur’s eyes just as undeniable as that of the poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*.<sup>2</sup> In order for a similar artistic revival of the Old Norse spirit to occur in Iceland, the literary tradition it would be based on first had to be properly understood, and protected against its ‘enemies’ who denied the original genius enclosed in the Eddas and sagas. With considerable academic ferocity, Finnur took the role of protector upon himself and defended his ‘national heritage’ through polemical writings, directed against rivals like Torkel Baden and others who believed that only *Greek* culture could be conceived as the cradle of human civilisation.<sup>3</sup>

An important element of this endeavour to *upgrade* the international status of Old Norse-Icelandic culture, lies in his presentation of eddic mythology as a noble branch in the great tree of Indo-European culture. Paradoxically, Finnur may – because of this universalisation of the Eddas – be compared to that other great Icelandic mythologist, Snorri Sturluson. A more abstract, structural analysis of Snorri’s and Finnur’s programmatic scholarship, as outlined in the table below, clearly demonstrates that the discursive similarities are more profound than one would maybe expect from two very different individuals, divided by centuries of cultural and intellectual development. After our analysis so far, we can now identify five general themes or motivations that inspired these two Icelandic mythographers:

<b><u>General themes:</u></b>	<b><u>Snorri Sturluson:</u></b>	<b><u>Finnur Magnússon:</u></b>
1: Special <i>status</i> and <i>prestige</i> abroad, linked to ‘ancestral heritage’:	Norwegian court (king and earl).	Danish court and academic prestige.
2: Heritage under <i>threat</i> :	From new genres of poetry from continental Europe.	From the ‘anti-Eddists’, the Enlightenment discourse on myth.
3: <i>Universal discourse</i> as means of emancipation:	Troy, Christendom.	Indo-European theory, natural sciences.
4: Transforming <i>folklore</i> into ‘high culture’:	Oral sources?	Salvaging ancient, oral wisdom.
5: Call for <i>new creations</i> , inspired by ancestral heritage:	A ‘manual’ for aspiring poets.	‘National art’ based on the Eddas.

<sup>1</sup> Þórir Óskarsson, “Nasjonale som de store nasjonene”, in A. Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008) pp.123-43, 127.

<sup>2</sup> Finnur dedicated a whole treatise to the interpretation of the Ossian poems. See Finnur Magnússon, *Forsøg til Forklaring over nogle Steder af Ossians Digte, mest vedkommen Skandinaviens Hedenold* (Copenhagen 1814).

<sup>3</sup> This graecophile view was shared by Goethe. On the polemic between Finnur and Baden, see Bödl (2000) pp.158-61.

Even though Finnur strongly rejected the idea that mythology was merely a primitive and distorted kind of historiography, and even *reversed* Snorri's euhemerism with his Romantic philosophy of the *Weltseele*, both mythologists sought to preserve and emancipate their cultural heritage by placing the myths in a larger framework of international significance.<sup>1</sup> For Finnur, this discursive framework of signification consisted of natural science and the Indo-European theory, for Snorri it was the classical myth of ancient Troy, admired throughout Europe. Despite the difference in contents, it could be argued that they shared the same goal – emancipation – and applied a similar strategy – encapsulation into a universal narrative – in order to achieve it. Also, both of them have emphasised the relevance of mythological themes and narratives to the contemporary arts; Snorri's Edda is structured as a handbook for aspiring poets, and Finnur maintained, as we have seen, that the Old Norse myths were *at least* equally appropriate for modern artistic expression as the classical ones had been for centuries. In this context, the link between mythology and identity becomes evident; knowledge of the Eddas enables one to solve the little word-games or riddles (*kenningar*) contained in poetry inspired by the Old Norse corpus, both ancient and modern.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge, contained in the community sharing the same narrative, becomes a prerequisite for understanding and participating in the literary discourse, and consequently an instrument of in- and exclusion; those equipped with the appropriate knowledge to play the game are in, all the others are out. Due to this function as community-builder, mythological systems remained culturally relevant even after the loss of their religious significance.<sup>3</sup>

It is this Romantic occupation with the relevance of myth in the modern world, that sets Finnur apart from previous generations of Icelandic Edda-exegetes. By undermining the outdated euhemeristic theory, he removed the Eddas from the dusty realm of antiquarian curiosities and unfruitful speculations on the historical origins of these Asian men, who were in the course of time deified by the easily impressed Scandinavians. Instead, Finnur proposed a more dynamic approach, which catapulted the ancient texts to the cutting edges of modern geology, astronomy, and comparative linguistics. This de-historisation of Old Norse mythology facilitated a more symbolic, psychological and internalised interpretation of the myths, which became the hallmark of Romantic mythography in the nineteenth century. I have demonstrated that this Romantic conception of mythology was by no means Finnur's own invention, and that his theories were firmly rooted in contemporary ideas in comparative linguistics and – Romantic – philology and philosophy. Nevertheless, no one in the Nordic world before him had ever combined and applied these divergent discourses to 'defend' Scandinavia's cultural heritage against its adversaries, and simultaneously promoted its artistic significance to this age of 'national awakenings'. He rendered philological concepts from Germany accessible and useful to Icelanders and Danes, and in turn provided German scholars with knowledge about the ancient language and culture of the North.

These activities define him as one of the crucial bridge-builders, or *cultural brokers* of his age, and makes him an appropriate starting point for any research into the dissemination of ideas within the elaborate network of Nordic and European intellectuals involved in the construction of their respective national philologies.<sup>4</sup> His mythological scholarship forms a bridge between myth as 'cultural capital' and myth as 'symbolic language' (see Chapter 1.1), by linking his comparative methodology directly to demands for new, national art based on the Eddas. Even-Zohar's claim that the medieval skálds embodied *both* forms of culture in

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<sup>1</sup> On Snorri's motivations for composing the *Prose Edda*, see Chapter 2.1.3.

<sup>2</sup> The same also goes for national history; someone who is unfamiliar with Ingólfr Arnarson, Iceland's first settler, will have a hard time grasping that 'Ingólfr's town' is a poetic description of Reykjavík. See Finnur's poem, discussed above.

<sup>3</sup> Huizinga, (1958) pp.137-8.

<sup>4</sup> See Leerssen (2004).

one ('culture-as-goods' and 'culture-as-tools'; see Chapter 1.1), is therefore equally applicable to their descendants in the nineteenth century; the Romantic scholars who actively emancipated and 'revived' their ancestral heritage in the process of nation-building. Finnur has been criticised for being unable to "set limits to his imagination",<sup>1</sup> and not without valid reasons. But it is exactly the imaginative and visionary element of his work, spiced up with superlatives and occasional outbursts of patriotic enthusiasm, that contributed to a more *poetic* strand of Edda-reception in Icelandic culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Valsson (1997) pp.52-3.

## 4. National Romanticism and the New Society (1820-1845)<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Bjarni Thorarensen and Freyja's Cats

#### 4.1.1 The Birth of the Lady of the Mountain

The 'Romantic turn' in the interpretation of Old Norse literature, which stimulated the imagination of Danish Romantics like Grundtvig and Oehlenschläger and found academic expression in the philology of Finnur Magnússon, would come to determine the basic character of what would – in the early nineteenth century – develop into a distinctly *Icelandic* national Romanticism. It is this early phase of Icelandic Romanticism that we will turn to in this chapter; how and when did comparative philology evolve into a transdisciplinary school of artistic and literary thought? How was Icelandic Romanticism any different from other Nordic 'national Romantics'? And how did Romantic ideas influence the debate on Iceland's cultural and political future?

In his study on the influence of foreign cultural movements on Icelandic culture, Ingi Sigurðsson demonstrates that an Icelandic awareness of there being something like a 'Romantic school' did not occur until the very last section of the nineteenth century, when the climaxes of what is generally referred to as Romantic culture<sup>2</sup> were already a thing of the past.<sup>3</sup> However, this relatively late reception of Romanticism does not automatically imply that none of the earlier Icelandic writers could therefore be categorised as Romantic. In the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Icelandic literary scholars reconstructed the course of their *own* Romantic tradition, characterised by the general conviction that Iceland's medieval heritage had preserved the most pristine and natural essence of Icelandic culture, in which modern national literature was to be rooted.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of Romantic thought to Icelandic literature is generally attributed to Bjarni Thorarensen (1786-1841): a poet of the same generation as Finnur Magnússon.<sup>5</sup>

Bjarni, whose father was a local official (*sýslumaður*), was born in Brautarholt on Kjalarnes, not far from Reykjavík. Aged fifteen, he moved to Copenhagen, where he acquired a degree in law at the age of twenty-one and followed Henrik Steffen's lectures (1802-3) that also inspired Finnur Magnússon, Grundtvig and Oehlenschläger. This encounter with Romantic philosophy resulted in a lively interest in the writings of contemporary Danish and German poets like Oehlenschläger<sup>6</sup>, Novalis and Schiller, and inspired the young student to

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<sup>1</sup> Certain parts of this chapter, especially those relating to landscape, were previously published in Simon Halink, "The Icelandic mythscape: sagas, landscapes and national identity", in *National Identities* 16:3 (2014), special issue on the making of landscapes in modernity, pp.209-223.

<sup>2</sup> For the divergent definitions of the term Romanticism, see Chapter 1.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ingi Sigurðsson, *Erlendir straumar og íslensk viðhorf. Áhrif fjölpjódlegra hugmyndastefna á Íslendinga 1830-1918* (Reykjavík 2006) p.113. See also Þórir Óskarsson, "Hugtakið rómantík í íslenskri bókmenntasögu 19. aldar", in *Skírnir* 170 (1996) pp.255-302.

<sup>4</sup> Páll Valsson, "Íslensk endurreisn", in Halldór Guðmundsson (ed.), *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* vol.3 (Reykjavík 1996) pp.219-269, 269. See also Egilsson (1999) pp.17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "Bjarni Thorarensen og Montesquieu", in Jakob Benediktsson and Jón Samsonarson (eds.), *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar* (Reykjavík 1969) pp.34-47, 34. See also Óskarsdóttir (1996) pp.247-51.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas Oehlenschläger formed a great source of inspiration to the first generation of Icelandic Romantics, Grundtvig's influence would only become a factor of importance in later decades, e.g. in the work of Matthías Jochumsson (Chapter 8.1.2). For an analysis of Grundtvig's influence on Icelandic culture, see Ingi Sigurðsson, "Áhrif hugmyndafræði Grundtvigs á Íslendinga", in *Ritmennt* 4 (2004) pp.59-94.



translate their works and to compose his own poetry in the same spirit.<sup>1</sup> After returning to Iceland in 1811, he took on a position at the superior court. In 1833, he became the deputy governor of northern and eastern Iceland; an important position that engaged him in the local and national politics of his island. In spite of this demanding public office, Bjarni produced an impressive poetic oeuvre that has always attracted considerable attention from Icelandic literary scholars.<sup>2</sup> In 1818, his patriotic poem *Ísland* ('Iceland'), arguably the first Romantic poem in Icelandic, appeared in Magnús Stephensen's journal *Klausturpóstinn*.

As a student Bjarni was an active associate of the Arnamagnæan Commission in Copenhagen, and he became a close friend of Finnur Magnússon. In 1834, when Finnur experienced his finest hour as the great decipherer of Runamo and received tributes from all directions, Bjarni celebrated the occasion with a poem containing the following verses:

Infamous Harald Wartooth<sup>3</sup>  
 from life and victory fell  
 on the fields of Brávellir.

Now, a true story  
 over the ocean flew  
 that my Finnur  
 won a great victory there.  
 (...)
 Peace be to you, *Mímir Magnússon!*  
 Runes like those of Rögnahroptur<sup>4</sup>  
 you decipher with wisdom.

The love of the fatherland, fame and hope,  
 may they prosper for a long time  
 and bring you luck and gentle joy.<sup>5</sup>

The high esteem in which Finnur was held by his proud friend and fellow Icelander Bjarni, is expressed in the name 'Mímir Magnússon', in which Finnur is equated with the eddic god of wisdom Mímir. This deity is the protector of the Well of Wisdom, or Mímir's Well (*Mímisbrunnr*), from which Óðinn is allowed to drink only after sacrificing one of his eyes.<sup>6</sup> In another narrative, Mímir is beheaded by the Vanir gods, who send the head back to Ásgarðr. There, Óðinn continues to receive wise council from the bodiless head.<sup>7</sup> The runes themselves are associated with the inconceivable wisdom of Óðinn (*Rögnahroptur*), but can be deciphered with the deep wisdom epitomised by Mímir – in this case embodied by Finnur

<sup>1</sup> "While the relationship of Steffen's [*sic*] lectures and the Danish Romantic movement to Bjarni's poetry has not been explained beyond the level of subjective supposition, there can be no doubt that the flurry of literary activity during the first decade of the nineteenth century had a definite impact on his own poetic aspirations as a translator." Wayne M. Senner, *The Reception of German Literature in Iceland, 1775-1850* (Amsterdam 1985) pp.94-5.

<sup>2</sup> A short overview of the scholarly reception of Bjarni's work is provided in Egilsson (1999) p.14. A thorough examination of his poems was conducted by Finnur Jónsson in 1916; "Um skáldmál Bjarna Thórarensens", in *Ársrit Hins íslenska fræðafjelags í Kaupmannahöfn* 1 (1916) pp.109-17.

<sup>3</sup> A legendary king, believed to have commissioned the Runamo inscription. See Chapter 3.4.

<sup>4</sup> *Rögnahroptur* ('Wise Ruler') refers to Óðinn, who received the knowledge of the runes after hanging from a tree for nine days and nights. Óðinn is attributed with endowing mankind with the wisdom of the runes (see the poem *Hávamál* of the *Poetic Edda*).

<sup>5</sup> Bjarni Thorarensen, *Til Finns Magnússonar* (1834) verse one, two, five and six (of six), in *Kvæði Bjarna Thórarensens amtmanns* (Copenhagen 1945 [1847]) p.141. Italics added.

<sup>6</sup> The well is attested in both the *Poetic Edda* (*Völuspá*) and the *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning*).

<sup>7</sup> See chapter four of Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*.

Magnússon. This very direct poetic application of mythological themes, which seems very appropriate for a poem dedicated to a great mythologist like Finnur,<sup>1</sup> is a relatively marginal feature of Bjarni's oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> His use of the Eddas as a source of creative regeneration was of a different, more technical nature. Already in the 1790s, the eddic metre known as *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre'; see Chapter 2.1.2) was experiencing its comeback in Benedikt Gröndal Jónsson's Icelandic translation of Alexander Pope's *The Temple of Fame* (*Musteri mannorðsins*, 1790). Jón Þorláksson's application of this metre in his Icelandic translations of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (*Paradísarmissir*, 1828) and Klopstock's *Messiah* (*Messías*, 1834-8) contributed significantly to the revaluation and reintroduction of the *fornyrðislag* to Icelandic literature. The decision to opt for this metre, instead of the more conventional *dróttkvætt* or other verse forms applied in the traditional *rímur*, would prove a defining moment in Iceland's literary history and inspired Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson to cultivate the *fornyrðislag* as *the* national verse form *par excellence*.<sup>3</sup> This more prosodic inspiration drawn from the Eddas, which did not in any way necessitate the treatment of mythological themes, could be situated somewhere in between the two modes of Edda-reception – the *pragmatic* and the *metaphysical* mode – as identified by Mats Malm (see Chapter 1.3); the interest in the Eddas was no longer of a strictly philological nature, since the ancient techniques were not merely studied but also actually applied to create something new. But the artistic reactivation of the mythological material itself was not yet prominent enough to speak of a metaphysical approach, as constituted by the works of Grundtvig or Oehlenschläger. The most prominent 'eddic feature' in Bjarni's poetry is undoubtedly his frequent use of the *fornyrðislag*.<sup>4</sup> But also thematically the Eddas have influenced his oeuvre, albeit implicitly.

More central features of Bjarni's work are his Romantic preoccupations with landscape and the national spirit of Iceland. These two themes cannot be considered separately, since they were organically intertwined in Bjarni's mind. Unlike Finnur Magnússon, he did not consider Danish and Icelandic national character two equal branches from the same noble tree. Inspired by the climate theories of Montesquieu, he considered the noble Icelanders, hardened by the cold and harsh living conditions on their island, in stark *opposition* to the unheroic Danes, who had been weakened by their relatively warm climate.<sup>5</sup> In his student years, he grew to dislike the Danish landscape – with its lack of mountains and glaciers – which he compared to a face without eyes or a nose. Of course, quite the opposite was true for the rugged landscape of his homeland, which was 'complete', permeated by facial features – like mountains and glaciers – and therefore filled with character, not unlike an actual human being. In his poem *Sjáland og Ísland* ('Zealand and Iceland'), composed in Copenhagen (1809), he declares nostalgically that he cannot be charmed by Zealand's wide plains and its flowers. Instead, he cherishes the memory of Iceland's 'high and holy' mountains, concealing real silver.<sup>6</sup> Silhouetted against Copenhagen's cosmopolitanism, Iceland becomes the cradle of true heroism and natural authenticity. It was in this context of cultural Romanticism that Iceland's fundamental otherness, the very *topos* of abnormality

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<sup>1</sup> For other poems dedicated to Finnur Magnússon, also containing mythological motives, see Bjarni's *Til F.M.*, in Thorarensen (1945) pp.190-1, and also *Gamanvísur til Finns Magnússonar*, in Thorarensen, *Kvæði* (two vols., Copenhagen 1935) vol.1, p.64.

<sup>2</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.106.

<sup>3</sup> Margrét Eggertsdóttir, "From Reformation to Enlightenment", in Daisy Neijmann (ed.), *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln 2006) pp.174-250, 233-6.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough prosodical analysis of Bjarni's poetry, see Jónsson (1916).

<sup>5</sup> Guðnason (1969).

<sup>6</sup> Thorarensen (1945) pp.8-10.

that Eggert Ólafsson had sought to refute in the eighteenth century (see Chapter 2.2.1), was reinterpreted in a positive sense.

In Bjarni's nature poetry, this dualistic world-view and the contrastation of a 'heroic north' to a morally debased and inferior south found expression in a strangely positive exaltation of the Icelandic winter (*Veturinn*, 1823<sup>1</sup>) which had, after all, been responsible for the development of the nation's heroic character. Winter, personified by a pseudo-mythological hero riding the sky with a shield of ice and a helmet adorned with the *aurora borealis*, is presented as a severe but just teacher, who, like Iceland – but unlike the more pleasant climates in other countries – 'never spoiled its children'.<sup>2</sup> Although there is no direct allusion to eddic themes in this poem, it is characterised by the same imaginative 'mythologisation of nature' that Finnur Magnússon had identified as the origin of all mythology. In the poem *Suðurlönd og norðurlönd* ('Southern Lands and Northern Lands') the north – south dichotomy is primordialised through the creation myth from the *Gylfaginning* (*Prose Edda*), and situated in a time 'before Óðinn's father was alive', when Frost (*Hrímið*) moved southwards to encounter the sun. The cosmogonical narrative of the Eddas, in which the universe comes into existence when the absolute principles of cold (*Niflheimr*; 'Mist World') and heat (*Múspellsheimr*; the realm of fire) collide, is thus projected onto the 'collision' of Nordic and southern climate and culture. Montesquieu's normative ideas on climate and culture are thus primordialised through Old Norse mythology.

Another one of Bjarni's poetic personifications – the one incarnating the organic unity of landscape and nation – would become a potent *Leitmotiv* and a unifying symbol in Iceland's national discourse. In his famous poem *Íslands minni* ('Memory of Iceland', also known as *Eldgamla Ísafold*; 'Ancient land of ice'<sup>3</sup>) from 1819, a feminine personification of Iceland – already prefigured in Eggert Ólafsson's poem *Ofsjónir* ('Hallucinations'; 1752) – is for the first time referred to as *Fjallkonan*; the 'Lady of the Mountain'. Like the jagged land itself, she is beautiful and pure, and unspoiled by weaknesses associated with the south:

Ancient Iceland,  
beloved native soil,  
fair Lady of the Mountain!  
your sons will adore you  
as long as the sea girdles the lands,  
lads desire lasses,  
and sun glosses the hill.<sup>4</sup>

Presenting the nation's *genius loci* in the guise of feminine allegories was by no means a practice unique to Iceland, as demonstrated by Tricia Cusack; the Janus-faced nature of nationalism assigned women to a 'backward-look', associated with the nation's past, tradition, and the organicity of the rural community, as opposed to the forward-looking masculine element, which represented the nation's promising future in a modern world (fig. 6).<sup>5</sup> The identification of the quintessential Icelandic woman with the nation's landscape, as

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.13-6.

<sup>2</sup> See *Ísland* (1818), in Thorarensen (1945) pp.60-1. Compare Þórir Óskarsson, "From Romanticism to Realism", in Daisy Neijmann (ed.), *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln 2006) pp.251-307, 263. See also Þorleifur Hauksson, *Endurteknar myndir í kveðskap Bjarna Thorarensens* (Studia Islandica 27; Reykjavík 1968) pp.23-27.

<sup>3</sup> Thorarensen (1945) pp.1-2. The lyrics of this poem served as Iceland's unofficial national anthem, sung on the tune of British one.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, verse one (of five). I would like to thank Jón Karl Helgason for his help on this translation; *Fjallkonan fríð! mögum þín muntu kær/meðan lönd gyrðir sær/og gumar girnast mær,/gljár sól á hlíð.*

<sup>5</sup> Cusack (2000).

performed in Bjarni's poem, is indicative of the national sentiments attached to landscape in Iceland.<sup>1</sup> This can be contrasted with the case of France, for instance, where *Marianne* allegorises the more abstract values of Liberty and Reason, associated with the French Revolution.

Bjarni, who prepared some transcriptions of eddic poems himself,<sup>2</sup> infused his poetry with mythological imagery, both classical and Old Norse, often in order to emphasise the sublimity of the natural phenomena that loom large in his work. An example of this Romantic functionalisation of mythology is provided in his short poem *Um Fljótshlíð* ('On Fljótshlíð', a region in the south of Iceland),<sup>3</sup> in which the eroding power of a stream, cutting its way through the 'legs' of the hillside, is implicitly likened to *Níðhöggr*: the eddic dragon or snake who gnaws eternally on the roots of the world-ash Yggdrasill.<sup>4</sup> By mythologising the hill in this fashion, it becomes more than merely a feature in the landscape, but rather something of essential importance and universal significance, rather like the Old Norse *axis mundi* (Yggdrasill) itself. On several occasions Bjarni applies the maritime deities Ægir and Rán as personifications of the sea. In his nationalistic poem *Ísland* ('Iceland'),<sup>5</sup> 'silver-blue Ægir' is presented – along with fire and ice – as one of the natural elements which have hardened the Icelandic people, and which have fended off cowardliness like a Cherub with his sword. The god of the sea is thus a teacher and 'shaper' of national character, just like Bjarni's personified winter. These allegorical entities are therefore worthy of the Icelanders' appreciation, because the islanders would not have been what they are ('Icelandic') if it was not for their creative powers. The secular pantheism of Romanticism is characteristic of the anti-Cartesian, semi-religious experience of the – often 'terrible' – Sublime in natural phenomena. Ancient mythological entities associated with these phenomena, like mountain trolls and frost giants, were revived in order to imbue nature with subjective personality, or a spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from these subtler allegorical applications of eddic themes, some poems in Bjarni's oeuvre delve somewhat deeper into the meaning and significance of the Old Norse myths. The same dualistic world-view underlying his ideas on Nordic and southern nature led him to distinguish very rigidly between true love – as personified by Freyja – on the one hand, and lust, passion and intoxication, as incarnated by her opponent Bacchus on the other, who he describes as being "worse than a dog."<sup>7</sup> In his collection of drinking songs (*Drykkjuvísur*) this opposition is thematised, and his ambivalent relationship with the god of wine – representing alcohol itself – becomes evident:

I am leaving your lands, o Freyja!  
The bottle  
pleases me more:  
your power never joins  
          more than two;  
but thirty men or more  
seducing Bacchus unites in friendship.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Hálfðanarson (2007a) pp.191-216, and Halink (2014) pp.217-8.

<sup>2</sup> Nanna Ólafsdóttir, "Af eddukvæðahandritum Bjarna Thorarensens", in *Árbók 1984 (Landsbókasafn Íslands)* 10 (1984) pp.50-2. These transcriptions are from 1809 and 1810.

<sup>3</sup> Thorarensen (1935) vol.1, p.142.

<sup>4</sup> See also Óskarsdóttir (1996) p.248.

<sup>5</sup> Thorarensen (1945) pp.60-1.

<sup>6</sup> For a further analysis of this phenomenon, in juxtaposition to the utilitarian views of the Enlightenment, see Chapter 4.2.

<sup>7</sup> *Drykkjuvísur* ('Drinking Songs') verse 6; Thorarensen (1945) pp.159-63, 162.

<sup>8</sup> Thorarensen (1945) p.159 (verse 1).

Bjarni is not the first Icelander to compose poems about Bacchus; his esteemed predecessor Eggert Ólafsson had already called upon his fellow countrymen to awaken, and to join all the other nations in their ecstatic celebrations of the Bacchanalia.<sup>1</sup> But the antithesis of Bacchus and Freyja is an innovation, and characteristic of Bjarni's tendency to polarise. It is no coincidence that he selected a deity from the Old Norse pantheon to signify everything pure and 'true', and one from the 'southern' (classical) pantheon to signify its exact opposite. In doing so, the poet uses Norse mythology as an instrument of cultural *differentiation* (the fifth function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1). But at the same time, the tradition of the north is also *associated* with its more prestigious southern counterpart (the fourth function of myth) through this comparison; by placing Freyja in this classical narrative, some of the cultural prestige of the classical traditions is transferred to the Nordic tradition, which is – according to Bjarni – not merely *equal* to that of Hellas and Rome, but *superior*.

#### 4.1.2 Eddic Necrophilia

The most explicitly 'eddic' poem in Bjarni's oeuvre, *Freyjukettirnir* ('Freyja's Cats'), was published in the fifth volume of the journal *Fjölnir* (see Chapter 4.2) in 1839.<sup>2</sup> In this playful work, Freyja's mythological antipode is entirely absent, and the animals pulling her golden chariot are still the cats of the Eddas, not Oehlenschläger's tigers (see Chapter 3.4.4). These cats, symbolising the more kittenish side of love, explain to the reader that they are different from other cats, in that they catch men rather than mice.<sup>3</sup> In this poetic reinterpretation, they become more than simply Freyja's draught animals, and are refashioned as Freyja's 'representatives on earth', sent on a mission to make people fall in love with each other. The divine principle of love is thus transplanted into the realm of everyday life, through something as trivial as a regular house cat. Freyja is not an unapproachable abstract principle hidden away in her hall in Ásgarðr, but rather a very real ingredient of human life, the playful character of which can be discerned in the behavior of the animals traditionally associated with her. By placing Freyja's cats in *this* world, instead of the faraway realm of the gods, Bjarni actualises the divine principle of love in a very teasing fashion.

Bjarni's Romantic preoccupation with the subject of love is not only evidenced by his poetic treatment of Freyja, 'love's gentle goddess'.<sup>4</sup> The more macabre facet of the same life-giving force is thematised in his poem *Sigrúnarljóð* ('Sigrún's Song'; 1820),<sup>5</sup> in which the poet merges his fascination with Old Norse-Icelandic themes with his love for contemporary foreign literature. He introduces the poem with a quote from Adam Oehlenschläger's tragedy *Axel og Valborg* (Copenhagen 1810), indicating where he found much of his Romantic inspiration.<sup>6</sup> The poet composing the verses, in which there are no explicit references to the Eddas, vows to love his beloved Sigrún as intensely – and carnally! – in death as he has done in this life. The image of her white body, buried underneath cold earth and at the mercy of nature's seasons, intensifies the sensation of sublime love and borders on downright necrophilia:<sup>7</sup> "White is the purest lily, white like snow are you."<sup>1</sup> This treatment of the

<sup>1</sup> Eggert Ólafsson, *Vínleikabragur* ('Wine Parties' Poem'; 1767). However, also Eggert's relationship with Bacchus is ambivalent, and in the final two verses of the poem Bacchus is requested to leave the country after the drinking has gotten out of hand. See Eggertsdóttir (2006) p.237.

<sup>2</sup> *Fjölnir* 5 (1839) p.5-6. The title was originally spelled *Frejúkettirnir*. See also Thorarensen (1945) p.157-8.

<sup>3</sup> These same cats also appear in Bjarni's *Gamanvísur*, a poem dedicated to Finnur Magnússon. Thorarensen (1935) vol.1, p.64.

<sup>4</sup> *Freyjukettirnir*, Thorarensen (1945) p.157-8, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Thorarensen (1945) pp.144-6.

<sup>6</sup> See Jón Helgason's introduction to Thorarensen (1935), vol.1, pp.x-xi and xliii.

<sup>7</sup> Egilsson (2008) pp.106-7.

quintessentially Romantic *topos* of love beyond death – love in decay even – echoes the necrophilia theme from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur* ('The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-slayer'): a heroic poem from the *Poetic Edda*. In this ancient lay, the slain warrior Helgi Hundingsbani briefly returns from the dead in order to spend a night together with his beloved Sigrún in his burial mound. Afterwards, Helgi returns to Valhöll, and Sigrún spends the rest of her life waiting in vain, for his return.<sup>2</sup> Her physical interaction with a dead man was not considered appropriate by her maid, and the accusation of necrophilia was as shocking then as it is today. But in the early nineteenth century, the theme of (carnal) love beyond death acquired new literary significance due to the 'gothic' obsession with the macabre, and the morbid love poetry of the German poet Novalis (Georg Friedrich Philipp Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772-1801), whose melancholic oeuvre was determined by the premature death of his fifteen-year-old fiancée Sophie. The *Sehnsucht* and longing for death characterising his poetry, in which the darkness of night is celebrated as a key to the soul,<sup>3</sup> have influenced Romantic spirits everywhere in Europe and engendered a literary vogue known as 'Novalism'. Along with Friedrich Schiller and Oehlenschläger, Novalis was an important source of inspiration for Bjarni,<sup>4</sup> whose frequent symbolic use of flowers – white lilies, associated with purity and death, rather than red roses – appears to have been inspired by Novalis's allegory of the 'blue flower': a mystical symbol for the Romantic ideals of nature, inspiration, and sublimity.<sup>5</sup> Also in Oehlenschläger's aforementioned *Axel og Valborg*, this combination of melancholia, flower symbolism, love and death displays all the hallmarks of Novalian Romanticism. By infusing these modern themes into his poem alluding to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Bjarni refashioned the ancient story of Helgi Hundingsbani in such a way, that it acquired new layers of relevance to the modern, Romantic reader. This practice contributed to the Scandinavian domestication of foreign literary themes, and simultaneously facilitated a more anachronistic and internalised approach to eddic mythology.

## 4.2 The Men of Fjölnir

### 4.2.1 From Volksgeist to þjóðarandi

Although Bjarni's national Romanticism is now generally considered a radical break with the past, heralding a new era in Icelandic culture – he has even been characterised as the *only* genuinely Romantic poet in Icelandic history<sup>6</sup> – his work initially did not reach a very large audience, as he himself made little effort to publish his poems. It would be a new generation of Icelanders, inspired by Bjarni's Romantic ideas as well as foreign writers like Heinrich Heine, that would eventually acknowledge his importance to the national cause and provide Bjarni with a literary platform for his poems in the form of their journal, *Fjölnir* (1835-47), published in Copenhagen. The four editors of this influential journal, who would become known collectively as the *Fjölnismenn* ('the Men of Fjölnir'), were Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810-1851), Konráð Gíslason (1808-1891), Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) and Tómas Sæmundsson (1807-1841). After Bjarni had moved back to Iceland in 1811 and had become

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<sup>1</sup> Thorarensen (1945) verse 3, p.145. See also Páll Bjarnason, *Ástakveðskapur Bjarna Thorarensens og Jónasar Hallgrímssonar* (Studia Islandica 28; Reykjavík 1969) pp.36-40.

<sup>2</sup> *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur* stanzas 39-50.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800).

<sup>4</sup> On the influence of Novalis on Bjarni's work, see Andr sson (1973) pp.200-1.

<sup>5</sup> The motive of the blue flower appears in Novalis's unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799-1800).

On the symbolic use of flowers in Bjarni's poetry, see Hauksson (1968) pp.16-9.

<sup>6</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.251.

intellectually isolated – his only intellectual allies in Iceland were the translator Hallgrímur Scheving (1781-1861) and the translator and poet Sveinbjörn Egilsson, teacher at Bessastaðir – it was Tómas Sæmundsson who first demonstrated the relevance of his work in his Danish pamphlet *Island fra den intellektuelle Side betragtet* ('Iceland considered from the intellectual perspective'; 1832), in which he calls upon Bjarni to continue his literary activities, since Iceland had never known a greater poetic genius.<sup>1</sup> Tómas held the quintessentially Romantic view, that poetry and the arts were considerably more important to the national cause – and to humanity in general – than politics could ever be:

Does he [*Bjarni Thorarensen*] not understand that poets, like Molière, Milton and Klopstock, Holberg and Evald, have done more for their mother countries than the Napoléons, more for ethics and religion than a thousand spiritual men. Not to use and develop such a talent is to refuse one of the most brilliant of God's gifts and is also to reject Poetry's holy spirit!<sup>2</sup>

Bjarni, who was already a middle-aged man by the time his poetry was thus received and venerated by the Fjölnismenn, endorsed the cultural *and* political program of the younger generation to a large extent, and honored the 'holy spirit of Poetry' by contributing to the journal himself.

The national Romanticism disseminated by *Fjölnir* received its inspiration from the literary historicism that flourished in intellectual scenes throughout Europe.<sup>3</sup> Its editors proclaimed optimistically that, although many good and useful books had already appeared in the Icelandic language, a great deal more still remained unwritten.<sup>4</sup> It was this intellectual deficit that the Fjölnismenn sought to remedy. The name of the journal literally means 'The Wise One', and appears frequently in eddic poems and skaldic poetry as an alternative name for Óðinn. It was also the name of a mythological king of Sweden, who was considered a son of the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr.<sup>5</sup> However, the Fjölnismenn cannot be accused of fixating exclusively on Old Norse antiquity, as the tables of contents of the journal demonstrate. The international outlook of the editors of *Fjölnir* is evidenced by the translations from Heinrich Heine's – whose name is conveniently Icelandicised to Hinrik Hæni<sup>6</sup> – *Reisebilder* (1827, *Frá Hæni*), and Ludwig Tieck's *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797, *Ævintýri af Eggerti glóa*<sup>7</sup>), included in the journal's first issue. Tómas Sæmundsson – who studied theology in Copenhagen but did not consider his intellectual development completed after graduation – was one of the first Icelanders to travel extensively through France, Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, and – more importantly – Germany and Austria in order to familiarise himself with the latest literary and philosophical developments there, without the customary 'Danish filter', the mediator through which Icelanders had encountered these new ideas until then.<sup>8</sup> In his – until 1947 unpublished – intellectual account of his journey, *Ferðabók* ('Travel Book'),<sup>9</sup> written after his return to Iceland in 1834, Tómas immerses himself in the ideas of Fichte, Kant, and the liberal theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Contrary to what one would expect from a travel book, the author was not concerned with exotic monuments or

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.265.

<sup>2</sup> Tómas Sæmundsson (1832), quoted and translated in idem, p.265.

<sup>3</sup> As described in Leerssen (2005).

<sup>4</sup> See the programmatic *boðs-bréf* ('prospectus': 1834) accompanying *Fjölnir* 1 (1835), written by Brynjúlfur Pétursson, Konráð Gíslason, and Jónas Hallgrímsson.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the Old Norse poems *Grottasöngur*, *Ynglingatal*, and Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga*.

<sup>6</sup> "Frá Hæni", in *Fjölnir* 1 (1835) pp.140-5, 140.

<sup>7</sup> *Fjölnir* 1 (1835) pp.145-70.

<sup>8</sup> Senner (1985) pp.81-4.

<sup>9</sup> Tómas Sæmundsson, *Ferðabók Tómasar Sæmundssonar: Jakob Benediktsson bjó undir prentun* (Reykjavík 1947).

tourist attractions; what interested him, were the metaphysical concepts of German idealism – like Friedrich von Schelling’s *Weltseele* and Hegel’s dialectics –, the Herderian notion of *Volksgeist* (Icelandic: *þjóðarandi*), and the aesthetics of contemporary German poetry, which are treated extensively.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Fichtean ideas on national identity, Tómas did not present all artistic and intellectual currents he encountered indiscriminately, but rather selectively, with the special ‘national needs’ of his fellow Icelanders in mind.<sup>2</sup> The political and cultural enlightenment of the Icelandic people was the motivation behind most of his writings, including his fifth issue of *Fjölnir* (1839). The kind of national ideology disseminated in Tómas’s writings has been referred to as ‘national conservatism’, due to his emphasis on religious virtue and the degenerative influence of sea-faring and urbanisation.<sup>3</sup> Although his early death prevented him from giving full shape to his religious brand of Icelandic nationalism, his political ideas – which were closely linked to these religious convictions – concerning the restoration of the Alþingi and the rejuvenation of Icelandic cultural and literary life have contributed considerably to the advent of Romantic nationalism in Iceland.

The Fjölnismenn’s predilection for Old Norse-Icelandic themes and their own native language, which would be renewed by their influential journal, did not originate in Copenhagen. Already at Bessastaðir, a boarding school and Iceland’s highest educational institution, the foundation of their later literary historicism was laid. Tómas Sæmundsson, Konráð Gíslason and Jónas Hallgrímsson were all classmates there – Brynjólfur Pétursson was an earlier friend of Jónas – who began their classical curriculum at around the age of sixteen. They were immersed in ancient history, theology, Greek and – primarily – Latin, which they learned by singing Horace’s poems to traditional Icelandic folk melodies.<sup>4</sup> Páll Melsteð, who was a couple of years younger than the future Fjölnismenn, would later assert that at Bessastaðir “the body grew strong and healthy, thanks to wrestling, ball games, swimming, and plenty of nourishing food, while the soul became archaic and half-classical.”<sup>5</sup> The influence of classical themes is evident in the earliest writings of Jónas Hallgrímsson, whose poem *Occidente Sole* (1826-8) constitutes an adaptation of themes from a Horacian ode.<sup>6</sup> While the works of Plato, Homer, Virgil and Caesar were scrutinised in the classroom, the students turned their young minds to “*Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Egils saga* in the sleeping lofts.”<sup>7</sup> According to Páll, the students “thought about little else than the heroic ages of Greece, Rome, and ancient Scandinavia.”<sup>8</sup>

The dynamic fusion of classical and Nordic antiquity taking place at Bessastaðir found its most prolific embodiment in the school’s history and Greek teacher Sveinbjörn Egilsson: Bjarni Thorarensen’s learned friend, who had translated the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into Icelandic – applying ancient eddic metres like the *fornyrðislag* which had, as we have seen, been reintroduced by Benedikt Gröndal Jónsson and Jón Þorláksson – and compiled an impressive dictionary of skaldic and eddic poetry (*Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ*

<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough examination of Tómas’s treatment of modern philosophy and literature, see Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Tómas Sæmundsson – trú, sannleikur, föðurland”, in *Saga* 45 (2007b) pp.45-70. See also Andrésón (1973) pp.265-70.

<sup>2</sup> Senner (1985) p.83.

<sup>3</sup> Hálfðanarson (2007b) p.70.

<sup>4</sup> Ringler (2002) p.15. See also Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, “Óðinn sé með yður!” Fjölnismenn og fornöldin”, in Sverrir Tómasson (ed.), *Guðamjöður og arnarleir. Safn ritgerða um eddulist* (Reykjavík 1996a) 261-294.

<sup>5</sup> Páll Melsteð, *Endurminningar Páls Melsteðs ritaðar af honum sjálfum* (Copenhagen 1912) p.35, quoted and translated by Ringler (2002) p.15.

<sup>6</sup> Ringler (2002) p.17.

<sup>7</sup> Melsteð (1912) p.35, Ringler (2002) p.15-6.

<sup>8</sup> Melsteð (1912) p.35, Ringler (2002) p.15.



*septentrionalis*; 1860) in Latin.<sup>1</sup> No other teacher at Bessastaðir would have a greater influence on the young geniuses assembled there than this charismatic poet. Much later, Sveinbjörn's son Benedikt Gröndal (Sveinbjarnarson; see Chapter 6.3) would claim that it was this influence that instigated the cultural and linguistic renaissance generally attributed to the Fjölnismenn:

It is generally held that the renewal of the Icelandic language in modern times is the work of *Fjölnir* and especially of Jónas and Konráð. Men do not appreciate, or will not acknowledge, that Scheving [Bessastaðir's Latin teacher] and my father laid the foundation for all this. They were the teachers and models for both these men. Konráð was influenced by Scheving and Jónas by my father.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Sveinbjörn's creative treatment of the Icelandic language – now associated with the greatness of Homeric poetry – instilled in his pupils an awareness of the literary potential of their own mother tongue.<sup>3</sup> In his memoirs, Páll Melsteð remembers how he was placed in a dark candlelit room together with all the other first-year pupils at Bessastaðir, and how the room fell completely silent:

Then a man entered (one of the senior students), in a cape and with glasses on his nose [...], he walked with the greatest dignity and worthiness to the table and stood there, while all were observing this grim and bizarre person in anticipation. He looked over the whole congregation, then he raised his voice and said: “Óðinn be with you!”<sup>4</sup>

Although the identity of this theatrical ‘senior student’ remains unrevealed, it is not at all unlikely that this gothic ceremony was performed by one of the future Fjölnismenn themselves. The ritual initiation of the new pupils at Bessastaðir, consisting of pseudo-pagan ceremonies like a thorough immersion in a nearby pond,<sup>5</sup> was stylised as an ancient ‘ancestral’ tradition of heathen origin. The senior students’ flirtations with the pre-Christian, eddic gods of old, can be considered remarkable in the semi-religious context of a boarding school, where – under the direct supervision of a bishop – the pupils were trained for the study of theology.<sup>6</sup> Although the *Poetic* and the *Prose Edda* were not part of the standard curriculum at Bessastaðir – also the absence of Snorri's *Heimskringla* is noted by Páll Melsteð<sup>7</sup> –, their contents would have been known to the students through the lectures of spirited teachers like Sveinbjörn Egilsson. Also, the pupils consumed many additional and different books after school hours. In a letter written during his years at Bessastaðir, Jónas Hallgrímsson indicates that the lecture of the *Poetic* (or *Sæmundar Edda*) and the poems of Ossian – available to him in Danish translation – constitute his main solace in this life away from home.<sup>8</sup> This small glimpse into the private life of the young pupil, who would later become *the* paradigmatic Icelandic poet of the nineteenth century, demonstrates that the

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<sup>1</sup> Valsson (1996) pp.291-3.

<sup>2</sup> Benedikt Gröndal, *Ritsafn* (five vls.; Reykjavík 1948-54), vol.4 pp.340-1, quoted and translated by Ringler (2002) p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Ringler (2002) p.18.

<sup>4</sup> Melsteð (1912) pp.31-2. See also Egilsson (1996a) p.261.

<sup>5</sup> Egilsson (1996a) p.261.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.261-2.

<sup>7</sup> Melsteð (1912) p.35.

<sup>8</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Ritverk Jónasar Hallgrímssonar* (four vls.; Reykjavík 1989) vol.2, p.5. See also Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, “Hóras, Ossían og Edda”, in Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (ed.), *Undir Hraundranga. Úrval ritgerða um Jónas Hallgrímsson* (Reykjavík 2007) pp.149-56.

literary historicism that would determine the Romantic nationalism of *Fjölnir* was already an indispensable ingredient of the young men's adolescent imaginations.

#### 4.2.2 Retribution for the Rhapsodists: Jónas Hallgrímsson

Posthumously, the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson would – in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – come to 'defeat' Bjarni Thorarensen in the race for the title of 'national poet' (*þjóðskáld*) and become canonised as Iceland's 'favourite child' (*óskabarn*).<sup>1</sup> As such, he would become the embodiment of Iceland's literary rebirth – a commemorative publication on the occasion of the first centenary of his birth was titled simply *Íslandsk Renæssance* ('Icelandic Renaissance')<sup>2</sup> – and the quintessential Icelandic Romantic. Like the other Fjölnismenn – with the exception of Konráð Gíslason, who lived to become eighty-two – Jónas died young, at the age of thirty-seven. His short life was filled with misery and difficulties, and – heartbroken after having been rejected once as a young man – he remained unmarried. Also, the tragic circumstances of his premature death, which occurred as a result of blood poisoning after breaking his leg on the stairs of his Copenhagen apartment, may have contributed to his later status as the Romantic poet *par excellence*.

After having completed his education at Bessastaðir, Jónas moved to Copenhagen in 1832 to study law. After four years in Denmark, he switched to the study of literature and the natural sciences, which placed him in the position to undertake scientific research trips to his homeland, financed through a grant awarded by the Danish state treasury. Biological, meteorological and geological findings, which Jónas considered no less important to the enlightenment of the Icelandic people than poetry, were not only published in Danish periodicals like *Naturhistorisk Tidsskrift*, but also in *Fjölnir*, where they appeared alongside the more literary works and translations of the Fjölnismenn.<sup>3</sup> His proposition to write a study on the birds of Iceland was approved by the Copenhagen branch of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, but turned down by the Reykjavík division, many members of which held a grudge against *Fjölnir* and the Fjölnismenn.<sup>4</sup> His idea to create a new, all-encompassing description of Iceland – the geographical and natural-historical portion of which he would look after himself<sup>5</sup> – was accepted in 1838, and would remain Jónas's life's work. His poetic talents also assisted him in the translation of highly complicated scientific texts into Icelandic; this task called for the invention of many neologisms, like for instance his term *reikistjarna* (literally: 'wandering star'), which became the standard Icelandic term for planet.<sup>6</sup> To Jónas, his activities as a scientist were by no means separated from his Romantic aspirations as a poet. In fact, he saw these two sides of himself as mutually enriching and interlaced, just like they had been in the writings of his esteemed predecessor and idol Eggert Ólafsson.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A title he received posthumously from the poet Grímur Thomsen in 1846. See Jón Karl Helgason, "Lárviðarskáld. Valið milli Bjarna Thorarensen og Jónasar Hallgrímssonar", in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 73:1 (2012) pp.63-77, 63. On Jónas's canonisation, see also Þórir Óskarsson, "Þjóðskáld verður til", in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (16 November 2007) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Olaf Hansen, *Íslandsk Renæssance. I Hundredeaaret for Jónas Hallgrímssons Fødsel: Et Stykke Litteraturhistorie* (Copenhagen 1907).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance his "Um eðli og uppruna jarðarinnar" ('On the Nature and Origin of the Earth'), in *Fjölnir* 1 (1835), pp.99-129.

<sup>4</sup> Ringler (2002) p.31.

<sup>5</sup> The other half, dealing with Iceland's people and history, was supposed to be written by Jón Sigurðsson.

<sup>6</sup> In his Icelandic translation of G.F. Ursin's *Populært Foredrag over Astronomien* (1838), which appeared in 1842. This translation led Páll Melsteð to the conclusion that Jónas was "so damn good at inventing words". See Ringler (2002) p.48.

<sup>7</sup> On the intertwined poetic and scientific reception of Icelandic nature in Jónas's work, see Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, "Ways of Addressing Nature in a Northern Context: Romantic Poet and Natural Scientist Jónas

In Denmark, Jónas grew acquainted with the work of Heinrich Heine (*Hæmir*), many of whose poems he translated into Icelandic, and whose poetic sense of irony also became a hallmark of Jónas's poetry. Also, the influence of Adam Oehlenschläger on his creative development is evident, especially in his poem *Ísland* ('Iceland'; 1835), which opens with the famous line: "Iceland, fortunate isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!"<sup>1</sup> The resemblance with Oehlenschläger's poem *Island* (1805), which opens with the line: "Iceland! Holy isle!" (*Island! hellige Øe!*) – the word 'Holy' was later, in the revised version of 1823, replaced with 'Antiquity's' (*Oldtidens*)<sup>2</sup> – would have been obvious for most of Jónas's Icelandic contemporaries in Copenhagen. The theme of Iceland's rebirth, which Oehlenschläger celebrates in this poem in relation to the work of the famous sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen – whose Icelandic father had moved to Denmark – is also present in Jónas's poem, which encapsulates the entire political and cultural agenda of the Fjölnismenn in embryonic form, and which rendered its author "the poet of our reborn language".<sup>3</sup> In essence, it follows Finnur Magnússon's central statement, that it is the *past* that determines the standard for the present and the future, and that attaining that high standard is a matter of national honour (see Chapter 3.4.6). I will return to this key-work in Jónas's oeuvre – and in Icelandic Romanticism in general – further on in this chapter.<sup>4</sup>

Although the *Poetic Edda* may have been a source of solace for the young student at Bessastaðir, the explicit use of eddic themes or characters is as good as absent in his oeuvre. Even in comparison to Bjarni Thorarensen, allusions to Old Norse mythology are scarce. The most obvious influence of the Eddas – and of Jónas's immediate predecessors *inspired by* the Eddas – is of a formal, prosodic nature, and concerns the frequent application of eddic metres; the *fornyrðislag* was his preferred metre of choice.<sup>5</sup> However, he was also a prolific innovator of Icelandic literature, and introduced foreign verse forms – such as the classical penta- and hexameter, but also the more Romantic terza and ottava rima, and later on the triolet and the sonnet – to his readers. New though these verse forms may have been to the Icelandic audience, the subject matter treated in these poems remained – as I will demonstrate in this chapter – very indigenous and Icelandic, which is why the application of these foreign metres to the Icelandic language was not deemed too outrageous. In this case, the cultivation of traditional material – related to the sagas, to folklore and Icelandic history – functions as a literary 'Trojan horse', through which foreign verse forms are more smoothly introduced and incorporated (or indigenised) into Iceland's literary imagination.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Jónas is a typical cultural broker, or cultural agent; instrumental in the dissemination of cultural nationalism (see Chapter 1.2.1) by introducing new, international forms for the cultivation of national culture, while simultaneously turning to ancient, 'national' forms to address the present and the future.<sup>7</sup>

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Hallgrímsson", in Karl Benediktsson and Katrín Anna Lund (eds.), *Conversations with Landscape* (Farnham-Burlington 2010) pp.157-72.

<sup>1</sup> "Ísland! farsældafrón og hagsælda hrímhvíta móðir!", *Fjölnir* 1 (1835) pp.21-2, translated in Ringler (2002) p.101.

<sup>2</sup> The original version appeared in his *Poetiske Skrifter* (Copenhagen 1805).

<sup>3</sup> According to Hannes Hafstein, quoted in Ringler (2002) p.30.

<sup>4</sup> On Jónas's intellectual development and contacts in Copenhagen, see Páll Valsson, *Jónas Hallgrímsson. Ævisaga* (Reykjavík 1999) pp.96-127. See also Oskar Bandle, "Jónas Hallgrímsson og 'þjóðernisrómantíkin'", in Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (ed.), *Undir Hraundranga. Úrval ritgerða um Jónas Hallgrímsson* (Reykjavík 2007) pp.157-70.

<sup>5</sup> Ringler (2002) p.363.

<sup>6</sup> I have Jón Karl Helgason to thank for the metaphor of the Trojan horse.

<sup>7</sup> For a comparative perspective on international aspect of 'national' poetry, see especially Marijan Dović, "The Canonization of Cultural Saints: France Prešeren and Jónas Hallgrímsson", in *Slovene Studies* 33:2 (2011) pp.153-70, as well as Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, "Model Behaviour: The Role of Imported Aesthetics in the Rise

Of course, the striking absence of eddic themes in the writings of Iceland's foremost Romantic poet is *in itself* interesting, *ex negativo*, and demands our full attention. Why did Jónas decide to ignore this inexhaustible treasure trove of Nordic imagery and metaphors of Icelandic origin, so readily applicable in national poetry?<sup>1</sup> Why did he, who turned to the sagas so eagerly in his quest for ancient themes, hardly mention any of the colorful gods of the Old Norse-Icelandic pantheon at all?

When Finnur Magnússon was serving his third term as president of the Copenhagen branch of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, between 1839 and 1847, Jónas sporadically worked for him and collected Icelandic antiquities and runic inscription for him and his *Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift Selskab* when visiting Iceland for his own ambitious description of the island.<sup>2</sup> For Jónas, whose research depended on the financial support of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, maintaining good relations with Finnur was essential, and he corresponded with him – notably about the progress of his research trips – on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> However, a generation gap yawned between the rebellious Fjölnismenn and the more conservative, respectable archivist. In a letter to Jónas, Tómas Sæmundsson admits that he has never been too fond of Finnur. He considered his work on the Eddas especially as proof of his ideological sell out to the Danes. Nevertheless, being an esteemed scholar with many friends in high places, he might still come in handy for the Fjölnismenn.<sup>4</sup> Finnur was 'too Danish' and too old school to be worthy of admiration from the more radical new generation of patriots.

However, this ambivalent relationship with Finnur and his political ideas did not automatically exclude his theories on the origin of mythology from Jónas's writings. As a natural scientist, Jónas was very interested in the interpretation of myth as 'natural philosophy', which he incorporated in his "Um eðli og uppruna jarðarinnar" ('On the Nature and Origin of the Earth'), a popular treatise on geology appearing in the first issue of *Fjölnir*.<sup>5</sup> This essay is more than "merely a discussion of some of the most important concepts and findings of geology in both past and present but also a poetic vision of the world written in polished and elevated prose."<sup>6</sup> In that respect, it answers to Schelling's ideal of a science that

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of Romantic Nationalism in Iceland and Slovenia", in Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser and Vladimir Martinovski (eds.), *Literary Dislocations* (Skopje 2012) pp.570-6, and idem, "Nation and Elevation: Some Points of Comparison Between the "National Poets" of Slovenia and Iceland", in *Primerjalna književnost* 34:1 (2011) pp.127-46.

<sup>1</sup> A very different reading of Jónas's oeuvre has been proposed by the author Svava Jakobsdóttir, who maintains in her controversial essay "Skáldið og ástarstjarnan" ('The Poet and the Star of Love'; 1999) that traditional interpretations have done little to reveal the mystical and esoteric profundity of Jónas's poetry. She claims that the same interplay between *micro-* (man) and *macrocosm* (the universe) which underlies the account of the creation of man and the world in *Völuspá*, is equally at work in the Romantic world-view underlying Jónas's poem *Ferðalok* ('Journey's end'; 1845). Following this bedazzling line of argumentation through to the end, Svava concludes: "Völuspá talks about the beginning of the world and the earth, it deals with a peaceful golden age, the decline of this golden age and the fall of the gods into strife and the wars of history, and finally it speaks of resurrection and renewal. Jónas uses this frame but makes important changes in the structure of the story" (Svava Jakobsdóttir, "Skáldið og ástarstjarnan", in idem, *Skyggnt á bak við ský* (Reykjavík 1999) pp.67-273, 118). Surely, her assertion that any explanation of *Völuspá* is simultaneously an explanation of *Ferðalok* is taking it too far, and gravitates towards the anachronistic – and deeply Romantic! – fallacy that the Eddas can be explained through Jónas's poetry, rather than the other way around. This is at best an interesting thought experiment, best appreciated as a creative work of literature in its own right.

<sup>2</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.245.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance his letter of 12 November 1842, written in Arendal (Norway), published in Aðalgeir Kristjánsson and Ólafur Halldórsson, "Tvö óbirt bréf", in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 27 (1966) 81-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Bréf Tómasar Sæmundssonar* (Reykjavík 1907) p.94.

<sup>5</sup> *Fjölnir* 1 (1835), pp.99-129.

<sup>6</sup> Þorleifur Hauksson and Þórir Óskarsson, *Íslensk stílfræði* (Reykjavík 1994) p.457, quoted and translated in Ringler (2002) p.114.

has found its way back to the ‘the ocean of poetry’ through mythology (see Chapter 3.4.5). On the first pages of this ambitious essay, Jónas pays homage to the natural wisdom contained in the Eddas:

Our own ancestors, who were not in the habit of playing second fiddle to anyone, did not neglect this field of inquiry [natural philosophy]. Their myths about the gods show that they had thought deeply about the essential character of the earth and the fundamental forces of nature. These appeared to them in various guises, sometimes as harmful beings who were bent on destroying the handiwork of the gods, sometimes as benign and powerful deities who created light and life, driving away giants and monsters from the homes of gods and men.<sup>1</sup>

Jónas continues his praise of the profound scientific insights of Old Norse mythology, and turns to the famous prophecies of the sibyl, who is consulted by Óðinn in the *Völuspá* of the *Poetic Edda*:

I will not cite here the description in “The Sibyl’s Prophecy” of the end of the world, when the earth is destroyed and sinks into the sea, overwhelmed by water and fire. The earth does not succumb permanently, of course, but lifts her head once again and rises reborn from the depths of the ocean, lovelier and more fertile than ever. This story is so profound – so near to the real truth – that one can hardly avoid the thought that its inventor must have had an intuition that something like this had once actually happened.<sup>2</sup>

The catastrophic events prophesied in the *Völuspá* were easily related to the violent geological events which had, according to the scientific teachings of *catastrophism*, been responsible for the – not at all gradual – development of life on earth.<sup>3</sup> The inquisitive mindset from which the whole building of eddic mythology had sprung, was – according to Jónas – most vividly expressed in the preface to the *Prose Edda*, which Jónas believed to have been written by the mysterious Óláfr *hvítaskáld* (‘white poet’) rather than Snorri:

“They pondered and wondered what it meant,” he [the writer of the preface] says, “that the earth and the animals and birds had certain characteristics in common, though they were unlike in form. To take one such characteristic: if you dig into the earth at the top of high hills, you come upon water without needing to delve down any farther than you do in low valleys. Similarly with animals and birds: the blood flows at no deeper level in their heads than in their feet...”<sup>4</sup>

Although modern science had moved beyond this pantheistic conception of the earth as a living organism or life-giving mother, Jónas found the “speculations of this ancient sage so pleasing and vivid that no one should really make fun of them.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Jónas’s great hero from ancient times was not the composer of the eddic poems, but rather Plato, and it is *his* account of the creation of the world that the author elaborates on in the next passage of the essay. In this representation of affairs, Jónas recognised his own poetic views on the origin of the universe, in which the polytheism of ancient – Greek and Old Norse – mythology is transcended by the omnipotent and omnipresent supreme – Christian – God, Plato’s *Demiurge*, from whom the lower gods and spirits received their creative powers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hallgrímsson (1835), in the English translation of Ringler (2002) pp.106-13, 106.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.107.

<sup>3</sup> Important proponents of this theory were Georges Cuvier and the so-called ‘natural theologians’.

<sup>4</sup> Hallgrímsson (1835), in the English translation of Ringler (2002) pp.106-13, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.109.

This animated view of creation, which Halldór Laxness would later characterise as pantheistic,<sup>1</sup> would determine the very Romantic character of his later poetic writings, especially those concerning Icelandic nature and landscape.

Impressed though Jónas may have been with the proto-scientific contents of the Eddas, the gods and themes that constitute them are by no means a crucial constituent of his poetic imagination. The most obvious reason for this somewhat surprising absence of the gods, lies in Jónas's aversion to the poetic tradition that had dominated Icelandic literature between the late Middle Ages and Jónas's own day: the flourishing *rímur* tradition (see Chapter 2.2.1). Not without justification, later admirers of the genre have identified Jónas as the man who had taught the Icelanders to despise their own national treasures, the *rímur*.<sup>2</sup> The reason for Jónas's dislike of this popular verse tradition – as well as his lack of interest in eddic themes – lies in the very nature of this tradition itself, which the Swedish philologist Elias Wessén has characterised as follows:

The skalds of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries often refer to the Edda, its art and teaching. The Edda has in reality exercised its influence on Icelandic poetry far down into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This has contributed to create a permanent tradition in Icelandic literature, but at the same time it has given Icelandic poetry a character of formal virtuosity which has proved an obstacle to more personal expression. [...] From a general Northern point of view it should be noted that it has contributed to isolate Iceland from the development of other Northern literature.<sup>3</sup>

The undisputed master of this 'formal virtuosity', Iceland's foremost *rímur* poet of the nineteenth century, was Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798-1846), whose catchy verses – especially his *Núma rímur* (see Chapter 2.2.1) – were beloved in all layers of Icelandic society. Like generations of poets before him, Sigurður applied standardised phrases and metaphors as well as traditional metres in his poetry. From that perspective, he can be considered a typical Icelandic *rímur* poet. What set him apart from his predecessors and contemporaries however, was his knowledge of foreign literature – the Danish poet Jens Baggesen inspired him considerably – and the presence of nationalistic, arguably even Romantic tendencies in his nature poetry.<sup>4</sup>

It was this *rímur* poet who would come to represent everything that was wrong with Icelandic literature, according to Jónas Hallgrímsson. In his relentless attack on one of his works – the *Rímur af Tistrani og Indiönu* ('The *Rímur* of Tristan and Indiana'; 1831) – which was published in the third issue of *Fjölnir*,<sup>5</sup> Jónas accuses the poet of simplistic verse-mongering, and claims that the backward and suffocating straightjacket of the *rímur* genre had made Iceland the laughing stock of the literary world.<sup>6</sup> Not only did Jónas disapprove of Sigurður Breiðfjörð's lack of originality and reflective capacities, he also thought the whole thing was badly written and held together by mechanically applied clichés and platitudes, which did not add to the story, but were only implemented to suit the complicated verse form. As indicated by Wessén, the strict prosodic system of the *rímur* genre was clearly experienced – by Jónas at least – as an 'obstacle to more personal expression'. This lethal

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<sup>1</sup> Halldór Kiljan Laxness, "Um Jónas Hallgrímsson", in *Alþýðubókin* (Reykjavík 1949 [1929]) p.56. Dick Ringler has suggested that, at this stage of Jónas's development, the classification Platonic would be more accurate; Ringler (2002) p.115.

<sup>2</sup> S. Gr. Borgfirðingur (pseudonym), in his review of W.A. Craigie's translation of the *Skotlands rímur*, in *Skírnir* 82 (1908) pp.365-6, 366.

<sup>3</sup> Elias Wessén, introduction to the *Codex Regius of the Younger Edda. Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi* (Copenhagen 1940) p.xiv. On this presumed continuity, see also Tómasson (1996) pp.1-64.

<sup>4</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.285.

<sup>5</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson, "Um rímur af Tistrani og Indiönu", in *Fjölnir* 3 (1837) pp.18-29.

<sup>6</sup> Valsson (1999) pp.154-8.

review has been characterised as “one of the most relentless reevaluations of Icelandic literary traditions that took place in the nineteenth century”,<sup>1</sup> which elevated an aversion to *rímur* to a marker of good taste and literary refinement, heralding the end of the genre altogether. Of course, Jónas cannot be accused of having killed this long-standing tradition single-handedly; there were other factors at play, like the declining popularity of rural practices and the growing influence of foreign literature.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Jónas’s aggression towards one of Iceland’s most popular poets – which would gain him and the Fjölnismenn many enemies in Iceland – changed the literary discourse for good, and paved the way for a new ‘national literature’, which received its inspiration from foreign – Danish and German – strands of Romanticism. The virulent hatred towards the fossilised *rímur* tradition may be explained by the Fjölnismenn’s objective to accomplish something quintessentially *new*: a national rejuvenation. And, as Johan Huizinga established in the early twentieth century, a new epoch in cultural history is always accompanied by a temporary blindness for the beauty of the preceding one.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Romantics throughout Europe venerated the oral and rural traditions of the land, which were generally conceived as vestiges of ancient indigenous wisdom (see Chapter 5.1), the Fjölnismenn did quite the opposite by condemning an ancient tradition in favor of something new.

So, did Jónas simply throw away the child with the bathwater? Did he dismiss the eddic gods – whose memory had been tainted by centuries of tasteless versification – together with everything else connected to the *rímur* tradition? If that were truly the case, Jónas could have discarded many of his favourite *Íslendingasögur* on exactly the same grounds. As the description of the Eddas in his writing on the origin of the earth demonstrates, Jónas did not simply equate the eddic narratives with the *rímur* genre at all. Interesting proof for this can be found in his important poem *Hulduljóð* (‘Lay of Hulda’; 1847), in which the gods are summoned to avenge the ‘wretched rhapsodists’ – referring to the *rímur* poets – who with their ‘gabbling verses’ had contributed to the downfall of Iceland’s literary greatness:

Everyone here is custom’s mindless slave.  
 Dead are the poems that adorned our nation,  
 now doggerelists and caterwaulers rave —  
 sheepsheads who fill the land with fatuous bleating  
 the foolish people cannot help repeating.

My mocking language makes poor Hulda [a personification of Iceland] tearful  
 and must not soil these verses any more.  
 But send those wretched rhapsodists some fearful  
 retribution, Njörður, Freyr, and Thor!  
 May every god they smirch with gabbling verses  
 grimace with rage and drown their souls in curses.<sup>4</sup>

In these verses, the eddic deities are not portrayed negatively at all. Rather, those who have blasphemously smirched them with their ‘poetic’ filth are under attack, and deserve the highest penalty for their defilement of Hulda’s – that is: Iceland’s – noble legacy. It is interesting that the eddic gods Njörður, Freyr, and Þórr – the most frequently worshipped gods in ancient Iceland – are connected to this noble legacy, and act on Hulda’s behalf as righteous avengers. This may lead to the paradoxical conclusion that the mythological motives and *kenningar*, preserved by Snorri and continued by the *rímur* poets, now lay under

<sup>1</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.285.

<sup>2</sup> Andersen and Hilmarsson (2012) p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Huizinga (1949) p.332.

<sup>4</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson (1847), in the translation of Ringler (2002) p.174-9, 174.

siege from those same gods that Snorri had sought to preserve for Icelandic culture. Even though eddic themes and motives have remained a source of inspiration throughout Iceland's literary history, it is impossible to maintain that an uninterrupted continuity connects Icelandic Romanticism directly to Old Norse-Icelandic medieval literature; the Fjölismenn's rebellion against the old *rímur* tradition *did* constitute a break with the past, which revolutionised Icelandic culture, opened the Icelandic mind for – translated – works and ideas from Europe, and put an end to the 'shameful' isolation of Icelandic literature as described by Wessén. By invoking the timeless gods in this matter, and by connecting them to the 'authenticity' of contemporary Romantic literature, Jónas simultaneously *primordialises* and *indigenises* (functions one and two respectively, as outlined in Chapter 1.1) these new, foreign aesthetic concepts. Although the eddic sources themselves were not 'rediscovered' – as they were in other European countries –, they were nevertheless seen through 'new eyes'. Thus, the 'shock of the old' was also felt in Iceland, very much in tandem with the 'shock of the new'.

But the rebellion against *rímur* poetry is not the only possible explanation for the near absence of eddic themes in the poetry of the Fjölismenn; in order to clarify a second explanation, we have to briefly revisit Oehlenschläger's influential poem *Island* (1805), discussed in the above. In this poem, Oehlenschläger fashions the former – and now, through Thorvaldsen's genius revived – greatness of Iceland in mythological terms. In his description of the sculptor's paternal homeland, temple of Saga (history), actual historical characters – including Snorri (Snorro) – are heavily outnumbered by references to the gods and goddesses of Asgard and other mythological beings, including (among others) Óðinn, Freyr, Bragi, Askr, Þórr and Iðunn. The poem culminates in the concluding statement that 'Thor from Iceland' – Thorvaldsen, who then worked and lived in Rome – is still alive, and that he is bringing Kronion (Zeus, representing the classical tradition) back to life in the eternal city.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Jónas's poem *Ísland* – clearly modelled after Oehlenschläger's – contains *no* references to eddic deities; here, the role of embodying authentic Icelandicness is reserved for "our famous forebears – those freedom-worshiping heroes": the great names from the *Íslendingasögur*, such as "Gissur and Geir, Gunnar and Héðinn and Njáll."<sup>2</sup> This 'replacement' is striking, and in a recent (unpublished) paper, Jón Karl Helgason theorises that a comparison between these two poems may provide us with clues as to why Jónas discarded the gods. According to Jón Karl, the myths were already 'contaminated' by foreign appropriation by the time *Fjölirnir* was established; one could argue that, by that time, Old Norse/Germanic culture was already divided (roughly) between the Germans (Wotan, Thor, the Nibelungen), the Danes (Odin, Thor, Ragnarr Loðbrók), and the Norwegians (*Heimskringla*), leaving the quintessentially 'Icelandic' *Íslendingasögur* to the Icelanders.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, this seemingly clear cut representation of the division of Old Norse culture is something of an oversimplification. Nevertheless, it corresponds to the national preferences in cultivations of the texts, and the theory of foreign contamination of the Eddas – in combination with the rejection of 'eddic' *rímur* poetry – constitutes the best explanatory model for understanding the low level of myth-cultivation in *early* Icelandic Romanticism. Due to the Eddas' association with German and Danish culture, *not* cultivating the myths was in itself an act of emphasising the national contrast with these 'significant others', much in the same way actually *cultivating* the myths would become an act of Icelandic self-contrastation later on in the nineteenth century. By adopting the format of Oehlenschläger's

<sup>1</sup> Oehlenschläger (1805).

<sup>2</sup> Hallgrímsson (1835), translated in Ringler (2002) p.101.

<sup>3</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, "“Og hvur sá Ás, sem ata þeir í kvæði”: Nordic Myth and Iceland's Independence Movement" (unpublished paper, presented at the conference *Mythology and "Nation Building": N.F.S. Grundtvig and His Contemporaries*: Sorbonne University, Paris; January 2017).



poem and replacing the ‘Nordic’ gods with ‘Icelandic’ heroes, Jónas performed an act of hostile imitation, turning the poetics of Romantic nationalism against his Danish teachers themselves.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, focussing on the sagas rather than the Eddas, on history rather than myth, also better suited the ideological agenda of the Fjölnismenn; as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4.2.4, the men of *Fjölnir* were committed to the ideals of Romantic historicism, and hence attached to the backward-looking face of nationalism rather than the forward-looking one. A predilection for the past, for historical narratives and sagas – linked to a specified time (when Iceland was *free*) and place –, rather than the abstract and timeless realm of myth, is therefore hardly surprising.

However, although explicit references to eddic narratives are not exactly engrained in Jónas’s poetic work, mythological *topoi* are certainly incorporated in several of his poems, albeit on a subtler plain. In his address to the esteemed French naturalist and explorer Paul Gaimard, delivered at a banquet of Icelanders in Copenhagen (*Til herra Páls Gaimard*, 1839), he describes Gaimard “standing on Hekla’s stony height”, overlooking the plains below him and the broad rivers streaming towards the ocean, “while Loki lurked among the boulders / lying beneath the mountain’s shoulders – / were you not awed by Iceland then, / this ancient realm of crag and glen?”<sup>2</sup> Like for Bjarni Thorarensen, a mythological motive – in this case Loki, whose binding in a cave after Baldr’s death is associated with the origin of earthquakes – is applied to underscore the geological grandeur of Iceland’s volcanic landscape. Also, the reference to Loki serves as a reminder of the unpredictability and lethal powers of Hekla and the surrounding land, manifesting itself in the form of natural catastrophes, in the presence of which mankind is humbled and stands in awe: a sensation of fear that belongs to the complex Romantic conception of ‘Sublime Nature’, which is to be feared as if it were God Himself.<sup>3</sup> Like in Jónas’s essay on the origin of the earth, the mythological – here represented by the metaphor of Loki – and the scientific experience of nature – personified by Gaimard himself – do not contradict each other, but rather form a complementary unity.

The sudden trembling of the earth, a very common phenomenon on Iceland, serves as an instant reminder of mankind’s fragility in the face of the natural forces beyond its control. In February 1829, when Jónas was still a student at Bessastaðir, a minor earthquake occurred in south-central Iceland, not too far from mount Hekla, damaging some farms in the area and indirectly causing the death of a little child. It is very likely that this event inspired Jónas to write one of the most puzzling poems from his early years, which would become known under the name *Nótt og morgun* (‘Night and Morning’; posthumously published in 1847).<sup>4</sup> Here, Loki is not mentioned by name, but the motive of his breaking of the chains that bind him in his cave – initiating *Ragnarök* – is reinterpreted in a positive sense. The trembling of the earth is in this case brought about by the guardian angel of Iceland, who touches the island with its ‘holy feet’ and makes the country tremble. Frightening though this may appear, this *specific* earthquake serves as a metaphor for something altogether positive and worthy, namely the violent awakening of Iceland’s national spirit, after many centuries of slumber. The night of the nation becomes morning, and the evil spirits, symbolising the powers that kept the nation asleep during the night, noisily “engulf the air with fury”. This time, it is not malicious Loki who breaks free and breaks his fetters, but Iceland itself:

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<sup>1</sup> This ‘hostile imitation’ is characteristic of marginalised or suppressed communities seeking to establish their identity vis-à-vis a stronger, significant other. See also Homi Bhabha’s concept of *mimicry*, which I will apply in Chapter 6.1.2.

<sup>2</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson (1839), first stanza, translated in Ringler (2002) pp.163-4, 163.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1.3.

<sup>4</sup> Jónas originally composed the poem in the same year as the earthquake, in 1829.

Garðar's Isle [Iceland] breaks loose from chains and bands!  
"Hurry north of Greipur, comrades! Hurry!  
Hide on Greenland's cold and icy strands!"<sup>1</sup>

The demonic creatures, associated with Iceland's centuries of inertia, are of course in great fear of this new, awakened Iceland, that Jónas believed had begun to take shape in the writings of his hero – and alter ego – Eggert Ólafsson. Their association with ice, snow and glaciers, makes Greenland, 'north of Greipur' – Greipur was a fishing station of the Norse settlement in Greenland – their natural place of refuge, now that they no longer have a place in modern Iceland.<sup>2</sup> With the introduction of the holy guardian angel, waking the national spirit, the poem can be interpreted as a "a sort of Christianized update of the pagan myth".<sup>3</sup>

A similar Christianisation of eddic themes can be found in yet another one of Jónas's earlier poems, most likely composed in 1828, when he was still very much under the influence of the rich imagery of the *Poetic Edda*:

It was ages ago  
that the earth, reborn  
and freighted with hills,  
first went spinning  
on her unknown path,  
eagerly heeding  
the word of the Almighty,  
who made all things.<sup>4</sup>

This long poem, consisting of twenty-five strophes in the *fornyrðislag*, draws heavily Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which had been translated into Icelandic by Jón Þorláksson and was greatly admired by the young Jónas. But in this first strophe, in which the author sets the stage for the introduction of the first man in the garden of Eden, the earth is introduced as 'reborn', instead of just created, as one might expect in this biblical context. Even though Jónas identifies the Almighty as the creator of all things – just like he did in his essay on the origin of the earth – he applies the mythological image of a reborn earth, the new world after *Ragnarök* as prophesied in the *Völuspá*, in order to introduce a cyclical world-view based on modern scientific theories – like *catastrophism* – concerning the long term geological evolution of the earth. In the most concise manner, Jónas attempts to synchronise the biblical creation story from *Genesis*, modern science, and Old Norse mythology, all in the course of several perfectly metered lines. More precisely: the biblical and scientific accounts of the origin of the world, both adhered to by Jónas, are harmonised through the eddic – and thus *familiar* – image of the reborn earth, implying a more cyclical evolution of the planet's history.<sup>5</sup> In this case, mythological imagery is instrumentalised as a mediator between science and religion, just like Schelling would have envisioned it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the translation of Ringler (2002) p.92. Italics original.

<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough analysis of this complex poem, see Hannes Pétursson, "Hreyfðist land", in his *Kvæðafylgslu. Um skáldskap eftir Jónas Hallgrímsson* (Reykjavík 1979) pp.34-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ringler (2002) p.400 (note 3).

<sup>4</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Ad Amicum*, first strophe (1828? First published in 1847), in the translation of Ringler (2002) pp.84-9, 84.

<sup>5</sup> See also Egilsson (1999) pp.92-6.

<sup>6</sup> Jónas's love for scientific research and the astonishing wonder of creation is also expressed in his poem *Alheimsvíðáttan* ('The Vastness of the Universe'; 1843), which is based on an idea from Schiller.

### 4.2.3 The Icelandic Mythscape

Inspired by Adam Oehlenschläger's conception of Iceland as *Oldtiden's Æ* ('Antiquity's Isle'), Iceland's early Romantics turned to the *Íslendingasögur* and began to conceive of their island's landscape as a timeless stage; a silent witness to former national greatness. As a scientist and great admirer of his enlightened predecessor Eggert Ólafsson, Jónas travelled his own island far and wide, and was well acquainted with Iceland's many natural faces. Brought up on a farm before commencing his higher education at Bessastaðir, his vision of Icelandic nature was ambivalent, and cannot be contained by any of the usual categories – 'pastoral', 'sublime', or 'scientific' – alone.<sup>1</sup> A good example of his complicated and creative landscape-reception can be found in his poem *Gunnarshólmi* ('Gunnar's Holm') which first appeared in *Fjölnir* in 1838, and was allegedly inspired by a visit to Bjarni Thorarensen.<sup>2</sup> The poem is preceded by a short description of a green patch of land on the south coast, between Eyjafjöll and Fljótshlíð. This place was believed to be the place where Gunnar Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi, the tenth-century chieftain and undisputed hero of Iceland's most beloved saga – *Brennu-Njáls saga* – made his way to a Norwegian ship on which he was to leave the island after he had been outlawed on the Alþingi. According to the saga, Gunnar's horse stumbled when he and his brother Kolskeggur approached the ship, and the hero leaped from his saddle. Turning towards the slope and his farm – Hlíðarendi – behind him, he proclaimed: "Fair is the slope, fairer it seems than I have ever seen it before, with whitening grain and the home fields mown; and I shall ride back home and not go aboard at all!"<sup>3</sup> Despite Kolskeggur's attempts to convince him to board the ship, Gunnar's mind was made up and he returned to his farm, where he would – as prophesied by his friend Njáll – find a heroic death at the hands of his enemies. It is this dramatic passage of the saga that inspired Jónas to write his poem, in which Gunnar's decision to stay in Iceland acquires new dimensions.

Jónas opens his poem with an emphatic description of the location: the Eyjafjalla glacier (*Eyjafjallajökull*), purpled by the setting sun, and Mount Hekla in the North, standing on guard. In this scene of tranquil beauty, Gunnar and his brother are described as approaching from a distance – implying that not the approaching hero, but the elaborately introduced scenery in which his story is to unfold features as the poem's true protagonist – descending towards the ocean. As the brothers ride in silence with Kolskeggur focusing on the ship in front of them while Gunnar glances back, the poem reaches its dramatic climax with Gunnar's fatal decision:

“ [...] The fields so golden, roses in such glory,  
Such crowds of sheep and cattle everywhere!  
Here will I live, here die – in youth or hoary  
Hapless old age – as God decrees. Good-bye,  
Brother and friend.” Thus Gunnar's gallant story.  
For Gunnar felt it nobler far to die  
Than flee and leave his native shores behind him,  
Even though foes, inflamed with hate and sly,  
Where forging links of death in which to bind him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Egilsson (2010) p.157. See also Matthías Johannessen, “Jónas Hallgrímsson – Dichter der Naturschönheit”, in *Island. Zeitschrift der Deutsch-Isländischen Gesellschaft e.V., Köln und der Gesellschaft der Freunde Islands e.V., Hamburg* 14:1 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> After having read *Gunnarshólmi* for the first time, Bjarni is said to have spoken the historic words: “Now I believe it would be best for me to stop writing.” See *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (18 October 1925) p.8.

<sup>3</sup> In the translation of Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander, *Wordsworth Classics of World Literature* (London 1998) p.146.

<sup>4</sup> In the translation of Ringler (2002) pp. 136-43, 137.

In these lines, the basic attachment to farm and field as expressed in the original saga is transcended, and interpreted as an expression of unwavering *amor patriæ*: a fatalistic love so intense that death in the homeland is preferred over the abandonment of the ‘native shores’. In their characteristic matter-of-factness, the sagas hardly ever elucidate the inner motivations underlying their protagonists’ actions, leaving much to the imaginative interpretation of the reader. The modern nationalistic sentiments harboured by Jónas and the *Fjölnismenn* could therefore easily be projected anachronistically onto this passage of saga-literature, which was highly susceptible to ideological reinterpretation due to this stylistic ‘vagueness’. To Jónas’s mind, there appears to have been no inhibition for any patriotic Icelander to experience the location traditionally associated with this saga-scene as a place of great significance:

His story still can make the heart beat high,  
And here imagination still can find him,  
Where Gunnar’s Holm, all green with vegetation,  
Glistens amid these wastes of devastation.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Markarfljót (‘Forest River’), a glacial stream that runs through the area described in the poem, had devastated much of the original setting of the saga through erosion, the little ‘islet’ (*hólmi/hólmur*) of green grass identified as Gunnar’s Holm had remained untouched by the detrimental effects of time – symbolised by the flow of the river – , serving as an everlasting, spatial testimony to Gunnar’s heroic patriotism and loyalty to the homeland. The place itself seemed steeped in a primordial spirit of heroism and honour; themes Jónas may have had little problem relating to, considering the fact that he probably composed the poem on a short research trip to his homeland, from which he was bound to return to his own place of exile – Denmark – shortly.

Standing in proximity to the grandiose landscape, perpetually expressing Gunnar’s noble virtues, the dividing lines between the present and a glorified past were erased. The green patch of unaltered land, fostered an experience of continuity in experience, creating a sense of timelessness and primordial Icelandicness. The emotions that moved Gunnar to stay in Iceland had become an integral part of the land itself and could therefore be experienced by the contemporary observer in exactly the same way as almost a thousand years ago:

The dwarves are gone, the mountain trolls are dead;  
A desperate land abides its time of trouble;  
But here some hidden force has long defended  
The fertile holm where Gunnar’s journey ended.<sup>2</sup>

In these lines, the Romantic spirit of Jónas’s poetry reaches full bloom. He experiences the Iceland of his own day as a ‘desperate land’, characterised by lethargy, abiding its ‘time of trouble’. Interestingly enough, Jónas relates this troubled state to the death of the dwarves and mountain trolls: mythical creatures, just like the dwarves Frosti and Fjalar, to whom he refers in the opening lines of his poem, and who are known to us through the *Völuspá* of the *Poetic Edda*. These entities play no part in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Jónas’s main inspiration for this poem. The reason why he invokes them – or rather: their absence in modern Iceland – in this context, lies in the allegorical significance attributed to them by the Romantic minds of his age. The utilitarian, mechanistic mind-set of the Enlightenment with which Eggert Ólafsson had sought to demystify the ‘monstrosity’ of Icelandic nature had caused conceptions of nature as a living entity – or a collection of supernatural living entities – to fade in the light of

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.138.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

reason, thus ‘killing’ the landscape itself as well as the mythical creatures that personified it. The world had been disenchanted in the Weberian sense. Jónas did not lament the death of the dwarves and the mountain trolls in *Gunnarshólmi*, but his experience of Icelandic nature was in essence, despite his scientific endeavours and admiration for Eggert Ólafsson, of a pantheistic kind. To claim that this Romantic discovery of Iceland’s natural beauty necessarily ran counter to Eggert’s enlightened utilitarianism would be misleading; in the course of Iceland’s struggle for independence, these two modes of approaching landscape often strengthened each other and fused to become what has been labelled ‘Romantic utilitarianism’.<sup>1</sup>

In the aforementioned pastoral elegy<sup>2</sup> *Hulduljóð*, Jónas offers a more explicit expression of his pantheistic experience of nature. The Lady Hulda (‘The Hidden One’) – along with the spirit of Eggert Ólafsson the central persona in this poem – is traditionally associated with the ‘hidden people’ (*huldubjóð*) or elves, that populate and animate the Icelandic wilderness.<sup>3</sup> However, in this poem, she is invoked to represent *anima* in general: the life-giving force, or *Weltgeist*, that remains hidden to mortal eyes but can nevertheless be experienced in nature. Jónas’s Romantic ideas on nature are articulated poetically in this ode to both animated nature – Hulda – and the man who first opened Icelandic eyes to her bountiful beauty:

Hulda! The world is life and ghost and glory,  
With God in different shapes in different souls,  
Wherever blossoms chant their blazing story<sup>4</sup>

The universality of that which is represented by this feminine personification, is somewhat nuanced by the quintessentially *Icelandic* character of Hulda herself. Her name is connected to traditional Icelandic folktales, and the nature she represents is that of Iceland, which Eggert (“a thriving spirit [that] wakes within our nation”<sup>5</sup>) had adored so much during his industrious life. In that sense, Hulda, “Our loving Mother [who] stills the hills and fjords”,<sup>6</sup> fulfills a similar function as the unnamed feminine allegory of the nation in Eggert’s own poem *Ofsjónir* (1752). But she is still more universal than Bjarni Thorarensen’s Lady of the Mountain (*Fjallkonan*).<sup>7</sup> The universalism of a Platonic *Weltgeist* on the one hand, and nationalistic sentiments on the other, are thus harmonised and united in Hallgrímsson’s poem and in the figure of Hulda.

Jónas’s reverence for his famous predecessor, “a moral hero armed in bright achievement”,<sup>8</sup> did not rest on Eggert’s activities as an enlightened naturalist alone. Like

<sup>1</sup> See Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, *Náttúra ljóðsins. Umhverfi íslenskra skálda* (Reykjavík 2014), and Hálfðanarson (2007a) pp.198-208.

<sup>2</sup> On the pastoral characteristics of *Hulduljóð*, see especially Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, “Hulduljóð sem pastoral elegía”, in *Andvari* 119:1 (1994) pp.103-11.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the elves in Icelandic national culture, see Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, “Hjólaskóflur og huldufólk. Íslensk sjálfmynd og álfahefð samtímans”, in J. Y. Jóhansson and K. Ó. Proppé (eds.), *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* (Reykjavík 2003) pp. 197-214, and Terry Gunnell, “How Elvish were the *Álfar*?”, in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth. Essays in Honour of Tom Shippey* (Turnhout 2007) pp.111-30.

<sup>4</sup> Ringler (2002) pp.174-9, 175.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.176.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, “Skáldið og konan. Um Hulduljóð Jónasar Hallgrímssonar”, in Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (ed.), *Undir Hraundranga. Úrval ritgerða um Jónas Hallgrímsson* (Reykjavík 2007) pp.307-22. See also Guðmundur Andri Thorsson, “Ferðalok Jónasar Hallgrímssonar”, included in the same anthology, pp.293-306.

<sup>8</sup> Ringler (2002) p.175.

Jónas, he had combined his scientific endeavors and love for his country with his poetry, in which the pastorality of Icelandic agricultural life was celebrated. Especially his popular *Búnaðarbálkur* ('Rural Cantos'; see also Chapter 2.2.1) influenced the way Icelanders envisioned their relationship with the land, and inaugurated a tradition of "admiration of the physical beauty of Icelandic nature, in all its manifestations [...] that would persist in Icelandic poetry down to the present day."<sup>1</sup> However, in Eggert's experience, this love for Iceland's natural and rural life was connected to their perceived functionality, and the enlightened battle against dark and irrational superstitions that had prevented Icelanders from exploiting the land's full potential for too long.<sup>2</sup> Although, stylistically, there was no harm in invoking a feminine allegory to represent the Icelandic nation – as he did in his poem *Ofsjónir* – his rationalism and campaign to demystify the land prevented him from pantheistic musings on mountain trolls, elves, and dwarves as expressed by his admirer one century later. This makes *Hulduljóð* one of the most problematic, and simultaneously one of the most fascinating works in Jónas's oeuvre; the Janus-faced (slightly schizophrenic) character of the poem, results from its attempt to strike a balance between the rational positivism of Eggert's Enlightenment on one hand, and the Romantic subjectivism of his own liking on the other.<sup>3</sup> Jónas's treatment of Icelandic landscape, personified by Hulda, entails a form of aesthetic re-mystification that was to characterise poetic renderings of Icelandic nature for generations to come. In this discourse, the experience of landscape was fathomed in semi-erotic terms; in the words of Jónas, it was the sweetness of the pastoral song that wooed Hulda to kiss him sweetly.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.2.4 'Ravens on Hummocks': the Alþingi Restored

This love for the physical beauty of 'national landscapes' was not equally spread out over the island; dotted throughout the land were special junctions of concentrated significance: settings in which the Icelandic *genius loci* was somehow more tangible than in other places. These locations of heightened national significance, or *lieux de mémoire*<sup>5</sup>, are generally associated with important historical events or characters from and are therefore spatial expressions of the nation's history. Þingvellir, the historical site of the annual Alþingi and where many of the major events in Icelandic history and saga-literature took place, still appears as the very centre of all Icelandic memory-scapes and "the embodiment of the experience that has shaped the Icelandic nation".<sup>6</sup> Its *Lögberg* ('Law Rock'), from which the laws of the country were proclaimed every year and which functioned as the focal point of the Alþingi, is situated in an awe-inspiring natural setting of towering cliffs and a gorge, the *Almannagjá* ('All Men's Gorge'), shaped by the continental drift of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates (see fig. 7). This theatrical location is considered "a protected national shrine for all Icelanders, the perpetual property of the Icelandic nation under the preservation of parliament, never to be sold or mortgaged."<sup>7</sup> Þingvellir combines natural and geological splendour with the historical and political significance of the *Forum Romanum*, and transcends all factions in Icelandic society in its function as the spatial embodiment of the nation's *genius loci*. It could be described in the same terms as those used by Czech semiotician Vladimír Macura to clarify the role of Prague in the Czech national revival, as a

<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.182.

<sup>2</sup> Schaer (2007) pp.126-140.

<sup>3</sup> Ringler (2002) p.184.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.174.

<sup>5</sup> A term introduced by Pierre Nora, in his paradigmatic *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (seven volumes.; Paris 1984-92).

<sup>6</sup> Hálfðanarson (2000a) p.6.

<sup>7</sup> *Lög um þjóðgarðinn á Þingvöllum* ('Law concerning the national park in Þingvellir'), which was accepted 1 June 2004 (47/1).

“collection of emblems with a past sign and past values – a ‘holy place’, a ‘sanctum’, a place where this world meets ‘the other world’, a reality with a sacred world of patriotic ideals.”<sup>1</sup> The geological forces that shaped – and are still shaping – the landscape, and the historical forces that shaped the Icelandic nation, appear to coincide in the island’s crowd symbol *par excellence*, the location of the nation’s ‘heart’,<sup>2</sup> which still functions as the stage for Iceland’s main national celebrations.

The key to Þingvellir’s prominence in the Icelandic imagination lies in the fact that, apart from having been the centre stage of the island’s historical narrative, the place functions as a symbolic representation of political – egalitarian – ideals that *transcend* history and form one of the core constituents of the way Icelanders have fashioned themselves in modern times. It is the modern myth of an ancient ‘democracy’, the historical singularity that set Iceland apart from feudal Europe, that could most clearly articulate and demarcate the essence of Icelandicness *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the process of *othering*, the silhouetting of oneself against others in order to accentuate the uniqueness of the self – in this case: the nation – was facilitated by the cultivation of a symbol – Elias Canetti’s *crowd symbol*<sup>4</sup> –, representing that which fundamentally *distinguishes* Iceland from the rest. After the abolition of the Alþingi by royal decree in 1800, Þingvellir remained a symbol of the national golden age. The very absence of political activity in a natural setting that was seemingly *built* to function as a public arena painfully intensified the experience of silence, emptiness, and desolation. Although there is nothing to indicate that the abolition of the Alþingi directly inspired the young Bjarni Thorarensen to write this poem *Íslands minni* (see Chapter 4.1.1), his *Fjallkona*, personification of the nation, did eventually become associated with Þingvellir and everything it represented. Now that the sacrosanct site was no longer in function as meeting ground for the General Assembly, *Fjallkonan* lay there, as *pars pro toto* for the nation, unprotected, discarded, and susceptible to violation by intruders.<sup>5</sup>

This topos of the betrayed or discarded nation, left to wither away or to become a ruin of its former self, is elaborated on by Jónas in his famous poem *Ísland* (‘Iceland’), which was printed in the first issue of *Fjölnir* in 1835 (pp.21-2). In this poem, the loss of fortune and fame, the freedom and happiness that had once characterised life on the “frost-silvered isle [...] Our beautiful, bountiful *mother*”<sup>6</sup> is lamented. What follows is a description of Þingvellir, where the famous forbears – “those freedom-worshiping heroes”<sup>7</sup> – used to meet, where Þorgeir Þorkelsson thoughtfully charted the change of religion, and where Icelanders, “hugely content with their lot”,<sup>8</sup> traded goods from abroad, imported on fabulous ships. In a dramatic turn, this lively image of an industrious centre is contrasted to the silent inertia of the present:

Oh, it is bitter to stand here, stalled and penned in the present!  
Men full of sloth and asleep simply drop out of the race.  
How have we treated our treasure during these six hundred summers?

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<sup>1</sup> Macura (2010) p.42.

<sup>2</sup> Birgir Hermannsson, “Hjartastaðurinn: Þingvellir og íslensk þjóðernishyggja”, in *Bifröst Journal of Social Science* 5 (2011) pp.21-45.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparative analysis of democratic ideals in Icelandic and Czech national discourses, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “The Renovation of Native Pasts. A Comparison between Aspects of Icelandic and Czech Nationalist Ideology”, in *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78:4 (2000) pp. 688-709.

<sup>4</sup> Canetti (1971).

<sup>5</sup> Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “Public View and Private Voices”, in E. Paul Durrenberger and Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *The Anthropology of Iceland* (Iowa City 1989) pp.98-118, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Ísland* (1835), in the translation of Ringler (2002) p.101.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Have we walked promising paths, progress and virtue our goal?  
 Comely still is our country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,  
 azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.  
 Ah! but up on the lava where Axe River plummets forever  
 into the Almannagorge, Alþing is vanished and gone.  
 Snorri's old shed is a sheep pen. The Law Rock is hidden in heather,  
 blue with the berries that yield boys and the ravens a feast.<sup>1</sup>

Because the natural appearance of the setting had remained unchanged since those days – the same ‘Axe River’ (*Öxará*) still plummets – Þingvellir serves as a place of contrast, an invitation to nostalgic contemplation, where the past is activated and the sense of loss intensified through landscape. Notably, the cultural remnants of the Alþingi, the shed of chieftain Snorri (*not* Snorri Sturluson) and the Law Rock are described as being ‘reclaimed’ by nature, in the shape of sheep and heather, which serves as a metaphor for the slumbering state to which the nation itself had fallen victim. Blueberries covering the Law Rock are described in the last sentence as a ‘feast for ravens’: an image that seems to echo ancient descriptions of deserted battlefields, where ravens – associated with the two ravens of Óðinn, or his Valkyries – feasted on the dead. Arguably, one could therefore attest that Jónas describes the nation *itself* – Mother Iceland, represented by Þingvellir – as a corpse, left to decay and to fill the stomachs of scavenging birds. Þingvellir’s return to nature would then equal the *rigor mortis* of the nation. Indeed, critics have interpreted the poem as an elegy, decorating the ‘gravestone of the nation’ (*grafskrift yfir Ísland*).<sup>2</sup> This is an important point of deviation from Oehlenschläger’s poem *Island*, on which Jónas’s verses are modelled; Oehlenschläger paints an unmistakably *optimistic* image of the present, in which Thorvaldsen is still reviving the great spirit of the past in his Roman studio. Jónas’s view of the present is, on the other hand, decidedly *pessimistic*, and contrasts sharply with the deficient present.

However, this pessimistic reading of the poem is too one-dimensional and does not do justice to the ideological programme it implies. Nowhere in the poem is the nation actually declared *dead*, and if anything, the statement that all of the natural features that once witnessed Iceland’s greatness are still intact, contains a message of hope; everything *could* return to the way it once was. Or rather: *should*, since Jónas subscribed to Finnur Magnússon’s idea that the glorious past should serve as a blueprint for the future (see Chapter 3.4). What else is the idea of a long-lost golden age “but a stick with which to beat the present”,<sup>3</sup> and a demand for an equally golden future? The conceived unity of glorious past and glorious future is what Homi Bhabha referred to as the ‘double time of the nation’,<sup>4</sup> and what Tom Nairn has described as the ‘Janus-faced’ character of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Þingvellir is conceived as a place of historical continuity, where Iceland’s greatness, although slumbering in the present, exists *detached* from actual history, and is recognised as a promise for the future. The de-historicised, or mythical time-space expressed in the grandeur of its timeless landscape serves as a powerful antidote to the present state of affairs.<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that Jónas’s Þingvellir performs both of the functions that Jan Assmann has attributed to myth,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Valsson (1999) p.123.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800) Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (South Bend 2005), p.254.

<sup>4</sup> Bhabha (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Nairn (1997). See also Chapter 1.2.

<sup>6</sup> For a similar contrastation of a negatively perceived present and a timeless landscape in the Holy Land, see Moxnes (2012) p.128.



both of which are political<sup>1</sup>; it is certainly *contra-present*, in that it evokes an idealised past which is infinitely different from the present, which is perceived as deficient. But it is also *foundational*, in that it signals a long and continuous history in order to legitimise a concept or institution, in this case the fairly recently abolished Alþingi.<sup>2</sup> In Jónas's own words – extracted from a letter from 1841 –, the location is charged with a ‘spiritual power’, more than any other place in the country: a power that Icelandic politics could not do without.<sup>3</sup> If the nation was to remain ‘consistent with itself’, this was where Iceland's future governing body would have to convene.<sup>4</sup> The heartfelt cry with which Jónas concludes his poem – “O you children of Iceland, old men and young together! See how your forefathers' fame faltered and passed from the earth!”<sup>5</sup> – was therefore meant to inspire and activate his fellow-countrymen to *restore* that which had been lost, but which the never-changing mountains and rivers had witnessed, and were still testifying to by their very existence. Despite the revolutionary undertone of this poem, it is noteworthy that, stylistically, the work shows several striking similarities with another – not at all revolutionary – landscape poem, *Fjöllin á Fróni* (‘Iceland's Mountains’), which was composed two years earlier by the same Sigurður Breiðfjörð who Jónas had attacked so viciously in his notorious review.<sup>6</sup>

However, not all Icelanders who sympathised with the idea of re-establishing the Alþingi were convinced of this indispensable ‘spiritual power’ stored in the rock of Þingvellir. In fact, it was the leader of the Icelandic national movement in Copenhagen who dismissed the Romantic idea of reviving the ancient assembly on its original outdoors location as ‘unpractical’.<sup>7</sup> Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), known to Icelanders simply as Jón *forseti* (‘Jón the Chairman’), was the son of a clergyman from the desolate Westfjords (*Vestfirðir*), who came to Copenhagen in 1833 to study philology, Icelandic literature, and history. Although these were, as we have seen, exciting years for the Icelandic enclave in Denmark, in which the Fjölnismenn were preparing the first issue of their ground-breaking journal, remarkably little is heard of Jón or his activities in the Danish capital. Until 1840 that is, when he abandoned his studies – he never acquired an academic degree – and entered the political arena. He was in contact with the Fjölnismenn, and even attempted to ‘hijack’ their journal and to change its name, which had become too tainted with the questionable reputation of its radical editors.<sup>8</sup> When this plan failed, Jón decided to establish his own platform for national activism, and began to publish his influential *Ný félagsrit* (‘New Society's Papers’) together with four fellow editors, the first issue of which appeared in 1841. The journal, consisting of articles of a more practical and pragmatic nature than those appearing in *Fjölnir*, would survive for thirty years and was widely read on Iceland. It was mainly on the basis of his contributions to *Ný félagsrit* that Jón was soon recognised as the unofficial leader of the national movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Myth is meant here not in the sense of pre-Christian (or presumably pre-Christian) narratives of gods and heroes – as the term is primarily used in this study –, but rather in the sense of ‘national myths’, as applied by e.g. Anthony Smith (see Chapter 1.1).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich 1992) pp.78-83.

<sup>3</sup> Hallgrímsson (1989) vol. two, p.67.

<sup>4</sup> Egilsson (1999) pp.35-8, and idem. (2010) p.163.

<sup>5</sup> Ringler (2002) p.101.

<sup>6</sup> Idem., p.401; Valsson (1999) p.95.

<sup>7</sup> For Jón Sigurðsson's ideas on the re-establishment of the Alþingi, see his “Um Alþing á Íslandi”, in *Ný félagsrit* 1 (1841) pp.59-134.

<sup>8</sup> Karlsson (2003) p.206.

Apart from his involvement in the ‘re-establishment’<sup>1</sup> of the Alþingi in Reykjavík in 1845, in which Jón initially represented his native district (*Ísafjarðarsýsla*; ‘Ísafjörður District’), his political esteem in Iceland grew due to his commitment to the national cause in his function as the Alþingi’s chairman (*forseti*)<sup>2</sup> in the years 1849-1853, shortly in 1857, and again between 1867 and 1877. Especially his heroic stance against the Danish Governor Jørgen Trampe during the National Assembly of 1851, when the constitutional status of Iceland within the Danish realm was to be determined, stands out in the story of the national struggle for independence (*sjálfstæðisbarátta*). This scene, in which Jón and the other members rose from their seats and spoke the legendary words ‘We all protest!’ (*Vér mótmælum allir!*), has become an emblem of national resilience and was later immortalised by the painters Brynjólfur Þórðarson (1932) and Gunnlaugur Blöndal (1956). Despite his prominent position in Iceland, Jón did not attend all of the Alþingi’s assemblies, and spent most of his adult life in Copenhagen instead of Reykjavík. It was there, in his house on the Øster Voldgade – known to Icelanders as *Jónshúsið* (‘Jón’s House’) – that he died in 1879.<sup>3</sup> His status as the paradigmatic ‘national hero’, and – like Jónas Hallgrímsson – the nation’s ‘favourite child’ (*óskabarnið*) was solidified in poetic odes, statues and national commemorations, and eventually lead to his birthday – June 17 – becoming the date on which the independent Republic of Iceland was proclaimed in 1944, and Iceland’s national holiday.<sup>4</sup>

Jón’s many activities as a philologist cannot be considered separately from his political endeavours. As we have seen, he had worked for Finnur Magnússon in his student years (see Chapter 3.3.1), and between 1851 and 1879 he held the office of president of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*.<sup>5</sup> Apart from his articles in *Ný félagsrit*, he also published on Old Norse-Icelandic literature and history in *Skírnir* and the Danish journal *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift*. He never received salaries for his political activities, and instead lived on academic scholarships for his philological research. He was an important editor of Iceland’s medieval documents, and edited the first volume of the series *Diplomatorium Islandicum* (Copenhagen 1857). However, his approach to the ancient sources was very different from the ‘literary historicism’ of his Romantic contemporaries, and is characterised by a high level of pragmatic – political and legalistic – instrumentalisation and *Realpolitik*.<sup>6</sup> He applied his knowledge of the ‘Old Covenant’ (*Gamli sáttmáli*; 1262) and related official documents to undermine Denmark’s legal claims on Iceland,<sup>7</sup> and followed the heated political debates

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the new parliament established in Reykjavík was not at all a continuation of the old Alþingi of Þingvellir. But by construing a manipulated sense of continuity, the Reykjavík parliament could legitimise itself historically, and connect its modern ideals to a glorified past.

<sup>2</sup> The term is often translated as ‘president’, which is not at all incorrect, but may be a bit confusing from our modern perspective since Jón was never ‘President of Iceland’ (*forseti Íslands*). It is for this practical reason that I translate *forseti* with ‘chairman’.

<sup>3</sup> On Jón’s life and works, see especially Guðjón Friðriksson, *Jón Sigurðsson. Ævisaga* (two volumes.; Reykjavík 2002).

<sup>4</sup> On the image of Jón as Iceland’s national hero see Páll Björnsson, *Jón forseti allur? Tákmyndir þjóðhetju frá andlátí til samtíðar* (Reykjavík 2011), as well as Hálfðanarson (2007a) pp.95-6, and Egilsson (1999) pp.278-302.

<sup>5</sup> See Björn Magnússon Ólsen, “Jón Sigurðsson og bókmenntafélagið”, in *Skírnir* 85 (1911) pp. 234-59.

<sup>6</sup> On Jón’s activities as a historian, see Einar Laxness, “Sagnfræðingurinn Jón Sigurðsson”, in Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson (ed.), *Íslenska sögupingíð 28.-31. maí 1997: Ráðstefnurit I* (Reykjavík 1998) pp.19-27, and Jón Þ. Þór, “Sagnfræðingurinn Jón Sigurðsson”, in idem. and Veturlíði Óskarsson (eds.), *Ársrit sögufélags Ísfirðinga 2011* (Ísafjörður 2011) pp.101-14.

<sup>7</sup> According to Jón the ‘Old Covenant’ clearly states that the Icelanders submitted to the king alone, and not to the Norwegian people. Also after the Kalmar Union, Iceland’s loyalty was directed towards the king and not the Danish state. This meant that, after the abolishment of Danish absolutism – which had been accepted in 1662 –

concerning the Schleswig Holstein Question – in which Danish authority also lay under siege – with great interest.<sup>1</sup> As a linguist, Jón was involved in the establishment of a new orthography for the Faroese language, based to a large extent on Icelandic orthography, thus assisting the Faroese national movement in its stance against Danish cultural and linguistic imperialism. Because, even though the Faroese nationalists did not subscribe to Rask’s view that Faroese was a dialect of the Icelandic language, they certainly did prefer being associated with the noble and ancient culture of their Icelandic brothers than with Denmark.<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, Jón can be said to have answered Finnur Magnússon’s call to consider Iceland’s glorious past a blueprint for the nation’s future. But what sets him apart from the Romantic Fjölnismenn, was his emphasis on institutional, legal and economical, rather than cultural ‘restoration’. As a future-minded *Realpolitiker*, Jón neither shared Jónas’s nostalgic primitivism or literary historicism, nor his wish to restore the Alþingi at Þingvellir.

Gunnar Karlsson has argued that, in a time when the national aspirations of Belgium and Portugal were ridiculed because of these nations’ small populations – in both cases hovering around four million –, Iceland, with its sixty thousand souls, obviously needed to play all its trumps in order to compensate for this major disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> These trumps came in the shape of medieval manuscripts, highly acclaimed in the entire Nordic world, and virtually all protagonists of Iceland’s national movement combined their political activities with philology. However, this does not mean that all Icelandic nationalists were on one line where the medieval corpus was concerned; Jón Sigurðsson’s pragmatic-legalistic approach to ancient texts like the Old Covenant – on which he based his technical claim that Iceland *did* fall under the Danish king, but *not* under the Danish state – differed immensely from Jónas Hallgrímsson’s poetic and nationalistic rendering of Gunnar’s refusal to leave Iceland (see Chapter 4.2.3). Nevertheless, overemphasising the differences between these two approaches to philology may lead the reader to forget that they are the two faces of the same Janus-like endeavour: the struggle for national autonomy, more or less united in a shared goal.

It may come as no surprise then, that Old Norse mythology – which was quite useless from Jón’s pragmatic perspective – does not loom large in his written legacy. Together with Sveinbjörn Egilsson – the popular Latin teacher of Bessastaðir – he began publishing a new edition of Snorri’s *Prose Edda* including translations and a lexicon in Latin, the first volume of which appeared in 1848.<sup>4</sup> In its scope and scholarship, this edition stands in the tradition of Finnur Magnússon’s earlier Latin work on the *Poetic Edda*, and especially his *Priscaae veterum borealium mythologiae lexicon* (1828; see Chapter 3.4.3), but it is nowhere even nearly as innovative or programmatic – think of Finnur’s call for new art based on Old Norse themes – in its outlook. Nowhere in his writings are Old Norse gods or themes applied as metaphors for the present, nowhere does Jón disentangle them from the ancient *vellum* in order to present something excitingly new or original. The only references to the Eddas in his letters are in the form of codex numbers and philological technicalities.<sup>5</sup> Nothing in his work

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Iceland should have regained its former status of an independent political body, in personal union with Denmark. See Jón’s “Hugvekja til Íslendinga”, in *Ný félagssrit* 8 (1848) pp. 1-24.

<sup>1</sup> Kristjánsson (1993) pp.123-426.

<sup>2</sup> In that sense, Icelandic and Faroese nationalisms can truly be called ‘interlocking nationalisms’ (Joep Leerssen). See Simonsen (2011) pp.4-5, and Hans Jacob Debes, “The Formation of a Nation: the Faroe Islands”, in Sven Tägil (ed.), *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World* (London 1995) pp.63-84.

<sup>3</sup> Karlsson (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Jón Sigurðsson, Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar – Edda Snorronis Sturlæi* (Copenhagen 1848-87). The fact that this project was conceived in Latin is interesting in itself, and demonstrates that Jón Sigurðsson did not subscribe to the more Romantic ethno-linguistic strand of Icelandic nationalism. Jón wrote his contributions in Icelandic, which were then duly translated into Latin by Sveinbjörn.

<sup>5</sup> See especially his correspondence with Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Magnússon, collected in *Bréf Jóns Sigurðssonar. Nýtt safn* (Reykjavík 1933) pp.1-13.

on the *Prose Edda* would lead one to suggest that this lawyer was anything more than an antiquarian of the classical type, rather than a political activist or national hero. Old Norse mythology and the national cause seem to have been two entirely separate things in Jón's experience.

The ideological conflict between the Fjölismenn on the one hand, and Jón Sigurðsson and his 'New Society' on the other, is easily exaggerated and conceived as an absolute clash of two irreconcilable ideologies. But nothing is further from the truth; although they could not agree on the exact location, they both agreed that the Alþingi was to be restored. In accordance with Tom Nairn's Janus metaphor,<sup>1</sup> Jónas and his fellow editors can be considered the backward-looking, historicist and nostalgic element of nationalism, whereas Jón represents the pragmatic, future-minded element of the same ideological construct.<sup>2</sup> Their shared goals often brought them together, and their relationship is best characterised as ambivalent, rather than hostile. Jón was in close contact with Konráð Gíslason, and Jónas and Jón both contributed to the aforementioned 'description of Iceland' commissioned by *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*. Jónas even composed a poem in Jón's honour, on the occasion of his departure to Iceland in 1845.<sup>3</sup> But Jón was not deaf to the discontent of the more conservative circles, and was pragmatic enough to realise that *Fjölirnir* was too radical an initiative to serve as a platform for a general national movement. Although *Fjölirnir* may have been "excellent in places", as bishop Steingrímur Jónsson wrote to Jón Sigurðsson, many people disliked "its arrogant tone and provocative scolding or the fact that it seems to like – indeed to relish – entering into competition with other writers."<sup>4</sup>

When the 'restored Alþingi' finally convened for the first time on 1 July 1845, practical considerations had led to the decision that Reykjavík, not Þingvellir, was to become the location of its assembly. Although the majority of the people appear to have been in favour of bringing the Assembly back to Þingvellir, most officials – who may not have enjoyed the prospect of setting up tents every year – voted for Reykjavík.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jónas Hallgrímsson fashioned his disappointment over this betrayal of Þingvellir in metaphors of landscape as well. In a poem composed in 1841, commemorating his suddenly deceased friend Bjarni Thorarensen, he comforts himself with the idea that the 'great eagle' – Bjarni Thorarensen – would not have to witness the "ravens holding a caucus on hummocks", instead of the hoped for gathering of "hawks on the cliff tops".<sup>6</sup> In this verse, the 'unnatural' Danish town of Reykjavík is depicted as a collection of uninspiring hummocks, which is easily contrasted to the robustness of Þingvellir's heroic cliff tops. In this respect, the characterless landscape of Reykjavík, void of any natural splendour, echoes Bjarni's own description of Denmark's monotonous flatness, which he juxtaposed to Iceland's mountainous landscape, permeated with heroic character. The lack of heroism and authenticity, associated with cosmopolitanism and foreign – Danish – influence, is thus projected onto Reykjavík, which is not deemed a worthy place for proud hawks to assemble. Only ravens, those spineless, noisy, and greedy omens foretelling bad fortune and death – as they do in Jónas's poem *Ísland* – would gather on those weak hillocks, incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> Nairn (1977).

<sup>2</sup> On the modernistic and anti-modernistic currents in national movements, see also Trencsényi (2012) p.7-8.

<sup>3</sup> On the ambivalent relationship between Jón and the Fjölismenn, see Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, "Nokkur minnisatriði um muninn á Jóni Sigurðssyni og Fjölismönnum", in *Spunavél handa G.H. 1. febrúar 2006* (Reykjavík 2006) pp.25-31. See also Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, *Jónas Hallgrímsson og Fjölirnir* (Reykjavík 1980) 180-3.

<sup>4</sup> Steingrímur Jónsson, quoted and translated in Ringler (2002) p.35.

<sup>5</sup> Karlsson (2000) p.207.

<sup>6</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson, "†Bjarni Thorarensen", first published in *Fjölirnir* 6 (1843) pp.20-1, translated in Ringler (2002) pp.207-8.

sustaining the true spirit of Iceland.<sup>1</sup> This poem, allegedly written on horseback while on his way to Bjarni's funeral, was scorned by many for its lack of patriotism.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the Alþingi was established – albeit on the wrong location –, and even Jónas, despite his pessimism, seems to have felt the urge to give Jón Sigurðsson a word of advice before attending the new assembly. In one of his very last writings, Jónas urges the leader of the national movement to pause at the site of Þingvellir, and to insert a short moment of contemplation on the historical messages embedded in its rock before continuing his journey to the Alþingi in Reykjavík.<sup>3</sup>

After the philological endeavours of Finnur Magnússon and the Romantic innovation of Icelandic literature by Bjarni Thorarensen, Jónas Hallgrímsson and the Fjölnismenn, Old Norse antiquity had become a standard feature of Iceland's national self-images. Iceland's present and future were increasingly fashioned in concepts of the past, and with the re-establishment of the Alþingi, the nation's ancient splendour appeared to be preparing its comeback. Still, in this early phase of Icelandic Romanticism, allusions to eddic mythology were relatively sparse, and their application remained limited “in the sense that they do not seem to become a significant factor in giving shape to [...] poetry as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> A more explicit application of mythological themes in literature, art, and national culture in general would gain momentum in the creative output of the next generation of Icelandic intellectuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Jón Sigurðsson's reaction to the claim that Reykjavík was not 'Icelandic' enough for the Alþingi, was that the very presence of the Alþingi would automatically render the city more 'Icelandic'. See Karlsson (2003) p.206.

<sup>2</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson (1989) vol.2, p.117.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, vol.1, pp.248-50.

<sup>4</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.107.

## 5. The Gods of the People: Folklore and Visual Representations (1840-1870)

### 5.1 The Grimmian Project

#### 5.1.1 A View from Mount Hekla

The Romantic reinterpretation of Icelandic landscape, as described in the previous chapter, was not a practice reserved for Icelandic nationalists alone. On the contrary, the pan-European Romantic movement and the positive revaluation of the rough fringes of the peripheral North, engendered a veritable ‘discovery’ of Scandinavia in the nineteenth century. Actually travelling to the Nordic world would have been a privilege for the wealthiest travelers of continental Europe, who fashioned their Nordic experiences in quintessentially Romantic terms.<sup>1</sup> The travel literature produced by these happy few provides us with a vivid reflection of the ideas and expectations, the *a priori* assumptions and stereotypical concepts they carried with them, and through which they filtered their experiences of new environments. Their observations did not occur in an intellectual vacuum, and their travel accounts serve as a platform where their preconceptions and biases enter into a dialogue with the actual land as they perceive it.<sup>2</sup> In their confrontation with the land and its people, the travelers saw their preconceptions either confirmed or refuted and their ideas about ‘the other’ consequently modified. In the case of Icelandic travels, these preconceptions were more often than not shaped by the lecture of Old Norse literature and the Oehlenschlägerian notion of ‘Antiquity’s Isle’ (*Oldtidens Øe*; see Chapter 4.2.2). In this Romantic discourse, Iceland was conceived as the heroic stage of the equally heroic sagas, or as a repository or ‘deep freezer’<sup>3</sup> in which the spirit of the ancient North had been preserved.<sup>4</sup> Hence, actually travelling to Iceland could be experienced as travelling back in time; in her 1882 travelogue about Iceland, Elizabeth Oswald likens her experience of entering the Old Norse past in Iceland to what “classical scholars would feel if some lonely island could be found where the Greek of Pericles or the Latin of Augustus was still common speech.”<sup>5</sup> Being the least populated and cultivated part of Europe, Iceland was easily transformed into a *blanco* projection screen on which the phantasies and imaginations of the Romantic mind could run wild.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the Romantic concept of Northernness, see Tuchtenhagen (2007), Astrid Arndt (ed.), *Imagologie des Nordens. Kulturelle Konstruktionen von Nördlichkeit in interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (Frankfurt a.M. 2004), and Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London 2005).

<sup>2</sup> On the value of travel literature for imagological research, see Albert Meier, “Travel writing”, in Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters. A critical survey* (Studia Imagologica 13; Amsterdam – New York 2007) pp.446-50.

<sup>3</sup> Simonsen (2011) p.2; Halink (2010) p.398.

<sup>4</sup> On the historical development of these positive stereotypes, see especially Ísleifsson (1996; 2007; 2011; (ed.) 2011) and Oslund (2011).

<sup>5</sup> E.J. Oswald, *By Fell and Fjord, or Scenes and Studies in Iceland* (Edinburgh – London 1882) p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Halink (2010) p.398.

The ‘tourist’s gaze’<sup>1</sup> of the traveler, for whom Icelandic nature and culture constituted something utterly new and exotic, did not go unnoticed on Iceland and in turn influenced the internal view, or the *auto-image* of the Icelanders themselves (see Chapter 1.2.1). In a sense, the external view and the experience of Icelandic landscapes as something novel and unique was contagious, and inspired Icelanders to take a distance from their familiar surroundings in order to appreciate them in the same way the foreigners were doing. Technically spoken, the external view was internalised, and the touristic exoticisation of what was otherwise familiar led to *self-exoticisation*. This interaction between self-image and images of the exotic other can be demonstrated by examining the development of Icelandic landscape paintings, which did not take off until the mid-nineteenth century, when local painters were influenced by foreign artists who had discovered their landscape as a source of artistic inspiration.<sup>2</sup> The Romantic quest for ‘poetic spaces’ and ‘golden ages’,<sup>3</sup> which was now leading foreigners to the rugged shores of Iceland, was adopted by Icelanders and transformed their conception of the island’s unique geography and history.

One particularly well-informed Iceland explorer was the German legal historian Konrad Maurer (1823-1902), professor at the university of Munich, who visited the island in 1858. His deep involvement in ‘Icelandic matters’, both cultural and political, would have a profound effect on the development of Icelandic intellectual life in the nineteenth century. He mastered the Icelandic – and Old Norse – language, published authoritative studies on the legal systems of ancient Scandinavia, and was a strong supporter of Jón Sigurðsson’s political struggle for a more autonomous Iceland. These two sides of Maurer’s fascination with Iceland – the historical-philological and contemporary-political side – were inseparable, and were firmly rooted in each other. His involvement in modern Icelandic politics set him apart from most other German philologists of his age, and even rendered him a *persona non grata* in Denmark.<sup>4</sup> He was in close contact with Jón Sigurðsson, with whom he corresponded about legal arguments against Denmark’s claims on Iceland, and he wrote an article on this matter which was duly translated into Icelandic and published in Jón’s own *Ný félagsrit*.<sup>5</sup> This programmatic piece recycled many of the arguments already put forward by Jón and his fellow editors, but the fact that it was composed by a learned foreigner, voluntarily siding with the Icelanders in their struggle against the Danes, granted him the status of honorary Icelander and opened “many doors and hearts” for him in Iceland.<sup>6</sup> Jón and Maurer remained life-long friends, and the professor never grew weary of advocating Jón’s ideas in Germany.

Maurer’s dedication to the Icelandic cause is also reflected in his views on Icelandic philology and the origins of Old Norse literature, which he expressed in his lectures delivered in Munich, Oslo and Copenhagen. In his opinion, the *Íslendingasögur* were first and foremost

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<sup>1</sup> A term introduced by John Urry, and based on Foucault’s concept of the gaze. See Karen Klitgaard Povlsen, “Eighteenth-Century Stereotypes of the North. An Introduction”, in idem (ed.), *Northbound. Travels, Encounters and Constructions 1700-1830* (Aarhus 2007) pp.11-23, 11.

<sup>2</sup> On the influence of tourism on the indigenous reception of landscapes, see Tuchtenhagen (2007) pp.127-8, and in relation to Icelandic landscape painting, see Anna Jóhannsdóttir and Ástráður Eysteinnsson, “Transporting Nature: Landscape in Icelandic Urban Culture”, in Karl Benediktsson and Katrín Anna Lund (eds.), *Conversations with Landscape* (Farnham-Burlington 2010) pp.137-56, and Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “Foreign Visual Arts and Changing Attitudes to the Icelandic Landscape in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, in Marie Wells (ed.), *The Discovery of Nineteenth-Century Scandinavia* (London 2008) pp.57-66.

<sup>3</sup> Two central and intertwined concepts in Anthony Smith (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Or so Maurer believed, judging from unpublished letters from his hand. See especially Kurt Schier, “Konrad Maurer, ævi hans og störf”, in *Konrad Maurer Íslandsferð 1858*, translated by Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík 1997) pp.xiv-xxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Konrad Maurer, “Kaflar úr verzlunarsögu Íslands.”, in *Ný félagsrit* 22 (1862) pp.100-35.

<sup>6</sup> Árni Björnsson, “Konráð Maurer og Íslendingar”, in *Konrad Maurer Íslandsferð 1858*, translated by Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík 1997) p.xxxvi.

works of literature, produced by the medieval minds who entrusted the story to parchment. He did not believe that the medieval sagas were the result of centuries of oral transmission, nor did he share the general opinion that the sagas were historical accounts, documenting actual events taking place in Iceland in the Saga Age.<sup>1</sup> This critical stance towards the historicity of the stories was a controversial one, and provoked angry reactions among his German colleagues, who accused him of defiling the nest of German national philology – prepared by the great Jacob Grimm himself – with his detestable ‘view from Mount Hekla’ (or *Heckelberg* in German).<sup>2</sup> But his theory on the literary origin of the sagas – which would become known as the *book-prose* theory – influenced some of the most prolific Icelandic philologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – like Björn M. Ólsen<sup>3</sup> and Sigurður Nordal – and would become the central creed of the later ‘Icelandic School’ of philology (see Chapters 7.1 and 10.1).

Arguably, Maurer’s most substantial contribution to Icelandic culture should be sought in his activities as a folklorist, or folktale collector. When still a student in Germany, Maurer frequented the lectures of his mentor Jacob Grimm, who would become a great source of inspiration for him. During his half year stay on Iceland in 1858, where he was accompanied by an Icelandic guide – Ólafur Ólafsson – and the geologist Georg Winkler, Maurer decided to follow the example of his great teacher and record every orally transmitted folktale he could get his hands on.<sup>4</sup> His impressive collection of folktales was eventually published in Leipzig, under the title *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart* (1860).<sup>5</sup> In the preface to this work, Maurer explains why precisely the Icelandic people has preserved such an impressive treasure trove of oral traditions:

Wer sich einigermaßen mit dem Leben und Weben der Volkssage vertraut gemacht hat, der wird von vornherein erwarten, dass in Bezug auf sie in Island noch reiche Schätze zu heben seien. Mehr noch als anderwärts zieht dort eine glänzende und vielgefeierte Vorzeit, von den beengten und beschränkten Zuständen der Gegenwart grell abstechend, den Blick des Volkes auf sich, und nur allzu tief wurzelt in den Herzen der überwiegenden Mehrzahl isländischer Männer die trübe Überzeugung, dass vordem Alles weit besser und herrlicher gewesen sei im Lande als es jetzt sei oder jemalen wider werden könne.<sup>6</sup>

This concise psychological profile of Iceland’s national spirit serves to demonstrate the difference in historical consciousness in Iceland and in many other countries in Europe, where the ancient oral traditions have been all but lost. In his book, Maurer introduces a structured system of genres – mythical stories, ghost stories, stories involving magic, nature stories, legends, historical stories (including stories about saints and outlaws), fairy tales and farces – that would eventually determine the way Icelanders would interpret and classify their own folktales.<sup>7</sup> The fact that a highly learned man from Germany took an interest in the rural

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<sup>1</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, “Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders”, in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden-Oxford-Victoria 2005) pp.285-301, 286.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde* (5 vls., Berlin 1890-1920) vol. 5, p.64, 66. The view from Mount Hekla of course represents a non-German(ic), but rather *Icelandic* approach to the sources. See also Julia Zernack, “Das Norröne und das Nationale in der germanischen Altertumskunde”, in Annette Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008) pp.241-60, 251.

<sup>3</sup> See Björn M. Ólsen, “Konráð Maurer”, in *Almanak Hins íslenszka Þjóðvinafélags* 24 (1898) pp.25-31.

<sup>4</sup> Maurer kept a journal of his Icelandic journey which was never printed in its original form, but appeared in Icelandic translation in 1997: *Konrad Maurer Íslandsferð 1858*, translated by Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Konrad Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart, vorwiegend nach mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt, und verdeutscht von Dr. Konrad Maurer* (Leipzig 1860).

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p.v.

<sup>7</sup> Björnsson (1997) p.xxxv.



culture of simple commoners, farmers and fishermen, was in itself remarkable, and led some Icelanders to believe that their own folk culture might in fact be something valuable and unique in the world. It has been said that, after the publication of his *Isländische Volkssagen*, everyone in Iceland knew Konrad Maurer, whereas the Grimm brothers remained virtually unknown.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of the present study, the first of Maurer's genres – the mythical stories (*mythische Sagen*) – deserves further attention. This section of the book is subdivided in four chapters, dealing with gods (pp.1-2), elves (pp.2-29), water spirits (pp.29-35) and giants (pp.36-54) successively. Although all these fairy tale creatures stem from the pre-Christian pagan imagination, Maurer concluded that the actual heathen religion of old had left only very few traces in Icelandic folk culture. Apart from several animal and plant names – like *Baldursbrá* ('Baldr's brow'; sea mayweed) –, personal names, place names, and the occasional banishment formula, hardly anything in Iceland had kept the memory of the eddic gods alive.<sup>2</sup> But over the centuries, many other mythological creatures – especially those connected to the land (*landvættir*; 'land wights') and the waters – survived in modified forms, adjusted to the Christian world-view. The very word 'troll' (Icelandic: *tröll*) for instance, may originally have been a synonyme for 'giant' (Icelandic: *jötunn*), and can "jede überirdischen Wesen von mehr oder minder feindseligem und böartigem Charakter, also namentlich auch die Gespenster umfassen, ja sogar bis auf zauberkundige oder sonst durch übernatürliche Kräfte ausgezeichnete Menschen sich erstrecken".<sup>3</sup> But generally, the term troll refers to a creature that shares many of its essential characteristics with the giants of Old Norse mythology. Like the Old Norse gods, the *jötnar* of the Eddas have survived primarily in place names – like *Surtsheilir* ('Surtr's Cave', referring to the fire giant *Surtr*) – and designations for *natural* phenomena, like certain kinds of rock and insects.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on the natural aspect of mythology is reminiscent of Finnur Magnússon's interpretation of myth as natural philosophy, and would remain an important ingredient in the writings of Maurer's Icelandic followers.

### 5.1.2 Jón Árnason and the Folkloristic Turn

The folkloristic activities of Konrad Maurer are best considered in their international context, as a manifestation of the typically Romantic appetite for rural and orally transmitted narratives. Especially in national cultures that were concerned with establishing some sort of autonomy or independence – Scotland, Norway, Iceland – or that were in the process of constructing a 'new' national identity – e.g. Germany –, the unrecorded folktales were conceived as a reservoir of primordial, authentic and national culture that could be seen as a life-line between the modern nation and the ancient past.<sup>5</sup> The influential theorists of national identity – notably Herder – had emphasised the importance of rural culture, in which the most authentic expressions of the *Volksgeist* had remained intact (see Chapter 1.2.1).<sup>6</sup> The 'discovery' of the ancient bardic songs of Ossian, recorded from the mouths of common Highlanders but no less sublime than the epics of Homer, had demonstrated that true poetic genius was not so much a quality of the cosmopolitan elite, but rather of the farmers in their fields and the fishermen in their secluded villages. Folktales, as well as the ancient customs

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.xxxv.

<sup>2</sup> Maurer (1860) pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.36-7.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Gunnell, "Daisies Rise to Become Oaks. The Politics of Early Folktale Collection in Northern Europe", in *Folklore* 121 (2010a) pp.12-37, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Leerssen (2012). See also Regina Bendix, *Search of Authenticity. The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison 1997).

and traditions of the pastoral people keeping them alive, were not written or conceived by one single author, and appeared to have grown organically from the omnipresent and all-pervading national spirit. Joep Leerssen has argued that, in the mid-nineteenth century, Romantic nationalism shifted from historicism to folklore, “from the past to the peasant”<sup>1</sup>, and the oral traditions of rural communities were reinterpreted as the last vestiges of primeval wisdom, pre-Christian religion, and indigenous culture; authentic expressions of national character.<sup>2</sup> The anthropologist Anne Knudsen has typified the role of peasant culture in the popular imagination of the nineteenth century as follows:

The image of peasant culture was an intrinsic part of the nineteenth-century articulation of European progress, urbanization, and national homogenization. As is apparent in countless museums on peasant culture, peasants were viewed as living not in the realm of progressive history characteristic of the nineteenth-century economic and political self-image of *la mission civilisatrice* but in a sort of non-time – a cyclical, sleepy, traditional life in which wars and seasons were met with an equally patient lack of protest or understanding. Peasant culture was viewed as stable, unchanging, timeless; the only notion of *time* found in connection with the definition of peasant culture was the *point* in time marking its demise or its awakening to political or religious consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Although many Christian elements had been incorporated into these oral transmissions, their roots were believed to have reached much deeper than the introduction of Christianity and to have tapped into the primordial pagan substrata of the nation in question. This meant that many elements from the pre-Christian world-view were still present in the oral narratives in rural societies, albeit in a metamorphosed way, and virtually always “on the verge of disappearing”.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the practice of collecting these ‘pagan elements’ in oral culture was initiated by countryside priests and other ‘soldiers of God’, who intended to research popular pagan – and Roman Catholic! – superstitions in order to refute them more effectively.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century, the ideological motivation for folktale collections shifted from the religious to the Romantic-nationalistic, as the example set by the Grimm brothers inspired local enthusiasts to demarcate their own national character through folktale collections. In Norway, determining Norwegian national character had become a politically relevant issue due to the country’s annexation by Sweden (1814), and in Denmark a clear definition of Danishness was pivotal in order to counter Germany’s appropriation of Nordic culture for its own agenda of cultural-political expansion. Although all of these cultural activists took their cues from the paradigmatic folk- and fairytale collections of the Grimm brothers, their exact motivations – and consequently: their selections of material – were not identical, and depended on the cultural and political contexts in which they were conceived.<sup>6</sup> They contributed to the emancipation of the previously discarded rural cultures

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.15.

<sup>2</sup> One could argue that, in the case of Iceland, this orientation on oral culture was somewhat frustrated by the overwhelming quantity and quality of medieval literary sources, as well as the early Romantics’ disapproval of the *rímur* tradition; a crucial constituent of Iceland’s rural and oral traditions. See Chapter 4.2.2.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Knudsen, “Dual histories. A Mediterranean problem”, in Kirsten Hastrup (ed.), *Other Histories* (London – New York) pp.82-101, 83. Italics original.

<sup>4</sup> João de Pina-Cabral, “The gods of the Gentiles are demons. The problem of pagan survivals in European culture”, in Kirsten Hastrup (ed.), *Other Histories* (London – New York) pp.45-61, 50.

<sup>5</sup> A British example of the religiously inspired folktale collector was Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924), who claimed that both nonconformism and Roman Catholicism contained “the dust and ashes of heathenism”. See Andrew Wawn, “Sherlock Holmes and the Sagas. The Case of the Devonshire Priest”, in Annette Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008) pp.161-182, 177. For a general examination of the role of Icelandic priests in early folklore research, see Gunnell (2012a).

<sup>6</sup> For a comparative perspective on folktale collections in Northern Europe, see Gunnell (2010b).

of the nation to such an extent, that themes from folktales – e.g. the story of Peer Gynt – were absorbed into the ‘high culture’ of the metropolis, and refashioned in modern, more elitist forms of cultural output – in the case of Peer Gynt: a play by Henrik Ibsen and the suites of Edvard Grieg. In this national discourse, the gap between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture was bridged ideologically, and folktales collections became the starting point for veritable industries of a unified national culture.<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued that in early nineteenth-century Iceland, the contrast between rural and urban life was not yet developed enough for an urban elite to develop modern nostalgic or idealised images of rural culture, comparable to the ones being constructed in Europe’s cosmopolitan discourses. Even in Reykjavík, the atmosphere was still too rural, and the distance to the peasant’s way of life was still too small.<sup>2</sup> However, foreign curiosity and international scholarly attention for the North Atlantic reservoir of ancient culture – as expressed in the writings of Konrad Maurer – increased the Icelanders’ awareness of their own oral heritage. Maurer was not the first foreign philologist to express his interest in Iceland’s oral heritage; Jacob Grimm himself proposed that the island which had preserved the Eddas and sagas might very well still have a lot more to offer in the form of unwritten material,<sup>3</sup> and Norwegian folktale hunters turned to the Icelandic sagas for comparison and authentication of their own national versions of Old Norse folklore. If comparable stories could be found in the Icelandic manuscripts, then they were deemed truly ancient and primordial.<sup>4</sup> In 1845, the influential English runologist and philologist George Stephens (1813-1895), based in Stockholm, issued two calls – in Danish and Icelandic – for the preservation and collection of Icelandic folktales. These were published by *Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab* in Copenhagen, to which Jón Sigurðsson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson were affiliated.<sup>5</sup>

Inspired by the Grimm brothers, the librarian and museum director Jón Árnason (1819-1888) and his friend, the schoolteacher and clergyman Magnús Grímsson (1825-1860) began compiling their own collection of Icelandic legends and folktales. Since both men lacked the means and the time to travel the island themselves, their collection relied heavily on their students and clergymen in all corners of Iceland.<sup>6</sup> Their activities eventually resulted in the publication of *Íslenzk Æfintýri* (‘Icelandic Legends’; Reykjavík 1852), in which the two men emphasise the importance of folktales “for the history of our nation’s education”, and explain how these oral narratives are related to the more venerated gems of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, which had made it on to medieval parchment. In a sense, the oral heritage of Iceland constituted a continuation of the same national genius expressed in the Eddas and sagas; “a kind of *latter-day Edda*, or a mythology which time has matured or changed”.<sup>7</sup> The practice of linking contemporary folklore to ancient literature, and presenting folktales as a ‘latter-day Edda’, is by no means unique to Iceland; in 1843, the Swedish diplomat and

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<sup>1</sup> On the development of this Norwegian ‘heritage industry’, see Oscar J. Falnes, *National Romanticism in Norway* (New York 1933) pp.205-36.

<sup>2</sup> Hálfðanarson (2000a). Most ‘Romantic’ Icelanders developed their Romantic ideas not in Iceland, but in Copenhagen. On the history of Icelandic ethnology – and Jón Árnason’s role therein – see Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson, “Um íslenzk þjóðfræði”, in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 32:1 (1971) pp.62-9.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* (2 vols.; Göttingen 1854 [1835]) vol.1, pp.8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnell (2010b) p.16. Compare this function of Icelandic literature as the great authenticator to Finnur Magnússon’s concept of the *Poetic Edda* as a benchmark for Nordic culture (see Chapter 3.4.3).

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (London 1972) p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson, *Íslenzk Æfintýri* (Reykjavík 1852) p.3, quoted and translated in Gunnell (2010b) p.24. Italics added. Gunnell uses the word ‘altered’ for *lagað* (from the infinitive *að laga*) where I use ‘matured’, which I believe captures the positive connotations of *að laga* (to improve or remedy, to ‘iron out’) slightly better.

folklorist Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius (1818-1889) fashioned his collection of Swedish folktales as the *youngest Edda*, or the *still living* nature myths of Scandinavia.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, Hyltén-Cavallius could claim part of the cultural prestige connected to the term Edda for his own nation, and take on Iceland's literary supremacy over the other Nordic nations. The term Edda itself had become an honorary title at this point, and presenting one's folktale collection as *metamorphosed* mythology, as a living, new, or alternative Edda, could have a positive effect on its commercial success.

Unfortunately, Jón Árnason's and Magnús Grímsson's *Íslenzk Æfintýri* failed to attract the hoped-for attention. This initial disappointment left Jón and Magnús with little appetite for further Grimmian activities. They would probably not have developed any new initiatives on this field, if it would not have been for Konrad Maurer's enthusiastic letters to Jón, which he wrote during his journey around the island (1858) and which contain encouragements to continue their collection, in order to open the people's eyes for this treasure trove of national culture, hidden away in desolate fjords and inhospitable backlands.<sup>2</sup> Like Rasmus Rask before them, Jón and Magnús conceived their recording of traditional stories – or in Rask's case: the Icelandic language – as a battle against a relentlessly advancement of modernity, destroying everything in its path. This was a rescue operation, motivated by a sincere 'sense of urgency' and 'moral panic' (Stanley Cohen) over the potential loss of authentic heritage, and hence national identity (see Chapter 3.3.1); if *they* were not going to collect these stories, then who would? Inspired by Maurer's words, the two friends continued their activities, and after Magnús's premature death in 1860, Jón finished their monumental task on his own. However, once enough material had been collected in order to compile a definitive anthology of Icelandic folktales, Jón was unable to find an Icelandic publisher willing to invest in the project. And again, it was Maurer who saved the day. Due to his intervention, the two volumes of Jón's *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* ('Icelandic Folktales and Legends'; Leipzig 1862 and 1864), comprising over thirteen-hundred pages, were published by the same publisher who had previously published Maurer's own *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart*. The work was dedicated to the 'distinguished veteran scholar' Jacob Grimm himself.<sup>3</sup>

Although Jón Árnason, who soon earned the nickname 'Grimm of Iceland',<sup>4</sup> had been the one collecting, 'refining' and editing the folktales and stories that made it to his desk, he was not the only one involved in this national project. The most programmatic content of the work – the introduction – of the 1862-4 edition was not from his hand, but from that of Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1827-1889), a widely respected Icelandic scholar of Old Norse, who was at that time affiliated to the Arnamagnæan Library in Copenhagen.<sup>5</sup> Jón's own two draft introductions to the collection, which were considered too lengthy and uninspired, were either dismissed or simply ignored by Maurer, Guðbrandur and Jón Sigurðsson, who all had a say in the realisation of 'Jón Árnason's' project.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by the ideological modernism of his colleague Jón Sigurðsson (see Chapter 4.2.4), Guðbrandur conceived the ancient folktales not so much as relics of a glorious past, but rather as living proof of the *endurance* of Iceland's national genius. The island's literary greatness was not restricted to those medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Hyltén-Cavallius envisioned his collection of Swedish legends (*Svenska folksagor och äfventyr*; 1844-1849) as a 'Legend Edda'.

<sup>2</sup> Björnsson (1997) p.xxxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (2 vls.; Leipzig 1862-4) vol.1, p.iv.

<sup>4</sup> George E.J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon in the preface to their translated selection of Jón's folktales, *Icelandic Legends, Collected by Jón Árnason* (2 vols.; London 1864-6) vol. 1, p.6.

<sup>5</sup> In 1866, Guðbrandur moved to Oxford, where he worked on the *Oxford Icelandic-English Dictionary* (1866-73) and held the position of 'Reader in Scandinavian' from 1884 until his death in 1889.

<sup>6</sup> Gunnell (2010b) p.25.

manuscripts that were admired by the whole world, but was *still* expressed by fishermen and peasants constituting the modern nation. This theory of cultural continuity, linking contemporary Iceland directly to the national ‘golden age’ of the sagas, implied that the oral narratives were indeed “ancient in spirit, but newly created; old sagas wizen and die, but in their place come new people and new stories which the poetic mind of the nation continuously reproduces”.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on the *modernity* of the folktales, proving that the modern nation was in no way inferior to the idealised island republic of the Middle Ages, was quite unique, and ran counter both to Grimmian undertakings in Europe and the literary historicism of the Fjölismenn. Old Norse culture was *not* the golden standard to which modern Icelanders were supposed to aspire, nor was the medieval corpus of sagas and Eddas some sacrosanct sarcophagus, in which Iceland’s genius lay mummified; the ‘poetic mind of the nation’ was as much alive today as it had been all those centuries ago. Guðbrandur’s introduction echoes many of the ideas previously put forward by Jón Sigurðsson himself, in a positive review of Maurer’s *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart* published in his *Ný félagsrit*.<sup>2</sup> In line with his modernist agenda, Jón compares the practice of worshipping the ancient sagas – “which stand like mountain-high oaks” –, while simultaneously discarding the multitude of ‘smaller’ unrecorded stories – “which spring up around us like small flowers” –, to the practice of looking backwards rather than forwards, gazing at the ancient past rather than attending to the present, of which the Icelanders have often been accused.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary reader needed no further explanation to understand that Jón had transformed his review into a full frontal attack on the naïve primitivism of the Fjölismenn: the backward-looking face of Icelandic nationalism. Folklore could – in Jón’s view – serve as an antidote to this unhealthy addiction to history, and focus the attention on the present and the future rather than the past.

The influence of Maurer’s *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart* on Jón Árnason’s collection of folktales can hardly be overstated; judging from its table of contents alone, one could be excused for mistaking *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* for an Icelandic translation of the German original. The aforementioned system of thematic divisions and subdivisions introduced by Maurer is more or less copied by Jón, and just like his German inspirer, Jón opens his compilation with the genre of mythological stories (*goðfræðissögur*). Also the subdivisions of this first section – dealing with elves, sea or water creatures and trolls respectively – roughly coincide with the layout of Maurer’s work, with one notable exception: Maurer’s short article on the gods has no equivalent in Jón’s anthology.<sup>4</sup> Since the *Æsir* and *Vanir* of the Old Norse religion had become irrelevant in post-medieval everyday life, or had evolved into entirely new entities – no longer recognisable as gods –, they had no place in an anthology that aspired to give an impression of Iceland’s eternal ‘poetic spirit’, in which antiquarian singularities – with no links to contemporary Iceland – were ignored. Like in Maurer’s work, the ancient gods are only referred to where their names have survived in place names, names of heavenly bodies, animals, stones and plants,<sup>5</sup> and a considerable portion of Jón’s first volume is concerned with popular magic and sorcery (*töfrabrögð*), in which pre-Christian deities were still summoned for help, or to inflict harm upon others. So-called *bandrúnir* – magical symbols in which two or more runes were combined, and which remained in use until the late nineteenth century – still served a purpose in everyday life and

<sup>1</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Formáli* (‘Introduction’) to the 1954-61 edition of Jón Árnason’s *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (6 vls.; Reykjavík) vol.1, p.xvi, quoted and translated in Gunnell (2010b) p.26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ný félagsrit* 20 (1860) pp.190-200.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, pp.190-1; see also Gunnell (2010b) p.26.

<sup>4</sup> Notice also that Maurer’s chapter on giants (*Riesen*) is replaced by a treatise on trolls (*tröll*) in Jón’s work.

<sup>5</sup> Interest in the origin of these names was already expressed by George Stephens in his aforementioned call for further research (1845); see Guðbrandur’s preface to Jón Árnason (1862) p.xxviii.

sometimes simply consisted of sequences of different names (*heiti*) for the same deity, e.g. ‘Fjölnir, Flugur, Þundur’ etc. for Óðinn.<sup>1</sup> *Bandrúnir* representing the gods “Baldur, Týr, Þór, Óðinn, Loki, Hæni, Frigg (and Freya?)” were used to bring about the return of stolen goods, as was the ancient symbol of Þórr’s hammer (*Mjöltnir*), which was to be used as follows:

If one is in possession of a *Þórshamar*, one can determine who has stolen from you in case one has lost something. The hammer should contain copper from a church bell and should be stolen thrice [*þristolinn*]. One should harden it in human blood on Pentecost, between the lecture from the epistles and the gospels. One should also create a spike from the same material. This spike should be pinned into the hammer’s head with the words: “I stab the eye of *Vígföður*, I stab the eye of *Valföður*, I stab the eye of Ása-Þórr.” Then the thief receives pain in his eyes; if he does not return the stolen object, the same procedure is repeated and the thief loses one eye, and if the same procedure is repeated a third time, he loses his other eye as well.<sup>2</sup>

The syncretic nature of this ritual, fusing heathen remnants with Christian beliefs, is typical of the form in which pre-Christian customs appear to have survived in Icelandic culture. Without referring to Finnur Magnússon specifically (see Chapter 3.4), Jón recounts how imagery from the eddic myth known as *Grímnismál* (‘Sayings of Grímnir’) still plays a part in Icelanders’ experience of specific meteorological events. For example: when two ‘sun dogs’ – or ‘phantom suns’; an atmospheric phenomenon (*parhelion*) that creates the illusion of multiple suns – are seen flanking the sun at the same time, it is said that the sun is *í úlfakreppu* (literally: ‘in a dilemma of wolves’), meaning that it is attacked by wolves from both sides.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor refers to the wolves *Sköll* (‘Treachery’) – who chases the sun in order to eat her – and his equally sinister brother *Hati* (‘Hatred’), who chases the moon.<sup>4</sup> The continued existence of these pagan motives in Icelandic folklore did not mean that Icelandic peasants were still heathen, or that they entertained naïve beliefs in actual wolves roaming the skies. It did however demonstrate that the same ‘poetic soul’ from which the Eddas had sprung was still very much alive, and still determined the people’s poetic experience of nature.

Interestingly, the practice of connecting oral traditions and popular practices (‘low culture’) to stories from the sagas and the Eddas (‘high culture’), and thus proclaiming them two sides of the same egalitarian ‘national’ medal, would have a profound effect on the contents of folkloristic narratives themselves. It should be noted that the Grimmian folktale collectors were by no means neutral observers, merely ‘recording’ what they had seen or heard, but evolved into proficient storytellers in their own right. Their practice of selecting and ‘improving’ those narratives that fit into their constructed discursive system of the ‘national mythology’ – and consequently discarding those narratives that did not – can at best be called creative preservation. Others have referred to these functional fictions as *faklore*.<sup>5</sup> The Grimm brothers’ rather monolithic conception of mythological systems, implying that all the separate stories constituting this system should somehow ‘fit together’ like the pieces of a giant coherent puzzle, led to the distorting assumption that pagan elements which had been preserved in oral culture could be explained and elucidated through the more systematised elements of the same ‘system’, preserved in written sources like the Eddas.<sup>6</sup> This meant that

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<sup>1</sup> Jón Árnason (1862) p.450.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.445. *Vígföður* (‘Father of Killing’) and *Valföður* (‘Father of the Fallen’) both refer to Óðinn.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp.658-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Grímnismál* (*Poetic Edda*), stanza 39; in Larrington (1999): p.57. For Snorri’s account of this myth, see *Gylfaginning* (*Prose Edda*), in Faulkes (1995): pp.14-5, and p.53.

<sup>5</sup> Dorson (1977) p.4; Thiesse (2005) pp.122-143 and pp.134-136.

<sup>6</sup> Shippey (2005).

motives from Icelandic folklore, like the omnipresent elves and trolls, were studied through the lens of the Eddas. This practice gave rise to entirely new *invented traditions*, resulting from the creative interaction between eddic mythology and popular beliefs in the Romantic mindset of the folklorist. In the course of this development, the elves (*álfar*) or ‘hidden folk’ (*huldufólk*) of popular culture – who had never been divided into a good and evil camp, and had much in common with the natural spirits of the land (*landvættir*) – gradually became identified with the *ljósálfar* (‘light elves’; good) and *svartálfar* (‘black elves’; evil) of Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, who in turn seem to have been modelled on the Christian opposition between angels and demons.<sup>1</sup> The outcome of this quintessentially Romantic reinterpretation of the elves, which formed the foundation for the annual processions of torch-bearing Icelanders dressed up like elves and headed by a king and a queen of the elves<sup>2</sup> – has been characterised as “a text-book example of the transformation of *folk* culture into *national* culture”.<sup>3</sup> A national culture which consisted of a ‘top down’, *eddic* reflection on oral traditions.

## 5.2 *Painting the Gods: Sigurður málari and the Nation*

### 5.2.1 Material Culture and the Fine Arts

A more industrious and influential advocate of the nationalisation of folkloristic themes, was the creative polymath Sigurður Guðmundsson, better known as Sigurður *málari* (‘the painter’; 1833-1874). Apart from being a painter, Sigurður designed the Icelandic national costume, conducted archaeological research, founded the Icelandic National Museum (*Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*; 1863), and propagated the idea of a national Icelandic theatre. Through all these widely diverging activities, he sought to cultivate – or rather construct – Iceland’s national identity, and encourage his compatriots to focus on the vernacular culture of their own island.<sup>4</sup> There have been only very few people capable of combining virtually all the elements of national revival in one person, but Sigurður was certainly one of them.

Aged sixteen, Sigurður went to Copenhagen to develop his artistic skills. He became a successful student at the Royal Danish Academy of Arts (*Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi*), where he was admitted without having to pay the otherwise obligatory remuneration. His Danish professors thought highly of his work, and among the Icelanders in Copenhagen he soon earned the nickname Sigurður *geni* (‘the genius’). Being a man of many talents but very limited financial means, he received mental and material support from

<sup>1</sup> Terry Gunnell, “National Folklore, National Drama and the Creation of Visual National Identity: the Case of Jón Árnason, Sigurður Guðmundsson and Indriði Einarsson in Iceland”, in Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin (eds.), *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden – Boston 2012b) pp.301-23, 301-2. For a more thorough cultural history of the elves, see Gunnell (2007).

<sup>2</sup> This *invented tradition*, which is celebrated on the sixth of January, is especially popular on the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*) and in the east and the north of Iceland. The origin of this costume can be dated to 1871, when the actors who had just performed Indriði Einarsson’s ‘national play’ *Nýársnóttin* (‘New Year’s Eve’) in Reykjavík, joined in the public New Year’s Eve celebrations while still wearing their *álfar*-costumes from the stage. See Gunnell (2012b) pp.317-8.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.302, emphasis added. For a similar analysis of trolls in Icelandic culture, see Martin Arnold, “*Hvat er tröll nema þat?*: The Cultural History of the Troll”, in Tom Shippey (ed.), *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous* (Turnhout 2005) pp.111-55.

<sup>4</sup> The immense importance of Sigurður in the formulation of Icelandic identity is currently being acknowledged and scrutinised in the large scale research project *Meningarsköpun: Fræðilegir áhrifavaldar, uppsprettur innblástrar og langtímaáhrif menningarsköpunar Sigurðar málara og Kvöldfélagsmanna 1857-1874* (University of Iceland: 2012 to the present), many publications of which can be accessed on [https://sigurdurmalarhi.is/?page\\_id=385](https://sigurdurmalarhi.is/?page_id=385) (last accessed: 13 May 2016).

prominent compatriots like Jón Sigurðsson.<sup>1</sup> The cultural *milieu* that Sigurður entered in Copenhagen was permeated by the esthetic ideals of Neoclassicism, which propagated the superiority of Greek culture over Roman culture. These ideas originated from the writings of the archaeologist and historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (see Chapter 2.2.3), who considered Greece, rather than Rome, the cradle of all that was good and beautiful. Winckelmann's ideas grew incredibly influential in Germany and triggered a wave of German art and literature inspired by the heritage of Greece in the decades around 1800. The Hellenistic paradigm also influenced Wilhelm von Humboldt's ideas on education (*Bildung*) and his reform of the Prussian education system. As opposed to the Romans, the Greeks had not only observed dedication and moderation in all their actions, but they had also been formidable patriots, dedicated to the well-being of their own *polis*. When – under the influence of Fichte and Herder - nationalism began its rise to prominence in German cultural life, classical *Bildung* came to be considered a means to teach young Germans to love their fatherland, the same way the Greeks had done. Studying ancient Greece therefore, would contribute to the national feelings of the inhabitants of any nation.<sup>2</sup>

German philhellenism soon took off and spread to France and Britain, where it inspired Lord Byron – among others – to take part in Greece's violent struggle for independence. One of the first Icelanders to adopt these neoclassical ideals was Sveinbjörn Egilsson, teacher at Bessastaðir (see Chapter 3.3.1), who combined in his works the qualities of a trained classicist and an expert on Old Norse literature. After having returned from Denmark he began spreading the literary and pedagogical ideals of Neoclassicism, and under his supervision the curriculum at Bessastaðir was thoroughly classicised.<sup>3</sup> This development should not be seen as *opposed* to the cultivation of – national – Old Norse culture, but rather as mutually reinforcing. Already in 1782, Jón Ólafsson of Svefneyjar (see Chapter 2.2.1) praised the literary heritage of the ancient North on the basis of its ancient and noble simplicity<sup>4</sup>; the same aesthetic criterium that Winckelmann had used to establish the superiority of Greek art. Also beyond the field of classical scholarship, Winckelmann's criteria became the benchmark for 'good taste'.

In Denmark, Neoclassicism inspired Grundtvig's 'anti-Roman' rhetoric (see Chapter 3.2.3) and fueled his conviction that Old Norse and ancient Greek mythology had originated from the same noble philosophy.<sup>5</sup> The 'father of Danish art' – initiator of what would become known as the Golden Age of Danish painting – Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853) studied under renowned neoclassicists in Paris and in Rome, where he developed a close friendship with the Danish sculptor – of Icelandic descent<sup>6</sup> – Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844), who became the most celebrated neoclassical sculptor in Northern Europe and who was hailed as a cultural saint in Denmark. His own museum (*Thorvaldsens Museum*), situated in central Copenhagen and housed in a lofty building resembling an ancient Greek temple, opened its doors in 1848, and was still quite the sensation among Copenhagen's upper classes by the time the young Sigurður arrived in Copenhagen the following year.

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<sup>1</sup> Lárus Sigurbjörnsson, *Páttur Sigurðar málara: brot úr bæjar- og menningarsögu Reykjavíkur* (Reykjavík 1954) p.21.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus. Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (New Jersey 1996).

<sup>3</sup> On the classical element in Icelandic (national) culture, see Glad (2011).

<sup>4</sup> See his prize essay *Om Nordens gamle Digtekonst, dens Grundregler, Versarter, Sprog og Foredragmaade* (Copenhagen 1786) p.1-18. On the basis of this ancient simplicity, Jón Ólafsson argued that the *Eddukvæði* predated the settlement of Iceland by many centuries.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Martin, "Lord and Protector of the Earth and its Inhabitants", in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myths* (Turnhout 2007) pp.27-52. See also Ægidius (1985) pp.59-63.

<sup>6</sup> Oehlenschläger celebrates Thorvaldsen as a great Icelandic genius in his poem *Island* (1805). See Chapter 4.2.2.



Another Danish sculptor – this time of *German* descent – Hermann Ernst Freund (1786-1840), had been a close associate of Thorvaldsen in Rome as well, and was equally inspired by the neoclassical ideals of his time. However, unlike Thorvaldsen, Freund – influenced by the writings of both Adam Oehlenschläger and Finnur Magnússon<sup>1</sup> – turned to Old Norse mythology rather than Greek narratives, and fashioned the eddic gods in an unmistakably Winckelmannian manner. By adhering to the Hellenistic criteria of Neoclassicism, Freund’s Óðinn (*Odin*, 1828)<sup>2</sup> – seated on his throne and recognisable by his stylised wolfs and ravens – bears a striking resemblance to classical statues of Zeus or Jupiter (see fig. 8). The classical beard, hair dress, and the Hellenistic cloak would indicate a Mediterranean rather than a Nordic origin. His best-known work, the Ragnarök frieze (*Ragnarökfrisen*) was completed after his death, and the designs for the project (1825-6) reveal the scope of Freund’s masterpiece as he originally envisioned it. His prize-winning sketch for a scene in which the Norns – winged women depicted in classical dress and posture – are interviewed by Mímir and Baldr, was only the beginning of an ambitious attempt to capture the whole of Old Norse mythology in a never-ending chain of neoclassical sculpture (see fig. 9). Space limitations in the Christianborg Palace – for which the work was commissioned – forced Freund to limit his design to the events of Ragnarök. Although the piece itself was lost during a fire in 1884, reproductions based on Freund’s designs<sup>3</sup> and drawings by Henrik Olrik<sup>4</sup> show the Old Norse gods in Homeric armour and dress, doing battle with equally classically styled creatures. Freund’s design even features sphinxes, seated in front of Óðinn’s throne, and the fire-giants marching from the fire realm of the south are depicted as black Africans. The inspiration Freund drew from Old Norse culture was purely *thematic*; nowhere are Old Norse ornaments – inspired by Viking age objects or medieval manuscript illuminations – to be found. Only by presenting the Æsir as Olympian gods could Old Norse, national culture be emancipated, and incorporated into the universal discourse of ‘good and beautiful’ – that is: Hellenistic – art.

In Danish painting, the call for a – Neoclassical – cultivation of Old Norse themes was voiced by the influential art critic and historian Niels Laurits Høyen (1798-1870), founder of the Nordic Art Society (*Selskabet for nordisk Kunst*; 1847). He would have a profound effect on Sigurður’s understanding of the visual arts, and their role in society.<sup>5</sup> Høyen believed – like Oehlenschläger – that Old Norse culture should become the main source of inspiration for Nordic artists, and that a thorough study of the ancient sources was indispensable for aspiring Danish painters. One of Sigurður’s professors at the academy of arts, Constantin Hansen (1804-1880), who had studied under Eckersberg, was a great advocate of Høyen’s Nordic programme, and set about creating a national school of painting based on Old Norse mythology. His work presents the gods in more authentic Nordic costumes than Freund had ever done, but the classical perspective and poses of the characters are still reminiscent of the neoclassical style. During Sigurður’s first year in Copenhagen, Hansen was, together with a colleague, involved in the painting of a neoclassical fresco in the vestibule of the main building of Copenhagen’s university, based on themes from Greek rather than Old Norse mythology. It is quite possible that Sigurður admired this ambitious

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<sup>1</sup> On Finnur Magnússon’s call for ‘Nordic art’, see Chapter 3.4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, Copenhagen.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, the museum of Odense University, the Carlsberg Museum and the restored Christianborg Palace, among other places.

<sup>4</sup> 1857, *Statens Museet for Kunst* in Copenhagen.

<sup>5</sup> It is uncertain whether Sigurður ever attended any of Høyen’s lectures, but as an artist in Copenhagen at this time, he must have encountered his ideas through other media. I would like to thank Karl Aspelund for clarifying Copenhagen’s cultural *milieu* during Sigurður’s student years.

work on more than one occasion; the heroic postures and colourful monumentality of his professor's work can easily be discerned in his own – rather less ambitious – drawings.

Sigurður admired Høyen's attempts to create a school of national art, and spent many hours in the Arnarnagænan Library studying the Icelandic texts in order to pursue similar goals in his own art. However, philological research alone was not enough for a visually oriented artist like him, and after returning to Iceland – where he settled in Reykjavík – in 1858, nine years after his departure to Denmark, he became one of the pioneers of Icelandic archaeology and co-founded the island's first official Antiquities Collection (*Forngripasafn*; later the Icelandic National Museum; *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*) in 1863. In his programmatic writings on the importance of such an institution, the nationalistic motivations behind all these endeavours become evident; a National Museum would protect Iceland's national heritage and prevent the Danes from shipping the island's antiquities off to Copenhagen, as they had done for too long. In that way, the Icelanders' awareness of their glorious past would grow, and the campaign for independence (*sjálfstæðisbarátta*) would benefit.<sup>1</sup> Instigated by Jón Sigurðsson, Sigurður performed extensive archaeological and historical research at Þingvellir, where he mapped the locations of the tents of prominent Saga Age Icelanders attending the annual Alþingi, and produced artistic impressions of what these tents may have looked like.<sup>2</sup> With his emphasis on the visualisation and reconstruction of Iceland's material culture – a new feature of Icelandic national culture – he sought to revive Old Norse-Icelandic culture in all its splendour and grandeur in its finest details, and to cultivate national self-awareness among his compatriots. In this antiquarian endeavour, the mythological narratives of the Eddas could only sporadically serve as an instrument to explain the function and nature of certain pre-Christian artefacts, or to prove the antiquity of certain objects through attestations in the ancient texts.<sup>3</sup> A less pragmatic, more artistic approach to the Eddas can be found in Sigurður's activities in an entirely different field, namely on stage.

In 1861, Sigurður and a group of like-minded intellectuals from Reykjavík founded the so-called *Kvöldfélag* ('Evening Society'; 1861–1874), initially known as *Leikhús andans* ('Theatre of the soul'), which consisted of artists, poets, theologians, playwrights, students and folklorists, all aspiring to cultivate Iceland's national culture by different means.<sup>4</sup> Jón Árnason was one of the society's leading members, who became the first director of the National Museum and who worked closely together with Sigurður, the initiator – and 'spiritual leader' – of the whole project.<sup>5</sup> The 'culture-creators'<sup>6</sup> of the *Kvöldfélag* can be said to have laid the foundation of modern national public culture in urban Iceland, and the first exclusively Iceland-based national society, focusing its attention on Reykjavík rather than Copenhagen. As such, the society functioned as an important foothold for Icelandic nationalism – as developed primarily in Denmark – and contributed to the indigenisation of a

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<sup>1</sup> See especially his introduction to the first volume of his *Skýrsla um Forngripasafn Íslands í Reykjavík*, 3 vls. (Copenhagen 1868) pp.5-36.

<sup>2</sup> His findings were published by *Hild íslenska bókmenntafélag* four years after his death, as *Alþingisstaður hinn forni við Öxará með uppdráttum* (Copenhagen 1878a).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Guðmundsson (1868) pp.91-2, where reference is made to the *Skáldskaparmál* of the *Prose Edda* in order to prove that in the thirteenth century, when the poem was composed, so-called 'stone-chains' – made of gems or glass beads and worn by women – were already referred to as something from the pagan past and utterly out of fashion. See *Skáldskaparmál* in Faulkes (1995) p.94.

<sup>4</sup> On the official foundation of the society and its members, see Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, *Reykjavíkurfélög: Félagshreyfing og menntastarf á ofanverðri 19. öld* (Reykjavík 1990) pp.32 and 143.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance their joint authorship of the article "Ýmislegt viðkomandi Fornmenja- og Þjóðgripasafninu í Reykjavík. II", in *Þjóðólfur*, 15 Febr. 1868, pp.53-55.

<sup>6</sup> This very apt term forms the central concept of the aforementioned research project on the legacy of Sigurður and the *Kvöldfélag*, titled *Menningarasköpun* ('The Production of Culture'). See <https://sigurdurmaliari.hi.is> (last accessed: 21 May 2014).

European-style national ideology. Not Copenhagen, where many of Iceland's looted treasures were stored, but Reykjavík was to become the metropolitan centre of Icelandic culture.<sup>1</sup>

Sigurður may be best remembered for his artistic work, and more specifically for his theatrical paintings or *tableaux vivants*, which consisted of painted backgrounds against which real life actors, dressed like famous saga heroes or mythological figures, depicting one specific scene or event. Occasionally, these performances – often consisting of a series of consecutive scenes – were accompanied by the recitation of the concerning literary scene, or even music.<sup>2</sup> While in Copenhagen, Sigurður frequented the theatres there and witnessed Oehlenschläger's grand funeral (1850) and the celebration of his impressive *oeuvre*. Although Sigurður has always maintained that he did not think much of the Oehlenschläger's work and ideas, it is hard to believe that his ideas on Icelandic national drama – drawing its inspiration primarily from local, indigenous narrative material – was not at least in part inspired by Oehlenschläger's influential ideas, as expressed in the preface to his *Nordiske digte* of 1807.<sup>3</sup> Sigurður also denied having been influenced by the runologist George Stephens – who himself wrote a play based on Old Norse themes<sup>4</sup> and resided in Copenhagen when Sigurður studied there – or by Finnur Magnússon's appeal to Nordic artists to turn to the Eddas for inspiration (see Chapter 3.4). He fashioned himself as a self-made man, untainted by the ideological influence of others, thus creating the self-image of a fully autonomous, artistic *genius*.

### 5.2.2 The Gods on Stage

When Sigurður resided in Copenhagen, the Old Norse gods were no strangers to the theatre stages of Northern Europe. Ever since the Gothic movement in Sweden had catapulted pre-Christian religion to the forefront of 'national' culture (see Chapter 2.2.2), the staging of Old Norse gods and heroes had become common practice in Scandinavia, and often served specific ideological and political purposes. A very early example of this theatrical adaptation of Nordic paganism is Johannes Messenius's *Disa*,<sup>5</sup> which premiered in 1611 – outdoors in the proximity of the ancient pagan temple of Uppsala – when Sweden was becoming a political superpower with international pretensions. The play combines euhemeristic interpretations of the mythological narratives with local and classical/biblical accounts – Jordanes believed that Noah's grandson Magog was the first man to settle in Sweden – in order to demonstrate Sweden's greatness and importance to the world.<sup>6</sup> Due to its glorification of Nordic culture, the play continued to be staged in Sweden and abroad – notably in Germany – throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and eddic themes rapidly became part of the standard repertoire of Nordic theatre under the influence of Ewald, Klopstock, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, and Oehlenschläger in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> On the development of public urban culture in Reykjavík, see Róbertsdóttir (1988).

<sup>2</sup> On Sigurður's *tableaux vivants*, see Sveinn Einarsson, *Íslensk leiklist: Safn til sögu íslenskrar leiklistar og leikbókmennta* (2 vls.) vol. I: *Ræturnar* (Reykjavík 1991) p.248.

<sup>3</sup> According to Oehlenschläger, poets and playwrights should seek out the 'peculiarly national' (*det ejendommeligt nationale*) in their quest for dramatic themes. See Chapter 3.2.2. For Sigurður's very similar ideas on the role the ancient past in modern national culture, see especially his introduction to Guðmundsson and Vígfússon (1868-75) vol.1, pp.5-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Revenge, or Woman's Love: a melodrama in five acts* (1857), which features the Viking Eric the Victorious.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Messenius, *Disa. Thet är en lustigh Comoedia om then förståndighe och högberömde Sweriges Drottning Frw. Disa: Hwilken sanserdeligen på rim uthsatt/ och hållen är i Ubsala Marcknadh/ Nemligen then 17. Och 18. Februarij/ År effter Gudz bördh 1611* (Stockholm 1611).

<sup>6</sup> See Fredrik J. and Lise-Lone Marker, *The Scandinavian Theatre. A Short History* (Oxford 1975) p.24, and Terry Gunnell, "Early Representations of Old Norse Religion in Drama" (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Old Norse religion on stage between 1830 and 2012, see Terry Gunnell and Sveinn Einarsson, "Theatre and Performance" (forthcoming).

political – and often polemical – use of these themes in Danish Romantic nationalism – notably in Grundtvig’s poem *Thryms-Kvide* (1815) and the plays of Oehlenschläger – is discussed in Chapter 3.2.4.

Although Sigurður’s Copenhagen notebooks leave us with very few clues about the plays, lectures and cultural events he frequented, it is hard to imagine that the popular plays of Oehlenschläger and Ewald did not influence his artistic imagination. The cultural infrastructure of Reykjavík was not yet mature enough to facilitate the performance of such epic productions on stage,<sup>1</sup> but this did not stop Sigurður from exploring alternative ways to fulfil his Grundtvigian mission in Iceland. Another, less ambitious form of theatrical performance which could be realised on Iceland and which would provide the audience with educational windows on their own heroic past were the so-called *tableaux vivants*. All that was required for a successful *tableau vivant* were one or several ‘actors’ in costume – capable of holding a certain pose for some time –, some authentic-looking props, and a painted backdrop (Icelandic: *leiktjald*) to indicate the location of the depicted scene. Several of Sigurður’s painted backdrops have survived, and are kept in the archive of Iceland’s National Museum (*Þjóðminjasafn*).<sup>2</sup> It is most likely that Sigurður got the idea to design *tableaux vivants* during his time in Copenhagen, although the genre had by that time been out of fashion for some time. However, an event that may have inspired him to turn his attention to this genre, was a popular exhibition of *tableaux* in Copenhagen, in which photographs of Algerian soldiers (*Zouaves*) who had fought in the Crimean War were ‘exhibited’.<sup>3</sup> This may very well have opened Sigurður’s eyes for the pedagogical potentials of this medium, which could potentially ‘strengthen the national spirit’.<sup>4</sup>

Sigurður’s *tableaux vivants* (Icelandic: *lifandi myndir*) were first exhibited – or rather: performed – in *Gildaskálinn*, a theatre in downtown Reykjavík, in January 1860. Among the dramatic scenes performed during these well-received performances<sup>5</sup> was one taken from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur* (‘The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-slayer’), in which the poem’s protagonist (Helgi) and his beloved Sigrún meet one more time after Helgi’s death, to spend a last night together in his burial mount before he leaves for *Valhöll*.<sup>6</sup> The love between them was expressed by her hand, gently covering the mortal wound on Helgi’s chest. The following year, the *tableaux* were performed in an even more spectacular manner; the fact that in one of them two slain bodies in full armour could be seen laying on the stage, was a great improvement according to one reporter.<sup>7</sup> It may be difficult to grasp for a modern audience, but for Icelanders who were unfamiliar with any artform beyond the paintings on their altars,<sup>8</sup> this quite a spectacular event. For the first time, these ancient stories appeared to be coming to life. A third exhibition followed in 1861, but Sigurður was not satisfied. What

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<sup>1</sup> On later Icelandic attempts to create a national theatre as envisioned by Sigurður, see Chapter 10.2.

<sup>2</sup> See for example his painting of a cave, used in the play *Útilegumennirnir* by Matthías Jochumsson; artifact number A-6259/B-1912-34, also accessible via the National Museum’s digital collection on [www.sarpur.is](http://www.sarpur.is) (last accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2014).

<sup>3</sup> These *tableaux vivants* were actually Orientalist photographs, taken by the British photographer Roger Fenton, showing dressed-up soldiers in theatrical poses and exotic costumes. Along with his other photographs taken during the Crimean War, these works constitute some of the first expressions of modern visual journalism. I would like to thank Karl Aspelund for drawing my attention to this possible connection.

<sup>4</sup> Sigurbjörnsson (1954) p.30.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of this first series of *tableaux*, see *Þjóðólfur* 12 (1859-60) p.29 (2 February 1860).

<sup>6</sup> See also Chapter 4.1.2; this tragic love story had been popularised by Bjarni Thorarensen in his poem *Sigrúnarljóð* (‘Sigrún’s Song’; 1820).

<sup>7</sup> *Þjóðólfur* 13 (1860-61) p.29 (10 January 1861).

<sup>8</sup> Sigurbjörnsson (1954) p.30.

Iceland really needed was a national theatre, with Icelandic actors performing Icelandic plays written by Icelandic playwrights.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Sigurður's envisioned living pictures never made it to the stage, but his many sketchbooks pay testimony to his ideal of educating the nation through painted and performed windows on their own past. In recreating this past, the aforementioned neo-classicism that he had grown acquainted with in Copenhagen occasionally determined his style of representation; since no complete Viking ship had yet been excavated, he resorted to general depictions of Roman galleons for his drawings of Old Norse boats,<sup>2</sup> and a portrait of the popular saga hero Grettir Ásmundarson (from *Grettis saga*) bears a stunning resemblance the marble bust of the bearded Roman emperor Caracalla, including the classical toga-like garment draped over his shoulders and the wild stare (see fig. 10).<sup>3</sup> Sigurður's effort to find inspiration in classical antiquity in order to construct a more epic image of Old Norse culture, may be best illustrated by a set of drawings from one of his sketch books, which represent a study of classical – Greek and Etruscan – chariots, including 'Jupiter's chariot'. However, it is the chariot at the bottom of the page that reveals the reason for this artistic study; the design of this last vehicle is best described as Nordic, and bears resemblance to the Viking dragon ships, including the head-shaped prow.<sup>4</sup> Since no Old Norse warrior-chariots have ever been discovered, Sigurður had to turn to classical examples in order to familiarise himself with the basic technical blueprint of this kind of vehicle, before he could 'Nordicise' the concept by adding decorative ornaments, reminiscent of the organic animal motives in Old Norse manuscript illuminations (see fig. 11). In this tendency to create Nordic variations on classical prototypes, one can clearly discern the influence of Sigurður's teacher, Constantin Hansen.<sup>5</sup>

The syncretisation of (neo-)classical and Nordic motives becomes most evident in Sigurður's non-historical sketches, representing mythological themes. Released from any restraints concerning historical correctness, it is in this realm of otherworldly narratives that he let his imagination run free. Plans for future *tableaux vivants* included mythological scenes like Loki and Sigyn in the cave (see fig. 12)<sup>6</sup>, Viðar fighting the wolf Fenrir, and Þórr doing battle with the Midgard Serpent (*Miðgarðsormr*) during Ragnarök.<sup>7</sup> One could be excused for mistaking Sigurður's drawing of Óðinn's horse Sleipnir for a sketch of a classical equestrian statue, if it was not for its eight legs and the addition of the name 'Sleipnir' in runic letters (see fig. 13).<sup>8</sup> In the same monumental and static style, Sigurður placed Þórr, posing as a half-naked Trojan hero on his chariot – not the 'Nordic' one of his chariot study – holding his hammer *Mjöltnir* (see fig. 14).<sup>9</sup> Like Sleipnir's eight legs, *Mjöltnir* is the only figurative element that reveals the eddic identity of the depicted character. The heroic pose, as well as the dramatically pleated cloak – creating the suggestion of wind or velocity – and the plastic *en profile* composition of the scene, appear to have been inspired by sculptured scenes from a classical frieze. In the same – undated – sketch book we find a less Hellenistic, fragmental representation to the same god, this time not *en profile* but facing the audience with his grim

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<sup>1</sup> Sveinn Einarsson, *A People's Theatre Comes of Age. A Study of the Icelandic Theatre 1860-1920* (Reykjavík 2007) p.51.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG04-10.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-LÍ-190.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG09-6.

<sup>5</sup> For a collection of Hansen's depictions of Old Norse gods, see the website 'Images of Old Norse Gods', on: <http://www.germanicmythology.com/works/HansenArtPage.html> (last accessed: 26 August 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG09-1.

<sup>7</sup> Sigurbjörnsson (1954) pp.30-1; Einarsson (1991) vol. 1, pp.247-50. See also: Einarsson and Gunnell (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG09-6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

expression and his waving – flaming? – hair (see fig. 15). One arm, presumably the one wielding Mjöllnir, is raised. The dynamic energy and visual perspective of these scene seems to serve as a stylistic counterpart to the static monumentality of the aforementioned one; Sigurður refused to restrict himself to one specific style.

On yet another drawing, we can see Óðinn on a cloud-like object overseeing the scene of Loki bound in his cave. His appearance and posture are reminiscent of statues of Jupiter and Zeus, Óðinn's classical counterparts. Zeus's function as god of the skies may very well explain why Sigurður decided to place the ruler of 'his own' pantheon, who was never explicitly associated with clouds, on a cloud in the first place. This syncretic interpretation of Óðinn may have been inspired by the aforementioned statue of the same god by H.E. Freund, which Sigurður is likely to have seen. Inspired by the neoclassical representation of Greek mythology in Copenhagen, as well as the programmatic call for 'Nordic art', these drawings represent an early Icelandic adaptation of the philosophies of Oehlenschläger, Grundtvig and Høyen. Contrary to most of his designs based on historical motives or scenes from the sagas, Sigurður's mythological drawings are *not* stylistically linked to the Old Norse culture that produced the Eddas. It can be argued that, in Sigurður's *oeuvre* at least, historical (saga) scenes are used to emphasise the uniqueness and *alterity* of Nordic culture, whereas the myths are instrumentalised to underline the timeless and universal – *classical* – validity of that same national heritage.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, Sigurður's Hellenisation of the gods, the *association* with classical traditions (the fourth function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1), served similar emancipatory and cultural political purposes as the Trojan narrative in the euhemerism of Snorri's introduction to the *Prose Edda*.

### 5.2.3 Modern Valkyries

A recurrent theme in Sigurður's drawings is the archetypal image of a strong woman, occasionally in armour, sometimes representing the female allegory of the Icelandic nation (*Fjallkonan*)<sup>2</sup> in archaic dress and wearing characteristic headgear. In this last category, there is an interesting sketch<sup>3</sup> of a lady leaning on a rock, which displays an elaborate runic inscription and a typically Old Norse decoration of a dragon biting its own tail (see fig. 16). Two birds, a falcon – one of Iceland's national symbols – and a raven, reminiscent of the two ravens of Óðinn, are seated on two rocks flanking the larger one that bears the runic inscription. A sword and shield are depicted leaning against the rock of the falcon, and the female figure herself appears to have placed her own spear against the larger rock. There is a clear link between the martial, belligerent nature of these artefacts and the national message the drawing seeks to convey: a strong nation must be willing to defend itself, by violent means if necessary. This association, between feminine – that is: national – figures and belligerence is further elaborated in a set of drawings representing Valkyries (Old Norse: *valkyrjur*, 'choosers of the slain'), the mythological maidens who rode their flying horses over the battlefield in order to select those fallen heroes they would bring to Óðinn's *Valhöll*.<sup>4</sup> In Sigurður's imagination, the Valkyries wear full chainmail armour, helmet, sword and shield, and bear a striking resemblance to the goddess Pallas Athena, who is generally equipped with the same martial attributes (see fig. 17). Although the composition of these heroic scenes still has a profoundly classical character, the colourful outfits of these women

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<sup>1</sup> On a similar entanglement of national alterity and universalism in the poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson see Chapter 4.2.3.

<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, these appear to be the oldest *Icelandic* depictions of Bjarni Thorarensen's Lady of the Mountain.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG09-3.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artifact number A-SG09-3 and 4.

contain many folkloristic elements, which Sigurður was well acquainted with and which he incorporated in his ‘national art’.<sup>1</sup>

His studies of Icelandic folk culture and women’s clothes inspired Sigurður to design a uniform national costume (*þjóðbúningurinn*) for women, composed of folkloristic elements and ornaments observed all over Iceland. In 1857, he published his ideas on the topic in an article appearing in Jón Sigurðsson’s *Ný félagsrit*,<sup>2</sup> in which he argued that in order to protect Iceland’s national character (*þjóðerni*) from invasive foreign influences, a standardised national costume should be agreed upon.<sup>3</sup> Through national costumes, tourists visiting the island could be convinced of the fact that – although no monuments from ancient times had been preserved – the Icelanders were indeed the descendants of Old Norse gentry, whose culture they preserved and whose language they still spoke.<sup>4</sup> However, in order to create the suggestion of something ancient, something new had to be invented. After his return to Iceland, Sigurður designed two versions of the Icelandic national costume for women, in which he tried to present the nation as a mother figure by echoing the island’s landscape in his designs. His costumes “consisted of a tight corset that lifted women’s breasts, representing the mountainous nature of Iceland; a full skirt that could be expanded during pregnancies, indicating the fertile plains and maternal womb of the nation.”<sup>5</sup> This urge to identify the archetypal Icelandic woman with Iceland’s landscape is comparable to Bjarni Thorarensen’s choice to name his personification of Iceland ‘the Lady of the Mountain’.

Although Sigurður’s designs for the national costume do not include swords or helmets, the link with the Valkyries becomes apparent from a long poem he composed in 1859, and which was published in his book on Icelandic national costume for women (1878).<sup>6</sup> The poem is intended to connect the traditional outfits to the very beginnings of the Icelandic nation, and evokes an atmosphere of mythical beginnings by opening the first seven stanzas – except for the sixth one – with the eddic formula ‘Of old was the age’.<sup>7</sup> In this attempt to primordialise his invented tradition – the national costume – through poetry, Sigurður praises the characteristic spoon-shaped headwear (*spaðafaldur*) of Icelandic women, which is here associated with the white headwear – foam – of *Himinglæfa* – daughter of the sea-deities *Rán* and *Ægir*, and thus: a wave – through which the Viking ancestors had navigated their way.<sup>8</sup>

Of old was the age  
when Valkyries  
heavenly breeze  
filled the air,  
hidden in their helmet  
and in full armour,  
where battle moon waded  
in glittering iron  
and grey spears  
from time engraved

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<sup>1</sup> On the incorporation of folklore in national art forms, see Gunnell (2012b).

<sup>2</sup> Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um kvennbúninga á Íslandi að fornu og nýju”, in *Ný félagsrit* 17 (1857) pp. 1-53.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.2-3.

<sup>5</sup> According to Mrinalina Sinha, *Gender and Nation* (Washington DC 2006) p.20. See also: Ida Blom, “Gender and Nation in International Comparison” in idem. and K. Hagemann (eds.), *Gendered Nations. Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* pp.3-26, 11-14 (Oxford 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Sigurður Guðmundsson, *Um íslenzkan faldbúning*, 2 vls. (Copenhagen 1878) vol.2, pp.15-23.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Ár var alda það’, taken from the third stanza of the *Völuspá*, in which the seeress speaks of the time when *Ymir* was alive and nothing, sea nor sand nor earth nor grass, existed yet.

<sup>8</sup> Guðmundsson (1878b) p.15, stanza 3.

carcasses sparking  
slide to the hearts.<sup>1</sup>

The detailed description of the Valkyries' outfit, and especially the use of the term *faldnar* in the third line – meaning 'hooded' – when referring to the helmet, suggests a connection between the appearance of the heroic battle maidens and the Icelandic *spaðafaldur* of the national costume. In a sense, every Icelandic woman wearing the national costume thereby becomes a Valkyrie. It is the entanglement of mythological imagery, the poetic allegory of Fjallkonan, and Sigurður's obsession with national costumes, which have led to the image of the strong and quintessentially *Icelandic* woman, who represents the traditions as well as the strength of her nation. Sigurður's mythologisation of the archetypal Icelandic woman, in which Fjallkonan is infused with the Valkyrian element, was to become the national blueprint for the ideal, stereotypical strong and independent Icelandic female. Without the inspiration from the Eddas, it is unlikely this image would have evolved along the same lines. In this poetic homage to Icelandic folklore, Sigurður created a sense of continuity between Old Norse mythology and modern folklore, which is very similar to the one implied by Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson when they referred to modern Icelandic folktales as a latter-day Edda. This enabled him to use mythology to *primordialise* (function one, as outlined in Chapter 1.1) a new national costume, an invented tradition. Like Jón Sigurðsson, Sigurður was deeply concerned with the national flowers, alive and evolving, which still flourished between the 'mountain-high oaks' of ancient literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, stanza 5; *Ár var alda það, /er valkyrjur/himneskur blær/um himin flutti, /hjálmi faldnar/í hildarskrúði, /þar böðmáni óð/í ísarnskímu/og gráir gearar/úr greiptri mund/hrælogandi/að hjörtum renndu.*





## 6. Eddic Poetry, Eddic Politics (1840-1900)

### 6.1 ‘*Quran of the Scandinavians*’: Grímur Thomsen and the Pan-Scandinavian Ideal

#### 6.1.1 New Manifestations of Romanticism

The cultural production of the first generation of Icelandic Romanticism did not immediately lead to the ‘rediscovery’ of Old Norse mythology, or to a large-scale literary and artistic cultivation of mythological themes, as it did in Danish art and literature.<sup>1</sup> The first stage of – philological and artistic – Romantic mythography was politicised by Danish poets like Grundtvig, who considered the noble heritage of the North an instrument of demarcation, with which a clear line could be drawn between the *true* North and the Prussian pretenders, or ‘Rome’.<sup>2</sup> The cultivation of a Nordic consciousness, in which the Eddas are considered a benchmark of Danish and Nordic identity,<sup>3</sup> constituted a centripetal cultural force rather than a centrifugal one. A plausible explanation for the relative scarcity of explicit mythological themes in the ‘national poetry’ of Bjarni Thorarensen, Jónas Hallgrímsson and the Fjölnismenn has been discussed in Chapter 4. The survival of highly formalised references to eddic myth in the living tradition of *rímur* poetry may have rendered the material presented in these ‘uninspired versifications’ rather unappealing to an idealistic movement, bent on *renewing* the literary climate of Iceland. However, a more nationalistic and political treatment of Old Norse mythology would eventually evolve in the writings of the next generation of Icelandic poets, born in the second decade of the nineteenth century. How did this transition in Edda reception develop? And why did the stories of ancient gods and legendary heroes become such an indispensable source of inspiration for the Icelanders, whereas their literary predecessors had preferred the *Íslendingasögur* and other arsenals of Icelandic greatness? In order to present an accurate analysis of this development in Icelandic cultural life, I will compare the poetic and political mythography of three prolific representatives of this new Romantic generation, who have all applied mythological themes in their writings in order to convey their – very divergent – political views: Grímur Thomsen (1820-1896), Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827-1888), and Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal (1826-1907).

All three of these writers can be considered, or at least considered themselves, to be nationalists. All three of them drew inspiration from Old Norse mythology and resorted to the ancient manuscripts in order to give shape to their national sentiments. But even though they may all be classified as national Romantics, the differences in their conceptions of Icelandicness are striking, and can reveal us a lot about the turbulent political and cultural climate in which they operated. While in their twenties, this new generation experienced the partial collapse of the ‘old order’ in Europe during the civil revolutions of 1848, which in Denmark resulted in the abolishment of absolutism. That same year, Jón Sigurðsson published his seditious article ‘Hugvekja til Íslendinga’ (‘Appeal to the Icelanders’) in his *Ný*

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<sup>1</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.107.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3.2.3.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3.2.4.

*félagsrit*,<sup>1</sup> and Matthías Jochumsson began editing the journal *Þjóðólfur* in Reykjavík (see Chapter 8.1.2). As a direct result of the political reforms in Denmark, the First Schleswig War with Prussia (1848-1851) erupted, and a second one followed in 1864. The ideological implications of these events had a profound effect on the ideas of the three protagonists of this section, and the process of national self-characterisation these wars engendered in Denmark served as an important *precedent* for Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen.<sup>2</sup> For Gísli Brynjúlfsson, it was the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 which provided the inspiration to pick up his pen and to begin his career as a political poet. In the midst of all this turmoil, Icelandic adolescents in Copenhagen developed their political instincts and ideas, and followed the development of a new political discourse based on the concepts of nation and language, rather than geopolitical arguments.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that it is the very *symbolic* – and consequently: without a fixed and objective meaning<sup>4</sup> – nature of myth which rendered this class of poetic, metaphor-laden imagery a preferred rhetorical device for poets like those under scrutiny here. It is the myth's inherent vagueness which makes it amenable to idiosyncratic interpretations. Powerful images – like Þórr's hammer (Gísli Brynjúlfur), *Ragnarök* (Grímur Thomsen), or a goddess of purity and love (Benedikt Gröndal) – can empower an argument and endow it with an aura of 'rightness' like no other tool in the rhetorical toolkit can.

Grímur Thomsen, the oldest of the three poets under scrutiny in this chapter, was born in Bessastaðir, where his father – a goldsmith who called himself Þorgrímur 'Tomsen' instead of Tómasson – worked at the Bessastaðir school. Grímur was a promising student and left for Copenhagen aged seventeen in order to study law. Instead, he earned a degree in aesthetics in 1845, and in 1854, he was awarded a doctoral title on the basis of his study on the work of Lord Byron. In Copenhagen, Finnur Magnússon managed the money Grímur's father had reserved for his son's education. Finnur perceived in the young man a 'good and inspirational core', which should not go to waste on the 'cold iceberg' – that is: Iceland –, but which was to be nurtured and cultivated in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Finnur recognised much of his former self in the young prodigy, arriving in the Danish metropolis with the intention of studying law, but turning his attention to more noble subjects – like literature – instead.<sup>6</sup> Finnur actively urged Grímur's father to continue to invest in his son's education, which would turn out not to be a bad decision; in his later writings on Old Norse literature, Grímur would revoice Finnur's call for a new, national Nordic art and literature in Scandinavia, inspired by Old Norse-Icelandic themes. And, as will become clear later on in this chapter, with considerable success – in his own opinion at least.

As a reward for his excellent study on Byron, Grímur received a grant from the Danish state to travel through Europe and continue his studies in Paris and London for two years. In 1848, he entered the Danish diplomatic service. As a literary scholar, Grímur is credited with being the first one to write about the literature of Lord Byron in Danish, but also with popularising the works of Hans Christian Andersen, who had been writing fairytales for many years.<sup>7</sup> He further introduced Icelandic students at Bessastaðir – where he taught French for one year in 1845 – to contemporary philosophy and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, and was considered – at least by Benedikt Gröndal – the "herald or harbinger

<sup>1</sup> *Ný félagsrit* 8 (1848) pp.1-24.

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of precedents in the process of identity formation, see Cohen (1985) p.106.

<sup>3</sup> On the transformation of Danish national identity in the early nineteenth century, see Brincker (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Cohen (1985) p.115.

<sup>5</sup> Finnur Magnússon in a letter to Grímur's father, quoted in Helgason (1959) p.195; "... góðan og andríkan kjarna [...] er synd væri að hrinda út á kaldan klaka, svo að hann yrði að engu."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Larsen, *H.C. Andersen og Grímur Thomsen* (Odense 1956).

of the new age”.<sup>1</sup> He spent about twenty years of his life in Denmark, where he was among other things involved in the publication of Jón Sigurðsson’s periodical *Ný félagsrit*. He also published a few poems in *Fjölnir*. In 1866, Grímur retired from his diplomatic post and finally returned to Iceland, where he purchased the Bessastaðir mansion from the Danish state. Here he would stay until his death thirty years later. He became an active member of the Icelandic Alþingi and evolved into an acclaimed poet in his native Icelandic, which – according to some of his critics – had become faulty due to his long stay abroad. In Iceland Grímur’s writings and ideas were not uncontroversial; his adherence to Pan-Scandinavian ideals – to which I will return later – was considered ‘un’ or even ‘anti-national’, and his poems were often deemed too foreign for the Icelandic audience.<sup>2</sup> According to Ingi Sigurðsson, Grímur’s writings on foreign literature first kindled Icelanders’ awareness of Romanticism as a separate school or movement,<sup>3</sup> the most significant Icelandic exponent of which – Bjarni Thorarensen – was celebrated by Grímur and Gísli Brynjúlfsson as the greatest Icelandic writer in history.<sup>4</sup> The ambivalence in the Icelandic reception of Grímur Thomsen, depicted as anything between unrooted *heimsborgari* (‘world citizen’) and Icelandic *þjóðskáld* (‘national poet’) – whose popular verses are still sung by Icelanders today – has been the subject of the doctoral dissertation of Kristján Jóhann Jónsson.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, Grímur has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention exactly *because* of this uneasy position in the pantheon of Icelandic Romantics<sup>6</sup>; uneasy when compared to the more ‘unproblematic’ cultural heroes of Icelandic Romanticism, most notably ‘the nation’s favourite’ Jónas Hallgrímsson. In the context of the present study I will take all of these recent explorations of Grímur’s work into account, but only in as far as they can shed new light on the larger issue at hand: the instrumentalisation of Old Norse mythology for ideological purposes. Furthermore, by zooming in on this one specific aspect of Grímur’s scholarship and poetry – and by placing it in the theoretical context of this study – many of the larger issues dealt with in the aforementioned studies can be addressed and reevaluated from a new perspective.

### 6.1.2 The Aesthetics of Nordic Culture

It was only after he had completed his studies in Copenhagen that Grímur first turned his attention from contemporary literature to the Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts. This shift of focus can even be characterised as ‘accidental’<sup>7</sup>, and came about when he began translating commentaries to a new edition of the sagas into Latin<sup>8</sup>, in order to improve his not very flattering financial situation at that time. When studying the biographies of intellectual Icelanders abroad, it seems as though this role – of antiquarian and translator – is one that they were virtually forced into by their environment due to their Icelandic background, even if initially their interests did not lie in this field. But Grímur’s growing admiration for the ancient texts would become a permanent feature of both his academic and his creative writings, and he even intended to express his views on this topic in an elaborate history of

<sup>1</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.127; “Grímur var herold eða fyrirboði hins nýja tíma...”

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough analysis of these negative images, see especially Jónsson (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Sigurðsson (2006) p.113.

<sup>4</sup> See Óskarsson (2006) p.266.

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson (2012).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Gunnlaugsson (2007), Egilsson (1999) pp.111-37, and the three works by Kristján Jóhann Jónsson: *Kall tímans* (Reykjavík 2004), Jónsson (2012), and *Grímur Thomsen. Þjóðerni, skáldskapur, þversagnir og vald* (Reykjavík 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Gunnlaugsson (2007) p.179.

<sup>8</sup> *Scripta historica Islandorum de rebus gestis veterum Borealium, latine reddita et apparatu instructa, curante Societate regia antiquariorum Septemtrionalium*, 2 vls. (Copenhagen 1846).

Old Norse-Icelandic literature. This ambitious project was never realised, but Grímur's basic ideas on the topic are extant in four important essays, which he published in the period between 1846 and 1857.<sup>1</sup> It is in these essays that we can observe crystallisation of Grímur's ideological concept of Nordic identity – and in tandem with this: *modern* Scandinavian culture – and the role of Old Norse literature in the greater historical scheme of human evolution. But in order to come to a full understanding of these essays, it is important to first acquire a better understanding of Grímur's philosophical development and aesthetic ideals by exploring two of his earlier writings, on contemporary literature.

The first of these two works was written in 1841 as a prize essay in a contest commissioned by the University of Copenhagen, in which participants were asked to answer the question whether French literature had improved or rather devolved in recent years.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, Grímur fully embraces the new developments in French poetry, which marked the transition from the formal literature of Classicism to Romanticism. An important feature of his line of argumentation is the distinction Grímur makes between 'Romanticism' (in Danish: *Romanticismus*), by which he means the modern cultural movement replacing Classicism, and 'the Romantic' (*Romantik*), which is used to indicate the character of all European literature since arrival of Christianity, and more specifically the chivalric literatures of the Middle Ages. By applying these terms in this manner, Grímur shows himself to be very well acquainted with the latest philosophical developments in Europe.<sup>3</sup> On the historical stage of European literature, this 'Romantic spirit' – which was, according to Madame de Staël, expressed in phenomena like Germanic chivalry, Christian mysticism, and contemporary German Romanticism<sup>4</sup> – was opposed by the classical spirit of pre-Christian, Roman and Greek culture. This division between a Romantic/Christian and a pagan/classical literature – which became fiercely normative in the cultural dialectics of Hegel – would later become one of the key-problems in Grímur's writings on Old Norse literature.

The second, more revealing introduction into Grímur's world-view is provided by his dissertation on Lord Byron, with which he completed his studies and which would later earn him his doctoral title and a grant to travel through Europe.<sup>5</sup> Grímur is credited with being one of the earliest exponents of 'Byronism' in the Nordic world,<sup>6</sup> and with introducing the warrior-poet's work to the Danish audience. Grímur's pioneering interpretation of Byron's work bears all the marks of Hegelianism, which is most obviously observed in his application of the German philosopher's historical categories of the Romantic, the Classical, and the Symbolic.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Grímur closely follows Hegel's division of this first category into three consecutive stages, the third one of which is identified with the 'independence of the individual character' (*Die Selbstständigkeit des individuellen Charakters*) which Hegel

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<sup>1</sup> They were probably all written in 1846, albeit in draft. The article in *The North British Review*, to which I will refer later on, is composed of the contents of several of these four articles.

<sup>2</sup> This essay, entitled *Om den nyfranske poesi* ('On modern French poetry') was published two years later by the Wahlske Boghandlings Forlag in Copenhagen (1843).

<sup>3</sup> Compare this definition to that of the term 'la poésie romantique' as applied by Madame de Staël in her influential *De l'Allemagne* (1810). Both concepts of romantic poetry can be traced back to the philosophy of August Wilhelm Schlegel. The antithesis of 'le classicisme' versus 'le romanicisme' was first introduced by Stendhal in his *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823). For a more thorough analysis of Grímur's essay on French poetry, see especially Jónsson (2004) pp.45-136.

<sup>4</sup> See Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (1810).

<sup>5</sup> The dissertation *Om Lord Byron* ('On Lord Byron') was published in book form by A.F. Host in Copenhagen, in 1845.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Beck, "Grímur Thomsen og Byron" in *Skírnir* 111 (1937) pp.129-43; 129.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel introduces these terms in his influential *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, compiled and published by his student Heinrich Gustav Hotho in 1835.

observed mainly in the great characters of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>1</sup> When dealing with this aspect of Hegel's philosophy, Grímur turns to Old Norse literature for the first time, and remarks that self-aware and independent individuals matching Hegel's description can already be discerned in the ancient sagas, where proud protagonists do not lay their fates in the hands of external powers but rather put their trust in 'their own strength'.<sup>2</sup> Although this equation of 'Romantic' and 'Nordic' – which is highly problematic in classical Hegelian terms – is not further elaborated in this early work of Grímur, it would become a central theme in his later essays.

The philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had acquired a strong foothold at the university of Copenhagen during Denmark's 'golden age', and was most actively promoted by the poet and literary critic Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860). Heiberg became known for his witty and often antagonistic outbursts against the sentimentalist excesses of contemporary Romanticism, although he also delivered a series of lectures in Kiel on the similarities between the poetry of Oehlenschläger and eddic mythology.<sup>3</sup> In his philosophical writings, he sought to reconcile Christianity with Hegelian thought, for instance by linking Hegel's concept of 'spirit' (*Geist*) to Christian conceptions of God. Heiberg's position in cultural and political matters can be characterised as conservative, and he was often at loggerheads with the more radical elements in Danish intellectual society, like the younger literary critic Georg Brandes.<sup>4</sup> Heiberg's political loyalties lay with the aristocratic elite and with absolutism, the repressive agenda of which he supported, arousing the repulsion of H.C. Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard among others. Hegel, too, had considered his own absolutist Prussian state as the ideal apotheosis of history's dialectical evolution towards perfection. But after Hegel's death in 1831, a new idealistic group of Hegelian thinkers – known as the 'Young' or 'Left' Hegelians – emerged in Germany and turned against the conservatism inherent in 'traditional' Hegelianism. In the view of this new generation – represented by the controversial Jesus-biographer David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and also Karl Marx and Karl Schmidt – the 'perfect state' had not yet been realised, and revolutionary action against the repressive, clerical and anti-democratic spirit of the post-Napoleonic age were called for. In Copenhagen, Grímur Thomsen's leanings towards this liberal left-wing brand of Hegelianism brought him at odds with Heiberg, whose conservative views he countered in reaction to his publications on the role of philosophy in society.<sup>5</sup> Grímur further allied himself with this progressive movement by eulogising other Nordic 'social activists' like the Swedish-Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877), among others.

Grímur's critical stance apropos 'classical' or dogmatic Hegelianism also reverberated in his four essays on Old Norse-Icelandic culture. The first one of these, entitled *Om Islands Stilling i det øvrige Skandinavien, fornemmelig i literær Henseende* ('On Iceland's position in Scandinavia, primarily concerning literature') started out as a lecture for the *Skandinavisk Selskab* ('Scandinavian Society') delivered in January 1846, and was published in Copenhagen that same year.<sup>6</sup> A sequel to this first essay appeared in several

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2007) p.182.

<sup>2</sup> Thomsen (1845) pp.24-5. The reference is to the Old Norse formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* ('believing in their own strength and power'), used to describe people who did not partake in the practice of *blót* (sacrifice) for the gods.

<sup>3</sup> These lectures were published in German in 1827, under the title *Nordische Mythologie. Aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen*. See also Chapter 3.2.2.

<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough analysis of Heiberg's philosophy and of Hegelianism in 'golden age' Denmark, see Stewart (2007).

<sup>5</sup> See Jónsson (2012) p.166.

<sup>6</sup> Grímur Thomsen, *Om Islands Stilling i det øvrige Skandinavien, fornemmelig i literær Henseende. Et Foredrag, holdt i det Skandinaviske Selskab, den 9de Januar 1846* (Copenhagen 1846).

parts in the journal *Nordisk Literatur-Tidende*,<sup>1</sup> and, also that same year, the third essay, *Et Bidrag til den gamle nordiske Poesies Charakteristik* ('A contribution on the character of Old Norse literature') was printed in the *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*.<sup>2</sup> The fourth and last contribution in this series appeared eleven years later in the *Nordisk Universitets-Tidskrift* under the title *Nogle Bemærkninger om den gamle nordiske Poesie* ('Some remarks on the Old Norse poetry').<sup>3</sup> Since Grímur's views on Nordic literature did not only concern Icelanders and Danes, he had his 1846 contribution to the *Nordisk Literatur-Tidende* translated into Swedish and published in the journal *Frey* (1848), and many years later, he translated two of his essays into English himself in order to publish them, anonymously, in the Scottish *North British Review* (1867).<sup>4</sup> Throughout these works, Grímur attempts to reconcile his own positive interpretation of Old Norse literature with Hegel's theories on aesthetics and history, which were rather less flattering in this respect. According to Hegel, the development of human culture could be divided chronologically into a primitive, 'symbolic' phase – to which the Sanskrit and Persian literatures were also counted –, a second 'pagan' and 'classical' phase, and thirdly, the aforementioned Western/Christian 'romantic' phase. From this – very normative – schematic rendering of cultural history, it followed that 'romantic', 'Christian' literature was the most noble of the three categories, and that 'pagan literature' automatically belonged to either one of the first two categories and could not possibly be considered 'romantic'. This rigid method of classification left very little room for exceptions or positive interpretations of medieval texts based on *pre-Christian* mythology, like the Eddas. In fact, Hegel was quite articulate about his views on Old Norse mythology:

Den hohlen Aufspreizungen aber, den natursymbolischen Grundlagen, die doch wieder in partikulär menschlicher Gestalt und Physiognomie zur Darstellung kommen, dem Thor mit seinem Hammer, dem Fenriswolf, dem entsätzlichen Metsaufen, überhaupt der Wildheit und trüben Verworrenheit dieser Mythologie hab ich keinen Geschmack abgewinnen können.<sup>5</sup>

So little did Hegel value the Old Norse myths, that he classified them as belonging to the most primitive, 'symbolic' class of human literature. Consequently, he accused his German contemporaries, involved in the Romantic celebration and appropriation of everything pagan and Nordic, of bad taste, and of misjudging the "Sinn und Geist unserer eigenen Gegenwart".<sup>6</sup>

In Grímur's view, a reorientation on the Old Norse sources was by no means a misjudgment of the present, or a foolish return to a barbaric and primitive past. A true Hegelian, he countered Hegel's arguments by applying Hegel's own aesthetic categories and idiom against him. Old Norse mythology, as expressed in the Eddas, belonged – just like most literature produced in the 'Christian' Middle Ages – in the most elevated of Hegel's three historical categories, being the romantic one. By making this claim, Grímur did not dispute the pagan contents of the Eddas; rather, he renounced Hegel's teaching of the mutual

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<sup>1</sup> Grímur Thomsen, "Den islandse Literaturs Charakteristik", in *Nordisk Literatur-Tidende* 1 (1846) issues 22-23 and 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> Grímur Thomsen, "Et Bidrag til den gamle nordiske Poesies Charakteristik", in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1846) pp.96-115.

<sup>3</sup> Grímur Thomsen, "Nogle Bemærkninger om den gamle nordiske Poesie", in *Nordisk Universitets-Tidskrift* 3 (1857) pp.1-54.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, these essays did not appear in Icelandic until 1975, when Andrés Björnsson translated and collected them in his *Grímur Thomsen. Íslenzkar bókmenntir og heimsskoðun* (Reykjavík 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (Berlin 1835), included in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe durch einen Verein von Freunden des Verewigten* (Berlin 1843) volume ten, p.407.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

exclusivity of ‘pagan’ and ‘romantic’, and instead proposed another, symbiotic category – applicable to Old Norse literature – which could be described as the ‘pagan romantic’.<sup>1</sup> Rather than representing the final convulsions of an earlier and superseded primitivism, the Old Norse texts and the culture they represented should be considered the very cradle of that romantic spirit in which Western literature reached its point of perfection. In this emancipatory discourse, Grímur remained loyal to Hegel’s categorisation, while simultaneously turning the tables in favour of his ancestral, Icelandic culture. By turning Hegel’s philosophical system *against* Hegel’s ideas on Old Norse culture – in order to emancipate ‘his own’ marginalised heritage – this line of argumentation can be interpreted in the light of Homi Bhabha’s concept of *mimicry*: a system formulating cultural dominance is mimicked by a representative of the dominated group, and used as an instrument of emancipation instead.<sup>2</sup> Not *all* aspects of medieval courtly culture and chivalry, which – according to Hegel – were quintessentially Christian/romantic phenomena, could be attributed to the arrival of Christianity, he argued. In the pre-Christian North, Grímur argued, the very un-Christian duty to repay any harm inflicted upon you or your relatives with equal coin, contributed to the evolution of a very self-less sense of honour, which would become one of the hallmarks of medieval courtly culture.<sup>3</sup> Also, women – who would become the sacralised expressions of purity and the objects of noble and platonic desire in courtly poetry – already enjoyed an elevated position and great freedom and equality in pre-Christian Nordic society, while they were still suppressed and considered inferior in most other cultures, including Greece.<sup>4</sup>

From comparisons like these, it becomes clear that Grímur wanted to move beyond a mere rehabilitation or emancipation of Nordic culture; not unlike Grundtvig, he wanted to make a case for the cultural *superiority* of the North vis-à-vis the classical South (see Chapter 3.2.3). Grímur shared – to a certain extent – Byron’s passion for Greek culture, and he translated a great number of classical Greek poems into Icelandic<sup>5</sup>, adhering to the Neohumanistic ideals of Sveinbjörn Egilsson (see Chapter 4.2.1). However, in his theoretical writings, Grímur develops a rather less positive image of this so-called cradle of Western civilisation; the protagonists of ancient Greek literature – and the people of the South in general – possess less depth of character, and lack the strong will power which characterises the protagonists of the sagas. To use the modern term, the characters of Greek literature are ‘flat characters’ – their deeper, emotional stirrings are immediately expressed in their external behaviour and actions – whereas the protagonists of Old Norse literature possess what Grímur refers to as the ‘pathos of tranquillity’ (*Rolighedens Pathos*); the Nordic man is largely an enigma to others, in which profound emotional developments occur below the surface and can take years to unfold. Revenge, that red thread running through all of saga literature, is hardly ever direct and predictable, but almost always calculated and ‘surprising’ when it materialises, often many years after the avenged incident occurred. It was this complexity of character which Grímur found lacking in the more straight-forward stories of the Greek world.<sup>6</sup>

The explanations Grímur offers for this division between the characters of North and South stem from different fields of thought, including popular climatic theories revolving around the ‘hardened man of the North’ and based on the ideas of Montesquieu. Grímur was

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2007) p.181.

<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Grímur discerned a similar highly developed code of honour in Islamic culture. See Thomsen (1846c) pp.107-10.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.102.

<sup>5</sup> Thomsen, *Ljóðmæli: Nýtt og gamalt* (Reykjavík 1969 [1934]) pp.281-313.

<sup>6</sup> Idem., p.104.



a great admirer of Bjarni Thorarensen, and greatly regretted the fact that Jónas Hallgrímsson had exceeded him in popularity.<sup>1</sup> It is most likely that Grímur was inspired by Bjarni's climate-based polarisation of North and South in the formulation of his own theory of Nordic supremacy (see Chapter 4.1). But what is more important in the context of the present study, is the significance Grímur attributes to differences in *religious world-view* between Hellas and Scandinavia; the Æsir of Old Norse religion were more human and therefore weaker and less reliable than the Olympian gods, as a result of which the Nordic peoples did not rely on their interference or any other form of external destiny-shaping force but rather on their own strength and abilities.<sup>2</sup> It was this belligerent mentality – the trade-mark of all heroes of Old Norse legend – which gave them the inner strength to face the hardest living conditions imaginable, instead of lamenting a fate bestowed upon them by some supernatural creature.<sup>3</sup> The mortal gods of the eddic poems are all aware of their imminent demise during *Ragnarök*, and they know in advance that their battle against the giants will be in vain. Yet, this knowledge does not render them cynical or inert. They continue their struggles against all odds, and live their lives with a certain dignified, tragic fatalism, which was also a key-feature of Old Norse culture in general.<sup>4</sup> In this tragic fate, both the humorous and the Sublime can be discerned:

But what is humor, if not Ragnarök's swallowing up of the gods, themselves knowing that they are no true gods, and in the midst of their daily strife and toil aware of their decay? And what is sublime, if not the assurance that this evening twilight of the gods, which threatens them with the gloom of a northern winter night, while the storm howls in the branches of the world's tree, and the serpent gnaws at its root, - is to make way for a better world and one almighty All-father?<sup>5</sup>

Without outlining exactly whether the 'Nordic spirit', hard and fatalistic enough to face extreme living conditions, had been hardened by this religious discourse, or whether this discourse was the product – a spiritual survival kit – of an already hardened Nordic spirit, the organic link between national spirit, religious world-view and environmental conditions, and their mutual effect on each other in an ongoing cycle of interaction, is firmly established in these passages. By explaining Nordic character through the ancestral conception of the gods, Grímur interprets the religion of the Æsir (*Ásatrú*) as a positive and creative historical force, to which modern Scandinavians owe their identity and which sets their culture apart from the rest of Europe. For Grímur, who was in the first place a scholar of *modern* literature, this historical force was by no means just a thing of the past. In his address to the *Skandinavisk Selskab* he urged his listeners to return to the ancient sources of their Scandinavian literatures in order for them to become truer to their own original and unique spirit – that is: more *national*. Even the Icelandic writers of the modern age had wandered away from the heroic stoicism of their ancestors, and had been inflicted by what Grímur referred to as the 'new-German illness' (*nytydske Sygeleghed*), one of the symptoms of which was a tendency

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<sup>1</sup> Grímur quite bluntly maintained that Bjarni Thorarensen was a poet, whereas Jónas Hallgrímsson was not. See Gröndal (2014) p.126.

<sup>2</sup> Compare these views on the formative effect of the pagan world-view on national character to those of Mallet and Tómas Bartholín the younger, outlined in Chapter 2.2.2.

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1846b) p.181. Compare Gunnlaugsson (2007) p.184.

<sup>4</sup> It is on the basis of this argument that Grímur concluded that the *Ragnarök*-theme could not possibly be a later import from Christianity, but had to be indigenous. See Gunnlaugsson (2007) p.189.

<sup>5</sup> Thomsen, "On the Character of the Old Northern Poetry", in *The North British Review* xlvi (March-June 1867) p.63, quoted in Egilsson (2008) p.108.

towards pathetic self-pity.<sup>1</sup> Just like Finnur Magnússon before him, Grímur considered the eddic poems a benchmark of Nordic authenticity.

This positive re-evaluation of pre-Christian religion did, however, not entail a renunciation of Christianity *an sich* or the Hegelian ‘romantic culture’ it engendered in the West. The individualism and stoic character of Old Norse religion set it apart from other, ‘symbolic/primitive’ pre-Christian religions, but not so much from Christianity. Already in his dissertation on Lord Byron, Grímur argues that the Nordic spirit underlying the characters from the sagas was essentially the same as the one underlying Shakespeare’s most popular and individualistic protagonists, and that, consequently, both Shakespeare and the Protestant culture in which he lived must be considered quintessentially *Nordic*.<sup>2</sup> Hegel could be blamed for situating the origin of the strong-willed and subjective ‘third-phase’ romantic character in the works of Shakespeare, and for consequently fully ignoring the mighty shoulders of the ancient North on which the British master was towering:

No, the Nordic spirit, which existed before the arrival of Christianity, and Nordic poetry, which belongs to this spirit, is more than merely of antiquarian interest; it’s presence can even be demonstrated in Christian times, and it even resonates in the best products of Romantic poetry. Therefore, it cannot be skipped in the philosophy of poetry, and even less in its history.<sup>3</sup>

Much of what Hegel valued in romantic/Christian culture had actually been prefigured in pre-Christian Scandinavia – an argument echoing older conceptions of a noble, pagan proto-Protestantism<sup>4</sup> – and the spirits of the two cultures were, in Grímur’s mind, far from incompatible. Like Grundtvig, he believed that Old Norse religion mystically anticipated the coming of a “better world and one almighty All-father”:

At all events it must be admitted that the finest, the most poetical feature of the creed of Odin, is the very circumstance, that it is weighed down by a mystery involving the victory of Christianity. What did Odin whisper in the ear of Baldur on the funeral pile? This was the great question nobody could answer in the heathen times, except Odin himself, and he never told it to any one, - a question in its way co-ordinate with the myth of the Ragnarökkr.<sup>5</sup>

When comparing the great classics of Christian religious literature to the profoundest of the eddic poems, the kinship between Christian and Nordic spirit became clearly visible. In the poem *Sólarljóð* (ca. 1200-1250; see Chapter 3.4.3), which at this time was still often considered an integral part of the eddic corpus, Grímur discerned the same *topoi* as those employed in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*.<sup>6</sup> The visionary poem, which Grímur admits was clearly written by a Christian writer – the Old Norse gods do appear but have surrendered all their religious significance to the new faith – draws heavily on themes from medieval continental literature, but is nevertheless conceived in the spirit of earlier, *pagan* visionary poems, and conveys the world-view of the *Hávamál*. Like Dante in his *Divina Commedia*, the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomsen (1846b) p.203.

<sup>2</sup> Thomsen (1845) p.23-4.

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1846c) p.98 ; “Nei, den nordiske Aand, som var för Christendommens Indførelse, den nordiske Poesi, som tilhører denne Aand, har mere end en blot antiquarisk Interesse; den kan endnu paavises i den christelige Tid, den klinger endnu efter i den romantiske Poesies bedste Frembringer, derfor tør den ikke forbigaaes i Poesiens Philosophi, endnu mindre i dens Historie.”

<sup>4</sup> The idea of a natural and indigenous proto-Protestantism was propagated by Gottfried Schütze in the eighteenth century. See Chapter 8.1.1.

<sup>5</sup> Thomsen (1867) p.63. For the story of Baldr’s cremation, at which Óðinn whispered secret words in his ear, see Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning*.

<sup>6</sup> Thomsen (1846c) pp.98-100.

Christian protagonist of *Sólarljóð* is transported through different realms of existence – from the underworld to heaven – and presents the reader with a detailed layout of the different shapes of afterlife. The fact that this very Christian, Dantean theme of the spirit’s long journey to heaven can co-exist peacefully with the pagan spirit of eddic poetry in one and the same poem, was interpreted by Grímur as proof for his thesis of the compatibility of Christian and Nordic spirit, and consequently also as proof for the noble qualities of the latter one. In Grímur’s view, the Nordic spirit – as expressed in the eddic poems – was one and indivisible; a common denominator uniting all the descendants of the Old Norse ancestors, spread out over Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. In his opinion, the Icelanders could not claim to be the sole inheritors of Old Norse culture, simply because the Edda’s had been written on Iceland; all the Scandinavians had originally– in pre-Christian times – been united in one monolithic, oral cultural and faith-community, held together by that – still unwritten but nevertheless – “ancient holy *book* of the Nordic lands, the *Quran* of the Scandinavians”<sup>1</sup>: the Edda.

### 6.1.3 Cultural Politics

Referring to the Edda as an Old Norse equivalent of the Quran has far-reaching ideological consequences, and reveals more about Grímur’s views on contemporary politics and culture than about the actual status of eddic narrative in pre-Christian Scandinavian society.<sup>2</sup> In this idealised presentation of the ancient North, the ethnic unity of Norwegians, Swedes, Danes and Icelanders had not yet been fractured by mutually antagonising political developments and the gradual estrangement between the languages which had all descended from Old Norse. By comparing the Edda to the Quran, implicitly, the religious community united around it – the Nordic peoples – is equated with the *Ummah*; the worldwide community of Muslims scattered out over many countries and continents, but nevertheless united by their holy book, the holy language in which it was conceived (Arabic), and the religious culture which evolved around it. The old religion of Scandinavia, entrusted to *vellum* after many centuries of oral transmission, had been just as monolithic as Islam in Grímur’s eyes, and its adherents throughout the Nordic world were, like a pagan *Ummah*, tied together through strong bonds of religious, cultural, and linguistic kinship. This argument should be interpreted as an attempt to cultivate supra-national *association* (function four, as outlined in Chapter 1.1) on mythological grounds.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond all the limitations of national boundaries and dynastic struggles, this initial Nordic unity was still as relevant today as it was back then, and could be restored to full glory if Scandinavian politicians and artists would join forces and regard the Nordic *Ummah* of antiquity as a blueprint for political action towards a new and united Scandinavia. The ideological instrumentalisation of the Edda as a ‘common’ and hence ‘uniting’ heritage in Scandinavia – an idea used to level the limitations of national demarcations, both culturally and politically – would prove to have long echoes in Scandinavian culture.<sup>4</sup> So intertwined were nationality, eddic mythology and language in Grímur’s mind, that when asked by a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomsen (1846a) p.22; “... det gamle Nordens hellige Bog, Skandinavernes Koran, ...” Italics added.

<sup>2</sup> For a very concise discussion on the contested ‘paganness’ of the Edda’s, see Chapter 2.1.

<sup>3</sup> Grímur Thomsen was not the first Icelander to compare Old Norse paganism to Islam; already in medieval sources, noble pagans who refused to convert to Christianity were likened to brave Muslims, defending their faith against the crusaders. See Jakobsson (2012), and Chapter 8.1.1. Both Islam and paganism could be conceived as non-Christian, alternative sources of religious virtue, devotion and bravery.

<sup>4</sup> For a modern example of this, see for instance the opening quote in the Introduction to this study, taken from Vigdís Finnbogadóttir’s address to an assembly of Nordic scholars (2007). In 1913, the *Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning* (‘Nordic journal for literary research’) changed its name to *Edda*, thus transcending the linguistic boundaries separating the contributing countries, and evoking a sense of primordial, literary unity.

foreigner what the language spoken on Iceland was called, he replied that his language was called “Icelandic, the ancient Nordic language of the eddic poems”.<sup>1</sup> Grímur had clearly adopted the very common and old Icelandic idea that the Old Norse language, the ‘Latin of the North’, had remained pure *only* on Iceland, while the other Scandinavian countries had squandered their linguistic heritage and contaminated it through their contacts with other languages.<sup>2</sup> The purity and unicity of the Icelandic language had been recognised and used as an instrument of cultural self-contrastation – vis-à-vis ‘less pure’ others (centrifugal discourse) – since the Middle Ages (see Chapter 1.2.2). Grímur subscribed to this discourse of linguistic purity, but – rather than using this as an argument in favour of national differentiation and self-determination, as was usually the case in nationalistic discourses – he used it to achieve the exact *opposite* of this; to lead his Scandinavian brethren back to their common source and to *reconnect* them to their lost heritage (centripetal discourse).

The ideal of far-reaching, Nordic cooperation and political and cultural integration (pan-Scandinavianism) which had been in vogue since the Napoleonic wars (see Chapter 3.2.4) was still of great relevance by the time Grímur began to argue in favour of Nordic unity in the 1840s, and considered a liberal threat in the conservative, absolutist kingdom. After the dissolution of the Dano-Norwegian union in 1814, the process of redefining what it meant to be Norwegian, Swedish or Danish dovetailed with utopian ideals of a democratic, constitutional and unified – or at least more integrated – Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup> In Denmark, one of the ideology’s strongest proponents was the philologist and historian Niels Matthias Petersen (1791-1862), who would in 1845 become the first professor of Scandinavian studies at the University of Copenhagen. Petersen – who had been a good friend of Rasmus Rask since childhood – was inspired by the processes of national unification taking place in Germany, and envisioned a similar development towards national unity – in the shape of what could best be described as a ‘federal republic’ – for Scandinavia. In his endeavour to create a cultural and linguistic common ground for this new – but also very ancient – national identity, Petersen turned to the Old Norse sources. Like the Grimm brothers had assembled a new, standardised German language from all the German dialects they had studied, so Petersen argued in favour of constructing a new, pan-Scandinavian language, based on the Old Norse language from which all the modern Nordic languages – or ‘dialects’ – stemmed.<sup>4</sup> Also, the cultivation of eddic myth played an important role in his cultural-political agenda:

What a poor language this is, our dear native language, and how lost we are for words when it comes to talking about things with some spirit in them! Everywhere we have allowed the foreign to displace our own; that is our sin. Nordic mythology! what a connection! Nordic to

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<sup>1</sup> See “Hvaða mál talar skrállinn?”, in *Morgunblaðið* (20 June 1991) p.38; “... íslenska, hin gamla norræna tunga Eddukvæðanna.” This apogryphical anecdote was first recorded in the periodical *Sunnanfari* 2:11 (1893) p.98, and does – true or not – render an accurate impression of Grímur’s ideas on the role of Iceland and the Icelandic language in this bigger, Nordic unity.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Jensson (2003) and Wahl (2008).

<sup>3</sup> During the Dano-Prussian wars over Slesvig and Holstein, the hoped-for Scandinavian fraternisation in the face of a non-Nordic enemy failed to materialise, and left Pan-Scandinavists everywhere disillusioned. Although remnants of the movement would persevere, the ideology lost its momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the development of distinct Danish and Norwegian national identities before and after 1814, see Rasmus Glenthøj, *Skilsmissen. Dansk og Norsk identitet før og efter 1814* (Odense 2012). On the history of the Pan-Scandinavian ideal, see especially Kim Simonsen, “Scandinavism”, in Joep Leerssen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (electronic version; Amsterdam: Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, www.romanticnationalism.net), last changed 5 August 2016, last consulted: 13 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Petersen’s philology and political ideas, see especially the recent anthology *Filologen N.M. Petersen. Grundlægger og fornyer* (Copenhagen 2014), edited by Frans Gregersen and Anne Mette Hansen.

the forefront and Greek to the back. Would it not be better if we said: Boreal mythology, for a Danish term is hard to find.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of eddic mythology as a connecting force in contemporary Nordic culture and politics was one that Grímur and Petersen had in common, and one which was unpopular in certain Icelandic circles where the Eddas were considered Iceland's unique and very *Icelandic* national heritage (see Chapter 6.3.2).

As outlined in the theoretical introduction to this study, every collective identity 'under construction' is in need of a *significant other*: a foreign threat or rival against which the national self can be silhouetted (see Chapter 1.2.1). This also applied to Grímur's united Scandinavia, and – like Grundtvig and Petersen – he identified Scandinavia's Germanic (but not Nordic!) neighbour to the south as its 'significant other', both in cultural and in political terms. The German lands had evolved into a major cultural force in Europe from the late 1700s onwards, and one of them, Prussia, had become a serious political threat to Denmark's political sovereignty as well. Furthermore, German intellectuals – the same ones accused by Hegel of 'misjudging the spirit of their times' – had started fashioning themselves as 'Nordic', and had initiated the process of appropriating Scandinavian culture for their own national agendas. In reaction to these German developments, Grímur's demarcation of the Nordic world was of a very anti-German nature; not only could Germany *not* be considered Nordic on linguistic grounds, its aggressive claims on Slesvig and Holstein in southern Denmark rendered them the outright *enemies* of Scandinavia. In his function as diplomat, operating on behalf of the Danish government, Grímur was actively involved in securing Denmark's position in the Slesvig-matter, and, while in London, copied documents dating from 1720, when both the English and the French crown guaranteed to support Denmark if ever its claim on Slesvig would be contested.<sup>2</sup> This political threat went hand in hand with its cultural equivalent, the aforementioned 'German illness' in contemporary literature, to which too many Nordic writers – including Icelanders – had already fallen victim.

The best cure against this cultural decline was a renewed orientation on the Old Norse corpus, which had nothing in common with the pathetic self-pity of German literature. However, even when turning to the Edda's, one had to remain careful; of the two branches of eddic poetry – the *mythological* and the *heroic* one – the first category was to be favoured over the latter, since many of the heroic lays were of Germanic ('German') origin and consequently more 'anti-democratic' than the mythological poems. This anachronistic claim can be interpreted as a very firm statement – strangely resembling the thesis of a German *Sonderweg*, as developed in the twentieth century – about the 'German spirit', namely that it had *always* been, and would *always* be dictatorial and anti-democratic in nature, and hence incompatible with the democratic and 'free' spirit of the North.<sup>3</sup> In his anti-German rhetoric, Grímur's threatened Nordic union had much in common with Grundtvig's 'holy alliance of Denmark and Iceland', united against the 'fierce attacks' from a Teutonic 'Rome' (see Chapter 3.2.3). Furthermore, by linking modern Romanticism to Hegel's category of 'the romantic' – to which, according to Grímur, Old Norse culture undoubtedly belonged – being a 'Romantic poet' *and* an opponent of German cultural hegemony ('the German illness') at

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<sup>1</sup> Niels Matthias Petersen, *Nordisk mytologi: forelæsninger* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Copenhagen 1863) p.1; "Hvad det er for et fattigst sprog, vort kære modersmål, og hvor forlegne vi ere for ord, når der skal tales om noget, som der er en smule gejst i! Overalt have vi ladet det fremmede fortrænge vort eget; det er vor skødesynd. Nordisk mytologi! hvilken forbindelse! fortil nordisk og bagtil græsk. Var det ikke bedre om vi sagde: borealsk mytologi, thi et dansk udtryk er næppe at få."

<sup>2</sup> In 1848, Grímur published these documents under the title *Om de Fransk-Engelske Garantier for Slesvig 1720. Eftir Original-Correspondencen i det brittiske Udenrigsministeriums Arkiv* (Copenhagen 1848).

<sup>3</sup> On the idea of the North as the birthplace of parliamentary democracy, see Chapter 7.2.3.

the same time, was not at all a problem; since the Nordic spirit, still resonating ‘in the best products of Romantic poetry’, was intrinsically ‘romantic’ – in the Hegelian sense –, modern Romanticism could be considered a movement true to Nordic national identity and native to Scandinavia. In this modified Hegelian discourse, Romanticism – which, in its first phase in Denmark<sup>1</sup>, was very heavily influenced by German philosophy and culture – could be indigenised and labelled as ‘Nordic’.

As mentioned earlier, Grímur’s position in Iceland’s discourse on national identity was a problematic one; generally speaking, the national ideal was to gain a larger degree of *independence* from Denmark, not to *surrender* national autonomy for the sake of some Scandinavian super-state. Grímur, who was rumoured to have lost touch with his own native language after all those years abroad, was accused of being un-patriotic and un-Icelandic, and too engaged with foreign ideals. When he published a rather negative article about the funeral of Jón Sigurðsson – the very personification of the Icelandic nation himself – in 1879, Grímur came close to antagonising the entire nation.<sup>2</sup> Still, even though he was at odds with most Icelandic nationalists of his time, it would be quite wrong to conclude from this that Grímur himself was *not* a nationalist. In his pan-Scandinavian discourse, Iceland played a very special role, as the conservator and protector of Scandinavia’s original Old Norse culture. It was Iceland that Scandinavia had remained truest to herself. Although, etiologically, the Edda – in its oral form – originated in the Scandinavian heartland long before the first settlers set foot on Iceland in the ninth century, it would have been utterly unknown to us today if it would not have been for Iceland’s unique history and intellectual culture, in which the ancient stories found their final expression in written form. In his *Om Islands Stilling i det øvrige Skandinavien*, Grímur elaborates on this special position of Iceland in the larger Nordic framework, and quotes a medieval Norwegian who wrote that most of the law texts used in Norway up to his own day had actually been written on Iceland.<sup>3</sup> Already in Middle Ages, Iceland had become the cultural, religious and legal memory of the ancient North: a reservoir of knowledge which all the Nordic peoples depended on and which, in the modern age, could play a key-role in the cultural awakening of Scandinavia. If one were to schematise the multiple layers of Grímur’s identity, this could best be achieved by using a set of concentric circles, in which the national-Icelandic identity is shaped and upgraded due to the prestige of Iceland – the last refuge of Old Norse culture – *within* the encompassing framework of Nordic identity.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what his critics may have claimed, Grímur’s belief in a monolithic Nordic spirit did not automatically exclude the idea of Icelandic exclusivity or superiority; in his own – very Hegelian – explanation, Iceland should be considered “one of the individuations of the Scandinavian idea”, or “one of the substantial differentiations of the spiritual Nordic unity”.<sup>5</sup> In these definitions, national and Nordic identity are fused and become part of one and the same logical identity construction. Rather than betraying the ‘national cause’ by identifying with Pan-Scandinavism, Grímur felt that these two layers of identity complemented and strengthened each other; his version of

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<sup>1</sup> After this initial ‘German phase’ in Danish Romanticism, French and English (Byron) influences would gain more importance.

<sup>2</sup> Páll Valsson, “Tími Þjóðskaldanna”, in Halldór Guðundsson (ed.), *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* vol.3 (Reykjavík 1996) pp.341-405; 350.

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1846a) p.22.

<sup>4</sup> The need to encapsulate national discourses, or discourses on national heritage in a larger framework in order to endow it with a higher level of prestige is a phenomenon I have already pointed out in the writings of Snorri Sturluson (the ‘Trojan framework’) and Finnur Magnússon (the ‘Indo-European’ and ‘scientific frameworks’), and which will be revisited in the following chapters of this study as well.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p.3; “... een af den skandinaviske Idees Individuationer [...] een af den aandelige nordiske Eenheds væsentlige Differentser”.

national identity was – like that of Finnur Magnússon (see Chapter 3.4.6) – profoundly multi-layered and multi-faceted.

In the same essay, Grímur calls upon all Nordic poets to turn to Old Norse-Icelandic culture for national inspiration, and to approach the Edda's and sagas not as antiquarian objects of interest but rather as blueprints for a new and revived Nordic literature. Many years later, he wrote two self-congratulatory essays in which he eulogised the poets Runeberg (Swedish-Finnish) and Andreas Munch (Norwegian; 1811-1884) respectively, not least because he considered their *oeuvres* to be the ultimate proof for the success of his 1846 appeal to all Scandinavians. This paradigmatic shift in Scandinavian culture, which he believed *he* had himself provoked through his address in Copenhagen, could be discerned in the works of artists in all the Nordic lands,<sup>1</sup> but – as so often – the Icelanders lagged behind. How did Grímur the Romantic *poet* contribute to the distribution of his cultural and political ideals in his own native Iceland?

#### 6.1.4 Paganism as a Historical Factor: Hákon Jarl

It was in the second half of his life that Grímur began to be acclaimed for his own Icelandic poetry, and in Iceland – where his philological works aroused little attention – he is remembered as a ‘national poet’, first and foremost. In the secondary literature covering his life and work, Grímur’s career is often divided into two consecutive and seemingly distinct parts; first, there was the ‘Danish’ Hegelian philosopher and philologist, and after that, there was the Icelandic poet, who had turned his back on Hegel and instead found inspiration in the proto-existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard. By emphasising this presumed faultline in Grímur’s biography, these two sides of Grímur’s character have become polarised, and it has been assumed that – since the ‘younger’ Hegelian scholar was certainly a Romantic – the poetry of his later years should maybe be considered as something slightly different or *beyond* Romanticism; his ‘turning away’ from Hegel and embracing Kierkegaard – a reflection of developments in Danish cultural life at that time – entailed the introduction of a more modern, almost ‘twentieth century’ literary style in his poetry:

There are certain things that are quite unexpected, as for example in the poem *Á Sprengisandi*, one of the most popular nineteenth century poems in Icelandic. Here man challenges the menacing forces of nature. While the style is Gothic, the lonely existentialist voice of the narrator is very modern and akin to literature associated with the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Grímur was indeed a ‘herald of new times’ and a tireless innovator. However, by interpreting the ‘lonely existentialist voice’ of the narrator primarily as a prefiguration of later, post-Romantic literary developments, the existentialist element in Romanticism itself – as, for instance, expressed in Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-8) – is at risk of being underestimated.<sup>3</sup> The solitary individual, locked in an existential struggle with the forces of nature, is in my opinion more akin to the stoic and taciturn ‘man of the North’ of Grímur’s other great Romantic hero, Bjarni Thorarensen. Also, Grímur’s shift from Hegel to Kierkegaard, from the belief in the agency of the *Zeitgeist* – in which the individual is but a mere pawn – to the solitary rebel, who is capable of actively opposing the

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<sup>1</sup> The Danish literary historian Vilhelm Andersen has claimed that that Grímur’s programmatic writings also influenced the creative work of Henrik Ibsen (*Hærmændene på Helgeland*) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (*Halte-Hulda*). See his *Illustreret dansk Litteraturhistorie* vol.3 (Copenhagen 1924) p.675.

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson (2012) p.415. Compare Jónsson (2004) p.244.

<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of this lyrical work, “a restless wanderer heroically seeking truth and insight beyond the common sphere of human society”, became – like his creator himself – a popular emblem of the Romantic movement and its ideals. See Leerssen (2014) p.9.

society and mentality of his age – as Kierkegaard did – has been overstressed, due to too monolithic and hence distorting a conception of Hegelianism. As mentioned earlier on, Grímur was a Hegelian liberal, who did not believe – like the more conservative school of Hegelians did – that the dialectical process of history had led mankind to the present, static, and final stage of development. Political activism was still of the essence, and bringing about the ‘next step’ in this teleological process was very much a task of strong-willed and solitary heroes – poets like Byron and Bjarni Thorarensen rather than politicians – who were no slaves of their *Zeitgeist* and could bring about change through their actions. I will not claim that Grímur’s poetry was not influenced by Kierkegaard’s existentialism, but I do not believe that the Hegelian paradigm was simply *replaced* by a Kierkegaardian one. On the contrary; through the poetic adaptation of Kierkegaard’s ‘modern voice’, the heroic, existentialist, and solitary element in Grímur’s liberal – and Romantic – Hegelianism became amplified. Consequently, the poetic and the scholarly side of Grímur’s creative career should not be considered separately, but rather as two sides of one and the same coin.

Grímur’s pre-occupation with the Nordic spirit can be traced throughout his *oeuvre*, and to a large extent determined his choice of themes and motifs. Apart from his own original poems – which appeared in two anthologies during his lifetime<sup>1</sup> – he also created acclaimed translations of foreign masterpieces, including ancient Greek and British poems. Very interesting are his Icelandic re-renderings of passages from the ‘ancient bardic’ songs of Ossian, which he considered equally Nordic in spirit as the *Völuspá* or *Hávamál*. By applying vocabulary and motifs from eddic poetry in these re-tellings, the essential one-ness of the Nordic genius – as expressed in the Eddas and in Ossian’s poetry – is emphasised.<sup>2</sup> One of these Ossian passages, giving an atmospheric description of the sun, received the title *Sólarljóð* – which suggests a link with the aforementioned eddic ‘Song of the Sun’ – and contains the very common metaphor of Ægir’s daughters, representing the waves of the sea.<sup>3</sup> By weaving these references to Old Norse mythology into the texture of the Ossianic poems, they could be indigenised and assimilated into the larger discourse of Nordic greatness.

Considering Grímur’s own original *oeuvre*, explicit references to eddic mythology are few; apart from the standardised formulaic metaphors – like Ægir’s daughters – scattered throughout the poems, only the poems *Ásareiðin* and *Hið nýja Ginnungagap* – to which I will return later on – truly qualify as mythological poems. However, restricting my analysis to these two poems would produce a very incomplete image of Grímur’s ideas on pre-Christian religion, as expressed in his poetry. In the context of his Nordic philosophy as outlined in the previous paragraphs, the religion of the Æsir is interpreted as a positive historical factor in its own right, simultaneously shaping, enhancing, and sprouting from the Nordic spirit. The clearest historical – or rather: legendary – examples of *Ásatrú*’s heroic character could be found in the accounts of those pagans who resisted the advent of Christianity and either refused to betray their old faith, or were baptised but remained pagans at heart. Grímur’s ideas on historical paganism, as practices and lived by these legendary characters, also found their way into his poetry, and – like Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson – I am convinced that it would be wrong to exclude this material from any assessment of Old Norse mythology in Romantic poetry.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ljóðmæli* (Reykjavík 1880) and *Ljóðmæli: Nýtt safn* (Copenhagen 1895). In this chapter, I will be referring to a more exhaustive anthology, *Ljóðmæli: Nýtt og gamalt*, edited by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík 1969 [1934]).

<sup>2</sup> For a further analysis of Grímur’s reception of Ossian, see Helgi Þorláksson, “Ossian, Jónas og Grímur”, in *Mímir* 8:1 (1969) pp.22-23. Compare also: Wawn (1994b).

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1969) pp.97-8.

<sup>4</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.110; “This poem [*Ásareiðin*] furthermore shows how difficult it is – and, indeed, questionable – to exclude the legendary from the mythological, when accounting for the Romantic re-writing of Old Norse myths and medieval sources. In Grímur Thomsen’s poem, mythological beings and legendary



The main historical/legendary example of the virtuous pagan in Grímur's poetry is Hákon jarl ('Earl Hákon'), also known as Hákon Sigurðsson (Norwegian: Håkon Sigurdsson; ca. 935-995), the proud earl of Hlaðir (Lade) and *de facto* ruler of Norway, whose rebellion against the advent of Christianity ended in his tragic and violent death. Hákon's zealous determination 'against all odds' – like that of the gods themselves – had been the object of Romantic admiration before, and was celebrated in Oehlenschläger's first great historical tragedy, *Hakon Jarls Død* (1803). In this play, the gods of old realise that their time is over when the mighty earl, the last staunch defender of the old faith, dies, and that the 'strong Light of Truth' (*det Staerke Sandheds Lys*) which their religion represented and which had 'shone from the North' for ages, would now come to an end (see Chapter 3.2.2). The historical event of Hákon's death is thus transformed into a cataclysmic event with cosmic repercussions; the gods, who had tied their fate to that of the earl, faced their doom or Ragnarök as a result of his death, and were to leave Scandinavia for good. In this instance, human history – or legend – flows over into myth, and becomes part of the story of the Æsir. It was this mythological dimension which endowed Hákon's death with significance even to modern readers, and which Grímur adopted from Oehlenschläger.

In the original Old Norse sources, which were written by medieval Christians, the jarl of Hlaðir did not receive a very positive treatment. As the evil protector of heathenism, he is portrayed sacrificing his seven-year-old son in return for help from a malicious troll in his fight against the famed *Jómsvíkingar* ('Jomsvikings'), and as an unjust and vengeful ruler.<sup>1</sup> As a final insult, the manuscripts tell of the disgraceful death of the warlord, at the hands of his own slave. Grímur knew these sources very well, but intended to paint a more sympathetic picture of Scandinavia's last great pagan warlord in order to underscore his positive interpretation of pre-Christian religion. In the first stanza of his poem *Hákon Jarl* (1895), the earl is depicted as the final upholder of the declining religion of the Æsir:

Shaking overtakes the bridge of Gjöll,<sup>2</sup>  
wide streams run underneath it,  
the gods have not yet completely departed  
but heavy are Óðinn's dreams;  
rapidly, the faith of the Æsir [*Ása trúin*] is fading,  
sacrifices of men have become few;  
only Hákon supports with force  
Yggdrasil, although the tree trembles.<sup>3</sup>

The essence of Hákon's heroism lay, according to Grímur, in the fact that Hákon went 'against the current of the age' (*gegn straumi aldar*), and was doomed to fall because he did not 'obey the call of his time' (*að hlýddi hann eigi tímans kalli*).<sup>4</sup> This verse clearly echoes some of the Hegelian assumptions underlying his philological essays, concerning the ongoing progress of an omnipresent *Zeitgeist* which was not to be ignored, misjudged – as Hegel accused the Germans chasing Nordic phantasies of doing – or countered by individuals. But, negative though Hegel's judgement of those disobeying the call of their time may have been, Grímur is outspokenly sympathetic towards Hákon's rebellion against the inevitable course

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characters all form one lengthy continuum, whether they are heathen gods, valkyries, heroes from the Poetic Edda or characters such as Earl Hákon."

<sup>1</sup> See especially the thirteenth century *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and the medieval narrative *Porleifs þáttur jarlaskálds*.

<sup>2</sup> *Gjallarbrú*, which bridges the river Gjöll in the netherworld.

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1969) pp.227-8; 227; Gnötra tekur Gjallar brúin,/gildir undir ríða straumar,/eigi eru goðin alveg flúin,/en Óðins eru þungir draumar;/óðum fynnist Ása trúin,/orðnar fórnir manna naumar;/Hákon einn með afli styður/Yggdrasil, þótt skjálfi viður.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, stanza four (p.228).

of events. That which the ancient sources interpreted as stubbornness or even pure evil, is refashioned as undiluted heroism; Hákon may not have been a saint, but neither did he deserve such a low death at the hands of his own slave (stanza five). With his fall, Yggdrasill came crashing down as well, and the religion of the Æsir (*Ása trúin*) came to an end.

The anachronistic neologism *Asatro* ('Faith of the Æsir') first appeared in Edvard Grieg's uncompleted opera *Olaf Trygvason*, composed in the 1870s and 80s. This work, in which the new term referred to the religion of King Olaf's pagan enemies, was not published until 1889. The Icelandic form *Ása trú*, or *Ásatrú* – variations of which are currently used by Neopagan groups around the world to designate their interpretations of Germanic Paganism<sup>1</sup> – was first mentioned almost *en passant* in an article by Gísli Brynjúlfsson, printed in the journal *Fjallkonan* (1885), dealing with the poetry and world-view ("the ancient ásatrú") of Egill Skallagrímsson.<sup>2</sup> This word proved a useful and more *positive* alternative to condescending terms like 'paganism' and 'heathenism', and was picked up by Grímur in an essay on the development of the world's religions, in which he discusses the influence of pre-Christian traditions on Christianity; not only Jewish, Egyptian and Indian influences, but also influences from "our own heathenism", namely the "Nordic and Germanic Ásatrú" – this time spelled with a capital *Á*, *nota bene*.<sup>3</sup> In *Hákon Jarl* the term is used to indicate the great and noble faith of Scandinavia, and also to emphasise its unity – *one* faith, rather than a collection of many different faiths – in which all the Nordic people were united, like a pagan Ummah. Jarl Hákon's defense of Ásatrú can therefore be considered a defense of Scandinavia's unity as well.<sup>4</sup> Ásatrú soon evolved into a common term, and was readily – and very anachronistically – applied by twentieth-century Icelandic historians when referring to Iceland's pagan past (see Chapter 7.2).

Grímur wrote two more poems about the great earl of Hlaðar, the most extensive and 'mythological' of which I will treat in the next paragraph. The poem *Jarlsníð* ('Earl's Fury'; 1895) thematises Hákon's supernatural powers – as described in a negative tone in the Old Norse sources – and engenders a very different image of the earl than the one in *Hákon Jarl*.<sup>5</sup> Rather than a pagan hero, Hákon is portrayed as an unjust ruler, who receives an Icelandic *skáld* – Þorleifr jarlaskáld, whose medieval story (*þáttur*) forms the poem's inspiration – at his court and is rendered unconscious as a result of the Icelander's insulting and magical poems. Only after the poet has left, the earl regains consciousness and realises that the furious skáld was in fact the same man whose valuables Hákon had unjustly confiscated and whose boat he had burned. Instead of using his supernatural powers to hunt down Þorleifr – as he does in the medieval story – the earl actually realises that he got what he deserved, and that poets were not to be fooled around with.<sup>6</sup> So, even in this poem, the final realisation – absent in the medieval original – places the pagan earl in a positive light, and demonstrates that even 'violent heathens' could be susceptible to reason.

By following Oehlenschläger in depicting a Norwegian earl as the very embodiment of the heathen spirit, Grímur clearly went beyond the limiting and nationalistic idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Strmiska (2000). Alternative spellings include *Asatru* and *Asatro*.

<sup>2</sup> Gísli Brynjúlfsson, "Tvær vísur eftir forn höfuðskáld", in *Fjallkonan* 2:1 (7 January 1885) pp.2-3, 3; "ásatrúin forna".

<sup>3</sup> Grímur Thomsen, "Framför trúarbragðanna", in *Fjallkonan* 4:22 (30 July 1887) pp.86-7; "... til heiðindóms sjálfra vor, í hinni norrænu og germönsku Ásatrú."

<sup>4</sup> Another example of the 'unifying power' of neologisms is the term 'Hinduism', which creates the suggestion of a single indigenous Indian religion – vis-à-vis Islam and Christianity respectively – whereas the term originally referred to a large diversity of wildly varying belief systems, practiced in a certain geographically defined space (India).

<sup>5</sup> Thomsen (1969) pp.200-3.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough analysis of this poem, see Egilsson (2008) pp.109-10, and – of Grímur's other poems on Hákon – Egilsson (1999) pp.131-7.

Eddas – containing that same heathen spirit – being exclusively Icelandic (see Chapter 6.3); the words of the Edda – which, according to Grímur, first entered this world not on medieval Icelandic parchment but, many centuries earlier, as sacred spoken words in the dense forests of the Scandinavian heartland – were just as relevant to inhabitants of the other Nordic countries as they were to the Icelanders. But, in order to express his admiration for a similar – although less heroic – *Icelandic* exponent of the old faith, Grímur turned to the Viking and *landnámsmaður* (‘settler’) Helgi *magri* (‘the slim’) Eyvindarson, who ‘took land’ in the north of Iceland and converted to Christianity in the ninth century. However, despite his renunciation of the old faith, the old sources tell us that Helgi’s embrace of the new faith was only half-hearted and that he still turned to Þórr whenever major decisions had to be made.<sup>1</sup> This double (dis)loyalty inspired Grímur to compose the short humoristic poem *Átrúnaður Helga magra* (‘Helgi the Slim’s Veneration’; 1895), which captures the ambivalence in Helgi’s religious world-view perfectly.<sup>2</sup> In the opening verse, Helgi claims to honour Christ and to hold him dear in times of peace and calmth. But the tide turns very quickly in the second verse, in which Helgi admits that he prefers the *old* faith instead, whenever big decisions and matters concerning seafaring had to be dealt with. In the third and last stanza, the suppressed paganism of Helgi’s character unveils itself entirely, when he says that when swords clash and there is no space for peace, “then it is better to call upon Þórr, / there is more trust to be found there.”<sup>3</sup> This final *demasqué* reveals the deeply rooted pagan character of the old Icelanders, veiled only by a very thin layer of Christian varnish, which still determined their course of action when it really mattered. This poem should however not be read as a serious attempt to come to a Grundtvigian symbiosis of Old Norse and Christian world-views; rather, it can be considered a humoristic indication of the noble pagan spirit, lingering on in Icelandic culture even long after the nation’s official conversion to Christianity. And there, it lingers still.

### 6.1.5 The New Ginnungagap

In a third poem dealing with Hákon jarl, the earl appears to us in yet another, more sublimated guise. In *Ásareiðin* (‘The Ride of the Æsir’; 1895), Grímur’s most explicitly mythological poem, we meet him in the company of his gods in the sky as they leave this world in solemn procession.<sup>4</sup> The eighteen verses offer a detailed description of Óðinn on his horse Sleipnir, Freyja and the other gods, making their way over the long ‘winter road’ (*vetrarbraut*) out of the world:

The Ásynjur [*goddesses*] and also the Æsir  
are moving faster,  
in the forefront you can see Freyr,  
they are all riding, except for Víðar,  
his power is in his shoe.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Landnámabók*, chapter 66.

<sup>2</sup> Thomsen (1969) p.226.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, 226; þá er betra’ á Þór að heita,/þar er meira trausts að leita.

<sup>4</sup> Thomsen (1969) pp.113-6.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, verse seven (p.114). Víðar’s shoe will play an important part in his slaying of the wolf Fenrir once Ragnarök arrives; Ásynjur og Æsir síðar/ásamt herða snarpa ferð,/fremstan þeirra Frey þú sérð,/allir ríða, utan Víðar,/öflug hans er skóagerð. (Víðarr is a son of Óðinn, who avenges his father’s death after Ragnarök by opening the wolf Fenrir’s jaws with his thick shoe and forcing his sword into his mouth. See *Gylfaginning*, chapter 51.)

Behind the gods and goddesses mounted on their noble horses, there are the Valkyries and the *Einherjar* (Óðinn's fallen warriors who live in Valhöll), and also Hákon jarl, who is in the company of other legendary pagan characters like the great warrior Starkaðure and Þorgerður Hörgabrúður, one of Hákon's deified ancestresses whom he was particularly devoted to (verse 10). The motif of gods or otherwise supernatural beings riding through the skies in the cold winter nights is one which Grímur did not extract from the Eddas themselves, but rather from popular folk-traditions throughout Europe, known in English as 'the wild hunt' and in German as 'die Wilde Jagd'. In post-medieval variations on this theme, the gods are sometimes replaced with legendary characters from local or national history, often associated with the pre-Christian past and heathenry, returned from the dead to rage over the barren fields.<sup>1</sup> By combining this popular motif with the 'classical', literary descriptions of the gods taken from the Eddas, Grímur is contributing to the Romantic project of elevating rural folk culture to the status of national – in this case: Nordic – heritage, and forging a direct link between the pre-Christian, *ethnic* religion of the nation and its pastoral, oral traditions in the present (see Chapter 5.1). In Romantic art, inspired by this folkloristic turn in national thought, the wild hunt had become a popular theme.<sup>2</sup> However, unlike the raging hordes of the wild hunt (see fig. 18), Grímur's orderly procession was moving in one clearly defined direction, namely towards the *exit* of the world-historical stage. I will return to the theme of the 'departing Æsir' – and, also, to the *destination* of their flight – in my chapter on the sculptor Einar Jónsson (Chapter 8.2).

When analysed in the discursive context of Grímur's previous poems, *Ásareiðin* should be seen as both a sequel to – Hákon's presence among the gods indicates that he is dead, and that the old faith has come to an end – and a *de-historicisation* of the *Hákon Jarl* narrative; although there is no clear fault line separating legend from myth, and the space between them constitutes a slippery slope, in *Ásareiðin* the balance is clearly tipped in favour of myth rather than legend. Human history is of no relevance in the mythical setting of this poem, and apart from the dead heroes joining the procession, all the characters are purely mythological. The story of the disappearance of the Old Norse faith, as narrated primarily from the *human* perspective in Oehlenschläger's poem and Grímur's *Hákon Jarl*, becomes a timeless and cosmic event in the sublimated, mythological style of *Ásareiðin*. Through mythology, the historical narrative is thoroughly *universalised* (function three, as outlined in Chapter 1.1). And, just like paganism is represented by the gods rather than by historical figures like Hákon or Helgi magri, so too is Christianity – the historical *and* cosmic force responsible for the twilight of the gods – embodied, not by Hákon's royal enemy Ólafur Tryggvason, but rather by the 'White Christ' (*Hvítakristur*)<sup>3</sup> himself:

When they saw the new faith  
settle in this ancient place,  
in anger, the gods departed;  
they flee neither for Surtr nor for the wolf,  
rather – they flee for the White Christ.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Dutch Friesland, the foreman of the wild hunt sometimes became Redbad, the greatest of Frisia's pagan kings. See Han Nijdam and Otto Knottnerus (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See especially the popular painting *Åsgårdsreien* (1872) by the Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo; fig. 18.

<sup>3</sup> A common reference to Christ in the Old Norse sources.

<sup>4</sup> Thomsen (1969) verse 13 (p.115). The wolf (Fenrir) and the fire giant Surtr both represent the destructive forces unleashed during Ragnarök; Er þau sáu siðinn nýja/setjast að í fornri vist,/viku goðin burtur byrst;/eigi Surt né Úlf þau flýja,/en - þau flýja Hvítakrist. (The fire-giant Surtr and the wolf Fenrir are both creatures associated with the destruction of the gods during Ragnarök.)

The gods, who did battle with the most fearsome of apocalyptic creatures – Surtr and the wolf Fenrir – are seen *fleeing* for the harbinger of peace – the predicate ‘white’ was initially a negative reference to Christ’s apparent cowardice –, which may indicate that this particular flight is not motivated by a standard form of fear. Christ does not represent the monstrous terror associated with the – temporary – demise of Ásgarðr during Ragnarök, and the Einherjar do not draw their weapons. The solemnity of the gods’ final procession conveys a sense of calm resignation, and a profound awareness of the fact that their time has come to an end. The new, *Christian* age is no longer the enemy which Hákon tried to oppose. Rather, it is the logical next step in the development of the world spirit (*Weltgeist*), and after Hákon’s heroic last stance against the ‘call of his time’ – for which he is rewarded with a place among his gods – the time has come to make way for the new age. The influence of Hegel’s philosophy of history is unmistakable; although the heroic but futile rebellion against the spirit of the age is celebrated, eventually, the omnipotence of the evolving world spirit has to be acknowledged. A synthesis of the combating powers has to take place. There is, however, one final consolation for the fading gods:

Even though the ancient rocks will crack,  
the heavens will break and the sea will dry up,  
all the suns will turn black,  
although everything dwindles, the memory  
of that which was, will never die.<sup>1</sup>

Their relevance to the present may have ebbed away, but the *historical force* they represent would remain important in the present and in all future ages to come, in which recollections of the past never die and are eternally present. This statement concerning the ‘presence of the past in the present’ is indicative of Grímur’s Romantic historicism, and his views on the cultivation of Old Norse culture; the Æsir may have been superseded and Christianity is the spirit of the age. Nevertheless, the pagan spirit is still active in the present, both in the form of *recollection* – the agency of which can hardly be denied – and in the national spirit of the Nordic peoples, which were once forged in the fires of the pre-Christian faith.

One last poem by Grímur deserves to be treated in this chapter, not because it contains legendary or mythological characters related to the old faith – for it does not –, but because it activates and re-signifies one of the Eddas’ most abstract, mystical, and tantalising concepts: that of *Ginnungagap*. In his poem *Hið nýja Ginnungagap* (‘The New Ginnungagap’; 1906),<sup>2</sup> the ‘mighty gap’ or great nothingness with which the Old Norse creation narrative commences and in which there was nothing but emptiness,<sup>3</sup> is incorporated in what amounts to an ironic attack on modern materialism:

Monstrous masses!  
no bird and nowhere a tree,  
upwards whirling bundles of dust,  
spirit and life are nowhere to be found.  
Everything is destined for destruction,  
no new seeds are formed,  
the Mighty Gap [*Ginunga-gapið*] they create,

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, final verse (p.116); Þó að fornu björgin brotni,/bili himinn og þorni' upp mar,/allar sortni sólirnar,/aldrei deyr, þótt alt um þrotni,/endurminning þess sem var.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp.382-3.

<sup>3</sup> It was from this great nothingness that the primordial worlds of fire and ice would eventually emerge, in the south and the north respectively. See Chapter 2.1.4.

in which no god dwells.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the nihilistic experience of a futile and meaningless world that a *new* Ginnungagap, just as empty and shapeless as the original one, is opened up to devour everything. The enumeration of things which did not (yet) exist in Ginnungagap, as presented in *Völuspá* (verse three) – “there was neither sand nor sea, no icy waves, there was neither earth nor heaven above it, only a yawning gap [*Ginnungagap*] and no grass anywhere”<sup>2</sup> – is echoed in these lines, “no bird nor tree [...] nowhere to be found”, and culminates in the denial of a higher purpose or a divine dimension altogether. Needless to say, that these lines do not express the opinions of a deeply religious man like Grímur, who merely places these words in the mouth of a modern nihilist as a means of ironic criticism. According to Grímur’s materialist, all will eventually come to nothing. The deafening silence of this great moral and spiritual emptiness is referred to as *fimbulþögn*,<sup>3</sup> meaning literally ‘awful’ or ‘mighty silence’: clearly a reference to the terrible eschatological event of the *fimbulvetr* (‘mighty winter’), preluding the world’s end in Ragnarök (*Gylfaginning*, chapter 51). A grimmer representation of the human condition is hardly imaginable. It is telling that the poet resorts to pagan narratives to paint an image – or a caricature – of what life without purpose, without meaning, and without God would be like: cold, cruel, chaotic, merciless, and without solace. This employment of eddic images as an instrument of ridicule and intellectual critique forms one of the more innovative aspects of Grímur’s oeuvre, and distinguishes this poem from all other mythological works discussed in this study so far.

However, all is not lost. In the final strophe of *Hið nýja Ginnungagap*, the nihilism of the previous verses is transcended, and transformed into something more positive and eternal. After the apocalyptic images of the previous verses, a way out of the chaos, a silver lining finally appears in the form of love:

Eternal life if love may be,  
never can they die,  
who love here, for love demands  
that lovers are two.  
All love withers,  
if it has no heart to live in,  
her own vision grows cold,  
if she is not housed in *you* and *me*.<sup>4</sup>

Love is not an abstract platonic concept, an autonomous ‘essence’ in its own right: it exists only as long as there are people who love each other, and thus create a home for love to live in. Love is determined by our own actions, and will languish if not nurtured and maintained by us. Her eternal life is dependent on the lovers’ willingness to love, without which there is nothing but that primordial emptiness of the yawning gap. It is human agency which creates something out of nothing, just like the worlds of fire (*Múspellheimr*) and ice (*Niflheimr*), the first manifestations of ‘somethingness’, spontaneously arose from Ginnungagap’s

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<sup>1</sup>Thomsen (1969) verse two (p.382); Óskapnaður almenningur!/enginn fugl og hvergi tré,/uppyrldaður agnabingur,/anda og líf og hvergi sé./Allt fer fyrir ættarstapa,/engin myndast frækorn ný,/Ginnunga- þeir gapið skapa,/guð á hvergi heima í því.

<sup>2</sup> In the original Old Norse: Ár var alda,/þar er ekki var,/var-a sandr né sær/né svalar unnir;/jörð fannsk æva/né upphiminn,/gap var ginnunga/en gras hvergi.

<sup>3</sup> Thomsen (1969) verse four (p.383); “fimbul má þar heita þögn”.

<sup>4</sup> Thomsen (1969) verse five (p.383); Eilíft líf ef ástin hefur,/aldrei geta dáíð þeir,/sem unnast hér, því ástin krefur/að elskandurnir eru tveir./Öll er fallin ást í valinn,/eigi hún hvergi í hjörtum bú,/hennar sjálf er hugsjón kalin,/hýsa hana eigi *ég* og *þú*. (italics original).

‘nothingness’ according to eddic cosmogony (*Gylfaginning*, chapter five). Grímur’s creative resignification of these eddic themes represents one way in which intellectual concepts and developments in contemporary literature could be criticised and demonised through the association with ancient myth, which is thus rendered relevant to the modern age.

The work of Grímur Thomsen offers us one of the clearest examples of political mobilisation of Old Norse mythology in the Romantic age. His controversial use of the Eddas as an instrument of forging Nordic unity (*association*; function number four) – rather than emphasising Icelandic exclusivity (*differentiation*; function number five) – received its cue from Finnur Magnússon’s cultural agenda, in which the Old Norse-Icelandic sources were designated as ‘Danish’ and all Nordic artists were encouraged to find inspiration in the Eddas. In this narrative of Nordic greatness, Iceland occupied a special and prestigious position, and was imagined as a champion of Nordic authenticity, the place where Scandinavia could rediscover itself. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Nordic paradigm was largely replaced by more exclusively nationalistic discourses, Grímur’s ideals did not resonate with the dominant current of Icelandic nationalism. But he was not the only Icelandic poet of his generation to use the Eddas as a rhetorical instrument for the purpose of creating bonds with the non-Icelandic world, rather than severing them; Gísli Brynjúlfsson, who was seven years younger than Grímur, would attempt to do the same in his political poetry, albeit not with the same pan-Scandinavian ideals in mind. The cultural unity he envisioned went beyond Scandinavia, and had more revolutionary implications.

## 6.2 ‘Raise Mjöltnir!’: Gísli Brynjúlfsson’s Revolution

### 6.2.1 Journalism and Mythology

Gísli Brynjúlfsson was born as Gísli Gíslason – he adopted his father’s last name later on in his life – in the Eastfjords, and was the son of a clergyman, and a mother whose father just so happened to be the uncle of Bjarni Thorarensen. Gísli never got to know his father, since he drowned two months prior to Gísli’s birth. Gísli was sent to the school in Bessastaðir where he studied until 1845, after which he moved to Copenhagen to study law. In Denmark, he soon grew weary of this, and, in fact, of “everything except the *Íslendingasögur*.”<sup>1</sup> He indulged himself in Old Norse philology and received the Arnarnagæan scholarship for Icelandic scholars in 1848. In 1874 he was appointed lecturer in Icelandic history and literature at the University of Copenhagen; a position he would retain until his death in 1888. In the course of his intellectual life, he developed a strong passion for politics that reached far beyond an obligatory interest in the Schleswig problem or the settlement of Iceland’s constitutional issues, and which has led literary scholars to the conclusion that this somewhat forgotten writer – he never quite made it into the pantheon of ‘great Icelandic authors’ – was in fact Iceland’s ‘first political poet’.<sup>2</sup> What did Gísli’s political views consist of, and how did they relate to his scholarly interest in Old Norse literature?

Gísli’s most personal work, his Copenhagen diary, gives us an idea of the eccentric and highly sentimental character of the adolescent in exile.<sup>3</sup> In a melancholic poem written

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<sup>1</sup> From a poem he sent to his friend the *Fjölnismaður* Konráð Gíslason in 1846, quoted in Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, *Textar og túlkun. Greinar um íslensk fræði* (Reykjavík 2011) p.164.

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Poestion, *Isländische Dichter der Neuzeit in Charakteristiken und übersetzten Proben ihrer Dichtung* (Leipzig 1897) p.409.

<sup>3</sup> Gísli Brynjúlfsson, *Dagbók í Höfn* (Reykjavík 1952). This diary was first published by Eiríkur Hreinn Finnbogason, about one century after it was written.

when he was just twenty years old, he concludes that he has ‘lived in vain’ for two decades.<sup>1</sup> He considered himself an outsider, and a tragic hero in the Romantic spirit of Goethe’s Werther<sup>2</sup> or Lord Byron. Especially the latter one would have a profound effect on the way in which Gísli fashioned himself as a poet, a revolutionary activist, and along the way, he would mobilise mythology in the political arena. In the course of the early 1840s, Icelandic poets – who had previously been interested primarily in the literature of Scandinavian and German origins – now turned their attention to Great Britain, and began to translate poems by Byron, Shelley, Burns and Sir Walter Scott. Among Byron’s Icelandic most fervent enthusiasts were Grímur Thomsen, who translated three of his poems, and Gísli, who translated six.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Gísli’s youthful enthusiasm for everything Byronian was kindled by Grímur, who introduced him to Byron’s poetry when Gísli was still an eighteen-year-old student at Bessastaðir.<sup>4</sup> When Grímur left to travel through southern Europe in 1846, Gísli sent him a sonnet in which he urges his older friend to follow in the footsteps of their British hero:

You get to go where Byron dwelt,  
those holy sites of the ancient past  
where the gold of ages under every sheet  
is content lingering quietly in heavenly tender power.<sup>5</sup>

Echoes of Byron’s poetry can be found throughout Gísli’s *oeuvre*, and the genre of the literary travel journal, as perfected in Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, resonated with Gísli’s own adventurous and restless state of mind. Byron’s love for the South – and especially Greece – is expressed in his ode to a dark-eyed girl (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto 1), which inspired Gísli to write his own poem about “dark eyes, black” (*Augun bláu*).<sup>6</sup> Gísli shared Byron’s fascination with classical Greek culture, and published fragmental Icelandic translations of works by Plato and Sappho.<sup>7</sup> Just like Maurer would later dovetail his passion for Old Norse culture with a lively interest in Iceland’s contemporary struggle for independence, Byron’s philhellenism was not confined to ancient antiquity, but inspired him to take up arms in the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Turks (1821-32). And, in line with the tragic life stories of the ‘Byronian’ heroes he had himself created, he died aged thirty-six as a result of the illness he contracted during the military campaign. Byron’s life story was as much a source of inspiration for his admirers as his poetry, and his political idealism was shared by Gísli.

Gísli can be characterised as an international political activist, writing not only about Hungary and Germany, but also about developments in France – 1848, 1849, the Peace of Paris of 1856 –, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8, and even on the Battle of Bannockburn in medieval Scotland.<sup>8</sup> In all these conflicts, Gísli instinctively mobilised his pen for the more

<sup>1</sup> *Nú eru liðin tvisvar tíu* (‘Now two times ten have passed’), composed in September 1847. In: Gísli Brynjúlfsson, *Ljóðmæli* (Copenhagen 1891) pp.396-398.

<sup>2</sup> See Gísli’s letter to Grímur Thomsen, written on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1845, published as “Ástríður. Bréf frá Gísla Brynjúlfssyni til Gríms Thomsens” in *Skírnir* 123 (1949) pp.166-177.

<sup>3</sup> Óskarsson (1996) p.303.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Beck, “Gísli Brynjúlfsson og Byron”, in *Skírnir* 113 (1939) pp.135-160, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Gísli Brynjúlfsson, “Til Gríms” (1846), first stanza, in *Ljóðmæli* (Reykjavík 1955), edited by Eiríkur Hreinn Finnbogason, pp.71-2, 71; Þú færð að koma þar sem Byron dvaldi/á þessa helgu öldnu sagna-staði,/þar aldin gullið undir hverju blaði/sér unir rótt í himinblíðu valdi.

<sup>6</sup> First published in his own journal *Norðurfari* 1 (1848) pp.19-20. On the influence of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* on Gísli’s poetry, see Richard Beck, “Gísli Brynjúlfsson: an Icelandic imitator of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*”, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 28: 2 (1929) pp.220-37.

<sup>7</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.16-8.

<sup>8</sup> Poestion (1897) p.410; Brynjúlfsson (1955) p.44.



revolutionary party, the underdog, fighting the establishment. His dedication to the revolutionary principles of freedom and national liberation were arguably as strong as that of the great ‘warrior-poet’ Byron, although he did not defend them on the battlefield. In his diary, he confesses that he regrets not having been able to take part in the revolution of that year, to “run blind in the whirlpool of the times” and dip his pen “in human blood” in order to spread the revolutionary message.<sup>1</sup> He believed that all ministers were to be hanged by the gut of the last king,<sup>2</sup> and detested the restoration of the old, pre-revolutionary regimes in Europe. Political radicalism entered the writings of Icelandic intellectuals at this time, and eventually evolved into occasional outbursts of downright hatred towards the Danish oppressors, as voiced in Jón Ólafsson’s (1850-1916) violent song *Íslendingabragur* (‘A song of Icelanders’; 1870), which he composed in the same meter as the *Marseillaise*.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to what has been suggested, Gísli cannot be considered Iceland’s ‘first socialist’.<sup>4</sup> Instead of turning to the ideals of the *commune* in Paris, he turned to Great Britain, where the only kind of liberty that truly counted in Gísli’s eyes – the liberty of the *individual* – had been realised.<sup>5</sup> And Lord Byron, of course, had epitomised this very British ideal of individual freedom. However, freedom of the individual could only be achieved in a nation that was free, and thus the themes of national liberation and individual freedom were inextricably linked in Gísli’s world-view. And with the Romantic ideal of national liberation came also the cult of the ‘Byronian’ hero, the national liberator. The paradigmatic example of this type of political hero was Napoleon,<sup>6</sup> and – much later – Gísli also considered Otto von Bismarck a freedom-fighter worthy of poetic glorification. In his poem *Bismarck* (1884),<sup>7</sup> composed in the eddic *fornyrðislag* meter, he compares the achievements of the forger of the German *Reich* with those of the legendary king Heiðrek, hero of the thirteenth-century *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*. The *Reichskanzler* is described as the great power of this century, and the one who reclaimed the mythical sword *Tyrfing* from the grave to bring Angantyr’s heroic lineage back to life.<sup>8</sup> The political heroism of Bismarck takes on even more mythological proportions in the next verse, in which Gísli is looking for Bismarck’s equal in the accomplishments of great deeds:

I can think of no one,  
 unless it is  
 Ása-Þórr himself  
 when he traveled East!<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1952) p.236. See also Óskarsson (1996) p.277.

<sup>2</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1952) p.198.

<sup>3</sup> *Baldur* 3:4 (1870) p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Gils Guðmundsson, “Gísli Brynjúlfsson og febrúarbyltingin 1848”, in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 6:2 (1945) pp.241-55, 255.

<sup>5</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1952) p.126. An illuminating expression of Gísli’s Anglophilia is his English poem *Great Britain and the English People*, in which he praises the time when ‘Angle and Northman both’ rose in greatness and crushed the ‘tyranny of Rome’; Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.480-2, 480.

<sup>6</sup> On the image of Napoleon in Icelandic Romanticism, see Egilsson (1999) pp.206-41.

<sup>7</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.347-8.

<sup>8</sup> The sword *Tyrfing*, which kills someone every time it is revealed, was buried together with his legendary owner Angantyr the Berserker. However, Angantyr’s daughter Hervor later visited his grave in order to claim the sword for herself in an event known as ‘the waking of Angantyr’. See the poem *Hervararkviða* in the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*. A further link between Bismarck and the world of the Berserker warriors is suggested by the quote from the saga of Egill Skallagrímsson, Iceland’s most famous Berserker, with which Gísli opens the poem.

<sup>9</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.347, verse 2 lines 5-8; Veit eg engan,/nema vera skyldi/Asa Þórr sjálf,/er hann austr fór!

The east was, according to the Eddas, the dwelling place of the giants, where Þórr went to do battle with them. By equating Bismarck with Þórr, his political enemies automatically become giants, personifications of everything detestable and worthy of destruction.<sup>1</sup> In this rhetorical verse, Þórr, the great protector of *Miðgarðr* and its inhabitants (mankind), becomes the symbol of righteous political action, undertaken for the common good of the people. It was Bismarck's great willpower and decisiveness which set him apart from mere mortals, and justified this comparison with mankind's best friend in *Ásgarðr*.<sup>2</sup>

This was not the first time Þórr assumed such a political role in the *oeuvre* of Gísli. Almost forty years earlier, another revolutionary force in Europe triggered Gísli's mythological imagination and attracted him to the image of the strong, hammer-wielding protector god of the North. He recognised the creative energy embedded re-renderings of ancient mythologies, as can be seen from his poetic eulogy for Finnur Magnússon, whom he credited with having created a *new version* of Old Norse mythology.<sup>3</sup> Gísli would do the same, but in a less academic way.

In the multi-ethnic patchwork of the Habsburg Empire, calls for national self-determination were echoing among the constituent peoples, and turned into a collective uprising in the Hungarian lands on the fifteenth of March 1848. In its initial phase, the revolution appeared to be successful and the Hungarian project was well on its way to become an inspiration for nationalists throughout Europe. But when Russian reinforcements joined the ranks of the Austrians in 1849, the new national government in Budapest soon lost terrain, and eventually Habsburg rule was restored. In the widely-read Icelandic weekly *Þjóðólfur*, various national reactions to Europe's political upheaval are presented in a paragraph which is clearly modelled on the first stanza of the (contested) eddic poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins* (see Chapter 2.2.1), in which several attitudes of different beings towards 'All-father's plan' are listed:

Copenhagen spits tobacco juice. Christiania yells at Óðinn. Stockholm drags it out. Petersburg looks askance. London mediates. Edinburgh dreams. Dublin begs. Paris is playing blind man's buff. Amsterdam is doing its sums. Brussels is smiling. Madrid is smoking. Lisbon shakes itself. Berlin is brewing. Vienna gnashes its teeth. Warsaw groans. Rome says its prayers. Constantinople gazes at the moon. Athens takes its bearings. And what is Reykjavík doing? Of course she ponders and concludes.<sup>4</sup>

Annette Lassen has argued that it may have been Hallgrímur Scheving (1781-1861), editor of the *Hrafnagaldr Óðins* poem, who sent in this anonymous contribution to *Þjóðólfur*.<sup>5</sup> It is an interesting example of the "creative mixture of mythology and modern politics"<sup>6</sup> which would evolve into one of the defining characteristics of Icelandic (philological) nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> This antagonistic use of the giants is in line with Grundtvig's interpretation of these creatures as symbols of everything that was 'not Nordic'. See Grundtvig, *Udvalgte Værker* (Copenhagen 1930) vol. 5, p.539.

<sup>2</sup> For similar *German* attempts to link Bismarck to Old Norse heroism, see Halink (2010) p.388.

<sup>3</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.205; "höfundur norrænnar goðafræði að nýju".

<sup>4</sup> *Þjóðólfur* 2 (16 November 1849) p.108; 'Kaupmannahöfn spýtir mórauðu. Kristjania æpir á Óðin. Stokkhólmur dregur seyminn. Pjetursborg lítur hornauga. London miðlar málum. Edinborg dreymir. Dublin betlar. Paris er í skollaleik. Amsterdam reiknar. Bryssel glottir. Madrid reykir. Lissabon akar sjer. Berlin bruggar. Vinarborg gnýstir tönnum. Varschau stynur. Rómaborg bænir sig. Konstantinopel glápir á mánann. Athenuborg áttar sig. En hvað gjörir Reykjavík? hún sjálfsagt þenkir og ályktar.' Translated in Lassen (2011a) p.95. For the corresponding stanza of *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*, see idem, p.82.

<sup>5</sup> Lassen (2011a) p.95.

<sup>6</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.118.

## 6.2.2 Þórr and Attila

Amidst all of the insurrections and revolutions sweeping through Europe in 1848 and '49, it was the fate of the Hungarians that infuriated Gísli's the most. When the wave of revolutions began, he and his friend Jón Thoroddsen (1818-1868), both students in Copenhagen, initiated their short-lived journal *Norðurfari* (1848-9) in which they attempted to capture the revolutionary momentum in articles, literature and art. The first issue of the journal opens with a provocative attack on the educational system in Denmark, and urges Icelanders to consider the question, what good a Danish education could possibly be for Icelandic men, since studying law amounted to nothing more than the reading of Danish laws, and Danish theology professors could not provide a proper training for Icelanders to enlighten common folk and children.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the wisest men were not those who were educated at universities, but rather, those who had traveled and seen much. In order to strengthen this point, Gísli concludes his argument with the eighteenth stanza of the *Hávamál* of the *Poetic Edda*:

Only that man who travels widely  
and has journeyed a great deal knows  
what sort of mind each man has in his control;  
he who's sharp in his wits.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of rhetorical instrumentalisation of eddic themes became one of Gísli's specialties, and can be found not only in his essays but also in his political poetry. Although the journal was short-lived, it was unlike any other journal in the Icelandic language, in that it provided Icelanders for the first time with in-depth and engaging analyses of the political developments in other countries. Icelanders, previously primarily interested in Iceland and the Schleswig question, were 'introduced to the world at large' through his work.<sup>3</sup>

Gísli's journalistic essays cannot be considered separately from his poetic works. The most elaborate system of political argumentation in mythological terms, can be found in a cycle of poems concerning the rise and fall of the Hungarian uprising, which he composed at the time when the events he describes were actually unfolding. The epic battle of the *Magyars* – an alternative name for the Hungarian people – against the demonic Austrians was, according to Gísli, of universal significance, and he blamed the Scandinavians for limiting their national interests to the tedious and unimportant Schleswig question.<sup>4</sup> His cycle of eight 'Hungarian poems', the *Magyaraljóð* ('Poems of the Magyars'), include among others *Magyarar og Ungaraland 1848* ('The Magyars and Hungary 1848'), *Sigr Magyara 1848-9* ('Victory of the Magyars 1848-9'), and *Fall Ungara* ('Fall of the Hungarians').<sup>5</sup> In order to emphasise the *universal dimensions* of the Hungarians' plight, Gísli resorted to mythology and its crystal clear demarcations of good and evil forces. In a very imaginative philological twist, he claims that Þórr, the hammer-wielding giant killer, was in fact inspired on the historical figure of Attila, king of the Huns (rule: 434-53 AD), who was considered the 'hammer of the world' (*malleus mundi*). Attila was not a stranger to Old Norse scholars like

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<sup>1</sup> Gísli Brynjúlfsson, "Íslendingar við háskólann í Höfn", in *Norðurfari* 1 (1848) pp.1-6, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.6. English translation: Larrington (1999) p.16; Sá einn veit/er víða ratar/ok hefr fjölb of farit,/hverju geði/stýrir gumna hvern,/sá er vitandi er vits.

<sup>3</sup> Guðmundsson (1945) p.247.

<sup>4</sup> According to Poestion, Gísli's hatred towards the Austrians was downright laughable; Poestion (1897) p.411.

<sup>5</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1955) pp.48-58. Of all of these poems, only *Fall Ungara* was published during Gísli's lifetime (*Ný félagsrit*, 1852). The other ones were first published in Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.121-50. The eighth 'Hungarian poem' included here, *Lítill viðbætur* ('A little supplement'; Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.150) was composed much later.

Gísli, since he figures prominently in the eddic poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* and in the *Völsunga saga*, under the Nordicised version of his name: Atli.<sup>1</sup> Although he mainly plays the part of the villain in these narratives, Gísli considered him to be the ancestor of the Hungarian people and portrayed him as a heroic and sympathetic character.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the god Þórr is called Atli on a few occasions in the *Snorra-Edda*, which might indicate that the two characters are historically linked.<sup>3</sup> Since the thundergod was considered the protector of *Miðgarðr* and a great friend of mankind, Attila the Hun could just as well be considered in a more positive light, and interpreted as an archetypal force for good. Although the philological arguments behind this identification are not considered plausible at all<sup>4</sup>, they do form the theoretical framework for the ‘mythological journalism’ which characterises Gísli’s whole cycle. Both Attila – symbolising the Hungarian people – and Þórr are benevolent freedom-fighters, smashing the forces of evil – Rome in the case of Attila; giants in the case of Þórr; Austrians and Russians in the case of modern Hungary – with their hammer. In the poem *Fall Ungara*, Gísli writes:

One I know, hope of ages  
growing strength of Earth’s son –  
he will then avenge his mother’s tragedy  
the nations will remember him.

Eight feet under ground  
Atli lingered a long while –  
he goes back to the east  
still will terrify the army of slaves.<sup>5</sup>

Þórr’s campaigns against the giants of the East are not a thing of the past, but very much a political necessity of the present. By applying the narrative format of Old Norse myth, the opponents of Þórr/Atli/Hungary are automatically assigned to the role of inhumane monsters, the cold frost giants of the Edda’s, abodes of chaos and cruelty:

Russia’s cold rule  
like a hound intending to kill the people,  
is setting up the battle tents  
raging red sheep run about.<sup>6</sup>

Gísli transformed the complex history of the Hungarian Revolution into a coherent and easily transmittable story by applying what James Wertsch has referred to as a *narrative template*,

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<sup>1</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.137. Atli is also mentioned in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*.

<sup>2</sup> Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson has pointed out that this transformation of villains into heroes is typical of the Romantic re-evaluation of ancient pagan characters; Egilsson (2008) p.117. See for instance Grímur Thomsen’s writings on Jarl Hákon (Chapter 6.1.4) and the transformation of Hagen von Tronje (from the *Nibelungenlied*) in Germany (Chapter 1.1).

<sup>3</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.146.

<sup>4</sup> Egilsson (1999) pp.266-7.

<sup>5</sup> Stanzas 10 and 11, in Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.146. ‘Earth’s son’ refers both to Þórr – whose mother was the earth – and to Atli, who lies buried underground. The tragedy to be avenged is the injustice committed by the jötnar/Russians (the army of slaves); Einn þó veit eg alda von,/aukinn megni Jarðar son –/þá mun móður harma hefnt,/hann ef þjóðir láta nefnt.//Átta röstum undir grund/Atli dvaldi langa stund –/hann er aprtr austr fer/enn mun skelfast þræla her.

<sup>6</sup> From *Enn er eigi úti um Ungverjaland!* (verse 5), in idem, p.142-3; Rússavaldr ráðum köldum/rakka hyggst að deyða þjóð,/hans af völdum Hildar tjöldum/hamast rauðum kindin óð.

which can be projected on any event taking place at any time.<sup>1</sup> Beyond merely determining the form and style of the account, the eddic template selected by Gísli transforms the narrative into an epic story of polarised – easily distinguishable – forces of good and evil, forcing the reader to sympathise with the quintessentially ‘good’ Hungarians. By operationalising these archetypal niches as a rhetorical device, Gísli prevents his readers from slipping away in moral relativism and indifference. Pure evil – in this case the Russians – *cannot* be downplayed, and should be fought. Like no other medium, myth confers ‘rightness’, and indicates the right “course of action by extending it to an otherwise murky contemporary view.”<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it is of importance that the Russians hail from the East, the cardinal direction associated with the ‘Home of the Giants’ (*Jötunheimr*). In his attempt to connect Scandinavia to the revolutionary spirit of the Magyars, Gísli emphasises that the Hungarians are not of the same eastern type as the Russians, but rather heirs to the northern *Volksgeist*; an argument which is elaborated in the poem *Upphaf Ungara* (‘Origin of the Hungarians’)<sup>3</sup>, composed in the eddic *fornyrðislag* meter and substantiated with elaborate scholarly footnotes. The poem introduces the legendary Viking-hero Örvar-Oddr (‘Arrow-Oddr’), known from the popular fornaldarsögur *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.<sup>4</sup> According to these sources, Örvar-Oddr travelled far and wide, and even became the king of *Hunaland* (a mythical realm mentioned in the *Poetic Edda* and several fornaldarsögur, alternately associated with either Franks or Huns<sup>5</sup>) after heroically defeating one of the kingdom’s enemies – identified by Gísli as the ancestors of the Russians<sup>6</sup> – and marrying the daughter of the previous king. Thus, the bloodlines of the Huns and the heroic North merged, rendering the peoples of Scandinavia and the Hungarians two branches of the same tree. And, urged by the same yearning for freedom, the offspring of the Huns eventually migrated to the location that would become known as Hungary – under the leadership of Hungary’s ‘founding fathers’ Almus and Arpad – at about *the same time* when a Nordic descendant of Örvar-Oddr, Ingólfr Arnarson, first settled in Iceland.<sup>7</sup> The poem serves as a genealogical reminder of Iceland’s kinship to the Hungarians, and consequently as an appeal to all Icelanders to identify themselves with the plight of their brethren. They and the Magyars, ‘friends of the Vikings’<sup>8</sup>, shared a common love for freedom and justice, personified by both Þórr and Attila, who are essentially variations on the same archetype. While the latter is depicted as a ‘hammer of the world’, raised in order to ‘avenge all nations’<sup>9</sup>, the hammer of the thundergod (*Mjöltnir*) fulfills the same symbolic role, as a metaphor for justice and revolution, in the closing verse of the poem *Fall Ungara*:

Hear now what Hrungrnir brought,  
no one to care for the sheep,  
raise Mjöltnir, friend of men,

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<sup>1</sup> Wertsch (2008). See also Chapter 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen (1985) p.99. See also Chapter 1.1.

<sup>3</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.128-32.

<sup>4</sup> Both sagas were composed in thirteenth-century Iceland, but contain fragments of ancient continental narratives about wars between Huns and Goths (fourth century AD).

<sup>5</sup> See Winder McConnell and Werner Wunderlich (eds.), *The Nibelungen Tradition. An Encyclopedia* (New York – London 2011) p.92.

<sup>6</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.126. See also Egilsson (1999) p.264.

<sup>7</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.130, verse 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, verse 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Sigr Magyara 1848-9* verse 2; Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.137.

crush that wretched breed of giants!<sup>1</sup>

Even to the untrained ear, the call for revolution implied by these seditious lines would have been crystal clear. Þórr's hammer had become a symbol of social and political upheaval, of justice, heroic determination and revolutionary activism, and as such, it would remain a powerful ideological emblem for generations to come.<sup>2</sup>

Next to the historical (Attila) and mythological (Þórr) embodiments of Hungary's heroic greatness, Gísli also identified its human incarnation in the modern age and dedicated one of the *Magyaraljód* to him. Lajos Kossuth (1802-1894) was a political agitator and journalist, who became the leader of the Hungarian Revolution and – from April until August 1849 – served as the Governor-President of Hungary. Although the new political order he and his government represented soon collapsed under the military supremacy of Austria and Russia, Kossuth quickly became a symbol of civic values and the resistance against imperial authoritarianism, honored with statues and memorials from the United States Capitol to Turkey. It may come as no surprise that a freedom fighter like Kossuth ignited the imagination of a Byronian soul like Gísli. In the third poem of the *Magyaraljód* cycle, *Kossúth í Szegedin* ('Kossuth in Szeged'), reference is made to the famous speech Kossuth delivered here in 1848, in which he called for far-reaching autonomy for the Hungarian people, in personal union with the Austrian monarch.<sup>3</sup> Gísli's glorification of Kossuth and his ideology, both in poetry and political articles, served a very Icelandic purpose. In a commentary to one of his poems, published posthumously in 1891, he admits that his main goal was to make the name of Kossuth famous in Iceland, so that "even stable boys would imagine him, when they saw horsemen driving out horses with their long whips".<sup>4</sup> Only in this way could the Hungarian Revolution be imported, and serve as a template for political action in Iceland. According to Gísli, every revolution needed a strong leader, a Byronian hero, in order to succeed. But who would be the most qualified candidate for the role of 'Icelandic Kossuth'?

### 6.2.3 An Icelandic Revolution?

In 1851, Gísli composed his patriotic poem *Til Jóns Sigurðssonar* ('To Jón Sigurðsson') in which he claimed that all Icelanders would forever be united under his name, and that, due to his great accomplishment – the resurrection of the Alþingi –, *Saga* (the eddic goddess of history) would once again carve her magic runes like she had done in pagan times.<sup>5</sup> However, although both Gísli and Jón strove to independence for Iceland, Gísli was clearly a Romantic and an ally of the Fjölnismenn. In the spirit of their ideological historicism, and Byron's political activism in the name of *ancient* Hellas, Gísli believed that independence for Iceland could only be legitimised on historical grounds. Not the *Realpolitiker* Jón Sigurðsson, but Bjarni Thorarensen, 'the greatest poet in the world',<sup>6</sup> was to be credited with bringing Iceland's former glory back to life. And just like his Romantic predecessors, Gísli was

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<sup>1</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.146, verse 7. Hrungrnir was a stone giant, who was smashed by Þórr's hammer (see *Skáldskaparmál* in the *Snorra-Edda*); Heyrðu því, sem Hrungni vannt,/hvergi gýgjar kindum annt,/lyptu Mjölni, manna vin,/merðu hið arma þussa kyn!

<sup>2</sup> *Mjöltnir* would become a popular symbol for Icelandic National Socialists, for example; see Chapter 10.1. Gísli's use of this symbol – representing a power with which ancient, fossilised structures are smashed – can be interpreted as a political precursor to Nietzsche's claim to 'philosophise with the hammer'; see his *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (1888).

<sup>3</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891).

<sup>4</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) p.121.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, pp.224-6.

<sup>6</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1952) p.96.

convinced that the Alþingi was to be restored on Þingvellir, not in Reykjavík.<sup>1</sup> These views brought him at odds with Jón Sigurðsson and his modernist agenda.<sup>2</sup> In two Danish articles which Gísli wrote in 1869 and 1873, and which were published shortly after his death (1889), he emphasised Iceland's 'natural right' to be independent, and denounced Jón's attempts to puzzle juridical arguments together from ancient legal documents. The nation was not helped with this kind of 'theoretical harping'<sup>3</sup>; the greatness of Old Norse culture was *in itself* reason enough to demand Iceland's independence, just like the greatness of ancient Hellas had rendered Turkish rule over Greece illegal and unnatural. Gísli considered Old Norse culture equal and related to Greek and Roman culture, which can be seen in his poem *Lofn* ('Praise'; 1884) where he praises 'das Ewig-Weibliche' (Goethe) in the three guises of Aphrodite, Venus and Freyja.<sup>4</sup> It is she, the eternal and archetypal woman, who in all ages lights the fire in the blood of men, and without whom the world would be colourless and dead. The poem is preceded by a quote from Sappho – concerning Aphrodite – and another one from Bjarni Thorarensen, both of which are presented as equal representatives of a universal and *classical* culture.

Educated in the neoclassical milieu of Sveinbjörn Egilsson's Bessastaðir, Gísli assimilated Greek and Old Norse mythology and contributed to the growing notion of a 'Hellas of the North'.<sup>5</sup> What Gísli added were the political, revolutionary, Byronian consequences of this cultural identification, which did not resonate with the more moderate architects of Iceland's future independence. His international outlook rendered him suspect in the circles of Icelandic nationalists, especially after his criticism of Jón Sigurðsson, who had – after his heroic stance at the National Assembly of 1851 (see Chapter 4.2.4) – become the undisputed leader of the national movement. Although Jón and Kossuth had much in common – they both emphasised the importance of a personal union with the monarchy, for instance –, Jón could not possibly meet the requirements which the Byronian freedom fighter Gísli envisioned for Iceland.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Kossuth, the erudite lawyer would never climb the barricades with a rifle in his hands. However, Gísli's narrative template – applied to both Hungary and Iceland – required a national hero, an Icelandic equivalent of Kossuth, just like founding father Ingólfur Arnarson had been the Icelandic equivalent of Almus and Arpad. Aðalgeir Kristjánsson has argued that Gísli's heroic descriptions of the Hungarian Revolution and the actions of Lajos Kossuth in *Norðurfari* have paved the way for Jón Sigurðsson's ascendance to the status of national leader; a Romantic niche which may otherwise not even have existed in the Icelandic imagination.<sup>7</sup> Can Gísli's polemics be held responsible for creating a *collective need* for such a hero? This is a rather controversial claim which is nearly impossible to verify. In none of the later glorifications of Jón is he directly likened to Kossuth – let alone to Attila or Þórr – or are his achievements compared to those of the Hungarian Revolution. Also, Gísli's later clash with Jón's triumphant modernist school makes Kristjánsson's claims come across as rather counterintuitive. However, on a subtler and more ethereal level, it cannot be ruled out that Gísli's widely-read reports of the events of 1848-9 have contributed to a more heroic and revolutionary concept of national emancipation.<sup>8</sup> His

<sup>1</sup> Gísli Brynjúlfsson, "Alþingi að sumri", in *Norðurfari* 2 (1849) pp.5-13.

<sup>2</sup> On the development of Gísli's views on Iceland's national identity, see Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir,

"Þjóðernishyggja Gísla Brynjúlfssonar", in *Sagnir* 3 (1982) pp.87-92.

<sup>3</sup> 'theoretisk Principrytteri'; Gísli Brynjúlfsson, *Om Islands statsretlige forhold til Danmark* (Copenhagen 1889) p.63. See also Valdimarsdóttir (1982) p.92.

<sup>4</sup> Brynjúlfsson (1891) pp.1-4. The reference is to Goethe's *Faust II*, lines 12104–12111.

<sup>5</sup> Ísleifsson (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.258.

<sup>7</sup> Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, "Gísli Brynjúlfsson og Norðurfari", in *Andfari* 111 (1986) pp.114-36, 125.

<sup>8</sup> See for a critical assessment of Kristjánsson's thesis especially Egilsson (1999) p.258 and idem (2011) pp.163-210.

problematic role in the story of Iceland’s independence struggle has gravely colored the reception of his work. However, in the 1840s and 50s, his practice of ‘filtering’ contemporary events “through the lens of Old Norse mythology”<sup>1</sup> may have been more influential than Gísli’s relative obscurity in our own days may lead to suspect. Although the overt Romanticism and literary historicism of his poetry did not resonate with the political modernism of Jón’s ‘new society’, *Norðurfari* did undoubtedly open many Icelandic eyes for the issues of world politics beyond the Slesvig question; foreign issues which Gísli then sought to internalise or *indigenise* (functions number two, as outlined in Chapter 1.1), by cloaking them in indigenous motives taken from the Eddas.

### 6.3 ‘Still *Iðunn* is not dead’: *Benedikt Gröndal*

#### 6.3.1 Eccentric and Idealist

Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal (1826-1907), also known as Benedikt Gröndal *yngrri* (‘the younger’, to prevent confusion with his maternal grandfather Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal) was born on the Álftanes peninsula, where his father Sveinbjörn Egilsson (see Chapter 4.2.1) served as a teacher at the school of Bessastaðir. Benedikt would become known as something of an eccentric, never quite adapting to the values and conventions of his milieu and at odds with the more respectable members of Icelandic society. A photographic portrait, printed in a collection of essays published on the occasion of his eightieth birthday<sup>2</sup>, shows the poet as a dandy-like figure, including the chaotic coiffure, a slightly opened mouth, and a dreamy gaze directed away from the camera. Although Benedikt led a difficult life and was often plagued by financial hardship and alcohol abuse, he would become an acclaimed poet, famous, and a household name during his lifetime. His popularity has made his work – and also the reception of Old Norse mythology therein<sup>3</sup> – the subject of relatively many studies and publications. Nowadays he is best remembered for his autobiography, posthumously published under the title *Dægradvöl* (‘Pastimes’), which reads like an amusing and insightful *who’s who* of the Icelandic establishment in nineteenth-century Copenhagen and Reykjavík; indispensable for anyone interested in this chapter of Icelandic history.<sup>4</sup> But Benedikt did not only sharpen his observation skills on the people around him; he was also a keen naturalist with a special interest in bird life, authoring and illustrating an impressive guide to the birds of Iceland (*Íslenzkir fuglar*, first published in 2011). He was one of the founding members of the Icelandic Natural History Society (*Hið íslenska náttúrufræðifélag*) and served as its first president between 1889 and 1890.

After completing his education at Bessastaðir in 1846, Benedikt moved to Copenhagen for his studies. He returned to Iceland without a degree in 1850 and settled in Reykjavík, before moving to Copenhagen again in 1857. There, one of his friends introduced him to a Catholic missionary with whom he traveled to the town of Kevelaer, where he converted to Catholicism in 1859, only to turn his back on his new-found faith the following year. He spent some time in Belgium – possibly the most fruitful period in his creative life –

<sup>1</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.118.

<sup>2</sup> Various authors, *Benedikt Gröndal áttæður* (Reykjavík 1906), frontispiece.

<sup>3</sup> A specifically meticulous analysis of eddic themes in the writings of Benedikt Gröndal was conducted by Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, “Benedikt Gröndals ‘Götterdämmerung’. Zur Edda-Rezeption im 19. Jahrhundert in Island”, in Katja Schulz (ed.), *Eddische Götter und Helden. Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption* (Heidelberg 2011) pp.215-236. See also Egilsson (1999) pp.176-205, and idem., “Gröndal og Freyja”, in Sverrir Tómasson (ed.), *Guðamjöldur og arnarleir. Safn ritgerða um eddulist* (Reykjavík 1996) pp.295-325.

<sup>4</sup> Benedikt Gröndal, *Dægradvöl*, first published in 1923 (Bókaverzlun Ársæls Árnasonar, Reykjavík).



before returning to Copenhagen, where he eventually became the first Icelander to acquire a degree in Nordic philology, in 1864. Between 1874 and 1883, Benedikt combined his position as teacher at the Gymnasium in Reykjavík (*Lærði skólinn í Reykjavík*) with various other activities as a poet, linguist, translator, journalist, naturalist, and a prolific writer of educational books.

There are only few poets as easily classifiable as ‘Romantic’ as Benedikt, not in the least because he himself actively characterised himself as such. His first poems were published in *Fjölnir* (1847) and clearly stand in the tradition of Jónas Hallgrímsson’s Romantic nature poetry. In the prologues to his literary works, but also in his essays on literature – published primarily in his own journal *Gefn* (a name of the goddess Freyja, meaning ‘she who gives’)<sup>1</sup> – Benedikt fashions himself as a protector of all true art, characterised by a Romantic sense of idealism and temperance.<sup>2</sup> In his eyes, this idealised concept of art lay under threat not only from contemporary currents in literature and the visual arts – especially *Realism*, which he referred to as a ‘prosaic hell’<sup>3</sup> – but also from so-called artists who had ‘perverted Romanticism’ with their lack of temperance; a rejectable development exemplified by the debased compositions of Richard Wagner.<sup>4</sup> Benedikt was one of the first Icelanders to give his unvarnished opinion on the oeuvre of the *maestro*, who had passed away in Venice five years prior to Benedikt’s lecture ‘On Poetry’ (*Um skáldskap*; Reykjavík, 4 February 1888) in which he made this statement. He had never actually seen any of his operas – the first Icelander to do so was probably the editor Hannes Þorsteinsson, in Paris (1896)<sup>5</sup> – but he knew enough about them to be appalled. The composer based most of the mythological narrative of his operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* on Icelandic rather than German sources, but considered his works – rather like Jacob Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie* – as quintessentially German, and discarded the Icelandic origin of the material altogether.<sup>6</sup> Benedikt’s reservations regarding Wagner were however not the same as those voiced against other foreign appropriators like Grimm and Sophus Bugge; they did not concern the (ab)use of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, but rather the distortion of Romantic ideals and the violation of aesthetic principles which he, ‘protector of true art’, held very dear. His critique is not elaborate or detailed, notably because Benedikt believed that the Wagnerian vogue would be short-lived and was already dwindling, now that “people are turning away from him.”<sup>7</sup> More thorough assessments of Wagner’s influence and treatment of the Eddas would not appear in Iceland until several decades later.

With his most famous Romantic predecessors – the *Fjölnismenn* – Benedikt shared a ferocious dislike of the traditional rímur poets, whom he accused of being too conventional, unoriginal and uninspired. In reaction to this tradition he demonstrated how the ancient sources could be cultivated in a more original fashion in his first long poem, *Drápa um*

<sup>1</sup> *Gefn* appeared from 1870 until 1874.

<sup>2</sup> On Benedikt Gröndal’s definition of ‘the Romantic’ see especially his lecture delivered in Reykjavík (February 1888) and published in Benedikt Gröndal, *Ritsafn IV* (Reykjavík 1953; edited by Gils Guðmundsson) p.232. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.217.

<sup>3</sup> Þórir Óskarsson, *Undarleg tákni á tímans bárum. Ljóð og fagurfræði Benedikts Gröndals* (Studia Islandica 45; Reykjavík 1987) p.158.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.217. See also Árni Björnsson, *Wagner og Völsungar. Niflungahringurinn og íslenskar fornþekkingar* (Reykjavík 2000) p.197. On his conservative aesthetic views, see Óskarsson (2006) p.290.

<sup>5</sup> Björnsson (2000) p.197.

<sup>6</sup> On Wagner’s treatment of Old Norse-Icelandic literature see especially Björnsson (2000), Bödl (1996), and Steward Spencer, “Engi má við sköpum vinna: Wagner’s Use of his Icelandic Sources”, in Úlfar Bragason (ed.), *Wagner’s Ring and its Icelandic Sources* (Reykjavík 1995) pp.55-76.

<sup>7</sup> “... en nú eru menn farnir að hverfa frá honum.” In Gröndal, “Um Skáldskap” (second part), in *Lögrjetta* 27:6 (1932) pp.443-69, 468. It is also telling that Benedikt does not mention Wagner anywhere in his *Dægradvöl*.

Örvar-Odd ('Song on Örvar-Odd'; 1851).<sup>1</sup> Exactly by choosing a *fornaldarsaga* – a very popular source of inspiration for rímur poets – as the theme of this work, fashioning the narrative in original stanzas and leaving out those elements of the story that were not to his liking, Benedikt intended to show the difference between the outdated and fossilised techniques of the rímur poets and his own original and free treatment of the sources; a method he would later on also apply to the eddic sources. Also with his popular humoristic prose work *Sagan af Heljarlóðarorustu* ('The Saga of the Battle of Solferino'; 1861), composed ten years later and rendering contemporary events – the struggle between Napoléon III and the Habsburgs in Italy – in the narrative style of the sagas, Benedikt once again emphasised the importance of creativity and originality as opposed to fixation on tradition and archaic formulas. In a frontal attack on the rímur verses, he accused them of being 'full of Edda'<sup>2</sup>, by which he meant that they were not much more than a collection of outdated kennings and other forms of poetic language. In this sense, the term Edda refers to the stylistic characteristics of the rímur, not so much to their contents, which were generally spoken not explicitly mythological in nature.

Benedikt's strong opinions on aesthetics and the uncompromising nature of his zeal were also reflected in his writings on philological topics. According to some, his academic mode of reasoning was overshadowed by his untamed passions, as a result of which his scholarly work never received the attention it deserved.<sup>3</sup> After his intended doctoral dissertation on skaldic poetry at the court of the Norwegian king Haraldr *hárfagri* ('fairhair') was rejected by the university of Copenhagen, Benedikt let go of all his academic endeavours and instead focused his attention on an Icelandic – *non-academic* – audience, allowing himself a more subjective tone of voice. His ties with the academic establishment were further severed by the death of his employer Carl Christian Rafn in 1864 (see Chapter 3.3.1), on whom Benedikt greatly depended financially. Despite his grave reservations against the genre, he resorted to writing poetry in the – still immensely popular – rímur tradition in order to fill the financial gap.<sup>4</sup> Although not an academic in the strictest sense, Benedikt continued to publish on philological matters throughout his life and followed the developments in the field of Old Norse scholarship with great enthusiasm.

Like Grundtvig, Benedikt was interested in the theories of Finnur Magnússon.<sup>5</sup> Although not impressed by Finnur's physical appearance in Copenhagen<sup>6</sup>, his essays on the topic of Old Norse mythology<sup>7</sup> bear witness to his debt to the runologist's ideas. With great enthusiasm he embraced the theory of Indo-European origins as propagated by Finnur, and he went to great lengths to prove the Asian origins of Nordic culture with etymological arguments. According to him, the term *Útgarðr* (see Chapter 1.1) was derived from Sanskrit *Uttarakuru*; a mythical land in Hindu cosmology. The origin of the word Norway was not to

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<sup>1</sup> On the Viking-hero Örvar-Oddr ('Arrow-Oddr'), known from the popular *fornaldarsögur* *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, see Chapter 6.2.1.

<sup>2</sup> "fullar af Eddu"; Jón Árnason, Egill Jónsson, Einar Þórðarson and Benedikt Gröndal, "Auglýsing" (Advertisement) in *Þjóðólfur* (2 May 1851) p.272. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.218.

<sup>3</sup> On the reception of Benedikt Gröndal's philological works, see Vésteinn Ólason, "Benedikt Gröndal som norrønfilolog", in Auður G. Magnúsdóttir and Henrik Janson (eds.), "*Vi ska alla vara välkomna!*" *Nordiska studier tillägnade Kristinn Jóhannesson* (Göteborg 2008) pp.319-33.

<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted that Benedikt's literary opinions were more fluid than sometimes suggested, and that not all rímur were always equally objectionable in his view.

<sup>5</sup> On Grundtvig's ambivalent views on Finnur's theories, see Chapter 3.4.4.

<sup>6</sup> Gröndal, *Dægradvöl* (Reykjavík 2014 [1923]) pp.163-4.

<sup>7</sup> These are primarily his article on the giant (*jöunn*) Hrungrnir (in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* 1860, pp.229-326), his master's thesis on Nordic popular beliefs (in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* 1863, pp.1-178), and three articles on the *Poetic Edda* and eddic mythology (in *Gefn* 3 (1872) pp.1-35, *Gefn* 4 (1873) pp.1-33, and *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafjelags* 13 (1892) pp.82-169).

be sought in the meaning of *Norðvegr* ('North Way'), but rather in the ancient Finnic-Ossetic term *Nur-jää*, meaning 'Ice Land'.<sup>1</sup> Still, the Indo-European perspective did not influence his poetic work as profoundly as it did the writings of Adam Oehlenschläger, who located the homeland of Freyja's husband Óðr on the other side of the Ganges (see Chapter 3.2.2). In his adolescent years Benedikt was quite fond of Oehlenschläger's poetic renderings of Old Norse mythology, and he even translated some of his poems into Icelandic.<sup>2</sup> But where Oehlenschläger emphasised the west's cultural links with the exotic east, Benedikt was more interested in the north's link with the *classical* south. Both of these universal identifications could be supported by the theories of Finnur, who had proposed that Freyja and Óðr could be interpreted as the Nordic equivalents of Venus and Adonis.<sup>3</sup> This philological thesis would be functionalised poetically in two of Benedikt's mythological poems, which will be scrutinised later on in this chapter. Also, the concept of 'natural mythology' – the idea that myths are in fact metaphorical descriptions of natural phenomena – determined Benedikt's treatment of the Eddas. Consequently, Max Müller's extensive elaborations on the same theory and his emphasis on 'comparative mythology' (see Chapter 3.4.5) captivated his imagination as well.<sup>4</sup> In the following I will demonstrate how Benedikt instrumentalised these theories rhetorically in order to 'reclaim' the Eddas for the Icelanders.

### 6.3.2 Reclaiming the Eddas

Benedikt's position *vis-à-vis* other scholars – and artists, for that matter – was determined by his belief that Old Norse literature was first and foremost the inheritance of the Icelanders. As a nationalist, he believed that foreign appropriations of eddic mythology – of which Wagner's operatic *oeuvre* was but one grotesque manifestation – should be treated with a healthy amount of suspicion. At first glance, it may seem difficult to maintain both the exclusively Icelandic origin, as well as the universal – that is: Indo-European – significance of the Eddas at the same time. However, the two categories of *nationalism* and *universalism* are not as mutually exclusive as one may expect, and in fact seem to reinforce each other in debates about 'national' mythologies. Eddic mythology – Benedikt's argument implies – can be seen as the uniquely Icelandic refashioning of universal, Indo-European themes.<sup>5</sup> Denying any cultural link with the other Nordic countries – on the basis of which these countries could lay claim to at least some of Iceland's ancient heritage – would have been completely unfeasible, both academically and ideologically. Although not a pan-Scandinavist like Grímur Thomsen, Benedikt still considered Old Norse-Icelandic literature "the band between Iceland and Denmark, which will not be dissolved nor severed."<sup>6</sup> Like Finnur Magnússon before him, he saw no need to dispute the obvious cultural and historical similarities between the two peoples. However, Benedikt added some nationalistic nuances to his argument, as a result of which the 'national ownership' of the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus was placed firmly in Icelandic hands. Unlike Finnur Magnússon and Rafn, he did not believe that Old Icelandic literature could be considered 'Danish', on the basis of the language in which they were written having been called *dönsk tunga*.<sup>7</sup> In reaction to a 'mister J.' (*herra J.*) who Benedikt

<sup>1</sup> For a short and critical assessment of Benedikt's Indo-European theories, see Finnur Jónsson, "Benedikt Gröndal og fornfræði", in various authors, *Benedikt Gröndal áttæður* (Reykjavík 1906) pp.67-86, 81-2.

<sup>2</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.81-2.

<sup>3</sup> Magnússon (1828) pp.377-8.

<sup>4</sup> See Gröndal, "Edda. Sæmundur fróði. Sæmundar-Edda" (part I), in *Gefn* 3 (1872) pp.1-35, 9-10. See also Egilsson (1999) p.198.

<sup>5</sup> For a further discussion on the interplay of universal and national themes in Romanticism, see Chapter 4.2.3.

<sup>6</sup> "...það band milli Íslands og Danmerkur, sem ekki verður leyst og ekki höggvið í sundur." Gröndal, "Folketro i Norden, med særligt Hensyn til Island", in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1863) pp.1-178.

<sup>7</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.164.

feels misunderstood his previous writings<sup>1</sup>, he explains that a literary creation can be both *alíslenzkt* ('all-Icelandic'; both conceived and recorded in Iceland) and based on more general Nordic ideas at the same time.<sup>2</sup> The crucial arguments of Benedikt's national 're-appropriation' of the myths seem to revolve around the idea of the 'creative moment', which is closely related to the Romantic concept of *genius* (see Chapter 1.3); mythological motives can be traced back to non-Icelandic origins – Nordic, Germanic and Indo-European respectively – but they did not become *literature* until a genius brought all of these motives together to form the creative construction known as the *Poetic Edda*. There was no doubt in Benedikt's mind that this sublimation, this 'creative moment', had taken place in Iceland and in Iceland only. In order to clarify this position, he quotes the archetypal original genius, Goethe, who in a famous poem ponders upon the question how much of what makes him 'Goethe' is actually really *his*, if he inherited his physique from his father and his 'Lust zu fabulieren' from his mother. Can any of this be 'original', even though it is inherited from someone else?<sup>3</sup> The fact that Goethe – the very epitome of originality – is the one asking this question, proves that, indeed, true originality and genius can be the product of a re-composition of pre-existing elements, just like the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>4</sup> Something is not automatically 'unoriginal' simply because it originates from pre-existing, inherited motives. Even the great Shakespeare, Benedikt demonstrates, hardly 'created' the raw materials for his dramas himself. In some cases, he did little more than turning that which others had written before him into verse.<sup>5</sup> Still, no one would deny that Goethe and Shakespeare are two of the most original geniuses in literary history. Having thus addressed the complex issue of authenticity, Benedikt concludes that the creative moment from which the *Poetic Edda* originated took place, beyond, any doubt, on Iceland:

I have never held the view that Sæmundur [the Learned] was the principal author of the Eddic Poems, for it is easy for everyone to see, that the material they contain is the common property of all the Nordic countries; The substance in *Gylfaginning* [written by Snorri Sturluson] is too, although its style is Icelandic – we do not know it any differently, so we cannot talk about it differently. Even if we said, that an Icelander merely improved the Eddic Poems when he wrote them down, and although we confessed that much in them dates from before the settlement of Iceland, then that still does not mean that they are not Icelandic nonetheless.<sup>6</sup>

Benedikt concluded from the uniformity in the use of words and expressions in the *Prose Edda* that the editing and 'improving' of the poems had been conducted by one single individual, who may very well have been Sæmundr. He did therefore not dismiss the

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter published in *Ísafold* (13 January 1892, p.14), mr. J. accuses Benedikt of contradicting himself, by claiming that the *Völuspá* could be traced back to original pre-Christian Nordic world-views, while suggesting at the same time that the story of Baldur was a relatively late and 'all-Icelandic' creation, put together from Christian and classical motives.

<sup>2</sup> Benedikt Gröndal, "Um Sæmundar-Eddu og norræna goðafræði, skoðanir Bugges og Rydbergs", in *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafjelags* 13 (1892) pp.82-169, 82.

<sup>3</sup> The poem is included in Goethe's *Zahmen Xenien* (1820-7), book VI.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (1892) p.89.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p.88.

<sup>6</sup> "Eg hef aldrei haft þá skoðun, að Sæmundur væri frumhöfundur Eddukviðanna, því öllum hlýtur að vera auðsætt, að efnið í þeim er sameiginleg eign allra Norðurlanda; það er efnið í Gylfaginningu líka, en búningurinn er íslenskur – vér þekkjum hann ekki öðruvísi, og getum því ekki öðruvísi talað um hann. Þó að vér segðum, að Íslendingur hefði einungis lagað Eddukviðurnar um leið og hann ritaði þær upp, þó að vér játuðum, að margt í þeim væri eldra en Íslands bygging: þá mundi það ekkert gera til, þær væru íslenskar eigi að síður." *Idem*, p.87. Compare these views to those expressed by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, quoted in the Introduction to this study.

traditional term *Sæmundar Edda*.<sup>1</sup> But even if the work could not be attributed to a larger than life genius like Sæmundr, the genius mind from which the *Poetic Edda* had sprouted had undoubtedly been an Icelandic one. This could be demonstrated by looking at the style, but also at the contents of the poems, Benedikt argued. In line with Finnur Magnússon's concept of natural philosophy, he identified the cataclysmic events described in *Völuspá* not simply as the fantastic products of a visionary mind, but rather as mythologised descriptions of actual natural phenomena. And although much of the material in the poem may have predated the settlement of Iceland, the nature described in it was, again, unmistakably Icelandic:

The person who wrote *Völuspá*, and those who have written the material related to it, must have witnessed a volcanic eruption, and everyone knows that this could not have happened anywhere in the Nordic countries except in Iceland. And the first eruption of Hekla took place just around the same time when Sæmundur came home from abroad: folklore connects him to the Hekla-eruption, and that belief dates without a doubt from his days...<sup>2</sup>

Although there are no actual place indications in the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*, they often describe volcanic landscapes dotted with glaciers, which at that time could not have sprung from the mind of a non-Icelander.<sup>3</sup> By reading the Eddas through the lens of Icelandic landscape, the *exclusively* Icelandic and relatively late medieval origin of the text could be demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> This claim could then be mobilised to counter Scandinavian and Germanic attempts to appropriate the Eddas for their own ideological causes, and to accentuate Iceland's status as a *Kulturnation* and the birthplace of the Eddas and sagas. In this case, the typically Romantic projection of mythology onto landscape is reversed, and national landscape is in turn projected onto the literary treasures of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Although this article appeared almost twenty years before the aforementioned article in *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafjelags*, the basic argument of both essays runs along the same lines; the Eddas are, as expressions of *original* literature, 'all-Icelandic'. And in all his writings on Old Norse literature, he would defend this position against foreign *and* Icelandic scholars alike. Among the foreign scholars whose theories Benedikt discussed in his writings are the Danish philologist Niels Matthias Petersen (1791-1862), Jacob Grimm, the Swedish writer Viktor Rydberg (1828-1895), and the influential Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge (1833-1907), among others. His approach to their writings can be typified as antagonistic; they could be either *with* or *against* him and his Icelandic interpretation of the Eddas.

In *Dægradvöl*, Benedikt remembers how he once, as a young student in Copenhagen, stumbled upon a work by the Norwegian historian Peter Andreas Munch (1810-1863) and found himself – as well as his compatriots in Denmark – appalled by this “attempt to deprive us of the ancient literature, just like Finnur Jónsson has attempted later on with the *Poetic Edda*”.<sup>6</sup> The battle against similar deprivations of Old Norse literature by foreign scholars

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<sup>1</sup> Gröndal (1892) pp.85-104.

<sup>2</sup> “Sá sem ort hefir Völuspá, og þeir sem hafa ort allt sem henni er skylt, hljóta að hafa sæð eldgos: en að þetta gat hvergi verið á Norðurlöndum nema á Íslandi, vita allir; og fyrsta Heklugosið varð einmitt um það leyti sem Sæmundur kom heim frá útlöndum: þjóðsögurnar kenna honum og um Heklu-eld, og sú trú er án efa allt í frá hans dögum...” Gröndal, “Edda. Sæmundur fróði. Sæmundar-Edda” (part II), in *Gefn* 4 (1873) pp.1-33, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Benedikt refers especially to the *Brynhildarkviða*; idem, p.25.

<sup>4</sup> Another indication of the ‘young age’ of Eddic poetry are the references to Christian/Latin concepts, which Benedikt lists in the same article. This meant that they came in to being after the introduction of Christianity – and Latin culture – in Scandinavia, and consequently *after* the settlement of Iceland.

<sup>5</sup> See Halink (2014).

<sup>6</sup> “... það var tilraun til þess að svipta okkur fornritunum, eins og Finnur Jónsson hefur reynt til síðar með Eddukviðurnar.” Gröndal (2014) pp.189-90. The insulted young students reacted by writing an essay entitled

continued unrelinquished in his later writings, and he shared Finnur Magnússon's reservations concerning Jacob Grimm and other German philologists in the Grimmian tradition. After some philosophical remarks on the topic of national identity, Benedikt continues his article "Ströbemærkninger" ('Scattered Comments')<sup>1</sup> with an attack on Grimm and his disciples, who have so far refused to acknowledge the very Icelandic nature of the Old Norse literature they have scrutinised. This refusal had to do in the first place with Grimm's preconceived ideas about the Icelanders, those 'uncivilised wretches', whom he must have considered incapable of creating something as beautiful as the eddic poems.<sup>2</sup> The Herderian notion of 'national poetry' having sprung organically, not from the minds of individual – in this case *Icelandic* – poets, but from a *Volk* as a whole, had distorted foreign conceptions of the Edda for too long: "That which people have always considered a 'reason' [why the *Poetic Edda* could not have been the product of one man], is that they knew no writer, and therefore always presumed that no one man was the author, but rather all of the Nordic lands."<sup>3</sup> The ferocity of this attack on Grimm and the whole 'German school' is explained by Finnur Jónsson from Benedikt's "deep and intense love for Iceland and for everything which is of Iceland."<sup>4</sup>

In his essay dealing with the theories of Sophus Bugge and Viktor Rydberg (Gröndal 1892), Benedikt accuses the first one of overstressing the *Celtic* influence on Old Norse-Icelandic literature. According to Bugge, most of whose theories were very controversial in his own days and are now largely rejected, the eddic poems were inspired by older Christian and classical narratives, which had made their way to Scandinavia through England.<sup>5</sup> In order to come to a more profound understanding of the myths, one must look *beyond* Iceland and instead focus on ancient Britain and Christian culture. Indeed, concepts like 'the end of time' (Ragnarök) and the sacrifice of a pure redeemer god (Baldr) appear to have been completely alien to the Germanic or Nordic imagination *prior* to the introduction of Christianity, he argued. After having analysed the eddic poems meticulously, Bugge wrote:

... one cannot but conclude that the oldest, and, indeed, the great majority of both the mythological and heroic poems were composed by Norwegians in the British Isles, the greatest number probably in northern England, but some, it may be, in Ireland, in Scotland, or in the Scottish Isles. Very few Eddic lays seem to have arisen outside of the British Isles. The late *Atlamál*, which varies greatly from the other heroic poems on the same subject, was certainly composed in Greenland. Some of the latest poems, e.g. *Grípisspá*, may have originated in Iceland.<sup>6</sup>

It may come as no surprise that this view was not shared by Benedikt, who saw in statements like these the foreign appropriation of Icelandic heritage. Bugge's 'Irish hypothesis' reduced the Old Norse myths to little more than inferior Nordic misinterpretations or distortions of

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"Brev til Islænderne om en Munk i Norge" under the pseudonym Bøðvar Gunnhéðinsson (Copenhagen 1849). On the reference to Finnur Jónsson, see Chapter 7.1.

<sup>1</sup> *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* (1861-3) pp.341-92.

<sup>2</sup> "Jacob Grimm anså eddasangene for sådanne skönheder, at det vilde være utåleligt, dersom sådanne uslinger sem Islænderne skulde have forfattet dem". Idem, p.355. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.225.

<sup>3</sup> "Það sem men allt af hafa haft fyrir >ástæðu<, er það, að menn þektu engan höfund, og var því ávallt skoðað svo, sem enginn einn maður væri höfundur, heldur öll Norðurlönd." Gröndal (1892) p.86.

<sup>4</sup> "... hin djúpa og innilega ást á Íslandi og öllu því sem Íslands er." Jónsson (1906) p.75. However, no matter how ferocious Benedikt's attack on Grimm may have been, in the preface to his poem *Ragnarökkur* (Copenhagen 1868) he is quite positive about the German scholar's work. See Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.225.

<sup>5</sup> This theory is explained in the introduction to his *Norroen fornkvæði. Islandsk samling af folkelige oldtidsdigte om nordens guder og heroer, almindelig kaldet Saemundar Edda hins fróða* (Christiania 1867).

<sup>6</sup> From the introduction to Bugge's *Helge-digtene i den Aeldre Edda* (Copenhagen 1896), in the translation by William Henry Schofield (provocatively entitled *The Home of the Eddic Poems*; London 1899) p.xviii.

Classical and Christian originals.<sup>1</sup> Benedikt refuted this ‘Christian’ reading of the Eddas, and wonders what – if not the eddic myths – the original pre-Christian belief-system of the Nordic peoples may have looked like: “Was there any other religion? Or was there no religion? Or did everyone believe in his own strength and power? We know very well that some ancestors did not have faith in the Æsir [*Ása trú*], or were lax in this, but that does not matter here.”<sup>2</sup> The *Völuspá* is a genuinely *pagan* poem in his view, written around the time of Sæmundr, in which much which would otherwise have been lost has been preserved for posterity.<sup>3</sup> The practice of finding similarities between different mythological and belief-systems – as practiced by Bugge – was nothing new in itself, but instead of explaining these similarities through a unilateral stream of influence from the South, Benedikt saw them as a result of the common, Indo-European origin from which they had arisen. Like Finnur Magnússon before him, Benedikt believed that ancient Sanskrit sources like the *Rigveda* could be used to demonstrate the antiquity and authenticity of the Eddic myths.<sup>4</sup>

Other Norwegians involved in the debate on the origins of Old Norse mythology were the aforementioned Peter Andreas Munch and the historian Rudolf Keyser (1803-1864), both teachers of Bugge in Christiania and associated with what would become known as the ‘Norwegian Historical School’ (*den norske historiske skulen*). According to this school, Old Norse culture originated in the far North, and was brought to the Norwegian heartland by migrants from the North and the East (*innvandringsteorien*) in mythical, pre-historical times. This provocative view was juxtaposed with the Danish belief in a *South-Scandinavian* – that is: Danish – origin and homeland of Old Norse culture, which was generally thought to be supported by the fact that the ancient inhabitants of Scandinavia referred to their own language as *dønsk tunga* (‘Danish tongue’). According to Munch and Keyser, the Eddas were not conceived in Iceland, but rather in ancient Norway, long before the settlement of Iceland when the use of Old Norse was still restricted to the Norwegian lands.<sup>5</sup> They preferred the term ‘Nordic language’ (*norrænt mál*),<sup>6</sup> which was simply equated with ‘Norwegian’. This appropriative simplification was signalled and criticised by Benedikt, who emphasised that a clear distinction between the terms *oldnorsk* (‘Old Norwegian’) and *fornnorræn* (‘Old Norse’) should be maintained.<sup>7</sup> However, by disconnecting Old Norse from Norwegian, and by claiming that it would actually be best to call this ancient language after the country in which its literature came into being (Iceland), he tended to use the term ‘Icelandic’ simply as

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<sup>1</sup> The influence of this hypothesis was so strong, that Finnur Jónsson still had to defend his own views against it in 1921, long after Bugge’s death. See Chapter 7.1, and also Michael Chesnutt, “Nordic-Celtic links in folk literature”, in Gillian Fellows Jensen (ed.), *Denmark and Scotland. The Cultural and Environmental Resources of Small Nations* (Edinburgh – Copenhagen 2001) pp.153-70, 154. The ‘German school’ was equally outraged about Bugge’s theories, since they appeared to deny the pre-Christian, pan-Germanic origin of the Viking-age myths. Again, it was Karl Müllenhoff – the same one who accused Konrad Maurer of being ‘too Icelandic’ (see Chapter 5.1.1) – who took up his pen against this Norwegian appropriation attempt. See Julia Zernack, “Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and German Culture”, in Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011) pp.157-86, 170-1.

<sup>2</sup> “Var þar önnur trú? Eða var þar engin trú? Eða trúðu allir á mátt sinn og megin? Vér vitum vel, að ýmsir formenn höfðu eigi Ása trú, eða voru linir i henni, en þetta gerir hér ekkert til.” Gröndal (1892) p.110. In the Old Norse corpus, people who did not partake in the practice of *blót* (sacrifice) for the gods are described as ‘believing in their own strength and power’ (*trúa á mátt sinn ok megin*).

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.118.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.94.

<sup>5</sup> On the views of the Norwegian School, see Magerøy (1965) pp.84-93, and Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, “Norrøne kildetekster og norsk nasjonsbygging”, in Annette Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008) pp.43-58. On the anachronistic use of the term *dønsk tunga* in the Danish appropriation of Old Norse-Icelandic culture – among others by Finnur Magnússon – see Chapter 3.4.3.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of ‘Nordic’ identity and language, see Jakobsson (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Gröndal (1892) p.105.

a synonym for ‘Nordic’ (*norræn*).<sup>1</sup> One could argue that this is a case of ideological overcompensation *vis-à-vis* his foreign opponents. Benedikt’s relentless struggle for the national reclamation of Old Norse-Icelandic heritage can be perceived in virtually all of his – scholarly and creative – writings on mythology, and had its effect on the appropriative tone of the later ‘Icelandic school of philology’ (see Chapter 10.1), the initiator of which was Benedikt’s much younger colleague Björn M. Ólsen (see Chapter 7.1).<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, Benedikt’s overall opinion of Bugge was not univocally negative; the Norwegian had recognised that the myth of Hermóðr’s ride to Hel was unmistakably Nordic in nature, and that the whole cycle of Baldr-myths were “an authentic product of the Nordic soul, just like the tragedy Hamlet by Shakespeare and not Saxo Grammaticus’s work.”<sup>3</sup> At least on this exclusion of Denmark (Saxo Grammaticus) from original Nordic culture, and the Nordic nature of Shakespeare’s tragedies, Bugge and Benedikt could agree. In Benedikt’s view, Bugge had been misunderstood by both his followers and his adversaries, who had created a ‘camel from a mosquito’, as was so often the case.<sup>4</sup> Far worse than the Norwegians in their shameless attempts to claim the Old Norse-Icelandic heritage for themselves were the Danes, who were – according to Benedikt – blinded by their own national pride (*þjóðdramb*); Grundvig’s entire mythological system amounted to little more than national self-glorification, and Niels Matthias Petersen (see Chapter 6.1.3) had gone so far as to claim that the Eddas could not possibly have been composed in Iceland, where there was nothing except “cold and frost, without culture”.<sup>5</sup> Benedikt claimed that this Danish arrogance, a symptom of the nation’s cultural and political imperialism, gave rise to a distorted image of Old Norse literature and especially of the highly developed medieval society from which it had originated: Iceland.

This kind of national appropriation of Icelandic heritage was what could be expected from jealous foreign philologists, whose ambitions were colored by national pride. Arguably more objectionable were the views of a fellow Icelander, Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1827-1889), one of the most influential Scandinavian scholars of the nineteenth century, who was based in Oxford. Guðbrandur, who as a young academic had visited Grimm in Berlin, had moved to England in 1866 and spent his time working on influential editions of the Icelandic classics and the *Oxford Icelandic-English Dictionary* (1866–1873). He was considered a great authority on the Eddas, and it was even claimed that, if the *Poetic Edda* would ever get lost, he could write down all the poems from memory.<sup>6</sup> But his views were not uncontroversial: in England, Guðbrandur became convinced that the origin of Eddic poetry should not be sought in Iceland or in Norway, but rather in Britain, where Nordic settlers had been inspired by local cultures and started composing the poems. These were then at a later stage brought to Iceland, where they were entrusted to parchment, but where the Eddic stories never really stroke root and never became part of Icelandic life and culture the same way they had been in

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<sup>1</sup> This terminological *Gleichschaltung* was already observed by Finnur Jónsson (1906) p.67.

<sup>2</sup> The problematic relationship between Benedikt and Björn M. Ólsen has recently been thematised in Guðmundur Andri Thorsson’s novel *Sæmd* (Reykjavík 2013).

<sup>3</sup> “... en ægte Skabning af nordisk Aand, ligesaavist som Sörgespillet Hamlet er Shakespeares og ikke Saxo Grammaticus’s Værk.” Sophus Bugge in his *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltedags Oprindelse* (1881-9), quoted in Gröndal (1892) p.111.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (1892) p.111.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.109. The reference is to Petersen’s *Nordisk Mytologi: Forelæsninger* (1849; second edition of 1863) p.262.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Guðbrandur’s life and work, see Jón Þorkelsson, “Nekrolog över Guðbrandur Vigfússon”, in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, vol.7 (Lund 1889) pp.156-163.



Britain. In short: the *Poetic Edda* was more British than Icelandic in character.<sup>1</sup> It was through these writings of Guðbrandur that Bugge first conceived his own version of the idea of British origins.<sup>2</sup> But, according to Benedikt, the fact that Guðbrandur was an Icelander made his attempt to deny the Icelanders their own national heritage even more distasteful, nothing short of high treason:

That is even more remarkable, since this is the first time that an Icelander has taken it upon himself to preach this kind of theories to foreigners, to humiliate all of us and to attempt to take from our people the only thing which has kept it upright and which has given it strength in hardship and adversity.<sup>3</sup>

Benedikt restricted his contempt for Guðbrandur's treacherous brand of philology not to this one review, and remained a staunch critic of basically everything Guðbrandur did.<sup>4</sup> As this example goes to show, being a good Icelander automatically implied having the 'right' – that is: *his own* – opinions on philological matters. One could not be achieved without the other.

A lot friendlier was Benedikt's treatment of the mythological works of Viktor Rydberg, the Swedish poet, novelist and scholar who is popularly considered Sweden's 'last Romantic'.<sup>5</sup> In Rydberg, Benedikt found a useful ally against the different schools and theories – Christian, Irish, Norwegian etc. – which all denied the ancient, Indo-European roots of eddic mythology. Rydberg had mobilised his great literary talents in defense of the great antiquity and authenticity of the myths, and received much praise for his monumental endeavour to systematise the large body of fragmented 'Germanic myths' and to reveal the poetic unity underlying these fragments. His *Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi* ('Investigations into Germanic Mythology')<sup>6</sup> even managed to impress Bugge, champion of the opposing camp, who commented that his "heart has warmed more and more" upon reading the first volume: "Forgive these words from a man who before such a magnificent and in many respects remarkable work is well aware that he is nothing but a philologist."<sup>7</sup> The added value of Rydberg's background as a poet was also acknowledged by Benedikt, whose epistemological values were still firmly rooted in Romantic idealism:

From these fragments, Rydberg has built up a splendid construction, presenting us with the amazing poetry of ancient times in all its splendour, reminding us of what N.M. Petersen said: 'the most poetic explanation is always the right one', and of what Max Müller says: 'the imagination of the poet is almost of more use than the astuteness and the accuracy of the

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<sup>1</sup> This view, which Guðbrandur developed in the course of the 1860s – quite possibly under the influence of Matthew Arnold's lectures 'On the study of Celtic literature' (1866) – can be found in the introduction to his English edition of the *Sturlunga saga* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1878). See also Wawn (2002) pp.342-54.

<sup>2</sup> Chesnutt (2001) p.154.

<sup>3</sup> "Þetta er því merkilegra, sem það er í fyrsta sinn, að Íslendingur hefur orðið til að prédika slíkar kenningar fyrir erlendum mönnum, niðra oss öllum og leitast við að svipta þjóð vora því eina, sem hefur haldið henni uppi og gefið henni máttinn í raunum og andstreymi." Benedikt Gröndal, in his treatment of Guðbrandur's introduction (1880), in *Ritsafn III* (Reykjavík 1950) p.316. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.225.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this professional disdain may have had rather personal grounds as well: in *Dægradvöl*, Benedikt claims that Guðbrandur has received much praise for philological feats already accomplished by Benedikt's underestimated father, Sveinbjörn Egilsson. See Gröndal (2014) p.120.

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Cyclopedia of World Authors*, third edition, vol. 4, edited by Frank N. Magill, 1997, s.v. Viktor Rydberg.

<sup>6</sup> Two volumes; Stockholm 1886-9.

<sup>7</sup> Bugge, quoted and translated in Fredrik Gadde, "Viktor Rydberg and Some Beowulf Questions", in *Studia Neophilologica* 15:1 (1942) pp.71-90, 73.

learned'. Rydberg's work is indeed the 'great epic of the Germanic myths', which he has rebuilt from the ruins of ancient times.<sup>1</sup>

Rydberg's creative synthesis of all the myths into a cohesive narrative structure, the great 'epic of our forefathers', did not stand the test of time from an academic point of view: the connections he 'demonstrates' between the separate myths and between Old Norse and Vedic mythemes – e.g. between Þórr and Indra – testify to his great creative abilities rather than to philological accuracy. In the reception of his work he is often described as the last – and the most poetically inclined – of the mythographers still working in the spirit of Jacob Grimm, searching for the lost – but retrievable! – overall structure supporting the whole body of Germanic pre-Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he did manage to raise doubts about the claims of the 'Norwegian school' and the 'Irish-Christian theory' so heavily opposed by Benedikt, and to reactivate Finnur Magnússon's concept of a 'Eurasian myth-tree' in a more productive manner. And, more importantly for Benedikt, Rydberg's poetic treatment of the Eddas had contributed to their status as national heritage in Sweden;<sup>3</sup> something the poet Benedikt could identify with.

### 6.3.3 Hellas and Hyperborea

Like Rydberg's, Benedikt's ambitions reached well beyond the academic antiquarianism of other philologists, and he was the first Icelander to concern himself with the theoretical study of aesthetics (*fagurfræði*). In line with contemporary Romantic thought, the fine arts were more than simply 'pleasing to the senses'; according to Benedikt they formed the highest source of knowledge and the most elevated goal of mankind.<sup>4</sup> His views are in many ways compatible to those of the *Fjölnismenn*, as expressed by their champion Jónas Hallgrímsson in his ferocious review of Sigurður Breiðfjörð's *Rímur af Tistrani og Indiönu* (see Chapter 4.2.2). Like Jónas, Benedikt despised the rímur and their artificial modes of expression, although he would later 'change his mind' on this matter when he composed his own cycle of rímur (*Göngu-Hrólfs-rímur*; Reykjavík 1893), in part because he simply needed money and the traditional genre was still unabatedly popular in Iceland.<sup>5</sup> But whereas Jónas fully embraced modernity – in the shape of Heine and Schiller for instance – Benedikt was decidedly conservative in his artistic outlook, and distrustful of any avant-gardist tendencies – especially realism – which challenged the Romantic notion of *subjective* truth.<sup>6</sup> The supremacy of subjectivity over objectivity is thematised in his long poem *Hugfró* ('Mind Satisfaction'; 1858), which relates the story of a seeker of truth, a lone *Wanderer* or *Ahasverus*, modeled after the Romantic archetype. In this quest, macro- and microcosm merge and contemporary scientific concepts – notably the star *Alcyone*, which was believed to be the centre of the universe – are applied as metaphors for events in the protagonist's

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<sup>1</sup> "Ur þessum brotum hefir Rydberg timbrað upp dýrðlega skrautbyggingu, sem sýnir hinn furðulega skáldskap fornaldarinnar í öllum sínum ljóma, svo vér minnumst þess er N. M. Petersen sagði: »den mest poetiske forklaring er altid den ægte«, og þess sem Max Muller segir: »die Einbildungskraft des Dichters ist fast noch besser zu brauchen, als der Scharfsinn und die Genauigkeit des Gelehrten«. Rydbergs verk er einmitt »den germaniska mythens stora epos«, sem hann hefir endurreist úr rústum fornaldarinnar." Gröndal (1892) p.150.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Karl Warburg, *Viktor Rydberg, en lefnadsteckning* (2 vls., Stockholm 1900).

<sup>3</sup> Rydberg's rendition of the myths for children, *Fädernas gudasaga* ('Our Fathers' Godsaga'; Stockholm 1887) became very popular, and would determine Swedish images of pre-Christian religion for generations.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Benedikt's collection of essays "Nokkrar greinir um skáldskap", included in his collected poems and essays, *Kvæði og nokkrar greinir um skáldskap og fagnar menntir* (Copenhagen 1853) pp.53-91. For a thorough analysis of Benedikt's aesthetics, see Óskarsson (1987).

<sup>5</sup> By this time, Benedikt had already developed a more sympathetic view on the rímur-tradition, which he now considered a significant ingredient of Icelandic cultural history. See Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.219.

<sup>6</sup> On Benedikt's conservatism, see Óskarsson (2006) p.290.

inner-world; a practice not unlike those employed by Benedikt's fellow-naturalist Jónas, who frequently resorted to geology and astronomy in his poetry. In the works of both poets, the line between poetry and science is eliminated through a pantheistic experience of nature, which transforms even the driest scientific matter into expressions of the omnipresent subject. It is in this creative interplay between 'reality' and 'subjectivity', *Wahrheit und Dichtung*, that the true artist – who in his work creates a mirror for God himself – has to strike the right balance.<sup>1</sup> For art without subjectivity is no art at all, and Romantic subjectivity void of any sense of reality could only result in the bombastic megalomania exemplified by Wagner's operas. In Benedikt's view, that greatest of 'Nordic geniuses', William Shakespeare, had achieved and cultivated this delicate balance most convincingly. True art, like that created by Shakespeare but also by Homer and Goethe, was universal – or 'unnational' (*óþjóðlegt*) – per definition, since true poetry "has no fatherland except for the realm of the soul, and its rules are eternal freedom."<sup>2</sup>

In the light of his philological arguments in favour of an 'Icelandic Shakespeare' as the mastermind behind the Eddic poems, Benedikt's own opinions on the Eddas may come as somewhat of a surprise. In his opinion, the works included in the *Poetic Edda* did not qualify as true literature, or even as actual poetry at all. In an article written in the year before his death, he expressed his dislike of the Eddas as follows:

The poetic value of the Eddic poems will not be discussed here: the mythological lays possess no such value, and the others are a barbaric description of a barbaric age, although on occasion something appears which can touch more intimate and soft strings. But departing from this, one can 'poeticise' however one wishes.<sup>3</sup>

The poems did not live up to Benedikt's aesthetic criteria, and were embryonic proto-poems<sup>4</sup> – containing some measure of poetic potential – at best. Whatever poetic value they *may* possess was primarily in the eye of the 'poeticising' beholder. They were neither universal nor worthy of praise and emulation, and incomparable with the great mythological narratives of the classical world from which Benedikt drew much of his inspiration. In *Dægradvöl* he quotes Goethe's wish that Greek and Roman literature will forevermore remain the foundation of all higher education<sup>5</sup>; a plea which appears to be strangely at odds with the Romantic preoccupation with vernacular cultures, Nordic authenticity and national epics. A classicist at heart, Benedikt did not adhere to the Grundtvigian brand of Nordic Romanticism, in which a pure and authentic North was juxtaposed to an unauthentic and generally perverted and debased South ('Rome'); a geographical dichotomy found in the climatological theories of Bjarni Thorarensen as well (see Chapter 4.1.1). In fact, in the larger scheme of things, Nordic culture hardly seemed to matter to Benedikt at all; in his unpublished prize essay submitted to the university of Strasbourg, *De studiis classicis* – otherwise known as the 'Strasbourg Book' (1869-70) –, which he wrote entirely in Latin and which has not yet been translated, he attempts to convince his readership of the importance of classical culture and classical writers to the modern world. No mention is made of Iceland or of its ancient literature, and no value is attributed to national identities; it is only the universal, supra-

<sup>1</sup> Óskarsson (1987) p.164.

<sup>2</sup> "Skáldskapurinn á ekkert föðurland, nema ríki andans, og lög hans eru eilíft frelsi." Gröndal (1853) p.84. See also p.118.

<sup>3</sup> "Um skáldlegt gildi Eddukviðanna verður ekki talað hér: goðfræðis-kviðurnar hafa ekkert slíkt gildi, og hinar eru barbarísk lýsing í barbarískri öld, þótt stundum komi sumt fyrir, sem getur snert innilegri og blíðari strengi. En það má >póetisera< út af þessu eins og vill." Gröndal (1953) pp.210-1. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.234.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (1864) p.371. See also idem. (1873) p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.308.

national Greco-Roman foundation of Europe that seems to make any difference to him.<sup>1</sup> Patriotism is considered a positive characteristic – as could be expected from a nationalist like Benedikt – but is conceived in more classical, pre-modern terms as *amor patriae*, rather than a dedication to an organic entity or a *Volksgeist* as constructed by the followers of Herder and Grimm.

The ambiguity in Benedikt's approach to Iceland's literary heritage can be explained in part by his dedication to his erudite father, the teacher Sveinbjörn Egilsson, and the Neohumanistic ideals he had sought to imbue the Icelandic youth with. Benedikt shared his father's commitment to the classical model of pedagogy, revolving around the study of Greek and Latin texts. This emphasis on the classical texts was not conceived as 'anti-national' or 'un-Icelandic', since it was believed that, through the examples of ancient antiquity, modern Europeans could be taught to love their own respective fatherlands, the same way the Spartans or Athenians had done. Classical antiquity served as a model calling for emulation, as Sveinbjörn had demonstrated himself with his poetic translations of ancient Icelandic literature into Latin and Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into Icelandic.<sup>2</sup> Benedikt often defended his father's legacy against oblivion, and against those who mistakenly praise others – like Guðbrandur Vigfússon or the *Fjölnismenn* – for innovations in Icelandic culture and philology brought about by his father (in Benedikt's eyes at least).<sup>3</sup> He also followed in his father's footsteps, both as a poet and a scholar; he continued the *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquæ Linguae Septentrionalis* which Sveinbjörn had initiated, and which would first appear in 1854-60, years after Sveinbjörn's death.<sup>4</sup> He also completed his father's translation of the *Odyssey*, and made a poetic translation of the *Iliad* – which his father had translated into prose –, of which only the first half was actually published. Instead of presenting classical culture as something remote and alien to the North – as Grundtvig tended to do – the greatness of Icelandic national culture and the Icelandic language could be enhanced by *association with* and *emulation of* the great universal (*óþjóðlegt*) classical heritage of Europe; Sveinbjörn considered Greek and Nordic antiquity to be mirror-images of each other.<sup>5</sup> The influence of this Neohumanism – both explicit and implicit – is readily discernable in many of Benedikt's poems.

It may be considered paradoxical that exactly *this* man, with his aesthetic reservations regarding the Eddas and his classical preferences, would compose the only truly Eddic cycle of Romantic poems in Icelandic, on a more extensive scale than any of his predecessors had ever done.<sup>6</sup> How can this be explained? I will argue that the answer to this question is twofold: first of all, Benedikt was not so much inspired by the Eddas themselves, but rather by previous *receptions* of the myths, especially those by Oehlenschläger, Grundtvig and Bjarni Thorarensen, and the scholarship of Finnur Magnússon. Secondly – and related to the first point – Benedikt did not believe that the value of the Eddas should be sought in their

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<sup>1</sup> The original manuscript sent in by Benedikt was lost in the course of the Franco-Prussian War, but another version of the text can be found in the National Library of Iceland (Lbs. 4043, 8vo). Currently, this problematic text is for the first time receiving the scholarly attention it deserves from Hjalti Snær Ægisson, to whom I am very grateful for drawing my attention to this classicist manifesto.

<sup>2</sup> On the role of classical culture in Iceland see especially Glad (2011).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Gröndal (2014) p.120, and Gröndal (1953) pp.340-1.

<sup>4</sup> A new edition of this influential lexicon of the Old Norse-Icelandic poetic language would appear in 1912-5, completely revised by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, *Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab*).

<sup>5</sup> Kristján Árnason, "Sveinbjörn Egilsson og grískar menntir á Íslandi", in idem, *Hið fagra er satt* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.359-375, 366-7.

<sup>6</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2011) goes so far as to claim that Benedikt Gröndal is the *only* Romantic in Iceland to have thematised Old Norse mythology in a significant fashion (p.216). Although it is true that the centrality and agency attributed to the gods in Benedikt's poetry is unprecedented, I do not consider the 'mythological works' of all the earlier Icelandic poets 'insignificant' in comparison.

uniqueness and alterity, in their ‘being different’ from an opposing and dominant cultural sphere in the South. Instead, Benedikt believed that the value of the Old Norse myths was determined by the extent to which they could be *related* to the ancient Greeks and their superior civilisation. Whenever the Eddic gods enter Benedikt’s poetic stage, the gods of the Olympus are never far behind. In order to justify this connection between Hellas and Thule historically, Benedikt claimed that there had been close contacts and cultural transfer between the ancient Greeks and the original inhabitants of Scandinavia (or *Nordbors*), whom the Greeks referred to as *Hyperboreans* (‘those who live beyond the North Wind’). This mythic people, which was believed to live in a perfect and blissful land, is first mentioned in Herodotus’s *Histories* (Book IV, chapters 32-36). In the course of the centuries many European peoples have identified themselves with these utopian descriptions, but according to Benedikt they could only refer to the ancient Scandinavians, who had possibly been visited by Greek explorers *long* before the ‘Æsir-peoples’ (*Ásaþjóðir*) – that is: the Asian immigrants who brought with them their Indo-European culture – had reached the North.<sup>1</sup> This very original take on the history of Northern Europe facilitates the idea of a classical primer coating, to which the Asian myths were then applied at a later stage in Scandinavia’s development. In their very essence, Northern and Southern culture supplement each other. This theory can be categorised as *association* (function number four, as outlined in Chapter 1.1), and simultaneously *universalisation* (function three) of Nordic culture.

#### 6.3.4 Freyja’s Tears

This ideological assimilation of classical and Nordic culture is functionalised poetically in poems like *Venus og Freyja* (‘Venus and Freyja’; 1860<sup>2</sup>), in which the two love goddesses are associated with each other, not unlike Gísli Brynjúlfsson’s (later) assimilation of Aphrodite, Venus and Freyja as representations of ‘das Ewig-Weibliche’ (see Chapter 6.2.3). However, the two deities are by no means identical in Benedikt’s poem; whereas Venus is described in terms of splendour and abundance and as a glorious bringer of joy, her Nordic counterpart is described as taciturn, pure and white, but quiet and in mourning over the absence of her husband. The contrast could hardly be more striking. In the very last strophe of the poem, Benedikt gives an interesting twist to the relationship between the two:

Wait Freyja, Óður will come again  
 from the East with a new brother,  
 power and endurance resound in their mutual song.  
 Venus died, and deep under the waves’ rushing  
 she dwells far away from the stream of ages;  
 dead flowers mask the white goddess.  
 But you live on the summit of the magnetic mount,<sup>3</sup>  
 love warms a glacier-cold path.  
 As long as a Nordic maiden knows your name  
 she will love and call upon you.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gröndal, “Forn fræði”, in *Gefn* 2 (1871) pp.19-91, 72. See also Gröndal (1892) p.149.

<sup>2</sup> Published together with poems by Gísli Brynjúlfsson and Steingrímur Thorsteinson in their *Svava. Ýmisleg kvæði* (Copenhagen 1860) pp.65-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Segulleiti*, which I translate here as ‘magnetic mount’, is a neologism invented by Benedikt, based on the word *kennileiti* (landmark). It should be interpreted as that to which the (inner) compass points, or the abstract concept of ‘True North’.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.68-9; Bíddu Freyja, aftur kemur Óður/austri frá með nýjan bróður,/afl og þrek í svásum söngva hljómi./Venus dó, og djúpt í ölduglaumi/dvelur hún í fjarrum aldastraumi;/hvíta gyðju hylja visin blóm./En þú lifir efst við segulleiti,/ástin vermir jökulkaldan stig./Meðan norræn meyja kann þitt heiti/mun hún elska og nefna þig.

These lines suggest that, while Venus has faded away and rests in the deep, taciturn Freyja is on the rise, and about to welcome her long-lost husband Óður (Old Norse: *Óðr*) home. The stanza seems to be breathing expectation: something great is about to happen. Óðr, about whom virtually nothing is known – except that he is Freyja’s husband, that they have a daughter together (*Hnoss*), and that Freyja weeps tears of gold because of his constant absence (see fig. 19)<sup>1</sup> – will finally come home, and bring with him a ‘new brother from the East’; a cryptic description of what can be interpreted as a new beginning of some sort. Just like every damsel in distress requires a heroic rescue, Freyja’s sadness *has to* provoke an act of deliverance. The eddic sources say nothing about Óðr having any brothers, and the adjective ‘new’ further suggests that poet is here adding a new chapter to the ancient narrative; one which offers not only a revealing justification for Óðr’s perpetual absence, but also a brand-new layer of meaning, with great significance for the modern age. The verse creates the suggestion of *succession* – like that of the signs of the zodiac, or the phases of the moon – in which Venus is waning, becoming a thing of the past, whereas Freyja is about to undergo a transformation which effects the entire Nordic world. The hegemony of classical culture is coming to an end, and a Nordic renaissance – symbolised by a *transformed* Freyja – lies just around the corner. In order to better understand the hidden message – and to unveil the identity of the enigmatic ‘brother from the East’ – one of Benedikt’s more elaborate poems, also focusing on the theme of Óðr’s messianic return, can offer solace.

In the poem *Brísingamen* (‘Freyja’s brooch’; 1871<sup>2</sup>), published eleven years after *Venus og Freyja*, Óður’s travels are thematised and Benedikt’s resignification of the god’s absence reaches its completion. Freyja is described as searching for her spouse, who had been drawn to the more moderate and cultured lands of the South; a poetic reflection on the perpetual lure of the South, which has attracted people from the North throughout the ages.<sup>3</sup> In the South, Óður – who is in this poem equated with Óðinn’s in his function as god of poetry – meets Apollo, god of light and poetry, who leads the way to a magical flower which symbolises the warm virtues of the South. Óður takes the flower to Ásgarðr where he presents it to his wife, who is not only the goddess of love but also of war and therefore arguably too belligerent to personify Benedikt’s more Romantic concept of love. The hard, martial element in Freyja’s character is here symbolised by *Brísingamen*; a piece of mythical jewelry generally considered to be a necklace but here presented as a brooch.<sup>4</sup> Upon Óður’s return, this cold metal object is dramatically shattered and replaced by the flower of the South, described by Apollo as follows:

With this flower, all the lands of the world  
will be bound in strong magic fetters  
so it will pale every single flower on my beach.  
in a golden wreath you will wind a treasure  
and then give it to fair *Vanadís* [Freyja]  
when you return to the high heavens.  
from new gain a bright flame will rise  
softening the hard slayings of a strong spirit  
warming icy peaks and ice cold.

<sup>1</sup> See stanza 25 of the *Völuspá*, where Freyja is called ‘Óðr’s girl’ (*Óðs mey gefna*), as well as chapter 35 of *Gylfaginning* in the *Prose Edda* and chapter 1 of the *Ynglinga saga* in Snorri’s *Heimskringla*.

<sup>2</sup> *Gefn* 2:2 (1871) pp.9-14. Benedikt had already composed the poem in 1864-5.

<sup>3</sup> See his own clarification of the poem; *idem*, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> See especially the *Þrymskviða* of the *Poetic Edda*.

without this, love may never blossom.<sup>1</sup>

The literary theme of a quest for a hidden flower with supernatural (transformative) powers did not arise from the Eddic sources themselves, but forms a quintessentially *Romantic* trope which started with Novalis's 'blue flower': an allegory for the Romantic ideals of nature, inspiration, and the Sublime (see Chapter 1.3). This theme already inspired Bjarni Thorarensen's application of 'white lilies' in his *Sigrúnarljóð* ('Sigrún's Song'; 1820. See Chapter 4.1.2), but in *Brísingamen* the flower is for the first time applied as a symbol not of *personal*, but rather *national* transformation and regeneration. This innovative resignification serves as a good example of how the personal (or subjective), the natural, and the national (*Volksgeist*) are intertwined in the Romantic imagination.

Another revealing element in this poem is the fact that Freyja, representing the nation, is depicted as melancholic and weeping, awaiting better times. The theme of weeping mythical characters – like Valkyries, or the *verndarvættir* ('guardian spirits') of Iceland – lamenting the loss of the nation's greatness after the 'Golden Age' (see Chapter 7.2.3) recurs in several of Benedikt's poems, including *Sjón* ('Vision') and *Kvæði* ('Poem').<sup>2</sup> This expression of sadness regarding the present state of affairs is a common feature of nationalistic poetry and is often intended to motivate the readers to undertake action and to restore the glory of the nation. The image of Freyja crying echoes the nostalgia expressed by Jónas Hallgrímsson in his poem *Ísland* (see Chapter 4.2.4), in which the former greatness of Þingvellir is contrasted to the gloomy silence and emptiness enveloping the abandoned place in modern times. The present, in which Jónas claimed to be 'stalled and penned' like a prisoner, is often described in negative terms, as a time of decline and forgetfulness, stalled between a glorious past and an awaited future which *could* become glorious as well, *if* the heritage of the ancestors is no longer neglected but rather cherished and emulated. This is why the two Janus-faces of nationalism only look backwards and forwards, but never at the present, which is only a degenerate phase of 'inbetweenness', but rife with anticipation. An age of weeping.<sup>3</sup> Like Jónas's Þingvellir and Bjarni Thorarensen's *Fjallkonan*, Benedikt's Freyja is abandoned and seemingly discarded (by Óður), and has good reasons to lament her fate. But, just like Jónas envisioned a restored *Alþingi* bringing new national life to the abandoned plains of Þingvellir, so too would Freyja be restored and even exalted in the future, when Óður returns.

The poem ends with the rather non-descriptive remark that the reunited lovers 'returned home', but this does not diminish the monumental message Benedikt tries to convey in these verses. The love goddess Freyja, stripped of her Nordic harshness (*Brísingamen*) and adorned with the flower of southern love and warmth, personifies Benedikt's ideal of a balanced symbiosis of Nordic and southern/classical characteristics. Old Norse-Icelandic culture was to be cherished and cultivated in Benedikt's opinion; *Iðunn*, the Eddic goddess of eternal youth – and in the national discourses of the nineteenth century increasingly an allegory for Nordic national rejuvenation (see Chapter 3.3.1) – and *Saga*, personification of (Nordic) history, still were 'not dead', Benedikt wrote in another poem.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Gefn* 2:2 (1871) p.13; Með þessu blómi muntu heimsins lönd/í meginstyrkan töfraffjötur binda/svo bliknar hvert eitt blóm á minni strönd./í gullinn sveig þú gersemi skalt vinda/og gefa síðan fagri Vanadís/er aftur snýrðu hátt til himin-grinda./af nýjum gróða bjartur bjarmi rís/blíðkandi harðan vígum stæltan anda/vermandi klakatind og kaldan ís./Án þess má ástin ei í blóma standa.

<sup>2</sup> In *Kvæðabók* (Reykjavík 1900) pp. 14-7 and 41-2 respectively. See also Egilsson (1999) pp.187-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present. Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge MA 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Jónsson (1906) p.70.

That which was beautiful in the past withers in the present,<sup>1</sup> but the Icelandic language itself forms a direct link with the past and even with the world of the gods themselves, since it had sprung from the well of *Bragi* – god of poetry – himself in order to resound in all the Nordic lands.<sup>2</sup> Benedikt’s admiration of the Old Norse language is reflected in the archaicised Icelandic of his poetry, in which he reintroduced extinct Old Norse words and spelling,<sup>3</sup> just like he claimed the Icelandic writer of the Eddic poems had done, consciously, in order to make them appear older and thus more venerable than they actually were.<sup>4</sup> However, cultivating this national heritage *in opposition to* an antagonistic (classical) South – as was the case in the writings of Grundtvig and Bjarni Thorarensen – was not an option in his view. Without the soothing influence of classical culture and Romantic love, the Nordic past was simply too harsh and uncultivated – like Eddic poetry itself – to be of any value to modern national poets and artists. As a cultural nationalist, Benedikt believed that an Icelandic renaissance could only be achieved through the cultivation of a *transformed* vision of the North; one infused with all the positive values and characteristics of the South and the East, symbolised by Óður’s ‘new brother’ and Apollo’s magic flower. The poem *Brísingamen* can therefore be considered an artistic expression of Benedikt’s – and his father’s – Neohumanistic and didactic ideals.<sup>5</sup>

Benedikt was not the first Nordic poet to be inspired by the tantalising obscurity of Freyja’s husband, and to mobilise this *tabula rasa* for his own ideological purposes. In his popular cycle of poems *Nordens Guder* (1819) Oehlenschläger had already thematised Óður, and described him as a wine-god from India whose chariot was pulled by tigers (see Chapter 3.2.2). Oehlenschläger’s works remained popular throughout the nineteenth century and had a considerable impact on the writings of Benedikt and his contemporaries. The similarities between Oehlenschläger’s Óður and Benedikt’s are therefore not unexpected: both Óðurs are connected to southern and exotic cultures and return to the North with rich gifts derived from nature, and both Óðurs transform, by doing so, the nature of the love between him and Freyja, and the very nature of love itself.<sup>6</sup> Even Oehlenschläger’s invention of replacing Freyja’s docile cats with tigers is taken over by Benedikt.<sup>7</sup> Rather than accusing Benedikt of plagiarism, it is worth considering these obvious references to his famous Danish predecessor as a poetic statement, regarding both romantic love and contemporary Old Norse philology. The poem *Brísingamen* can be read as a pledge of allegiance to the Romantic ideals of Oehlenschläger and his generation<sup>8</sup> and to the Indo-European theories of Finnur Magnússon, by which both poets were profoundly inspired. Rather than setting Eddic mythology apart from all other mythologies and consequently creating a discourse of national alterity *vis-à-vis* ‘the others’, Oehlenschläger and Benedikt followed Finnur’s footsteps in their attempts to *connect* Old Norse mythology to other traditions – primarily the Indian and classical ones – and to *emancipate* their national heritage – another branch of that honorable ‘Eurasian myth-

<sup>1</sup> See the poem *Björk*, in *Svava* (1860) p.55; “það fölnar í dag, sem var fagurt í gær”.

<sup>2</sup> See the poem *Tungan mín*, in *idem*, p.8. It is interesting that Benedikt here assigns a well, which is usually associated with *Mímir*, god of wisdom, to *Bragi*. This could be indicative of Benedikt’s Romantic ideas on the entanglement of poetry and wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Benedikt often applies the Old Norse suffix –r instead of the modern Icelandic –ur, so for instance: *sorgarleitr* instead of *sorgarleikur* (tragedy) in the full title of *Gandreiðin*.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (1872, 1873).

<sup>5</sup> See also Glad (2011) pp.81-2.

<sup>6</sup> Egilsson (1999) pp.196-9.

<sup>7</sup> In *Brísingamen*, *Gefn* 2:2 (1871) p.13. The possibility of both Oehlenschläger and Benedikt having been inspired by an earlier text linking Freyja’s chariot to tigers is deemed unlikely by Egilsson (1999), p.197-8.

<sup>8</sup> On the Romantic longing for mildness – which often conflicted with the harshness of the Old Norse past – see especially my treatment of Oehlenschläger’s *Der er et yndigt land* (‘There is a lovely country’, 1819) in Chapter 3.2.2. Here too, Freyja represents the milder side of the nation’s ancient past.



tree’ – by doing so. Popular theories – based on Montesquieu and professed by Bjarni Thorarensen and Grímur Thomsen – asserting that the Nordic peoples and their cultures were not only unique, but also *superior* to southern cultures on the basis of their climatic situation (see Chapters 4.1 and 6.1), had no place in this (Indo-)European inclusivism and were therefore dismissed by Benedikt. Bjarni’s juxtaposition of a noble North (Freyja) against a degenerate South (Bacchus)<sup>1</sup> does not resonate in his poems.

Benedikt’s programmatic transformation of Ásgarðr had earlier culminated in a more ambitious project, titled *Ragnarökkur. Kvæði um Norðurlanda guði* (‘Ragnarökkur. Poems about Nordic gods’): ninety-six pages of poetry – in dialogue form, though not ‘theatrical’ according to Benedikt<sup>2</sup> – dealing with the long overture to the eventual downfall of the gods (*Ragnarök*<sup>3</sup>), preceded by an elaborate scholarly introduction. The work evolved over the course of some twenty years, until it was finally published in 1868,<sup>4</sup> and deals with highly complex philosophical matters which were hard to grasp for the general Icelandic audience. It is the most elaborate poetic treatment of Eddic mythology in modern Icelandic, and stands out as the most vivid example of Romantic mythography of Icelandic origin. Benedikt applies a variety of different meters in this work, among others the traditional Eddic ones, but most frequently the – unrhymed – blank verse, which is here adorned with traditional alliterations.<sup>5</sup> In the introduction, Benedikt claims to remain as faithful as possible to the established ideas on the Eddas (*eddufræði*), but that he would also make use of his poetic license to deviate from them or to expand upon them in a more creative manner than scholars would allow.<sup>6</sup> He remains loyal to Finnur Magnússon’s interpretation of mythology as natural philosophy – or proto-science (see Chapter 3.4.5) – and interprets the entire *Ragnarök*-narrative of chaos, destruction, but eventually rebirth, as an allegorical rendering of Alexander von Humboldt’s scientific insight that the eternal flux of creation and perishing is not so much ‘destruction’, “sondern Uebergang der Stoffe in neue Formen.”<sup>7</sup> In the verses of the poem that follows, sporadically, the identification of deities with natural forces and phenomena becomes very obvious. But the narrative is not *merely* a dramatised representation of nature laws; the story is *simultaneously* a rendering of the *condition humaine* – both on the level of the collective and of the individual – which reveals to the reader that it is actually *love* that forms the alpha and the omega of all creation: “Therefore, this poem must end in a victorious rebirth, as Edda also teaches; and because *love* is the center and motive of all life, whether it is divine or human, spiritual or physical, it must also be its ending.”<sup>8</sup> With this distinctly Romantic interpretation of the Old Norse world-view, Benedikt places himself firmly in the psychologising and internalising tradition of Grundtvig, which would lead in a straight line to the philosophy of C.G. Jung.<sup>9</sup> The myths ‘make sense’ on more than only one level.

<sup>1</sup> See Thorarensen’s *Drykkjuvísur* (‘Drinking Songs’), discussed in Chapter 4.1.

<sup>2</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.309-10.

<sup>3</sup> This event is referred to as both *Ragnarök* and *Ragnarökkr* in the Old Norse sources, meaning respectively ‘Fate of the Gods’ and ‘Twilight of the Gods’. Benedikt and his *nemesis* Richard Wagner both opted for this second interpretation of the term.

<sup>4</sup> Copenhagen (1868). As a student in Copenhagen, Benedikt initially planned to compose the whole work in Danish.

<sup>5</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.229.

<sup>6</sup> Gröndal (1868) p.1.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, p.3-4. See also Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.232. The reference is to von Humboldt’s *Kosmos* (III, p.233), one of Benedikt’s favourite books.

<sup>8</sup> Gröndal (1868) p.4; “Þess vegna hlýtur þessi skáldskapur að enda á sigurhrósi endurfæðingarinnar, eins og Edda líka kennir; og af því ástin er miðpunktur og hvöt alls lífs, hvort heldur hún er guðdómleg eða mannleg, andleg eða líkamleg, þá verður hún líka endirinn.” Italics original.

<sup>9</sup> Chase (2000).

Benedikt's poem – which, in great lines, follows the narrative of *Völuspá* and the *Prose Edda* – becomes most interesting there where the story-line deviates from the original sources. This has already been indicated by Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, who in his thorough analysis of the poem claims that Benedikt's deviations mostly serve to strip the old myths of all aspects which could do damage to the *grandeur* of the gods.<sup>1</sup> Most noteworthy are the nearly complete removal of Þórr – who was considered simply too crude and unintelligent to do justice to the Æsir – and the story of Iðunn's apples – the apples of eternal youth, without which the gods grow old very rapidly –, because they did not resonate with Benedikt's more dignified view of the gods, who could not possibly be dependent on apples for their timelessness. Through these choices, Benedikt created a new, more dignified version of the Eddic stories, in which the Æsir seem more static, cultured, and, consequently, more in tune with their southern equivalents: the gods of the Olympus. Although the Greek gods do not make an appearance themselves, their presence even in this work can be sensed in Benedikt's attempt to *classicise* the Nordic gods. One could argue that, in fact, Benedikt tried to demonstrate what Nordic culture *could* – or *should* – look like, after it has been blessed and transformed with Apollo's 'flower of the South'. The picture he paints, is that of a more sensitive and peaceful Ásgarðr; one in which the goddesses and their loving, feminine qualities figure more prominently than the harshness of men. Upon publication, *Ragnarökkur* had become itself a literary achievement of mythical proportions, and one which could be understood – just like the original myths – on multiple levels. Benedikt had managed to express some of his most profound, abstract and philosophical ideas – for instance, on the nature of fate – in the form of myth; in the Eddic sources, it is only Baldr who foresees his own end in chilling dreams, but in *Ragnarökkur* his parents Óðinn and Frigg are haunted by similar nightmares as well. And unlike Baldr's dreams in the Edda, Benedikt's dreams become active agents in their own right, transcending their traditional function of 'harbingers of future catastrophes' and motivating the gods – infused with fear of the possibility of death – to undertake the actions which would eventually lead to Baldur's death and their own downfall. In this sense, the dreams have become *self-fulfilling* prophecies, and the whole catastrophe of *Ragnarök* is charged with psychological significance.<sup>2</sup> The only thing we ought to fear, the poem seems to convey, is fear itself.

However, these deeper messages permeating the whole poem did not seem to reach the Icelandic audience to which they were addressed. Benedikt's expectations regarding the reception of his great work were high, and arguably not unlike Grundtvig's grand vision of a revolutionary new national system of education based on the Eddas.<sup>3</sup> But Benedikt's efforts appear to have been wasted on his own people, who remained painfully silent and seemingly completely unimpressed. His envisioned transformation of Ásgarðr did not resonate with their more traditional concepts of Eddic mythology, and the philosophical profundity of the text remained largely unnoticed by the – all too 'common' – Icelanders. In his memoirs, Benedikt's disappointment over the flawed reception of this poetry – "which people do not want to read and which they don't know how to enjoy, because it is too heavy for the thoughtless general audience"<sup>4</sup> – leads to the bitter conclusion that he himself had never really been a 'man of the people' (*alþýðlegur*). His ideal of a more dignified and intellectually enriching mythology remained *his own* ideal, too elevated to be understood and

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2011) p.230.

<sup>2</sup> Gröndal (1868) p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Grundtvig, Benedikt did not seek to replace 'Rome' with the Eddas (see Chapter 3.2.3), but rather to combine the two. The comparison here is only between the high expectations both writers cherished regarding their new mythological models.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (2014); "Þess háttar skáldskap nennir fólk ekki að lesa og getur ekki notið hans, því hann er of þungur fyrir hugsunarlausan almenning..."

internalised by the people. For all his associations with Romanticism and its glorification of ‘the nation’, the people constituting this nation remained something of a problem to the outsider and cultural elitist Benedikt, throughout his life.

An indication of the paradoxality of Benedikt’s relationship with the Eddas is the humoristic – and often overlooked – satirical play *Gandreiðin* (‘The Witch Ride’),<sup>1</sup> in which the Æsir are presented in a way that appears to be the *exact opposite* of their dignified and classical appearance in *Ragnarökkur* and *Brisingamen*. In this play, which deals with the concerns of contemporary Icelanders living in Copenhagen, and in which characters from the sagas and Old Norse mythology – as well as the devil – enter the scene, Benedikt seems to embrace exactly the burlesque and humoristic crudeness of the myths which differentiates them from classical mythology, and which he had sought to correct in the aforementioned poems. Stylistically, this work has more in common with the satirical sharpness of his *Dægradvöl*, for which he is best remembered today. It contains many only very thinly veiled parodies of contemporary persons and circumstances – like for instance Grundtvig’s Christianised mythology<sup>2</sup> –, and when one of the protagonists, Ögmundr dyttir,<sup>3</sup> remarks that he did not know that Óðinn also spoke Danish – apart from Old Norse-Icelandic, of course –, Óðinn replies that he never speaks Danish, only to uncivilised people.<sup>4</sup> Even Finnur Magnússon, who “understood nothing of Sanskrit” did not escape his sharp pen.<sup>5</sup> It is especially the pompous loftiness of Eddic poetry which is ridiculed, for instance when Ögmundr greets Óðinn in a very poetic manner, to which the supreme god replies: “Not like this Mundi, I think I know you! You don’t have to screw yourself up with lines from [the Eddic poem] *Sigrdrífumál* to greet us here.”<sup>6</sup> The gods in this play are very human – reminiscent of the gods in the comical *Skíðaríma* (see Chapter 2.2.1) – and have nothing in common with the lofty and timeless beings of *Ragnarökkur*, which Benedikt wrote at about the same time as *Gandreiðin*. The elevated and the caricature thus sat side by side in Benedikt’s imagination, and appear to have been two sides of the same coin.<sup>7</sup> Interpreting this play as the creative expression of Benedikt’s aesthetic reservations regarding the Eddas would be too simplistic. Instead, *Gandreiðin* could be seen as a homage to, and a re-activation of the irony and self-deprecation embedded in many of the Eddic poems – like *Lokasenna* – themselves. Furthermore, the popular genre of satire has its respectable roots in the classical farces of Aristophanes, making this genre yet another classical – and hence *justifiable* – mode of dealing with the gods; something which could not be said about the Wagnerian megalomania of his own age.

### 6.3.5 A New Asgard

Summarising Benedikt’s views on the national value of the Eddas is – as this analysis of his philological and creative works has demonstrated – problematic to say the least; not only *synchronically* – many different and even conflicting interpretations of the myths appear to

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<sup>1</sup> Copenhagen 1866.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> This character is taken from the fourteenth-century story *Ögmundar þátrr dytts ok Gunnars helmings*, in which the clever protagonist – a cousin of the more famous Víga-Glúmr from *Víga-Glúms saga* – outsmarts the Norwegians and then travels through Sweden.

<sup>4</sup> Gröndal (1866) p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.5; “... sem ekkert skildi í Sanskrít..”.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.8; “Vert’ ekki að því arna Mundi, jeg held jeg þekki þig! Þú þarfst ekki að vera að skrúfa þig upp með glósur úr *Sigrdrífumálum* til þess að heilsa okkur hèrna.”

<sup>7</sup> In his reference to *Gandreiðin*, Egilsson clarifies the paradox of Benedikt’s mythography through the words of Napoléon Bonaparte, who – upon his disastrous retreat from Russia – is reported to have said that it was only one step from the Sublime to the ridiculous (2008; p.116). These historic words can indeed serve to elucidate the irony, not only in Benedikt’s work, but also in that of other great Romantics like Heine.

have co-existed in Benedikt's head simultaneously – but also *diachronically* – he tended to change his mind on many subjects – his vision of Old Norse myth was anything but monolithic. Just like his opinion on the *rímur*-tradition shifted in the course of the years, so too did his reluctance to reconsider the *alíslenzkt* origin of the Eddic poems – as expressed in the introduction to *Ragnarökur* – soften in the later years of his active life. In 1892 he wrote that, in fact, it was difficult to determine exactly which elements were authentically Nordic/Icelandic, and which were the result of Irish, Norman, Christian or classical influences.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, certain general themes in Benedikt's reception of Old Norse mythology are discernable, and – despite his ambivalent views on the poetic value of the Eddic poems – they are attempts to emancipate Nordic culture *vis-à-vis* – but not *at the expense of* – classical culture, brought about by connecting the myths to something 'greater' than themselves. This is something which Benedikt has in common with the other two protagonists of this chapter, although in his case this 'greater good' was classical – and to a lesser extent Indo-European – culture itself, whereas Grímur Thomsen and Gísli Brynjúlfsson reinterpreted and resignified the myths in the contexts of pan-Nordic and political/revolutionary ideals respectively. In the works of all three of them, philological theory and poetic creativity flow over in, and enhance each other: a typical feature of Romantic historicism. Poems and scholarly articles appeared side by side in his periodical *Gefn*, and in some instances a line of philological argumentation even culminates in poetry.<sup>2</sup> Considering the association of – poetic – beauty with truth in Romantic epistemology, this scholarly mobilisation of poetry is not as absurd as it may seem to us today, and it was also practiced by prominent Romantics like Grundtvig and Coleridge.<sup>3</sup> Any attempt to separate Benedikt the scholar from Benedikt the poet is thus bound to have a distorting effect on our understanding of both his philology *and* his poetry, since much of his creative work can be understood as a poetic functionalisation of philological theory, whereas his poetry can offer us the necessary clues to understand the Romantic idealism underlying many of his scholarly assumptions. Furthermore, these two sides of Benedikt can be considered complementary in the same way the two Janus-faces of nationalism itself – one looking back at some glorious past whereas the other one gazes towards the future – complete each other: Benedikt the scholar represents the backward-looking face, sifting through, interpreting, and *reclaiming* the historical raw materials, in order for Benedikt *the poet* (the forward-looking face) to transform and emulate them – discarding those elements which have no value for future generations – in order to create an ideological blueprint for a new and improved Nordic culture. The whole process of resignifying mythological characters and objects – both original (Brisingamen) and invented (the flower of the South) – serve the purpose of creating a new Ásgarður; one which was more dignified and respectable, and more suitable for a civilised nation like Iceland, built on the Neohumanistic ideals of his father. In short, the ideal nation as envisioned by Benedikt. In this poem, eddic myth serves two related purposes: cultural emancipation through *association* with classical traditions (my fourth function of myth, as formulated in Chapter 1.1), and at the same time *indigenisation* (function two) of 'foreign' concepts such as education and romantic love.

An interesting characteristic of Benedikt's 'improved' version of Eddic mythology is that the goddesses (*gyðjurnar*) are assigned a much more central role than the traditional male gods of Nordic antiquity. In this warmer, more cultivated and less barbaric reinterpretation, the goddess of love has become the focal point of all the action, whereas the most masculine of all the gods (Þórr) has been removed altogether. It is no coincidence that Benedikt selected

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<sup>1</sup> Gröndal (1892) p.106.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance his essay on the giant Hrungrnir (in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* 1860, pp.229-326) p.310.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Egilsson (1999) p.183, Ægidius (1985) pp.25-113, and Lundgreen-Nielsen (1965) pp.15-36.

Óður, the most obscure – and hence the most unspoiled and ‘improvable’ – male god in the Eddas for the role of male educator; in this allegory, Benedikt could single out the *artistic* aspect of – the otherwise too brutal warlord – Óðinn as the most admirable element of Nordic culture, exactly because of its compatibility with the classical values of education, love and moderation (Apollo). The crying Freyja, who will become a perfected version of her former self once she is reunited with her husband and infused with everything which is good and admirable from the South, has become the feminine personification of the nation itself, sharing most of her characteristics with the *Fjallkona* of Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson’s *Hulda* (see Chapter 4.2.3). Like *Fjallkonan* – and the *Þingvellir* of Jónas’s poem *Ísland* – Freyja is passively ‘stalled and penned in the present’, nostalgically gazing backwards and representing the nation’s link with an ancient past,<sup>1</sup> while anticipating the return of the *man*, who will *actively* lead her (the nation) to a glorious and distinctly *modern* future, without severing the traditional bonds with a glorified antiquity (Ásgarður). Thus, she represents the ‘double time of the nation’ as conceptualised by Homi Bhabha.<sup>2</sup> In Benedikt’s narrative, the male characters are outspokenly *modern* in the sense that they are either imported (Apollo) or reinvented beyond recognition (Óður), and in any case well-traveled and adaptable ‘men of the world’. The worn-out male stubbornness of Þórr and even Óðinn had little or no place in this new template of pragmatic mythography, in which *Fjallkonan* now finally found her more indigenous – that is: ancient/Eddic – manifestation in the figure of Freyja. Reinterpreted in this way, the ‘national’ gods and goddesses could become instruments of indigenisation, through which foreign ideals like Romantic nationalism and classical education could be woven into the mythical fabric of the nation itself. This may explain why Benedikt spent relatively little attention to the *Íslendingasögur* as a source of national rejuvenation, as for instance Jónas Hallgrímsson and Matthías Jochumsson (see Chapter 8.1.2) have done; the heroic masculinity – as represented by Þórr – and the historical boundedness of the saga characters – limited by time and space – made the sagas an unattractive vehicle for the propagation of Benedikt’s universal values and sophisticated world-view. From the philological perspective, his entire *oeuvre* – both poetic and scholarly – could be interpreted as a poetic bridge between the intellectual revivalism of Finnur Magnússon, and the institutionalised elitism and cultural nationalism of the ‘Icelandic School’ of philology, inspired on the views of Konrad Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen. Benedikt’s influence on the development of Icelandic philology in the decades around 1900 will be scrutinised in the following chapter.

In this section of the present study, dealing with ‘eddic poetry and eddic politics’, we have seen how old stories generate new stories, and how simple mythemes – like Óðr’s absence, or the wild hunt – can evolve into elaborate new mythologies of their own. A deeper understanding of this perpetual process of *autopoiesis* – or, in this case, *mythopoiesis* – leads to the question whether ‘reception’ is not too passive and misleading a term for describing the very dynamic rhetorical processes which underlie the creation of new myths from the fragmentary remnants of their ancient predecessors. These new narratives contain ideological agency in and of themselves, and constitute instruments of either centrifugal (e.g. Grímur Thomsen) or centripetal (e.g. Benedikt Gröndal) identity formation, more ‘active’ in a rhetorical sense than the term reception may lead to suggest. As argument-empowering metaphors, moving beyond words and rational argumentation, the myths convey ‘rightness’ (Cohen) and can be mobilised for any ideological standpoint, ranging from Grímur Thomsen’s pan-Scandinavism to Gísli’s call for revolution and Benedikt Gröndal’s classical nationalism. In all three cases, eddic language, characters and concepts are used to appeal to

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<sup>1</sup> Cusack (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha (1990).

the reader's sense of Icelandicness, through which he is invited into the group-shaping game of mythology (Huizinga) and encouraged to contemplate the relevance of modern, non-Icelandic phenomena – like Scandinavia, the Hungarian revolution, or classical education – to Icelandic culture and identity. Unlike the first wave of Icelandic Romantics (see Chapter 4), the three writers under scrutiny in this section have fashioned their divergent ideas on Icelandic identity *explicitly* in mythological terms, in philological tractates, political essays and Romantic poetry alike. In this endeavour, they were hardly original when compared to national instrumentalisations of mythology in other parts of Western Europe, and in some cases – for instance: in the case of Grímur Thomsen's imitation of Oehlenschläger in his poems on Hákon jarl – these works can be understood in the light of Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, according to which 'the colonised' imitate 'the coloniser' in their formulation of a separate identity (see Chapter 6.1.2). And by doing so, these Romantic polymaths determined not only their position towards Old Norse literature and the 're-awakened' Icelandic nation, but simultaneously towards the world at large.



## 7. Myth and National Culture in the Academy (1880-1918)

### 7.1 *Origin and Ownership: The Contested Origins of the Edda*

#### 7.1.1 Nourishing the Tree of Nationality

In the preceding chapters, it has been demonstrated how Romantic nationalism, mythological studies, philology, art and poetry were intertwined to such an extent, that most of the protagonists discussed so far were active in more than one of the fields just mentioned; Finnur Magnússon, the scholar of international repute, wrote poetry as well, and the poets Benedikt Gröndal and Grímur Thomsen formulated semi-academic theories to support their ideological and poetic views. The Romantic *polymath*, working as a cultural broker in an international intellectual context of ‘interlocking nationalisms’ – disseminating his ideas about the nation in rhyme, political polemics, and philosophical treatises alike – constitutes one of the defining hallmarks of Romantic nationalism (see Chapter 1.3).

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, this ideal of the heroic polymath made way for a more institutionalised brand of nationalism, in which brilliant philologists or historians no longer doubled as national poets or *vice versa*. In the decades around 1900, Romantic nationalism was undergoing a gradual but radical transformation, without ceasing to be Romantic. The same national discourse – defining of a ‘golden age’, a dark middle age, and a national awakening in the present – remained in place, but the ‘growing academic professionalization’ throughout Europe invoked “a tendency among later historians and philologists to denounce the ‘amateurism’ of the earlier, pioneer generation; fact-checking and a methodological climate of positivism tends to replace the earlier pattern of enthusiastic evocation and inspired empathy.”<sup>1</sup> In this section of my dissertation, I will focus on the evolution of Icelandic ideas on the Eddas and the pagan past, mutually interacting in the context of increasing professionalisation, and – more often than not – formulated in *reaction to* foreign discourses on Old Norse-Icelandic literature and mythology. How were the Romantic ideas of the nineteenth century reformulated or transformed by Icelandic philologists and historians working in those crucial years around 1900? How did these academic discourses contribute to the construction of a modern, national self-image? And what happened to the more poetic ‘enthusiastic evocation and inspired empathy’, with which the earlier generation of Romantics had approached the Eddas? I will return to this last question in Chapters 8 and 9, dealing with the cultivation of eddic themes in spirituality, poetry, art, and the Icelandic public sphere.

The institutionalisation of the Romantic discourse and the creation of a national *pantheon* of Romantic heroes, or ‘cultural saints’<sup>2</sup>, dovetailed with nationalism’s transformation into a mass-movement and its growing dissemination among the Icelandic people. Reykjavík, since the restoration of the Alþingi in 1843-5 the political heart of the nation, rapidly evolved towards the great capital city envisioned by both Jón Sigurðsson and Sigurður *málari* (see Chapter 5.2). This development called for the erection of monumental buildings and the celebration of the nation’s past in statues and memorials, leading to the

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.15.

<sup>2</sup> For the working definition of this term as applied by the international research project ‘Cultural Saints of Europe’, see Dović and Helgason (2017) pp.71-96.



formulation of a crystallised hierarchy of canonised literary and political heroes or ‘national darlings’ worthy of statues, headed by Jón Sigurðsson and Jónas Hallgrímsson.<sup>1</sup> Jón’s birthday – the seventeenth of June – was first commemorated with a public gathering in 1907, and celebrated for the first time as Iceland’s national holiday (*þjóðarhátíðardagurinn*) in 1911, one hundred years after his birth.<sup>2</sup> The public character of these events, better education, the explosion of easily available newspapers and periodicals, and the prominent position of statues and monumental references to Iceland’s past in the public sphere (Habermas’s *Öffentlichkeit*), marked the beginning of a new stage in the development of Iceland’s national discourse. No longer an exclusive project reserved for the educated – and often Copenhagen-based – elite, the basic tenets of Romantic nationalism now became a common good among all Icelanders, who had all heard of Jón Sigurðsson and Jónas Hallgrímsson, of the heroic Viking-age heroes Njáll, Egill and Gunnar, and who all ‘understood’ that Iceland was special in many ways, and therefore worthy of a larger degree of political autonomy, or maybe even independence. This democratisation of national ideals, which occurred throughout Europe, can be associated with phase two and three of Miroslav Hroch’s model of the development of national movements (see Chapter 1.2.1).

In 1874, marking the first millennial celebration of Iceland’s settlement, King Christian IX of Denmark visited ‘his’ island and presented his Icelandic subjects with their first, Icelandic constitution. Official celebrations in Reykjavík and on Þingvellir, overseen by Sigurður málari, were designed to present the king and the Icelandic people with the island’s glorious past, and Matthías Jochumsson’s poem *Lofsöngur* (‘Anthem’), composed for this occasion and put to music by Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson, would eventually – in 1944 – become the nation’s national anthem. After this first mass manifestation of national sentiment, and after Jón Sigurðsson’s death in 1879, his political heirs continued the struggle for greater autonomy with considerable success; in 1903 Iceland’s constitution was revised, and in 1904 further modifications increased the extent of the nation’s home rule dramatically. On the first of December 1918, Iceland was finally recognised as a sovereign state – a separate kingdom in personal union with Denmark through a shared monarch – with its own coat of arms and its own flag. In the midst of all these developments, the academic equivalent of Iceland’s political declaration of independence occurred in 1911, when – on Jón Sigurðsson’s hundredth birthday – the University of Iceland (*Háskóli Íslands*) was founded. From now on, Icelanders would no longer be solely dependent on Danish institutions for their higher education. How did this change in Iceland’s intellectual and institutional infrastructure influence Icelandic scholars and their ideas on Old Norse-Icelandic literature and pre-Christian religion? Who were the people behind the foundation of the university, and what were their ideological motivations? How did the fledgling Reykjavík-based discourses on philology and national history relate to the Danish ‘mother institutions’ they originated from?<sup>3</sup> And what can these discursive changes tell us about the development of Icelandic national identity around 1900?

In order to reach a better understanding of the development of Icelandic attitudes towards their Old Norse heritage, it is pivotal to situate them in their broader, international context. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Ossianic paradigm in which the imagological construction of ‘the Romantic North’ had taken flight in Europe, was largely replaced by a Wagnerian, or a ‘Teutonic’ paradigm, in which eddic deities, Germanic heroes, and Teutonic primordialism evolved into cultural and political hallmarks of pan-European

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<sup>1</sup> On the creation of this national pantheon, and especially Jónas Hallgrímsson’s posthumous ‘victory’ over Bjarni Thorarensen in this respect, see Jón Karl Helgason (2012).

<sup>2</sup> On the cultural and political canonisation of Jón Sigurðsson, see Björnsson (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the University of Iceland should not be interpreted as too revolutionary a break with the past, since many Icelanders still went to Copenhagen to pursue their studies.

significance. Just to provide the reader with some idea of the political significance of Norse myth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we will now briefly turn our attention to developments in Germany and in England, respectively.

After the first *Bayreuther Festspiele* of 1876, the rich imagery of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* would come to determine German visions of their ancient past.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Otto von Bismarck, 'forger' of the empire, achieved mythical proportions in the German imagination – especially after 1900 –, and was often depicted as a Germanic god for propaganda purposes, notably as Óðinn (Wotan), Baldr, or – especially from 1914 onwards – as the messianic 'resurrected war god' Þórr (Donner, or T(h)or), always in their Wagnerian manifestations.<sup>2</sup> A link between Bismarck's heroic actions and the Icelandic sagas was suggested by the philologist Felix Niedner, who claimed in his *Islands Kultur zur Wikingerzeit* (1913) that the "kraftvollen Menschennatur" of the saga heroes, "die sich in allen Widerwärtigkeiten des Schicksals durchsetzt", shone like a "Sinnbild aus ältester Zeit der Genius großen Germanentums, dessen willenstarkes Walten wir in dem Zeitalter Bismarcks so lebendig verspürten."<sup>3</sup> Just like Þórr's hammer (Mjölfnir) had become a symbol of revolutionary action in the poetry of Gísli Brynjúlfsson (see Chapter 6.2), the same object now became associated throughout Europe with German aggression during the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

The eddic gods became popular household names in Germany due to their appearance on stamps and popular collectibles – produced by chocolate or meat manufacturers –, and became so intertwined with German self-images, that Heimdallr – the god who guards Ásgarðr's frontiers and blows his horn to warn the gods when the forces of Ragnarök approach – was mobilised, paradoxically, in both German *and* Danish propaganda concerning the contested national status of Slesvig and Holstein. This border dispute, and the Dano-German rivalry it engendered, may be seen as the main motivation behind the large-scale politicisation of mythology, both in Scandinavia and in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Heimdallr, the divine guardian of frontiers, could serve both as the protector of a 'Greater Germany', as envisioned by *völkisch* nationalists, and as a symbol of Danish, or even pan-Scandinavian unity *against* German imperialism.<sup>6</sup> Both European nations therefore instrumentalised the same character from *Icelandic* medieval literature, in order to demarcate their own contested boundaries and to formulate their respective national identities *in contrast* to each other. The Danish may have considered themselves more Nordic than the Germans, but – as a contributor to the *Westminster Review* already noted in 1854 – the Old Norse myths were, like "potions from Mimir's well", nourishing the "tree of nationality" also in Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond Germany, the Wagnerian image of Teutonic antiquity appealed to the national senses of other, self-proclaimed Germanic peoples in Europe. The characteristic horned helmet, a Romantic invention popularised by Wagner<sup>8</sup> – which still serves as a popular

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<sup>1</sup> On the role of eddic mythology in German national culture, see especially Julia Zernack (1994, 2008 and 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Zernack, "Nordische Mythen und Edda-Zitate im Dienst von Politik und Propaganda", in Katja Schulz (ed.), *Edda-Rezeption* vol. II; *Eddische Götter und Helden. Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption* (Heidelberg 2011) pp.143-185, 163-176.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Niedner *Islands Kultur zur Wikingerzeit* (Jena 1913; introductory volume to Eugen Diederichs influential *Thule* series of translated Old Norse-Icelandic literature) p.125. See also Halink (2010) pp.387-9.

<sup>4</sup> Zernack (2011b) pp.168-70.

<sup>5</sup> Leerssen (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Zernack (2011b), pp.176-9.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Neuberg, "The Odin-Religion", in *Westminster Review* (1854:6) pp.312-42, 316. Quoted in Wawn (2002) p.189 (note 28).

<sup>8</sup> For the full history of this successful Viking 'logo', see Roberta Frank, "The Invention of the Viking Helmet", in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber* (2000, posted on

emblem of everything Viking, Germanic, primordial or indigenous – began to appear in schoolbooks and popular visualisations of national pasts in England, Scandinavia, and the Baltic lands.<sup>1</sup> Although the *Ring des Nibelungen* was celebrated in Germany as the very epitome of *German* art, this did not hinder the use of Wagnerian imagery in other – decisively *non* German – peoples’ quests for their own respective national origins.<sup>2</sup> The first Icelander to form a – rather outspoken – opinion on Wagner’s art was Benedikt Gröndal (Chapter 6.3.1). Some of his Icelandic contemporaries took a more positive approach to Wagner’s musical revolution, like the popular playwright and poet Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920) – author of the lyrics to what would become Iceland’s national anthem – who wrote about the premiere of the *Ring des Nibelungen* in the periodical *Þjóðólfur* (1876), and said about the *maestro* that he was “considered by many the greatest of all composers alive today”.<sup>3</sup> The poet Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) was so touched by the overture of the third act of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, which he had heard in London, that it formed the inspiration for the first verse of his lyrical poem *Í dísarhöll* (‘In the Hall of the Muse’).<sup>4</sup> But overall, Wagner and his creations remained largely unknown in Iceland, and his music was virtually never performed. In 1913, a disillusioned Icelandic Wagnerite explained this lack of interest as follows:

In this country, people have had little opportunity to get to know Wagner’s art. It demands so much equipment and choral force (especially a large orchestra group), that there is no hope for a poor and uncultivated land like Iceland, the way things stand today, to undertake a project like staging Wagner’s works, and sadly we will have to wait for a long time before his operas will be heard here.<sup>5</sup>

The first performance of an entire Wagner opera did not occur in Iceland until the late twentieth century, and there was hardly any direct reception of Wagner’s work and eddic imagery to speak of; virtually all Icelandic encounters with the Wagnerian reception of Old Norse-Icelandic culture occurred indirectly, through contacts with foreign Wagner enthusiasts.

The idea that the North and Nordic culture represented a more pure and uncompromised source of Germanic culture, a *Seelenheimat* for *völkish* nationalists, took root in the German imagination. This ideological North was constructed in polemical terms, as an antidote against Judeo-Christian modernity, decadence, and also as a refuge or sanctuary of primordial Germanness and racial purity.<sup>6</sup> The German identification with the North, which had started with Herder’s ideas on the rejuvenating power of Scandinavian culture (see Chapter 2.2.2), had by now often turned social-Darwinian under the influence of popular

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Scribd (<https://www.scribd.com/doc/51267328/Frank-Invention-of-Horned-Helmet>), last accessed: 12 August 2017).

<sup>1</sup> On the spread of Wagnerism in Northern Europe, see especially Hannu Salmi, *Wagner and Wagnerism in Nineteenth-Century Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic Provinces. Reception, Enthusiasm, Cult* (Rochester 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See especially David Large and William Weber (eds.), *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics* (Cornell 1984).

<sup>3</sup> *Þjóðólfur* of 16 October 1876, p.126. The title *Siegfried* is translated to its eddic equivalent, Sigurður *Fafnisbani* (‘Fafnir-Slayer’).

<sup>4</sup> See Björnsson (2000) pp.197-8. The title of the poem is a reference to Queen’s Hall, where Einar heard the overture in 1903.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, but probably Jónas Jónsson, in *Hljómlistin* 1913, pp.48-51. See also Björnsson (2000) p.198-9; “Hér á landi hafa menn átt lítinn kost að kynna list Wagners. Hún heimtar svo mikinn útbúnað og mikla söngkrafta (sérstakl. stóran hljóðfæraflokk), að engin von er til að jafn fátækt og lítt kunnandi land og Ísland, enn sem komið er, hafi getað ráðist í slíkt fyrirtæki að sýna leiki Wagners og verður þess því miður langt að bíða, að söngleikir hans heyrist hér.”

<sup>6</sup> See especially Halink (2010) on the construction of this image, and its later role in National Socialism.

racial pseudo-science. Felix Niedner assured his readers that “[d]er wanderlustige Deutsche darf beim Besuch der Insel [Iceland] gewiß sein, dort auch heute noch einen Hauch seiner eignen Vorväterzeit zu verspüren.”<sup>1</sup> Travelling to Iceland – now made possible by a steady increase of steamers connecting the island to the rest of the world – meant travelling back in time, back to one’s own roots, and undertaking a ‘pilgrimage’ to an ancient literature.<sup>2</sup> The first experience of Iceland and its incomparable rugged lavascapes was occasionally fashioned in eddic terms – see for instance John Ross Browne’s travelogue *The Land of Thor*<sup>3</sup> – in order to capture the island’s profound otherworldliness. Only mythological imagery would suffice to convey the experience.

Not only German tourists experienced a hint of their own nation’s primordial past while visiting Iceland; the British artist, writer, translator, and initiator of the ‘Arts and Crafts Movement’ William Morris (1834-1896) recited the old sagas surrounded by the island’s rugged landscape, and encountered there, in this place of ‘refuge’, the “representatives, a little mingled with Irish blood, of the Gothic family of the great Germanic race.”<sup>4</sup> In 1876, the same year in which Wagner’s *Ring* cycle premiered in Bayreuth, Morris published his *Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, a poetic re-rendering of the *Völsunga saga*.<sup>5</sup> Together with his Icelandic teacher and associate Eiríkr Magnússon (1833-1913), librarian and translator at Cambridge, he published the first English edition of that same saga in 1870, accompanied by a preface containing the translators’ views on Old Norse literature’s relevance to modern British culture:

In conclusion, we must again say how strange it seems to us, that the Volsung Tale, which is in fact an unversified poem, should never before have been translated into English. For this is the great story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that came after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.<sup>6</sup>

The eddic poems may not have *originated* in England, as the Oxford-based Icelandic scholar Guðbrandur Vigfússon had claimed (see Chapter 6.3.2)<sup>7</sup>, but their importance to the Germanic, Anglo-Saxon people of the British Isles could hardly be overstated; Iceland, the place of refuge where the Germanic race had preserved all that which the English had lost after waves of Roman and Norman invasion, could serve as an inspiration for a cultural revival in England and throughout Europe. Morris, a committed socialist, saw modern capitalism and its class society as a result of these foreign invasions, and believed that the

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<sup>1</sup> Niedner (1913) p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Halink (2010) pp.392-4.

<sup>3</sup> Browne, a writer and artist from California, published his *Land of Thor* in 1867 (New York). See also Halink (2014) p.220.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris, in his lecture *The Early Literature of the North – Iceland* (delivered on the ninth of October 1887, at a meeting in Kelmscott House, Hammersmith), retrieved from the *William Morris Internet Archive* at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1887/iceland.htm> (last accessed: 8 March 2015). Compare these views to those expressed, more than forty years earlier, by Thomas Carlyle (1841) pp.1-66 (see also Chapter 2.2.3).

<sup>5</sup> In the same spirit, Morris also published his own poetic reworking of *Laxdæla saga* – one of the most cherished Icelandic sagas – under the title *The Lovers of Gudrun* (1869).

<sup>6</sup> Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris, preface to their *Völsunga saga. The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda* (London 1870) pp.i-xi, xi. More than the actual contents of the saga, it was the potential *function* of the story in England’s national consciousness that Eiríkr and Morris were interested in.

<sup>7</sup> Eiríkr and Guðbrandur, both based in England, had been close friends, until they fell out over a disagreement on the right way to translate the Bible into Icelandic.

Old Norse sources offered their readers a glimpse of the egalitarian, utopian proto-socialist societies upheld by their Germanic ancestors before the Roman and French conquests of the North. A socialist revolution was needed to overthrow this twisted and un-indigenous order of things, a template for which was imbedded in eddic mythology – and in the Ragnarök narrative in particular – itself:

The very essence of his [Morris's] theory of revolution, and the peace which follows, and the idea of convulsion and cataclysm as a prelude to eternal harmony, were not first discovered by Morris in his readings in European social and economic writers. In the *Völuspá* story of Balder the White God, in the legend of Ragna Rök, Morris found the very words which he later used to express his belief in the ethical necessity for revolution. That his social and economic philosophy as it was ultimately developed had many connections with contemporaneous socialistic and communistic theory no one can deny. Yet this does not obscure the fact that the ethical basis of Morris' social philosophy was always closely related to his strange and stubborn belief in the Ragna Rök of the pagan Norsemen.<sup>1</sup>

Although Morris's political agenda may have been entirely different from that of the German *völkish* nationalists mentioned earlier on, both of them resorted to eddic vocabulary and imagery in order to strengthen their political views and to emphasise their deep-rootedness in original 'Germanic' culture.<sup>2</sup> Both strands of anti-modernism rejected the contemporary state of the industrialised West and projected on the North all their phantasies of a long-lost Germanic utopia, which could be restored by means of – either socialist or national – revolution. The anti-modernism and cultural pessimism described in the above, associated with collective anxieties in newly industrialised societies or a 'crisis of late Romanticism'<sup>3</sup>, formed an important ingredient in the development of European conceptions of Icelandic culture and Old Norse literature.

In the chapters to come, Icelandic interactions with these foreign cultural, intellectual and political developments, and their effects on the construction of Icelandic attitudes towards eddic mythology and pre-Christian religion, will be scrutinised; first in the academic sphere of philology and historiography (Chapters 7.1 and 7.2 respectively), in the sphere of personal and metaphysical experience and art (Chapter 8), and finally in everyday life, the Icelandic public sphere, and in 'new Icelandic spaces' overseas (Chapter 9). How did Icelanders give shape to their 'pagan heritage' in the light of these foreign appropriations, and how was the Romantic legacy of the nineteenth century, as analysed in the previous chapters, transformed or recycled in this new discourse on Icelandic identity? In the present chapter, this question will be addressed through an analysis of the heated debates concerning the origins – and hence the 'ownership' – of the eddic poems, which unfolded between two of Iceland's most eminent philologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Björn Magnússon Ólsen and Finnur Jónsson. What were their respective standpoints in this highly-charged dispute? What can their philological claims tell us about the ideological assumptions underlying them? And what do they reveal about Iceland's contested national self-image under construction at that time?

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Litzenberg, *The Victorians and the Vikings. A Bibliographical Essay on Anglo-Norse Literary Relations* (Michigan 1947) p.24. See also Paola Spinozzi, "The Topos of Ragnarök in the Utopian Thoughts of William Morris", in Katja Schulz (ed.), *Edda-Rezeption* (vol.2) *Eddische Götter und Helden. Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption* (Heidelberg 2011) pp.187-197, 192.

<sup>2</sup> There are interesting parallels to be drawn between the poetic indigenisation of the political/revolutionary through myth (function two) as practiced by Morris and by Gísli Brynjúlfsson (see Chapter 6.2) respectively.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Lewis, "Translating Anxieties: Morris, Wagner, and the Crisis of Late Romanticism", in *Sagas & Societies* 20 (2002), accessible online at <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/handle/10900/46212> (last accessed: 8 March 2015).

### 7.1.2 From Edda to Rímur: Finnur Jónsson

Few Icelandic scholars have been as prolific and productive as Finnur Jónsson, whose innumerable editions of sagas, Eddas and skaldic poetry are still in use today. His influence on early twentieth-century Scandinavian discourses on Old Norse poetry and culture was considerable, due to the unparalleled erudition and persuasiveness of his argumentation. He was known to defend his ideas on the origins of the sagas and Eddas ferociously against those who put forward conflicting hypotheses.<sup>1</sup> Born in the north of Iceland – in the town of Akureyri – in 1858, Finnur soon developed a passion for his ancestral literature, which was encouraged and nurtured by his father, who was an eager autodidact and book collector. In 1865 the family moved to Reykjavík, where Finnur graduated from the city's gymnasium – *Lærði skólinn í Reykjavík*<sup>2</sup> – in 1878. He moved to Copenhagen to study Old Norse literature and received a doctorate in philology in 1884, with his dissertation on skaldic poetry. In the introduction to this thesis (*Kritiske studier over en del af de ældste norske og islandke skjaldekvad*), Finnur observes that the works of his Icelandic predecessors – he mentions Guðmundur Magnússon, Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Jón Ólafsson, and Finnur Magnússon – lacked a deep understanding of the skaldic poems, often due to the fact that good renditions of these works were hard to come by.<sup>3</sup> Through his own study of the poems, Finnur sought to remedy this situation, and to grand these oldest but underappreciated remnants of Old Norse-Icelandic their rightful place in Old Norse literary history. And this he did with great dedication: between 1894 and 1902, his *magnum opus*, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, covering all Old Norse-Icelandic literature from ca. 800 AD until 1550, appeared in four volumes<sup>4</sup>, and between 1912 and 1915, he published the entire known corpus of skaldic poetry in an anthology consisting of four volumes, commissioned by the Arnamagnæan Commission.<sup>5</sup> As late as the 1930s, Finnur 'updated' Sveinbjörn Egilsson's extensive dictionary of Old Norse poetry, the *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis* dating from 1860 (see Chapter 4.2.1), but his reworking was so profound and elaborate, that Finnur's *Lexicon* should be considered his own original creation, rather than merely an updated version of the school teacher's work.<sup>6</sup> His scholarly approach to the ancient texts brought him into conflict with the Romantic idealist Gísli Brynjúlfsson, who did not only couple philological theories to his political poetry (see Chapter 6.2) but also intended to produce an anthology of skaldic literature; a project that was, 'luckily' – according to Finnur – never realised.<sup>7</sup> Finnur began teaching at Copenhagen's university in 1887, and became professor in philology there in 1898. Thirty years later, Finnur entered retirement, but he continued to produce critical and diplomatic editions of Old Norse works until his death in 1934. He wrote accessible introductions to the history of Old Norse-Icelandic history in both Icelandic and Danish, and composed a critical reflection on the history of his own field of research – Old Norse philology – on the occasion of King

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Finnur's life, works and legacy, see especially Jón Helgason, "Mindeord om Finnur Jónsson" in *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1934) pp. 137-60.

<sup>2</sup> The Latin school of Bessastaðir, the island's only institution of higher education, had moved to Reykjavík in the year 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Kritiske studier over en del af de ældste norske og islandke skjaldekvad* (Copenhagen 1884) pp.2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* (Copenhagen 1920-4 [1894-1902]). I will be referring to the revised edition, which appeared between 1920 and 1924.

<sup>5</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols. (Copenhagen 1912-5).

<sup>6</sup> Finnur Jónsson [Sveinbjörn Egilsson], *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis* (Copenhagen 1931 [1860]).

<sup>7</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar eftir sjálfan hann* (Copenhagen 1936) p.68. See also Egilsson (1999) pp.276-7.

Christian X's birthday in 1918<sup>1</sup>: the first self-reflective *Fachgeschichte* of its kind, providing its readers with a concise overview and assessment of the philological achievements of the past four-hundred years or so. His interest in contemporary interpretations of Old Norse literature were not confined to the academic, and – although he was no a poet himself – the Romantic revival of skaldic and eddic meters caught his attention as well. He analysed Bjarni Thorarensen's poetry meticulously and concluded that approximately one third of it was composed in eddic meters.<sup>2</sup>

Finnur was a skilled polemicist, and when it came to the origin of the eddic poems, he tended to emphasise their great antiquity – implying that they were composed in mainland Scandinavia *before* the settlement of Iceland – rather than their high-medieval character. In this respect, his ideas were closely linked to those of the German philologist Karl Müllenhoff – the same one who accused Konrad Maurer of being too Icelandic (see Chapter 5.1.1) – and Sophus Bugge (see Chapter 6.3), who also believed that the origins of the poems lay outside of Iceland. The *Poetic Edda* was no longer referred to as a monument of Danish culture, as Finnur Magnússon had done in the early nineteenth century (see Chapter 3.4)<sup>3</sup>, and the scholars belonging to the 'oral school' of philology located the cradle of eddic poetry primarily in Norway, on the basis of the mountainous landscapes described in the poems and the prominence of tree-related imagery in, for instance, the *Völuspá*.<sup>4</sup> Although Finnur shared many of the views of the so-called Norwegian School, he did express some serious reservations regarding one of its main proponents, Rudolf Keyser (see Chapter 3.2.4), on the basis of the ideological leanings of his work; he considered much of his scholarship to have been "based on a very strong national feeling" as a result of which, "against all historical facts an utterly disproportionate literary superiority is conferred to the Norwegians at the expense of the Icelanders, not to mention the Danish and Swedish.." <sup>5</sup> Like Benedikt Gröndal before him, Finnur warned against the distorting effects of national pride – Gröndal's *Þjóðdramb* (see Chapter 6.3.2) – on philological research, which he believed should always transcend emotion and national divisions. This adherence to the ideal of objective scholarship, detached from ideological currents, makes Finnur very much a man of his time, in which academic philology became increasingly specialised and disconnected from the now frowned-upon antiquarian 'amateurism' of earlier generations.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, dating the eddic poems was a very emotional and national business around 1900, as demonstrated by the great variety of proposed dates for the poem *Rígsþula*, ranging from ca. 900 AD – Finnur Jónsson – to the late twelfth or even thirteenth century, as proposed by the Swiss philologist Andreas Heusler.<sup>7</sup> In his writings, Finnur makes a clear distinction between these ancient original products of Old Norse culture, transmitted orally for generations before being committed to parchment in medieval Iceland, and later imports from continental Europe – primarily the medieval chivalric romances – into Nordic literature. These 'translations' of European literature were, according to Finnur, linguistically very

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<sup>1</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Udsigt over den norsk-islandske filologis historie* (Copenhagen 1918).

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson (1916) p.109.

<sup>3</sup> The term Danish (*dönsk tunga*), referring to the ancient language of Scandinavia, fell into disuse after the introduction of the term Old Norse (*oldnordisk*) by N.F.S. Grundtvig. See Chapter 3.2.3.

<sup>4</sup> Guðni Jónsson, *Eddulyklar. Inngangur-Orðasafn-Vísnaðsáhringur-Nafnaskrá* (Akureyri 1954) pp.6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson (1920-4) vol.1 (1920), p.2; "Den er et ud fra en meget stærk nationalitetsfølelse skrevet værk, hvor en aldeles uforholdsmæssig, mod alle historiske kendsgerninger stridende litterær overlegenhed tillægges Nordmændene på Islændernes bekostning, ikke at tale om de Danske og Svenske..."

<sup>6</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.15.

<sup>7</sup> Guðni Jónsson (1954) p.1. The general concensus among modern scholars is that *Rígsþula* is a relatively young poem, composed in the late twelfth century. See Frederic Amory, "The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*", in *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001) pp.3–20.

different from the “pure classicism of the Icelandic sagas”<sup>1</sup> and therefore dismissible as *Fremdkörper* in the body of authentic Old Norse literature.

An interesting result of this normative division between an indigenous Old Norse literary tradition on the one hand, and a body of imported European elements on the other, was Finnur’s interest in the latter-day manifestations of the authentic strand of Nordic literature, in the guise of the Icelandic *rímur*. Despised by the Romantic poets – notably Jónas Hallgrímsson – as uninspired formulaic versifications (see Chapter 4.2.2) and, consequently, ignored to a large extent by the scholarly establishment of the nineteenth century, this immensely popular genre in Icelandic poetry attracted Finnur’s academic attention. In 1896, he published the first anthology of Iceland’s oldest *rímur*<sup>2</sup>, which he dedicated to his learned father, Jón Jónsson Borgfirðingur, a ‘friend of the *rímur*’.<sup>3</sup> An anthology of Danish *rímur* translations followed between 1905 and 1912.<sup>4</sup> Finnur considered these works a sort of cultural lifeline, connecting late and post-medieval Icelandic poetry to the heydays of Scandinavia’s ancient antiquity. Originally, the *rímur*-poets had drawn their inspiration solely from indigenous – by which is meant: Icelandic *or* Nordic – sources, as a result of which the poems contain, in the multiple layers of meaning they consist of, a great treasure trove of insights into eddic mythology and Old Norse history.<sup>5</sup> Not only for academics, but also for those Icelanders in the general audience, “who are still practicing the art of *rímur* poetry, these poems are at least fun to read, as they are generally well composed and nitty, often well and wittily worded; they are on all levels easy to understand, [in] clear language and not particularly Edda-like.”<sup>6</sup> By thus highlighting the literary value of the *rímur* and their relevance to the contemporary Icelandic audience, Finnur clearly turned against the dominant aesthetic discourse of his time, founded on the Romantic idealism of the *Fjölnismenn*; to someone who attributed great significance to oral transmission, the distinction between popular, rural traditions and ‘world literature’, between high and low culture, was of little significance. Just like the Edda and sagas had existed in oral form for many centuries before they were put into writing, so too were the *rímur* of later generations no less prestigious or worthy of attention simply because they were ‘still alive’, and part of a non-educated, oral culture. Like Konrad Maurer and Jón Árnason (see Chapter 5.1) before him, Finnur was a proponent of the Grimmian notion that much of ancient culture and mythology survived and continued to thrive and evolve in the oral culture of rural societies, making their ‘output’ – the *rímur* – an important source of knowledge about the Old Norse world-view. And, also: since the eddic poems were in Finnur’s opinion not of Icelandic origin, the *rímur* constituted the *only* branch of Old Norse poetry that could be considered *exclusively* Icelandic. Finnur’s serious study of the *rímur* leads to an interesting case of cross pollination in Icelandic culture; whereas – very few – scholars were interested in the *rímur*, in as far as they could reveal something about eddic mythology, the contemporary *rímur* poets were only interested in the Eddas in as far as they could be used for the composition of new *rímur*.

Finnur’s believe in the oral origins of Old Norse-Icelandic literature did not only concern the eddic poems, but also the *Íslendingasögur*; as far as he was concerned, the sagas

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson (1920-4) vol.2 (1923) p.951; “..de islandske sagaers rene klassicisme..”

<sup>2</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Fernir forníslenskir rímaflokkar* (Copenhagen 1896).

<sup>3</sup> Idem, preceding numbered pages.

<sup>4</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Rímnasafn. Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen 1905-22) and a glossary volume: *Ordbog til de af Samfund til Udg. ad Gml. Nord. Litteratur Udgivne Rímur samt til de af Dr. O. Jiriczek Udgivne Bósarimur* (Copenhagen 1926-8).

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson (1896) p.I.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.II; “Fírir þá menn, af alþýðu Íslands, er enn unna rímnakveðskap, eru þessar rímur að minnsta kosti gamans lestur, enda eru þær víðast vel ortar og smellnar, oft og tíðum vel og hnittilega orðaðar; þær eru að öllum jafnaði auðskildar, málið ljóst og ekki sjerlega edduborið.” The claim that the *rímur* are not ‘particularly Edda-like’ means that their poetic language is not as difficult to penetrate as that of the eddic poems.



were to be understood first and foremost as historical accounts, based on actual events taking place during Iceland's *söguöld* (ca. 930-1056 AD). Icelandic farmers and their families had, throughout the ages, cherished the family sagas as trustworthy accounts of their ancestors' deeds, but it was Rudolf Keyser who first formulated a scholarly theory based on this idea. The influential Swiss philologist Andreas Heusler agreed with Keyser's emphasis on oral transmission, and developed the so-called *Freiprosalehre* ('free-prose theory') in his book *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (1914).<sup>1</sup> The theory was referred to as *sagnfestukenning* by Icelandic philologists, meaning literally 'theory of fixed tradition', and found its most committed Icelandic proponent in Finnur Jónsson.<sup>2</sup> Finnur conceived his philological mission, his crusade against those who doubted the sagas' historicity and who preferred to look at them as masterpieces of medieval (fictional) literature, in belligerent terms, and even vowed heroically to "uphold and defend the historical reliability of the sagas – however "grand" this may sound – until I am forced to lay down my pen."<sup>3</sup> In this endeavour, Finnur could be certain to count the traditional Icelandic farmers among his most powerful allies<sup>4</sup>, even if the academic tide was turning against him.

In his meticulous analyses of the eddic poems, Finnur emphasises the technical aspects of their elaborate metrical structure, building on the methodology for the study of prosody as developed in the late nineteenth century by the German scholar Eduard Sievers.<sup>5</sup> Sievers proposed a rather rigid and inflexible approach to the poems, and claimed that, by applying his overview of Germanic meters – based on Snorri's *Háttatal* (see Chapter 2.1.3) – the original forms of the poems could be reconstructed, and later additions or revisions – conflicting with Siever's metrical system – could be dismissed as unoriginal. Finnur, inspired by this new method, was the first Icelander ever to undertake a thorough prosodic dissection of the poems, in the belief that he was thus extrapolating the ancient oral tradition from their later medieval distortions. In his 1905 Icelandic edition of the *Poetic Edda* – one the very first *popular* editions, and the first one to appear in Iceland – he printed these later, deviating interpolations in a smaller type than the rest of the text that he deemed original, in order to give his audience an idea of what the compositions had looked like in their original form.<sup>6</sup> In his quest for the original – that is: oral – form of the eddic poems, Finnur proved himself to be a man of his time. But his methods were soon considered outdated, and many decades later, Jónas Kristjánsson regretted that "the eddaic poems first became generally known to twentieth-century Icelanders in this doctored form."<sup>7</sup> Finnur valued his academic integrity above all else, and even there where one would most expect it – in the introduction to a popular edition of the poems, directed to a general Icelandic readership – he stays clear from ideological claims or expressions of national pride, that could have inspired his fellow countrymen.

However, we should not conclude from this that Finnur's treatment of the Eddas was in any way dispassionate; just like the historicity of the sagas, the great antiquity of the eddic poems formed one of the central convictions he was willing to fight for. In his ambitious

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin 1914).

<sup>2</sup> It may come as no surprise that folklorists, like the Norwegian Knut Liestøl, felt especially attracted to this theory, in which the primacy of oral traditions is underlined. See Kristjánsson (2007) p.204-5.

<sup>3</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Norsk-Islandske kultur- og sprogforhold i 9. og 10. årh.* (Copenhagen 1921) p.141: "... sagaernes historiske troværdighed – hvor "stolt" dette end lyder – vil jeg hævde og forsvare, til jeg tvinges til at nedlægge min pen." Translation from Byock (1994) p.180.

<sup>4</sup> Byock (1994) p.180.

<sup>5</sup> Eduard Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik* (Halle 1893).

<sup>6</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Sæmundar-Edda. Eddukvæði* (Reykjavík 1905). Finnur named this popular edition *Sæmundar-Edda* ('Edda of Sæmundur'), simply because this was the name under which the work was generally known in Iceland, even if there was no historical indication of Sæmundr's involvement in its creation. See *idem*, p.iii.

<sup>7</sup> Kristjánsson (2007) p.34.

history of medieval Nordic literature (*Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*), Finnur presents Old Icelandic literature in the context of Old Norse culture, attributing no special role to Iceland other than being the place where the ancient texts were written down. In his view, only a handful of younger and remarkably unimpressive eddic poems had originated in Iceland and Greenland, building on themes from the original compositions from Norway. There, in their forests and green meadows, the original Nordic inhabitants of Scandinavia, who had lived there since time immemorial and were a “true nature people”<sup>1</sup>, first abstracted from the natural forces surrounding them the characters and personalities of the gods and turned them into people, with all their positive and their negative, their belligerent and their tragic characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Finnur claimed that the ensuing pantheon of Nordic gods, based on the structure of Old Norse society, was later – in the Viking Age – distributed to the far reaches of the Nordic world, where it underwent no note-worthy transformation but remained essentially the same, encapsulated and preserved in ancient pre-Icelandic verse.

It may come as no surprise that the peripheral role attributed to Iceland in all this met with considerable resistance from the side of Icelandic nationalists. Benedikt Gröndal, who considered the eddic poems to be quintessentially Icelandic creations (see Chapter 6.3.2), referred to Finnur’s theory regarding the *Poetic Edda* as “so naive and stupid that one can hardly respond.”<sup>3</sup> In Benedikt’s view, Finnur was no different from those adherents of the Norwegian School, notably Munch and Keyser, who had attempted to appropriate Icelandic heritage for their own Norwegian purposes. Not only did Finnur get it completely wrong where Old Norse poetry was concerned, he clearly did not understand the first thing about contemporary Icelandic literature either, Benedikt argued; by claiming that Benedikt and others had received their inspiration primarily from Danish poets, he demonstrated his ignorance regarding modern literature, and proved himself an adherent of the whole ‘Danification-rubbish’.<sup>4</sup> Benedikt’s dislike of Finnur and his theories had a more personal dimension as well, and are linked to Benedikt’s efforts to compile an index to the *Snorra-Edda* for the Arnamagnæan Commission. This all went very well, and the commission was pleased with his work, until Finnur showed up in Copenhagen, undermining Benedikt’s progress and producing a second index, “incomplete and unscientific”, which was subsequently accepted and published – in Benedikt’s eyes for the sole purpose of enhancing his own career.<sup>5</sup> When a celebratory publication was edited to mark Benedikt’s eightieth birthday in 1906, Finnur’s contribution consisted of an assessment of Old Norse themes in his poetry.<sup>6</sup> As can be expected from this type of publication, Finnur praises the incredible width of the poet’s knowledge – ranging from the natural sciences to Greek and Old Norse philology – and his love for the fatherland; no matter what subject Benedikt would start out with, he would eventually always bend it towards his homeland, with its glaciers and waterfalls, its dales and its flowers.<sup>7</sup> Finnur attributes the fact that his philological views differ so significantly from his own to the fact that Benedikt wrote in a different age, when philologists did not yet possess the knowledge they possess today, and which they continue to uncover on a daily basis. Furthermore, for the past thirty years, Benedikt has lived in Iceland, where the latest developments in philological research – Finnur claims – did not reach him at

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson (1920-4) vol.1 (1920) p.11; “... et ægte naturfolk.”

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp.12-3.

<sup>3</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.189; “Kenning F. Jónssonar [...] er svo barnaleg og heimskuleg að henni er naumast svarandi.”

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.174; “‘Daniseringar’-þvaður”.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, pp.316-7; “ófullkomið og óvísindalegt”.

<sup>6</sup> Jónsson (1906).

<sup>7</sup> Idem, pp.67-8.

all.<sup>1</sup> True academic progress only took place in Copenhagen, appears to be the underlying assumption. Everything the poet has produced was inspired by his love for all things Icelandic, Finnur concludes, and although this may sound positive enough in the celebratory context of this anniversary homage, it may also be interpreted as a point of criticism, considering Finnur's strong reservations regarding the distorting effects of national sentiments on philological research. It never came to a full-frontal confrontation between Finnur and Benedikt, but the poet applauded the scholar who eventually *did* attack Finnur's views, unleashing a passionate dispute about the origin – and hence the ownership – of the eddic poems: Björn Magnússon Ólsen.

Although Finnur fully subscribed to the value of personal detachment in all academic affairs, his personal life was not untouched by his intense study of the Eddas. When he once wanted to express in words everything he aspired to be, he turned to the sixty-eighth verse of the eddic poem *Hávamál*:

Fire is best  
among the sons of men,  
and the sight of the sun,  
if his health  
a man can have,  
with a life free from vice.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of his death in 1934, both the political landscape and the intellectual infrastructure in which the study of Old Norse texts was practiced, had changed beyond recognition in comparison to the situation in 1900. There was no Icelandic scholar left to take up the cause of the farmers and to defend the historicity of the sagas or the ancient and oral origin of the Edda. And what is more: Copenhagen, which had been the sole centre of Old Norse philology for centuries, was now being challenged by a fledgling 'Icelandic school' of philology, based on its own island, and at its own university.

### 7.1.3 Locating the Creative Moment: Björn M. Ólsen

In 1850, Björn Magnússon Ólsen was born in Þingeyrar, a farm in the north of Iceland, where his father looked after the political interests of the region as *alþingismaður*. Björn completed his secondary education at the Gymnasium in Reykjavík in 1869, but did not travel to Copenhagen until three years later due to health problems. In Denmark, he acquired master degrees in both linguistics and history, and he received funding for an extended study tour through Greece and Italy. This direct confrontation with Europe's classical cultures was to have a lasting effect on his scholarly development and his ideas on history and literature.<sup>3</sup> Björn did not linger in Copenhagen and returned to Reykjavík in 1879, where he remained unmarried and divided his time between, on the one hand, the production of an enormous variety of articles and publications on Icelandic history and literature, and on the other, his political duties as *alþingismaður* for *Heimastjórnarflokkurinn* ('The Home Rule Party') of Hannes Hafstein (1861-1922) in 1905 and 1907. This popular party's main objective was to have the post of Minister of Iceland in the Danish cabinet – a post which had always been held by a Dane, but was since 1904 for the first time in the hands of an Icelander (Hafstein) – relocated from Copenhagen to Reykjavík, which was to become the centre of all Icelandic

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.72-3.

<sup>2</sup> This anecdote can be found in Sigurður Nordal's obituary speech at the University of Iceland, printed in *Morgunblaðið* ("Finnur Jónsson prófessor", 6 April 1934) pp. 4-5, 5; Eldr er beztr/með ýta sonum/ok sólar sýn./heilyndi sitt./ef maðr hafa náir./án við löst at lifa (*Hávamál*, stanza 68).

<sup>3</sup> Glad (2011) pp.100-1.

politics. The political ideal of detaching all Icelandic affairs from Copenhagen can be considered a recurring *Leitmotiv* throughout Björn's active life, both as a scholar and a politician. In 1879, he became adjunct lecturer at the Gymnasium in Reykjavík, and in 1895 he was appointed as the school's dean (*rektor*). In 1883, he received a doctoral degree from the University of Copenhagen for his study on runes in Old Icelandic literature<sup>1</sup>, and between 1884 and 1893 he used the summer months to visit all the corners of his island in order to collect material for an Icelandic dictionary. In 1894, he acquired the prestigious position of President of the Reykjavík branch (*Reykjavíkurdeild*) of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*. His first presidential term lasted until 1900, and was followed by a second term between 1909 and 1912. Björn published extensively on the medieval *Sturlunga saga* – dealing with the contemporary political turmoil of the *Sturlungaöld* (1220-1262) – , on *Gunnlaugs* and *Egils saga*, and on the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, his most lasting effect on Icelandic scholarship should not be attributed to his numerous publications, but rather to his role in the establishment of the University of Iceland (*Háskóli Íslands*).

Although Björn is not remembered primarily for his creative accomplishments, he did actively contribute to the invention of traditions which link Old Norse mythology to the performance of Icelandic identity up to the present day. In January 1873, Icelandic students in Copenhagen celebrated for the first time the now 'traditional' midwinter festival of *Þorrablót* ('frost offering'), adorned by a great variety of 'national' dishes, speeches, and the recitation of poems. The word *Þorri* literally means 'Frost', and was believed to be the name of an early king of Norway, son of 'Snow' (*Snær*).<sup>3</sup> Also, *Þorri* was the name of the winter month in which the festival was celebrated.<sup>4</sup> Although there is no historical connection linking this term to the god Þórr, the Icelandic students who invented the festival considered it appropriate to forge such a link on the basis of the likeness of the two terms alone, and to endow their invented celebration with a profoundly pagan character. This can also be deduced from the term *blót*, which originally referred to the practice of offering to the pagan gods. Björn, then a young student who had arrived in Copenhagen the previous year, played an essential role in the 'paganisation' of this event:

Þorrablót was started by Icelandic students in Copenhagen, or at least they held a Þorrablót in 1873. I have heard that doctor Björn Ólsen presented the best performance with his poem *Full Þórs* ['Þórr's Drinking']. In 1880 the Archaeological Society of Reykjavík held a Þorrablót. [...] We drank together in commemoration of the gods, of Óðinn All-father, of Þórr, of Freyr and Njörður for the blessing of the year...<sup>5</sup>

This poem – or rather 'drinking song' (*drykkjuvísa*) – which Björn composed for this occasion, was published that same year in Jón Sigurðsson's journal *Ný félagsrit*, and opens with a justification for excessive drinking in the winter months, when all is dead and cold:

<sup>1</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, *Runerne i den oldislandske Litteratur* (Copenhagen 1883).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of his most important contributions to the field, see Finnur Jónsson's obituary lecture held in Copenhagen and published that same year: *Mindeord over afdøde medlemmer: Björn Magnússon Ólsen* (Copenhagen 1919).

<sup>3</sup> These legendary monarchs are mentioned in the *Orkneyinga saga*, written around 1230.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of this festival's history, see especially Árni Björnsson, *Þorrablót á Íslandi* (Reykjavík 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Ólafur Davíðsson, in idem. and Jón Árnason (eds.), *Íslenzkar gátur, skemmtanir, víkivakar og þulur* (4 vols., Copenhagen 1887-1903) vol.2, p.21; "Þorrablótin eiga upptök sín að rekja til íslenskra stúdenta í Kaupmannahöfn, eða að minnsta kosti héldu þeir þorrablót 1873. Ég hef heyrt sagt, að doktor Björn Ólsen hafi gengist mest fyrir því og eftir hann er veislukvæðið, Full Þórs. 1880 mun Fornleifafélagið í Reykjavík hafa haldið þorrablót [...] Við samdrykkjuna á eftir var guðanna minnst, Óðins alföður, Þórs, Freys og Njarðar til ársældar..."

In winter, all is so dead and sad,  
 When darkness lies over the nation,  
 And cold spells shudder bitterly  
 In hot blood.  
 Then peaks in the south  
 The low and dull sun,  
 When is it necessary to *boose*  
 If not then, on Midwinter?<sup>1</sup>

In the ensuing verses, Björn explains that their pagan ancestors already understood this, and that they gathered at great feasts where they let Þórr's full horns go around, and drank "to all the Æsir and eightfold to Þórr."<sup>2</sup> The god of thunder is depicted as somewhat of a 'patron saint' for all those who like to drink; reference is made to the great drinking contest in the hall of the giant Útgarða-Loki, who tricked the god by presenting him with a horn that could never be emptied since its other end was submerged in the sea, filling the horn immediately after every gulp. Þórr was unaware of this, and continued drinking until the sea level had been lowered so dramatically, that shores could be seen which were previously under water.<sup>3</sup> Those gathered around the table to celebrate Þorrablót, trying – despite their weaknesses – to "walk in our fathers' footsteps"<sup>4</sup>, could look up to this great achievement, and turn to Þórr directly to receive the same supernatural drinking capacities from the god:

Oh, grant us, Þór! this one time!  
 That we may *boose* as much as you!  
 We make the sign of the hammer of pagan memory  
 In pure faith.<sup>5</sup>

As is so often the case with drinking songs, the tone of the poem is almost sacrilegious; the holy cross is ridiculed by its equation with the sign of Þórr's hammer, which the participants make on themselves 'in pure faith', in order to maximise their capacity to absorb alcohol. As we have seen in earlier chapters, gods associated with intoxication figure frequently in this poetic genre; Bjarni Thorarensen expressed his ambivalent relationship with alcohol as personified by Bacchus, who could easily – unlike fair Freyja – unite 'thirty men or more' in friendship (see Chapter 4.1). In Björn's poem, Þórr has replaced the Greek deity and become himself a Nordic Bacchus: a positive symbol of Icelanders' ancient and traditional love for beer and mead. In a second drinking song with the same title, this time composed for the Þorrablót celebration of the Archaeological Society (*Fornleifafélagið*) in Reykjavík in 1881, a similar expression of mock 'pagan devotion' can be found:

Now we drink a frothy full bowl  
 of beer!  
 And dedicate our gulping thirsty soul  
 to Þór!  
 But whoever does not empty, he will blur  
 and sit with Útgarða-Loki.

<sup>1</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, "Full Þórs" (verse 1), in *Ný félagsrit* 30 (1873) pp.128-9, 128; *Á vetrum er svo dautt og dapurt, Því dimman grúfir yfir þjóð, Og kuldahretið hryllir napurt/Ið heita blóð./Þá gægist að eins lágt um ljóra/Í landasuðri hin daufa sól,/Hvenær er heldur þörf að þjóra/En þá, um jó!?* (Italics original.)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (verse 3); *Því full var drukkið Ásum öllum/Og áttfaldt Þór.*

<sup>3</sup> See Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning (Prose Edda)*, chapters 46 and 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ólsen (1873) p.129 (verse 5); *Og vér, sem nú í veikleik reynum/Í vorra feðra að gánga spor...*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. (verse 6); *Æ, gef oss, Þór! að þessu sinni!/Að þjóra jafnmikið og þú!/Vér signum hamri heiðið minni/Í hreinni trú.*

Now let us drink and sing  
and sing and drink  
to the bottom!<sup>1</sup>

The mythological jollity of the first poem, written eight years earlier, has not waned in this second one, and is indicative of the jovial and leisurely character of the later professor. These two songs, comically capturing the licentious and pagan spirit of the newly invented Þorrablót tradition, contributed to the identification of eddic mythology with an annual celebration now commonly held by most Icelanders to be age-old, and part of the nation's ancient heritage.<sup>2</sup> Björn successfully *primordialised* (the first function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1) a new concept by mythological means. This very successful attempt to implement an invented pagan tradition into the historical consciousness and national life of his people, occurred very much in tandem with Björn's life-long effort to emphasise Old Norse literature's *Icelandic* character, and to construct an explicitly *national* philological paradigm. The creative use of eddic themes was something Björn seems to have been quite fond of, also in the academic and political arena; in a highly critical reaction to an article by the historian and politician Valtýr Guðmundsson, published in the periodical *Andvari*, Björn sets the tone with a belligerent quote from the eddic poem *Lokasenna* ('Loki's flyting'), in which Freyja reprimands Loki for his 'false tongue'.<sup>3</sup> Even in contemporary polemics, the old verses could still serve their purpose as sharp rhetorical blades.

Like national theatres or national literary societies, national bodies of higher education ranked high on the list of indispensable institutions every self-respecting nation was to establish and cultivate. How could Icelandic national culture and history be studied anywhere else than in Iceland? Jón Sigurðsson, who spent virtually all his adult life in Copenhagen, already addressed the matter of intellectual independence as early as 1845, when he actively advocated the idea of a 'national school' (*þjóðskóli*) in Iceland, as proposed by a group of Icelandic students in Copenhagen. This school was envisioned more as an open institution, open to all who wanted to acquire knowledge about their own nation, and loyal to the idea that only scholarship of a national nature could 'bloom and carry fruit', instead of being merely a 'dead education'.<sup>4</sup> Although this envisioned national school could hardly be described as a university, the Icelanders involved in the establishment of the University of Iceland were eager to connect their endeavour to Jón's ideal, and posthumously elevated the great leader to the status of a secular patron saint, looking over the establishment of 'his' national university. The new institution was officially founded by the *Alþingi* on the seventeenth of June 1911 – the centennial anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth – through the merging of three previously independent post-secondary schools – providing training in law, theology, and medicine respectively – and the addition of a fourth, very essential faculty: the

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<sup>1</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, "Full Þórs" (verse 4), in *Máni* 2:21 (5 February 1881) pp.71-2, 72; Nú drekkum freyðandi fulla skál/af bjór!/Og heitum þambandi þyrstir sál/á Þór!/En hver sem ei tæmir, hann skal þoka/og hafa bekk með Útgarðsloka./Nú súpum og syngjum/og syngjum og súpum/í botn!

<sup>2</sup> Björnsson (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, "Dr. Valtýr og embættisgjöldin. Svar frá Birni M. Ólsen.", in *Andvari* 31 (1906) pp.87-104, 87. The verse in question is stanza 31, which reads: "Flá er þér tunga,/hygg, at þér fremr/muni ó-gótt of gala." Or, in the translation of Henry Adams Bellows: "False is thy tongue, and soon shalt thou find/That it sings thee an evil song;/The gods are wroth, and the goddesses all./And in grief shalt thou homeward go."

<sup>4</sup> Jón Sigurðsson, in the official minutes of the Icelandic *Alþingi* meetings: *Tíðindi frá Alþingi Íslendinga 1845* (Reykjavík 1845) pp.40-4, 40; "Hafi ekki mentunin slíkan þjóðlegan blæ, verður hún að mestu leiti dautt nám, og nær ekki að blómgastr og bera ávöxt." Quoted in Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Embættismannaskólinn 1911-1961", in Gunnar Karlsson (ed.), *Aldarsaga Háskóla Íslands 1911-2011* (Reykjavík 2011) pp.17-282, 23. For an earlier exposition of Jón's ideas on schooling in Iceland, see his "Skólar á Íslandi" from 1842, in: *Sýnishorn úr ritum Jóns Sigurðssonar* (Reykjavík 2011) pp.102-108.

humanities. From the onset, the undertaking was orchestrated in the nationalistic tone of the time, which had been growing in strength since the establishment of home rule in Iceland, some seven years earlier. The founding of an Icelandic university was considered a milestone in the process of national detachment from the colonial overlord, and the institution itself – initially even housed in the same building as the *Alþingi* – served as a “symbol of independence and an instrument to complete it.”<sup>1</sup>

Given the explicit nationalistic intentions of the institution, it may not be surprising that Björn, already president of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* and one of the most learned Icelanders of his time who choose *not* to settle down in Copenhagen, would serve as the university’s first rector. As professor at the faculty of the humanities (*heimspekideild*), which was more concerned with the ‘cultivation of national culture’ (Leerssen) than any of the other faculties, he was the obvious candidate for representing the university’s national ideals. In his opening speech, delivered during the formal establishment of the university, Björn formulated the institution’s national *and* international mission as follows:

We have reason to hope that the university will, in due course, become a nursery for new educational life in our nation, and see the immeasurable advantage it can be to our culture and national spirit to have such an institution here in our country. Even more so, we would like to hope that the university may, as time progresses, make its own little contribution to world culture, take new lands in the realm of science, in cooperation with other universities.<sup>2</sup>

In Björn’s view, the university was to serve a twofold function: first of all, it should contribute to the renewal of the national spirit. Secondly: it should contribute to ‘world culture’ (*heimsmenning*) in its own unique, and ‘national’ way. This last mission was by no means ‘less national’ than the first one, since national contributions to world culture and the universal advancement mankind could be considered the main generator of national prestige on the world stage.<sup>3</sup> This required cooperation with other universities, and alignment with the international scholarly paradigm – characterised by its emphasis on *classical* culture – may have inspired Björn to opt for a very classical design where the official seal of the university – consisting of a depiction of Pallas Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom – was concerned.<sup>4</sup> Resorting to more national equivalents like Mímir, the eddic god of wisdom, would not have contributed to the realisation of the institution’s international aspirations. Paradoxically, the omission of Nordic symbols and imagery in the university’s self-representation may be interpreted as a sign of national independence; whereas university jubilees in the nineteenth century had often been occasions for pan-Scandinavian integration and the promulgation of

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, “Formáli”, in idem (ed.), *Aldarsaga Háskóla Íslands 1911-2011* (Reykjavík 2011) pp.13-5, 13; “... tákn um sjálfstæði og tæki til að fullkomna það.”

<sup>2</sup> Björn M. Ólsen in his opening speech (17 June 1911), quoted in Karlsson (2011) p.15; “Vjer höfum ástæðu til að vona, að háskólinn verði með tímanum gróðrarstöð nýs mentalífs hjá vorri þjóð, og sjá allir hve ómetanlegt gagn það getur orðið fyrir menning vora og þjóðerni að hafa slíka stofnun hjer innanlands. Meira að segja viljum vjer vona, að háskólinn geti, þegar stundir líða, lagt sinn litla skerf til heimsmenningarinnar, numið ný lönd í ríki vísindanna, í samvinnu við aðra háskóla.”

<sup>3</sup> In very much the same way, Icelandic nationalists like Benedikt Gröndal tended to stress the unique artistic characteristics of the Old Icelandic contribution to ‘world literature’ rather than the assumed historicity of the sagas (see Chapter 6.3.2).

<sup>4</sup> The origin of the university’s seal is shrouded in mystery, but ‘legend has it’ that it originally served as Björn’s personal seal in his function of rector, and that he personally made it the university’s seal in 1911. See Hálfðanarson (2011) p.76.

*supra*-national, Nordic ideals, the fledgling University of Iceland claimed its own independent and *national* position in the universal *Respublica Scientiarum*.<sup>1</sup>

Only one year after the University of Iceland was founded, Björn took another important step in the nation's intellectual detachment from Denmark; under his leadership, the two branches of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* – based in Copenhagen and Reykjavík respectively – were fused into one single body, united under one single president. Historically, the oldest Icelandic literary society had had two separate presidents, operating on their own accord and overseeing only their own branch. However, now that the intellectual balance in Old Norse-Icelandic studies was shifting from Copenhagen to the island itself, it seemed only befitting that the entire society would, from 1912 onwards, be governed by one president, based in Reykjavík. Björn, who held this new position from 1912 until his retirement in 1918, can thus be considered the primary agent in not one, but two major transformations of Iceland's institutional and intellectual infrastructure. And in both cases, the national ideal of home rule – in the sense of intellectual independence – was served through the severing of traditional bonds with academic institutions based in Copenhagen.

When Björn returned from Copenhagen in 1879 and began disseminating his pedagogical ideals, he developed a complicated relationship with Benedikt Gröndal, who was over twenty-three years his senior and who died four years before the establishment of the University of Iceland. The two men – Björn a successful and accomplished scholar, Benedikt a poet, an outsider, and a 'failed scholar' – became colleagues at the Gymnasium of Reykjavík, where Björn served as adjunct teacher since 1879. Here, their strong and very different characters often clashed, as Björn sought to implement strict rules in order to discipline the young boys who would someday give shape to the future of the nation. Benedikt Gröndal's opinion on the strict scholar was rather ambivalent, since he considered him – despite the differences in personality – an ally in philological matters. In an article dealing with the origins of eddic poetry, published in 1892, Benedikt clarifies his own standpoint regarding the Icelandicness of the Edda (see Chapter 6.3.2) by quoting Björn on the carved church door of Valþjófsstaður, and applying his bold statement on this medieval object to the eddic poems:

Dr. B. M. Ólsen's words on the Valþjófsstaður door fit quite well here, with some minor alterations: "Because ... (Sæmundar Edda) ... is found in Iceland, it is also natural that it is (composed or written) there. At least, those who have a different opinion, have to come forward with *clear and irrefutable evidence* for their case. As long as this evidence is not presented, we Icelanders have the full right to claim (Sæmundar Edda) for ourselves, and to consider it a relic of the finest Icelandic (poetry), and of the art, in which our ancestors were no less skilled than the Norwegians, and which has remained with our country ever since those days".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "University of Iceland. A citizen of the *Respublica Scientiarum* or a Nursery for the Nation?", in Pieter Dhondt (ed.), *National, Nordic or European? Nineteenth-Century University Jubilees and Nordic Cooperation* (Leiden 2011) pp.285-312.

<sup>2</sup> Gröndal (1892) p.104; "Orð Dr. B. M. Ólsen um Valþjófsstaðarhurðina eiga hér alveg við með hæfilegum breytingum: 'Par sem ... (Sæmundar-Edda)... er fundin á Íslandi, er það líka eðlilegast, að hún sé (ort eða rituð) þar. Að minnsta kosti verða þá þeir, sem eru á annari skoðun, að koma fram með *ljósar og órækar sannanir* fyrir sínu máli. Á meðan þessar sannanir eru ekki fram settar, höfum vér Íslendingar fullan rétt til að eigna oss (Sæmundar-Eddu) og skoða hana sem hinar ágætustu menjar um íslenzka(n) skáldskap, þá list, sem forfeður vorir tíðkuðu eigi síður en Norðmenn, og sem hefir haldizt við á voru landi allt fram á þenna dag.'." (Italics original.) The original passage, dealing with the Valþjófsstaður door, appeared in Ólsen, "Valþjófsstaðarhurðin", in *Árbók hins íslenzka fornleifafélags* 4 (1884) pp.24-37, 36-7.



A strong statement of this nature, emphasising Icelandic unicity vis-à-vis the appropriation of Icelandic culture by the Norwegians – like Sophus Bugge – played directly into the hands of Benedikt and his nationalistic line of argumentation. Also, the poet was very pleased by Björn’s good and ‘thorough’ rebuttal of Finnur Jónsson’s ‘naive and stupid’ philological views<sup>1</sup>, to which I will return later on. However, if Björn was indeed an ally, he was a problematic or an ignorant one at the very least; although their ideas were very similar, the esteemed scholar never referred back to, or took any notion of, “that which I have written about the Edda, both in *Gefn* and in the journal of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, which are the only writings on this subject in Icelandic, so they could have been mentioned.”<sup>2</sup> Björn uses landscapes described in the eddic poems as arguments for his theses, but refers nowhere to his predecessors Benedikt and Finnur Magnússon, who had done the same. In fact, many scholars receive credit for “little and unremarkable things” in his writings, but nowhere is Benedikt’s name to be found. This comes as no surprise to the embittered outsider, who had, in his own view, “never been a favourite of these ‘doctors’”<sup>3</sup>. The derogatory tone of this statement derived from a lifetime of academic frustration, and a sense of having been wronged all his life. Just like the cultural and linguistic accomplishments of his father, Sveinbjörn Egilsson, were now being attributed to the Fjölismenn (see Chapter 6.3.3), so too were his own academic accomplishments hijacked by those so-called ‘doctors’, professional opportunists, who refused to connect their names to his. It is this theme of unsung originality, and deprivation of due credit, which forms a common thread in Benedikt’s autobiographical writings. When situated in the larger context of academic developments around 1900, Björn’s presumed negligence of Benedikt’s achievements can be interpreted as an indication of the new academic culture, specialised and professional, which sought to distance itself from the ‘antiquarian amateurism’<sup>4</sup> and the Romantic polymaths – of which Benedikt was one of the last Icelandic specimens – of previous generations.

An academically more established figure of Benedikt’s generation – and someone Björn was *not* afraid to connect his name to<sup>5</sup> – was the German legal historian Konrad Maurer, whose ‘un-German’ philological opinions bear many similarities to those of Benedikt, and rendered him an outsider to the philological establishment in Germany (see Chapter 5.1.1). According to Maurer, the eddic poems were considerably younger than many Nordic scholars, including Rudolf Keyser and N.F.S. Grundtvig had claimed; he rejected the idea of a long oral tradition predating the medieval manuscripts, and came to the consequent conclusion that the origin of the poems had to be sought in Iceland itself.<sup>6</sup> This rejection of an oral link to the Scandinavian mainland posed serious problems to the proponents of the free-prose theory and the Norwegian School, who were now in danger of losing the only argument which guaranteed their national share in the ownership of the Edda. And, just like the eddic poems, the Icelandic sagas were to be considered, not as orally transmitted reports of historical events, but as the creative output of their medieval scribes’ imagination. Maurer expressed this daring thought in a multitude of articles and contributions, and proclaimed in his monograph on *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (1871) that his opponents – notably from the Norwegian School, as well as the Danes N.M. Petersen (see Chapter 6.1.3) and P.E. Müller –

<sup>1</sup> Gröndal (2014) p.189; “Samt hefur dr. B. M. Ólsen tekist það á hendur, og gert það vel og rækilega...”

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.189; “... þess sem ég hef ritað um Eddu, bæði í *Gefn* og *Tímarit* bókmenntafélagsins, en það er það eina sem á íslensku hefur verið ritað um þetta efna, svo nefna hefði má það.” (Italics added.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; “En ég hef aldrei verið innundir hjá þessum “doktorum” [...] ... fyrir litla og ómerkilega hluti.”

<sup>4</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.15.

<sup>5</sup> See Björn M. Ólsen, “Konrad Maurer”, in *Almanak hins íslenska þjóðvinafélags* 24 (1898) pp.25-31.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Konrad Maurer, “Waldbär und Wasserbär”, in *Anzeiger für Kunde der deutschen Vorzeit* 10:10 (1863) pp.396-9, in which he considers the presence of a polar bear in *Hávamál* as an indication of the poem’s Icelandic origin. For Maurer’s role in the international dispute concerning the age of the Edda, see Jónsson (1920-4) vol.1 (1920) pp.4-6.

had failed to prove him wrong, and that he had presented them with a “Reihe von Quellenstellen [...], welche die Behauptung rechtfertigen, dass vor dem letzten Viertel des 12. Jahrhunderts auf Island von einer Sagenschreibung, soweit einheimische Geschichtsstoffe in Frage stehen, noch keine Rede war.”<sup>1</sup> Not only did the process of writing down the sagas begin very late, there was also no evidence for an oral tradition linking these medieval creations to events in Iceland’s earlier past. Björn had studied Maurer’s theories with great interest and expanded upon them in a series of publications, while at the same time using his position as professor at the University of Iceland to disseminate them amongst his students, the future generation of Icelandic philologists, including Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974).<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the free-prose school, this ‘Icelandic School’ of philologists would become known as ‘book-prosists’, due to their emphasis on the medieval manuscripts as the first and only form in which the sagas ever took shape; like that of the legendary *fornaldarsögur*, the material of the *Íslendingasögur* stemmed from a great variety of sources, including old poetry, medieval and classical works of literature, contemporary events – which were projected onto the men and women of the Saga Age – and, most importantly, the individual writers’ own imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Like Benedikt Gröndal before him, Björn cultivated these ideas in order to render foreign claims on Old Icelandic literature invalid, and to strengthen Iceland’s position as a cultural nation, with its very own unique and prestigious literary achievements.<sup>4</sup> This attitude towards the Eddas and sagas entailed a certain level of cultural elitism, which is expressed in Benedikt’s very negative opinion on the popular, non-academic saga editions that were beginning to appear in Iceland in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which still presented the stories as historical accounts. In his ferocious review of Einar Þórðarsson’s collection of four chivalric sagas (1852), he accuses the editor of ‘distorting’ the material, and of having presented the audience with stories that “do not suit in any way the spirit of the people.” Benedikt concludes his attack with the claim that no-one who would read this book “would believe that such a thing could be published in 1852!”<sup>5</sup> Jürg Glauser has diagnosed Benedikt’s attitude in this matter correctly as that of “an elitist, educated member of the bourgeoisie”, attacking this publication on the basis of “its non-scholarly format.”<sup>6</sup> I agree with Glauser that this viewpoint is hardly surprising, not only because of Benedikt’s flamboyant personality, but also because of the nationalistic discourse in which Old Norse-Icelandic literature was being mobilised. Coinciding with the construction of a pantheon of ‘cultural saints’ and national poets<sup>7</sup>, there was the construction of a national canon of quintessentially Icelandic literature, from the beginning of the nation to the present. If this prestigious national canon was to stand its ground among the other great canons of classical and world literature, any discourse emphasising the sagas’ historicity rather than their literary genius was deemed ‘naïve and stupid’ by the nation-building elite. The book-prose approach

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<sup>1</sup> Konrad Maurer, *Über die Hænsa-Þóris saga* (Munich 1871) p.159.

<sup>2</sup> Björn Ólsen’s university lectures on the *Íslendingasögur* have appeared fragmentarily in *Um Íslendingasögur, kaflar úr háskólafyrirlesturum* (Reykjavík 1939).

<sup>3</sup> Kristjánsson (2007) p.205. The term book-prose was, just like free-prose, coined by Andreas Heusler (1914; *Buchprosa*).

<sup>4</sup> On the long-term influence of these nationalistic ideas on the use of the *Íslendingasögur* as sources for historical and archaeological research, see Byock (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Benedikt Gröndal, in his review of *Fjórar Riddarasögur, Þjóðólfur* 4:92 (29 September 1852) pp.267-8; “... að þær ekki neitt eiga við anda þjóðarinnar. [...] ... og enginnskyldi trúá, að þetta sje gefið út 1852!” The English translation is taken from Jürg Glauser, “The End of the Saga: Text, Tradition and Transmission in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Iceland”, in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock 1994) pp.101-41, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Glauser (1994) p.106.

<sup>7</sup> Helgason (2012).

to Old Norse-Icelandic literature would – under the influence of Björn M. Ólsen and his successor Sigurður Nordal – evolved into the hegemonic paradigm in the course of the twentieth century, and grew so intolerant towards other, less scholarly interpretations – an intolerance prefigured in Benedikt’s angry review – that, in 1941, the Alþingi, representing the ‘Icelandic nation’, claimed the copyright over all Icelandic texts written before 1400. This way, no unapproved editions of the texts – which were not in line with the national book-prose narrative – could be published unpunished.<sup>1</sup> It was against this current of nationalistic philology that Finnur Jónsson sought to defend the age-old belief in the historicity of the sagas, until he would be ‘forced to lay down his pen’. But were the implications of this new discourse for the place of the Edda’s in Icelandic culture?

In general, the proponents of the Icelandic School considered the *Íslendingasögur*, with their Icelandic protagonists and setting, of greater literary value and more genuinely *Icelandic* than the eddic poems. This is exemplified by later twentieth-century attitudes towards the mythological material (see Chapter 10.1), but is less evident in the scholarship of Björn himself. Like Benedikt Gröndal, Björn went to great lengths to safeguard the Icelandic quality of the Edda’s against foreign appropriations. In one of his lectures on *Völuspá*, which was partially published in *Skírnir* (1898), he identifies the writer of the apocalyptic poem as an Icelander, standing with “one foot in pagan, and with the other in Christian” culture.<sup>2</sup> The poem is considered to be of a highly hybrid nature, and represents an attempt to reconcile Christian ideas – Doomsday, and the ensuing peaceful Kingdom of God – with the pre-Christian world-view, in order to demonstrate Christianity was not as foreign – or incompatible with established pagan views – as many suspected. Since many Christians believed the world would end around the year 1000, Björn believed that this poem, dealing with a pagan interpretation of the Christian Doomsday narrative, was composed around that time, when foreign missionaries were attempting to win Iceland over to Christianity:

This thought, that the end of the world was at hand, I believe is connected to the fear, which prevailed in the Christian world, that the end of the world was supposed to take place in the year 1000, and furthermore I believe, that *Völuspá* was composed just before 1000. I am of the opinion, that missionaries, who came here around that time (Stefnir, Þangbrandur and perhaps others) have used this fear for the world’s end in their missionary work, and what would be more normal than pagan menn connecting this anxiety to their own ideas on Ragnarök and became spellbound by the same fear?<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the *Íslendingasögur*, *Völuspá* was – in Björn’s view – not primarily the product of the medieval scribe’s imagination; there *had been* an indigenous oral tradition, through which the poem was transmitted from the time of Iceland’s conversion until the high Middle Ages. However, this was a relatively short and purely Icelandic tradition, which had nothing to do with the oral tradition connecting Scandinavia to the early Icelanders, as envisioned by the proponents of the free-prose theory.<sup>4</sup> Just like the carved door of Valþjófsstaður, the poems

<sup>1</sup> See Helgason (1999) pp.119-36.

<sup>2</sup> Ólsen, “Um *Völuspá*: kafli úr firirlestri.”, in *Skírnir* 86 (1912) pp.372-5, 375; “... sem stóð með annan fótinn í heiðninni, enn hinn í kristninni...”

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.372; “Þessi hugsun, að heimsslit sjeu firir höndum, higg jeg standi í sambandi við þá hræðslu, sem drotnaði í hinum kristna heimi, að heimsslit ætti að koma árið 1000, og því held jeg helst, að Vsp. sje ort rjett firir 1000. Jeg geng að því vísu, að trúboðarnir, sem komu hingað um það leiti (Stefnir, Þangbrandur og ef til vill fleiri), hafi notað sjer þennan kvíða firir heimsslitum í trúboði sínu, og hvað var eðlilegra enn að heiðnir menn settu þennan kvíða í samband við sínar eigin hugmyndir um ragnarök og irði gagnteknr af sömu hræðslu?”

<sup>4</sup> See also Ólsen, *Strøbemærkninger til Eddakvadene* (Copenhagen 1908); idem., *Til Eddakvadene: til Völuspá* (Lund 1914), and its sequel: *Til Eddukvadene: til Hávamál* (Lund 1915).

constituted the venerable relics of truly original creative art, “in which our ancestors were no less skilled than the Norwegians, and which has remained with our country ever since those days.”<sup>1</sup> Although much of the mythological material constituting the *Poetic Edda* was of common Nordic origin, the ‘creative moment’, in which these narratives were transformed into true poetry, had been brought about by the peculiar and unique character of medieval Icelandic history and society.

#### 7.1.4 Between Hekla and Dofrafjall

On this subject, Björn’s ideas were very different from those of Finnur Jónsson, the most learned and esteemed Icelandic philologist of his generation, and a public confrontation seemed inevitable. Björn delivered the first blow in 1894, with a long essay entitled – cutting straight to the point – ‘Where did the eddic poems originate?’, published in the journal of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*.<sup>2</sup> The author’s belligerent intentions are clear from the onset, and concern Finnur’s view that the majority of the eddic poems was “composed in Norway, some in Greenland, and only very few, and the weakest and least remarkable ones at that, in Iceland”.<sup>3</sup> Initially, Björn could hardly believe it:

I frowned in astonishment when I saw this, and was curious as to what evidence this view could be based on. Now, dr. F. J. has entered the battlefield with the underlying arguments in his work: “Den oldnorske og oldislandske literaturs hist. I”, and so the time has come to take them into consideration.<sup>4</sup>

What follows are over one hundred and thirty pages of ‘consideration’, in which he begins by praising Finnur for his scholarly objectivity, and his quest for the truth, in which he was not corrupted by the national sentiments of other nations, obsessed with appropriating the material for themselves.<sup>5</sup> Both men agreed that the poems could not have been composed before the late ninth century or after about 1100, and that this could only have occurred in either Norway or in the lands settled by Norwegians, including Iceland.<sup>6</sup> Up to a certain extent, Björn and Finnur were allies, standing united against those scholars like Bugge and Guðbrandur Vigfússon who stressed the Irish or British character of the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>7</sup> However, things begin to become more problematic when Finnur’s preference for Norway rather than Iceland as the cradle of the eddic poems comes into the picture. According to Finnur, the cultural climate in Iceland differed significantly from that in Norway during the *landnáms*- and *söguöld*, when most of the poems were supposed to have been composed; life in Iceland was hard, violent and turbulent, and there was hardly any communal life to speak

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<sup>1</sup> Ólsen (1884b) p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, “Hvar eru Eddukvæðin til orðin?”, in *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags* 15 (1894) pp.1-133.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.1; “... væri ort í Noregi, nokkur á Grænlandi, enn að eins fáein, og það hin lökustu og ómerkilegstu, á Íslandi.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; “Mjer brá í brún, þegar jeg sá þetta, og var forvitni á að vita, hvaða rök þessi skoðun ætta að stiðjast. Nú hefur dr. F. J. komið fram á vígvöllinn með ástæður sínar fyrir þessu í riti sínu: “Den oldnorske og oldislandske literaturs hist. I”, og er því nú tími til kominn að taka þær til íhugunar.”

<sup>5</sup> Idem, pp.2-3. Displays of academic diplomacy and amicality form an important element of modern scholarly conduct, which left little space for uncompromising tirades.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, pp.3-4. Here, Björn also claims that Swedish or Danish elements may very well have entered the corpus under scrutiny, and that they were absorbed after having been adjusted to the Nordic spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Finnur would continue to refute Bugge’s hypothesis all his life; see especially Jónsson (1921), and also Chesnutt (2001) pp.154-5. Chesnutt argues here that, after Finnur’s 1921 publication, the Irish hypothesis lost its appeal to Nordic scholars and became confined to the realm of Celtology and folklore studies. For Jón J. Aðils’s ideas on Celtic influence in Iceland, see the following chapter.

of, and hence no opportunity for an independent cultural life or infrastructure to develop. Furthermore, the first settlers were not overly concerned with poetry or worshipping the gods – some of them even appear to have been atheists – which is hardly surprising, considering the hard and time-consuming task of colonising a nearly uninhabitable land.<sup>1</sup> How different the circumstances in Norway, where the people enjoyed relative peace after king Harald *hárfagri* (see the Introduction) had united the country and created a royal court where poetry dealing with mythological themes was highly valued, and the gods were held in great esteem.<sup>2</sup> Peace and a stable cultural-political infrastructure were, according to Finnur, the two main conditions under which poetry could flourish. Björn, in response, does not deny that living conditions were hard for the first generations of Icelanders, but he also claims that Finnur ‘makes too much’ out of this. According to Björn, much of the world’s greatest literature was produced exactly in times of crisis:

Do we have any example of this, that any man has ever been so absorbed by warfare and battle, that he never sheathed his sword, never thought about anything else than killing and manslaughter? No, but on the other hand, we know enough examples of poetry and fine arts blossoming in unpeaceful times. The golden age of Roman literature was also the most violent age, rife with domestic insurrections and civil wars. Also, it was not peaceful in Greece at the time when Euripides and Aristophanes wrote their excellent plays, or when Thucydides wrote his unequalled history.<sup>3</sup>

The same rang true for Iceland; the life and times of Snorri Sturluson could hardly be considered stable or peaceful, and in the turbulent tenth century, when many of the eddic poems came into being, the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson composed his monumental verses.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting how Björn, who was also a classicist and a trained historian, equates the turbulence of Iceland’s earliest history with that of Roman and Greek antiquity, thus – implicitly – marking Old Norse-Icelandic literature as equally ‘classical’. Since instability and violence seem to have been *beneficial* rather than harmful to the development of literature, the likelihood of the poems having evolved in Iceland rather than in Norway was undeniable, and Finnur quite simply ‘wrong’ in maintaining that Icelanders did not begin to produce poetry of their own until after 950 AD.<sup>5</sup> Since the eddic poems are very much a product of the ‘Icelandic experience’, the only right way to approach them is as *Icelandic* literature, or – referring to his shining example Konrad Maurer – ‘from the summit of Mount Hekla’ (see Chapter 5.1.1):

Müllenhoff once reproached Konr. Maurer for viewing Germanic mythology from too narrow an Icelandic point of view, or, as he formulated it, that Maurer examined this “from Mount Hekla”. I confess that, in any case, it is best to have the broadest horizon possible. And, regarding that which touches upon the topic under discussion here, the question of the cradle

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<sup>1</sup> Ólsen (1894) p.5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp.7-8; “Vitum vjer dæmi til þess, að nokkur maður hafi nokkurn tíma verið svo önnum kafinn í hernaði og stirjöld, að hann hafi aldrei slíðrað sverð sitt, aldrei hugsað um annað enn víg og manndráp? Nei, þvert á móti vitum vjer nóg dæmi þess, að kveðskapur og fagnar mentir hafa blómgastr á ófriðartímum. Gullöld rómverskra bókmenta var um leið hin mesta ófriðaröld, full af innanlandsóeirðum og borgarastríðum. Ekki var heldur friðsamt á Grikklandi um það leiti, sem þeir Euripides og Aristofanes sömdu hin ágætu leikrit sín eða Þúkýdídes hina óviðjafnanlegu sögu sína.”

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.9.

of the eddic poems, I believe that the view from Hekla's peak will be both wider and better than that from some other places, whether they are called Dofrafjall or Brocken.<sup>1</sup>

Elaborating on Müllenhoff's geographical metaphor, Björn turns his argument against him in defence of his mentor Maurer, and dismisses the German *and* the Norwegian mountain in favour of the Icelandic one, from which the wide landscape of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is best understood.

This rejection of Norway was, of course, a direct attack on Finnur Jónsson's Norwegian hypothesis, and something Finnur had to react to. In 1895, he published his rebuttal under the same title and in the same journal as Björn's essay.<sup>2</sup> After having expressed his gratitude for Björn's very quick but nevertheless thorough and elaborate treatment of his book<sup>3</sup>, Finnur blames him for attacking his qualities as a scholar, by claiming that his book lacked solid argumentation and that Finnur had 'cast aside' all previous research on this topic. Apart from being entirely wrong – how could someone who spent so much time thinking about the origin of the Edda's ever ignore all previous scholarship? – this is considered an attack on his very person, and hence disrespectful.<sup>4</sup> Finnur retaliates by accusing Björn of being academically unstable, which can be concluded from the fact that he turned his opinion on the topic under discussion by one hundred and eighty degrees in the past five to six years. It was he who wrote six years earlier that, in truth, Icelanders had only "received, stored and written down the eddic poems", and who was thus on the exact same line as Finnur.<sup>5</sup> What had made him change his mind so drastically?

In reaction to Björn's historical arguments, dealing with the possibility of literature in turbulent times, Finnur reformulates his arguments based on descriptions of nature and landscape in the poem, which surely forms the most significant indication of the poets' origin:

I have gathered together everything peculiar, which I believed could qualify, and asked myself: is this *Norwegian* or *Icelandic* (anything else than these two is not eligible; on this BMÓ and I agree). The answer has almost always been: *Norwegian*. It is established, that Icelandic nature, or that which is or could be *particularly* Icelandic, does not appear anywhere in any poem.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Björn, Finnur does not consider it strange or unlikely that medieval Icelanders would commit themselves to writing down the Norwegian eddic poems; this was by no means stranger than the fact that Icelandic works – like Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* – contain the verses of other skálds of Norwegian descent. This was quite simply the result of the great

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.127; "Müllenhoff brigslaði einu sinni Konr. Maurer um það, að hann liti í goðafræði Germana frá of þröngu íslensku sjónarmiði, eða, sem hann komst að orði, að Maurer skoðaði hana "frá Heklufjalli". Jeg játa það, að í hverju máli er best að hafa svo víðan sjóndeildarhring sem unt er. Enn að því snertir það mal, sem hjer er um að ræða, spurninguna um heimkinni Eddukvæðanna, þá higg jeg, að útsjónin af Heklutindi verði bæði víðari og betri enn frá nokkrum öðrum stað, hvort sem hann heitir Dofrafjall eða Brocken." Dofrafjall and Brocken are mountains in Norway and Germany respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Finnur Jónsson, "Hvar eru Eddukvæðin til orðin?", in *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags* 16 (1895) pp.1-41.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.3-5.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.6. For the original, see Ólsen (1884a) p.ii; "Ganske vist har det islandske folk overfor Eddasangene væsenlig forholdt sig modtagende, opbevarende og nederskrivende".

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.9; "Jeg hef tínt saman alt einkennilegt, sem mjer fanst geta komið til greina, og spurt: er þetta *norskt* eða *íslenskt* (um annað en þetta tvent getur ekki verið að ræða; þar erum við BMÓ samdóma). Svarið hefur nær ætíð verið: *norskt*. Það er segin-saga, að íslenskri náttúru, eða því sem er eða geti verið *sjerstaklega* íslenskt, bregður hvergi nokkurstaðar fyrir í neinu kvæði." (Emphasis original.)

interest Icelanders had for their ancestral and ancient culture.<sup>1</sup> He agrees with Björn that no people would ever write down another people's poetic heritage without also creating poetry of themselves, but this is also not what Finnur claims, and is hence "completely meaningless as weapon against me"; the older poems of the Edda have *indeed* inspired Icelanders to create their own Icelandic poetry from the twelfth century onwards, when the conditions for writing poetry improved.<sup>2</sup> Finnur never considered himself any less patriotic than other Icelanders, and did not believe that his Norwegian hypothesis undermined the idea of Iceland's great contribution to the world:

The honour will never be taken from us Icelanders, of having collected this magnificent poetic capital and for having preserved it throughout many centuries; in *that sense*, it is *our own* – there is *no* question about that. But we have preserved miscellaneous, which is not *originally* our own, so it is not unheard of or exceptional if any of the eddic poems – or most of them – would be non-Icelandic in origin.<sup>3</sup>

The national honour of the Icelanders ensues from to their traditional talent for collecting and preserving, making Iceland the great 'deep freezer'<sup>4</sup> in which original Nordic culture had been preserved, and to which the other Nordic lands could turn to learn about their own ancient culture. In this passage, the problem of ownership is addressed; is the nation from which the poems originated not their owner as well? Yes and no, Finnur argues; just because the poems were initially non-Icelandic, does not mean that they have not become an integral part of Icelandic culture in the ensuing centuries, when Norway abandoned its Old Norse roots and the Iceland became their sole guardian. Finnur proposes what could be considered an *adoption* theory of ownership, in which geographical origin is not the sole indication of ownership.

Although this view on Iceland's importance to the world differs significantly from that of Björn and the Icelandic School, it cannot be dismissed as non-patriotic or anti-national; like many Icelanders – like Finnur Magnússon and Grímur Thomsen – before him, Finnur Jónsson and other proponents of the free-prose hypothesis fashioned their national pride in theories thematising Iceland's role as the 'memory' or 'historian' of the Nordic world, on which other nations – suffering from some form of national amnesia – heavily depended. The accumulation of Old Norse culture in Icelandic manuscripts formed the nation's *cultural capital*, and determined its relationship with, and its importance to, the rest of the world. In this respect, Finnur represents the older strand of cultural nationalism, discussed in the previous chapters, in which Iceland did not stand on its own but acquired its national prestige from its unique and paramount position in Scandinavia, as the guardian of authentic, Nordic culture.

In order to illustrate the interrelatedness of Norwegian and Icelandic national greatness even further, Finnur picks up the thread of mountain metaphors, initiated by Müllenhoff and continued by Björn. Finnur agrees with Björn that the German mountain – Brocken, representing the Grimmian/Germanic discourse – has no place in the study of eddic mythology. But that is where the agreement stops:

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.40.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; "...alveg þýðingarlaus sem vopn gegn mjer."

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.41; "Aldrei verður sá heiður tekinn af oss Íslendingum, að hafa safnað þessum ágæta kvæðasjóð og geymt hann um margar aldir, að því leyti er hann vor eign – þar á er *einginn* efi. En vjer höfum geymt ýmislegt fleira, sem er ekki vor *upphaflega* eign, svo að það er ekki eins dæmi eða undantekning, þótt eitthvað af Eddukvæðunum – eða flest – væri óíslenskt að uppruna." (Emphasis original.)

<sup>4</sup> Simonsen (2011) p.2; Halink (2010) p.398.

I do not fully agree – I dare say against this, that the most healthy thing to do would be to look at the matter *both* from Hekla’s peak **and** from Dofrafjall, and that is what I have attempted to do, completely impartially. Goethe says somewhere: Willst du den dichter recht verstehen, musz du im dichters lande gehn. [*sic.*] [...] In Norway, I first came to understand so surprisingly much of what is in the eddic poems, which I would never have grasped, even if I would have travelled between all the corners of Iceland – there, for the first time, I have fully understood the poet. That is why I hold on to the opinion I have reached, and which dr. Björn M. Ólsen held in the year 1884.<sup>1</sup>

The soundness of his own view in this matter, is here substantiated by a very *personal* experience, a semi-mystical identification with the nameless poet, which occurred in the natural surroundings from which the poems originated, and which could never have occurred in Iceland. Landscape and the description of natural phenomena in the poems, which formed one of Benedikt Gröndal’s fundamental arguments in favour of their *Icelandicness* (see Chapter 6.3.2), are now mobilised to underline their Norwegian origin and to overrule Björn’s historical arguments.

The sharp-tongued final twist to the argument, a reference again to Björn’s earlier views, from before he was somehow led astray, required an appropriate response from the accused heretic. The third contribution in this polemic, Björn’s voluminous ‘Reply to dr. Finnur Jónsson’, actually appeared in the same volume of the journal, directly following Finnur’s article.<sup>2</sup> The most urgent matter, namely Finnur’s accusation of scholarly instability, is addressed in the first pages of the essay. Björn maintains that, contrary to what Finnur writes, he was never ‘on the same line’ with Finnur regarding the origin of the eddic poems:

First and foremost, it is not true, as FJ. suggests, that I have at any time agreed with him that *Norway* was the cradle of the eddic poems. Back then I believed, just like so many, that they were the common possession of all the Nordic lands or even of all the Germanic peoples, and therefore I could very well “frown in astonishment” when I saw that which in 1894 appeared in print, that the majority of the eddic poems would have been composed in Norway, even if my opinion from 1884 would be entirely unchanged.<sup>3</sup>

As Finnur himself knew very well, much had changed in the field of Edda scholarship since ca. 1880, when historical linguists established that none of the eddic poems could be older than ca. 800 AD. With that revolutionary insight, the “foundations, on which this opinion [quoted by Finnur as being identical to his own] rested, were disrupted.”<sup>4</sup> When Björn wrote down this now outdated view, the paradigmatic book by the Danish-German linguist Julius Hoffory (1855-1897) which would establish these new insights for once and for all, was

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson (1895) p.41; “Ekki er jeg alveg á sama máli – jeg þori andspænis þessu að segja, að hollast sje að líta á málið *bæði* frá Heklutindi **og** frá Dofrafjalli, og það er það sem jeg hef reynt að gera og alveg óvilhalt. Goethe segir einhvers staðar: Willst du den dichter recht verstehen, musz du im dichters lande gehn. [...] Fyst í Noregi hefur mjer rjettilega skilist svo undramart í Eddukvæðunum, sem jeg hefði aldrei getað skilið, þótt jeg hefði farið landshorna á millum á Íslandi – þar fyst hef jeg skilið skálidið til fulls. Þess vegna held jeg fast við skoðun þá, sem jeg hef komist að og dr. Björn M. Ólsen hafði árið 1884.” (Emphasis and bold lettering original.) Finnur misquotes two lines taken from Goethe’s opening verse of the *Noten und Abhandlungen* to his *West-östlicher Diwan* (1819); Wer den Dichter will verstehen, Muss ins Dichters Lande gehen.

<sup>2</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, “Svar til drs. Finns Jónssonar”, in *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags* 16 (1895) pp.42-87.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.42; “First og fremst er það ekki rjett, sem FJ. gefur í skin, að jeg hefi nokkurn tíma verið á sama máli og hann um það, að *Noregur* væri vagg Eddukvæðanna. Jeg hjelt þá eins og fleiri, að þau væru sameign allra Norðurlanda eða jafnvel sameign allra germanskra þjóða, og því gat mjer vel “brugðið í brún” við að sjá það sett fram í prenti árið 1894, að flestöll Eddukvæðin væru ort í Noregi, þó að skoðun min frá 1884 hefði verið alveg óbreytt.” (Emphasis original.)

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.43; “... að grundvöllur sá, sem sú skoðun hvíldi á, hafði raskast.”



published one year later.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Björn could not be blamed for still adhering to the ‘old view’ in 1884, and Finnur ‘holding this old view against him’ had achieved nothing by doing so. In fact, Björn considered it a virtue rather than a vice, to adjust one’s opinions in accordance with the progression of academic insight.<sup>2</sup> His change of view was quite natural, given the developments of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Instead, it was Finnur *himself* who had, in his reply to Björn, begun to show signs of revision and doubt concerning his firmly formulated statements in *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*; rather than maintaining that hardly any of the eddic poems could *possibly* be Icelandic in origin – Björn provides a long list of strongly worded statements of this nature<sup>3</sup> – he now tended towards concession, turned soft, and moved away from the categorical rejection of the Icelandic position and ever so slightly in the direction of his opponent. This is of course applauded by Björn, who does not consider this a weakness, and has thrown the argument of academic instability back at Finnur.<sup>4</sup>

In the final section of Björn’s response, Finnur’s suggestive claim of having encountered the Norwegian poet of the Edda in Norwegian landscape and nature, is addressed in a fashion which can only be considered characteristic of Björn’s Icelando-centric viewpoint. He agrees with Goethe, that, in order to understand the poet, one must visit his *Heimat*. But the conclusions Finnur draws from this piece of poetic insight are refuted in formulations that bear witness to Björn’s patriotic love for Icelandic nature and rural culture:

It is a great pity, the FJ. has not had the opportunity to acquaint himself sufficiently with Icelandic nature and with the ancient customs and mentality of Icelandic farmers. He cannot be blamed for this, since he was brought up in a merchant town and left Iceland at a young age. I wish that he would get the opportunity to travel through the country a few summers. I am convinced, that his eyes would then open and much in the eddic poems, which is now shrouded in darkness, would become clear to him. With this I, by no means, want to deny that it can also be interesting to travel to Norway in this context. Norwegians have preserved much which is ancient, which we have forgotten, and we see there even today many of the same things, both in nature and in national life, that our ancestors witnessed when they visited their kinsmen in Norway.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Finnur’s theory is turned upside down, and the geographical table is turned; instead of Norway being the origin and Iceland the storehouse of Nordic genius, Iceland becomes the cradle, and Norway plays the second fiddle as a place where much has remained the same, and where one could still experience some of the things the Icelandic ancestors had

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Hoffory, *Über zwei Strophen der Völuspá* (Berlin 1885). On this theory (syncope), see Eddas and Sagas p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Ólsen (1895) p.43. Finnur was not convinced by Björn’s explanation, and included the controversial quote in the second revised edition of *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* as proof of the agreement that had once existed between them, and hence the oddness of Björn’s ‘sudden’ transformation. See Jónsson (1920) vol.1, p.55.

<sup>3</sup> Ólsen (1895) pp.45-6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ólsen (1895) pp.87; “Það er mikið mein, að FJ. hefur ekki haft tækifæri til að kinnast nógu vel íslenskri náttúru og um fram alt síðum og hugsunarhætti íslenskra bænda. Þetta er honum als ekki láandi, því að hann er upp alinn í kaupstað og fór hjeðan ungur. Jeg vildi óska, að honum gæfist kostur á að ferðast um landið nokkur sumur. Jeg er sannfærður um, að þá mundu opnast á honum augun og mart í Eddukvæðunum verða honum ljóst, sem nú er hulið í mirkri. Með þessu vil jeg engan veginn neita því, að það geti líka verið fróðlegt í þessu efni að ferðast um Noreg. Norðmenn hafa geimt mart fornlegt, sem vjer höfum gleimt, og vjer sjáum þar enn í dag mart hið sama bæði í náttúrunni og þjóðlífinu, sem bar firir augu feðra vorra, þegar þeir heimsóttu frændur sína í Noregi.”

experienced on their journeys. Norway is assigned the same secondary role as the one Iceland occupies in the discourse of the Norwegian School.

It is in these lines that Björn's patriotic line of argumentation reaches its climax, and in which the island *itself* becomes the strongest argument against Finnur's claims; the Copenhagen-based professor does not know his own fatherland well enough to be able to recognise the Icelandic elements in the poems. Epistemologically, this mode of thinking seems closely linked to the ancient Greek view that, in order to know something, one has to *be* – or *become* – like the object one is trying to grasp; Finnur is simply not *Icelandic* enough to notice the poems' *Icelandicness*, because in order to evolve the appropriate antennae to do so, one has to be fully acquainted with and shaped by the *same* land that once inspired the ancient skalds. The identification of the nation with its literature here becomes physical. Even though Björn never explicitly refers to him, the voice of Benedikt Gröndal can be heard loud and clear in this passage. Instead of applying solid philological arguments, Björn now turns Finnur's own biography against him, and transforms it into a rhetorical device; how could someone who has spent so little time on the island, who did not have Iceland running through his veins, possibly be in the position to determine what was 'particularly Icelandic' in the eddic poems and what not? Finnur, quite simply, does not qualify for this task.

At this point in the polemic, location has become *the* hermeneutical key to disclosing the otherwise hermetically sealed verses, just like the Holy Land was conceived by nineteenth-century travelling theologians and Jesus biographers as a 'fifth Gospel', which facilitated a fuller understanding of the other four.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Edda, localising this spatial 'fifth Gospel' – and hence determining 'the right way' of interpreting the poems – became a matter of national significance. After the polemic entered this spatial phase, a continuation on rational terms was out of the question; the whole issue now revolved around the choice between Iceland and Norway, and around the purely subjective question which one of the two lands could boast to possess more 'eddic landscapes' than the other. Björn's provocative conclusions did not provoke an immediate reaction from Finnur, but in the second revised edition of *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, which appeared rather safely one year *after* Björn's death, Finnur would maintain that, apart "from some very minor things – concerning the Greenlandic poems [...] – I have, in spite of the raised objections [by Björn], not been able to change my mind at any point".<sup>2</sup>

The idea that the creative spirit which had given rise to the eddic poems and to the Valþjófsstaður door alike, had 'remained with our country', and could therefore still be tapped into, is indicative of Björn's indebtedness to the Romantic notion of historical continuity, in which the distant past and the present could be conceived as manifestations of the same eternal and timeless national essence (see Chapter 2.2.3). Consequently, Björn's philological investigations into the oldest relics of Icelandic literature had direct consequences for his ideas on contemporary national culture. Especially the Icelandic language itself, arguably the most tangible link between modern Iceland and the Saga Age, was immensely dear to him, and in order to prevent the gap between written and spoken Icelandic to widen, he proposed an alternative orthography based on the language's verbal characteristics. This entailed the abolition of the 'unauthentic' letters *y* and *ý*, in favour of *i* and *í*. His ideas were never widely adopted, but Björn himself stayed loyal to his linguistic ideals, as can be deduced from his articles and books.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxical though it may appear, it

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<sup>1</sup> Moxnes (2012) p.126.

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson (1920) vol.1, p.55; "Bortset fra enkelte ganske underordnede ting – om de grønlandske digte se nedenfor -, har jeg tiltrods for de gjorte invendinger ikke kunnet ændre min opfattelse på noget punkt..."

<sup>3</sup> See for an example of his more linguistic eddic scholarship for instance Ólsen, *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda, tilligemed de grammatiske afhandlingers prolog og to andre tillæg* (Copenhagen 1884).

was exactly in this love for the Icelandic and Old Norse language that the *classicist* Björn comes to the forefront. When the classical languages in danger of being abolished in the Icelandic educational system around 1900, Björn came to their defense by eulogising Benedikt Gröndal's father, the Neohumanist Sveinbjörn Egilsson (see Chapter 4.2.1), and proclaiming that it was thanks to his translations of classical works – into Icelandic – that the Icelandic language, the very “foundation of national feeling”, had been restored.<sup>1</sup> Instead of considering classical and Nordic culture two opposing and irreconcilable historical forces – as Grundtvig had done – Björn recognised and cherished the contribution of classical education and Neohumanism to the development of the Icelandic nation, just like Benedikt Gröndal did.

Since the Icelandic spirit which had given rise to the *Völuspá* and the *Íslendingasögur* was as much alive today as it was back then, the concept of authenticity was not necessarily linked to antiquity, in Björn's view; the eddic poems did not have to predate Christianity or the settlement of Iceland in order to be genuine expressions of the nation's soul. This viewpoint, which is related to earlier detemporalisations of the Nordic literary spirit<sup>2</sup>, is best expressed in his edition of the apocryphal eddic poem *Sólarljóð*, which was often included in nineteenth-century Edda editions, but generally believed to be of a later, medieval date (see Chapter 3.4.3). In the explanatory remarks to his 1915 edition, Björn acknowledges that the poem cannot be very old, and that it was not composed until the late thirteenth century at its earliest.<sup>3</sup> One indication of this, Björn argues, is the fact that Freyja is referred to as Óðinn's wife, which is not the case in any of the other eddic poems.<sup>4</sup> However, the poem's young age does not influence Björn's opinion on the poem in a negative sense. On the contrary; the work is celebrated as “one of the brightest jewels of our literature”, in which the ‘light beams’ of foreign and indigenous culture are refracted, as in a prism.<sup>5</sup> Just like the anonymous poet of *Völuspá*, living some three-hundred years earlier, the creator of *Sólarljóð* is described as the product of a transitional age, standing “with one foot in the teachings of the church and with the other one in Hávamál.”<sup>6</sup> Again, the poetic magnificence of the work is attributed to Iceland's unique history and long process of conversion – in which pagan and Christian imageries co-existed for many centuries – and is therefore quintessentially *national*. Consequently, in the closing lines of the book, ‘national artists’ of the *modern* age are advised to turn to this Icelandic material for inspiration:

Finally, I suggest that our artists, composers, painters and carpenters consider the projects that await them in the *Sólarljóð*. I can hardly think of more beautiful material in the Icelandic *oratorium* than *Sólarljóð*. And does it not appear as though the many images that the poem brings before our mind's eye were created to be clothed in the flesh and blood of Icelandic

<sup>1</sup> Ólsen, *Skýrsla um hinn lærða skóla í Reykjavík 1897-1898* (Reykjavík 1898) p.41; “... málið er undirstaða þjóðernistilfinningarinnar.” See also Glad (2011) pp.100-1, where it is stressed that there is no evidence to suggest that Sveinbjörn Egilsson ever intended to strengthen the national sentiments of his students through his translations.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Johan Ludvig Heiberg's lectures on Oehlenschläger's poetry and the poems of the Edda (*Nordische Mythologie. Aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen*, 1827), and Finnur Magnússon's ideas on Walter Scott (see Chapter 3.4.1).

<sup>3</sup> Ólsen, *Sólarljóð*, in the series *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmenta*, vol.5 nr.1 (Reykjavík 1915) pp.71-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.73. Óðinn's wife is usually Frigg, whereas Freyja is married to the elusive god Óðr (see Chapters 3.4.4 and 6.3).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; “...einn af hinum skærustu gimsteinum bókmenta vorra [...]. Í þeim gimsteini brotna ljósöldur útlendrar og innlendrar menningar, ...”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; “... því að skáldið stendur með annan fótinn í kenningum kirkjunnar enn hinn í Hávamálum.” Compare this positive view on the poem's Christian character to that of Grímur Thomsen, who compared the work to Dante's *Divina Commedia* (Thomsen (1846c) pp.98-100). See also Chapter 6.1.2.

art? I trust that Icelandic artists will not leave this treasure trove unused. I can imagine the next edition of *Sólarljóð* decorated with images, created by the hands of masters.<sup>1</sup>

The resemblance with Finnur Magnússon's call for 'national art' inspired by eddic themes, almost a full century earlier, is obvious (see Chapter 3.4.3). Just like Finnur, Björn attempts to construct a direct lifeline between academic philology and popular, national culture. But there is one highly significant difference between the two; whereas Finnur encouraged *all* Nordic artists to turn to 'their' national heritage, preserved in the Icelandic manuscripts, Björn addresses only *Icelandic* artists, who can draw inspiration from this poem because it is exclusively Icelandic. This exemplary leap, from Nordic inclusivity to Icelandic exclusivity, is indicative of the developments in Icelandic national self-awareness in the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, when calls for greater autonomy from Denmark evolved into calls for independence (see Chapter 9.1.1).

In Björn's opinion, the national prestige of Old Norse-Icelandic literature laid not in its preservation of ancient Scandinavian or Germanic culture, but rather in its very unique and Icelandic character, to which no other nations could lay claim. This view would become the dominant one in twentieth-century Icelandic philology, and would silence the representatives of an older strand of national pride, based on Iceland's importance in relation to the Nordic world; the view represented by Finnur Jónsson. When Björn died in 1919, he had lived just long enough to witness Iceland's transformation into a sovereign, in personal union with the Danish monarch. Finnur survived him by fifteen years, and had to live with the consequences of the paradigm shift in Icelandic philology, brought about by Maurer, Björn, and the ensuing Icelandic School with its book-prose agenda. The new academic infrastructure, now no longer centered in Copenhagen, evolved in tandem with Iceland's growing independence discourse, and favoured the conception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature as an independent, unique, and very honorable branch of the great tree of European literature.

## 7.2 Historiography: *Ásatrú and the Nation*

### 7.2.1 Reconsidering Pagan Iceland

In the previous chapters, we have touched upon several instances in which Old Norse myth was infused with historical significance, either as the product of Iceland's unique history (Björn M. Ólsen) or as a historical force in its own right, shaping the character and the fate of the Nordic people (Grímur Thomsen). Different modes of interpreting the Eddas were linked to different conceptions of Icelandic and Scandinavian history. Of course, the leap from philology to historiography is a very logical one, since virtually all the scholars and writers discussed in the previous chapters have attempted to determine the value of the medieval manuscripts on the basis of their antiquity, and the historical conditions from which they arose. However, most of the time, historical arguments served the purpose of substantiating – or debunking – national claims on a corpus of ancient literature, in order to aggrandise the prestige of one's own nation; it was always the *text itself*, and its contested status as world literature or historical document, which remained the focal point of the philological

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.74; "Að endingu leifi jeg mjer að benda listamönnum vorum, tónskáldum, málurum og mindasmiðum á þau verkefni, sem bíða þeirra í *Sólarljóðum*. Varla get jeg hugsað mjer fegurra efni í íslenskt *oratorium* enn *Sólarljóð*. Og eru ekki hinar mörgu mindir, sem kvæðið bregður fyrir hugskots augu vor, eins og skapaðar til að íklæðast holdi og blóði af íslenskri list? Jeg hef það traust til íslenskra listamanna, að þeir láti ekki þennan fjársjóð ónotaðan. Jeg sje í anda næstu útgáfu *Sólarljóða* þridda mindum, gerðum af meistarahöndum." (Italics original.)

discourse. In the present chapter, I will move away from this focus on the texts themselves, and instead explore how philology has been mobilised as an auxiliary science to historiography, which, as a scholarly discipline, was undergoing the same ideological transformation as Icelandic philology around the turn of the twentieth century. How could historical knowledge about *Ásatrú*, the actual faith of the ancestors, be extracted from the written sources? How did this tie into the overall articulation of a ‘national past’, ideologically in sync with the national movement of the present? And how was the positive reappraisal of Icelandic paganism brought into resonance with the island’s Protestant identity?

Already in the Romantic poetry of Bjarni Thorarensen, national character, climatological determinism *à la* Montesquieu and mythology are intertwined, and turned into a system of historical reciprocity; in line with Finnur Magnússon’s conception of myth as natural philosophy, he pays homage to the sea god Ægir – symbolising the harsh living conditions of the North Atlantic world – for having forged the Icelandic national spirit, far harder and nobler than the national spirits of peoples in more temperate climate zones (see Chapter 4.1). Grímur Thomsen also linked the independent and self-sufficient spirit of the Nordic peoples to the peculiar character of the Old Norse gods (see Chapter 6.1), without indicating whether the national spirit resulted from the character of the gods or the other way around; both national spirit and mythological world-view were the *natural products* of the realities and deprivations of life in the far North. In this holistic interpretation of Nordic culture, the historical introduction of Christianity – a foreign faith, unrooted in Scandinavian soil – could be interpreted as something of a metaphysical apocalypse, and an important cause for Scandinavia’s long-term ‘estrangement’ from her Old Norse, national origins. Especially in Grímur Thomsen’s poetry dealing with the downfall of Hákon jarl (see Chapter 6.1.4), this intuitive overlap of religious cataclysm and national eclipse – taking place in actual history – is thematised. In this late Romantic discourse, permeated with an obsession for ‘the authentic’, the original religion of the Scandinavians is what determined their national spirit, and its demise ushered in the end of the golden age, when it ‘shone from the North’ (Oehlenschläger). Pre-Christian religion was thus a *historical factor* that could not be ignored by Icelandic historians.

In his controversial book *Der Antichrist* (1894), Friedrich Nietzsche refers to himself and his like-minded readers as Hyperboreans, detached and far removed from modern life lived by the masses:

Sehen wir uns ins Gesicht. Wir sind Hyperboreer, – wir wissen gut genug, wie abseits wir leben. [...] Jenseits des Nordens, des Eises, des Todes – unser Leben, unser Glück... Wir haben das Glück entdeckt, wir wissen den Weg, wir fanden den Ausgang aus ganzen Jahrtausenden des Labyrinths. Wer fand ihn sonst? – Der moderne Mensch etwa? ‘Ich weiss nicht aus, noch ein; ich bin Alles, was nicht aus noch ein weiss’ – seufzt der moderne Mensch ... An dieser Modernität waren wir krank, – am faulen Frieden, am feigen Compromiss, an der ganzen tugendhaften Unsauberkeit des modernen Ja und Nein.<sup>1</sup>

By equating his readers with the mythical blissful inhabitants of the north – the Hyperboreans of the ancient Greek sources, already connected to Nordic identity by Benedikt Gröndal (see Chapter 6.3) – Nietzsche separates them from the large majority, the ignorant masses, led by the Christian *Sklavenmoral*, and forges an exclusive community of initiated elects, of fearless *Übermenschen*. The North represents in this respect a place of refuge and sincerity, and of remoteness from the blind and ignorant world of slaves. Although Nietzsche’s North is first

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist* (1894) chapter one, on *Nietzsche Source*: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/AC> (last accessed: 6 March 2015).

and foremost an *internal* North, a metaphor for authenticity, desolation and truth, his writings deeply influenced the reception of Nordic culture and the geographical North in Wilhelmine Germany; the North could be experienced as a state of mind *and* a real place at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche himself, a classicist to the core, never forged a link between his concept of the *Übermensch* and the strong-willed characters of Old Norse literature. But he was advised by the influential Danish literary critic Georg Brandes (see Chapter 8.1.2) to pick up the Icelandic sagas, since so much could be found in them, “daß Ihre Hypothesen und Theorien über die Moral einer Herren-Race bestärkt.”<sup>2</sup>

The heroic character of Nordic history was also emphasised in the writings of the Scottish writer and historian Thomas Carlyle, who opened his series of six lectures on different types of heroism in history (see also Chapter 2.2.3) with an exposition on ‘the hero as divinity’, in which Óðinn is presented as the very emblem of divine heroism.<sup>3</sup> According to Carlyle, determining the primordial religion of a nation formed the key to understanding its history and its soul:

Answering of this question is giving us the soul of the history of the man or nation. The thoughts they had were the parents of the actions they did; their feelings were parents of their thoughts: it was the unseen spiritual in them that determined the outward and actual; - their religion, as I say, was the great fact about them.<sup>4</sup>

This tight link between pre-Christian religion – as expressed in mythology – and the progression of actual history, became a hallmark of national historiographies in nineteenth-century Europe. The Polish historian Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861) for instance justified his 1806 Polish translation of Mallet’s *Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc* (see Chapter 2.2.2) with the assertion that the Scandinavians had descended from the ancient Scythians, and were therefore closely related to the equally ‘Nordic’ Polish people.<sup>5</sup> In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the poet and Nietzsche enthusiast Pencho Slaveykov (1866-1912) advocated a messianic return to primordial Bulgarianness through the reconstruction of Bulgaria’s pre-Byzantine, pagan religion.<sup>6</sup> In the cult of national authenticity, Christianity was often conceived as the foreign aggressor; an intruder, or a historical accident, which had to be reversed in order to reconnect to the original spirit of the nation.

In the more moderate ideological climate of Iceland, the modern re-appreciation of *Ásatrú* (for the origin of this neologism, see Chapter 6.1.4) was of a less radical nature, and never appears to have been at odds with the mainstream, Lutheran establishment. To Iceland’s Early Modern historiographers, the island’s association with Old Norse heathenism constituted a problem rather than a cause for self-glorification, and undermined their attempts to present their fatherland as a civilised, *Christian* land. In his ecclesiastical history of Iceland in Latin (*Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiæ*, four volumes.; Copenhagen 1772-8), the learned bishop of Skálholt, Finnur Jónsson (1704-1789), dedicates a long chapter to the ‘pagan origins’ of Icelandic culture, in which he does not intend to disclose the heathen world-view, but merely to demonstrate the ‘religious darkness’ in which those pagan settlers waded.<sup>7</sup> Only

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<sup>1</sup> On the construction of the North as a mythical space, see especially Fjågesund (2014) pp.468-82.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Brandes, in a letter to Nietzsche from 1888. Quoted in Klaus von See, *Deutsche Germanen-Ideologie. Vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M., 1970) p.55.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyle (1841) pp.1-66.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, pp.4-5.

<sup>5</sup> The construction of a Nordic Polish identity occurred in the context of the binary opposition between feudal Slavic and ‘democratic’ Nordic culture. See Baár (2010) pp.174-8. On similar instrumentalisations of the Edda in Estonia, see Kuldkepp (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Trencsényi (2012) p.125.

<sup>7</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiæ* vol.1 (Copenhagen 1772) p.6.

the arrival of Christianity could finally put a halt to the terrible pagan arrogance of the Icelanders. However, in Iceland's defence, Finnur also concludes that the historical sources dealing with Iceland's pre-Christian religion are highly unreliable<sup>1</sup>, and that a significant percentage of the earliest Icelanders had been Christian long before foreign missionaries began spreading the faith in Iceland.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the very roots of the Icelandic nation were at least as Christian as they were pagan.

In the nineteenth century, this apologetic discourse in Icelandic historiography made way for a more self-confident strand of history writing, in sync with the nation's gravitation towards Romantic nationalism. Although historiography did not evolve into a separate and independent discipline at the University of Iceland until as late as the 1960s (see Chapter 1.2.2), the reformulation of Iceland's history – and of Old Norse paganism's role in it – did take place in the influential writings of the historian Jón Jónsson Aðils (1869-1920) Icelandic authors like Jónas Jónsson 'from Hrifla' (*frá Hriflu*; 1885-1968). How did the ideological interpretations of eddic mythology and pre-Christian culture, as scrutinised in the previous chapters, influence the construction of a historical narrative befitting Iceland's national aspirations? How was the world-view of the earliest, pagan Icelanders tied into the 'national character' or 'spirit' of Iceland, and how was this related to the Christian identity and faith professed by modern Icelanders? In this chapter, I will explore the reception of the pagan past and the process of Iceland's conversion to Christianity in a selection of influential historical writings from the decades around 1900, and analyse them in the light of Iceland's national self-fashioning. Special attention will be paid to the interaction with other fields, like philology (*Eddufræði*) and even Romantic poetry.

### 7.2.2 New Pagan Topographies<sup>3</sup>

In the north of Iceland there is a waterfall known as *Goðafoss*, or 'Waterfall of the Gods'. Legend has it that in 999 or 1000 AD, this was where the law-speaker and chieftain of Ljósavatn in the north, Þorgeir Þorkelsson, cast his statues of pagan gods into the water, thus renouncing the old faith in favour of Christianity – encouraging the rest of Iceland to do the same – and giving the waterfall its name. It is interesting to note that this incident is not recorded in any of the medieval sources dealing with Iceland's conversion – e.g. *Kristni saga* and *Íslendingabók* – and appears to have been a folk-tale of later date, first recorded by Kristian Kaalund (1844-1919), a Danish philologist and Iceland enthusiast.<sup>4</sup> The anecdote was first linked to the waterfall presently known by the name of *Goðafoss* when the same Kaalund, who had encountered *another* *Goðafoss* elsewhere on the island, asked the locals of the Skjálfandafljót area whether similar stories were told about 'their' waterfall. Intrigued by the story of Þorgeir Þorkelsson and Kaalund's quest for sites of historical significance, the locals may have adopted the story and connected it to their *Goðafoss*, consequently rewriting history *and* their landscape by means of creative etymology.<sup>5</sup> This putative connection to the waterfall in the Skjálfandafljót region was subsequently taken over and solidified in the Icelandic imagination by Jónas Jónsson from Hrifla, whose popular textbooks were used in schools all over the island, and which would determine the general public's knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Some fragments of this sub-chapter appeared earlier in Halink (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Kristian Kaalund, *Íslenzkir sögustaðir III: Norðlendingaffjórðungur* (translated into Icelandic by Haraldur Matthíasson; Reykjavík 1986 [Copenhagen 1882]) pp.113-4. An artistic rendering of this event appears on one of the stained-glass windows of the Church of Akureyri (*Akureyrarkirkja*), completed in 1940.

<sup>5</sup> Here I would like to thank Gísli Sigurðsson, Research Professor at the Folklore Department of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, for his valuable help on clarifying the origin of the *Ásbyrgi* legend and the etymology of *Goðafoss*.

Icelandic history for decades (see Chapter 7.2.4). The success of this strategy is demonstrated by the fact that most travel guides and Icelanders today will still point to Goðafoss as the actual setting of Þorgeir's epic renouncement of paganism; a site of natural grandeur to match its historical significance. By 'making sense' of their surroundings in this fashion, Icelanders incorporated their every-day living spaces into the grander, national narrative of Iceland, signifying their landscapes through the invention of *lieux de mémoire*.

The spatialisation of Iceland's (pagan) past, and the landscape's consequent physical identification with the Old Norse gods themselves, reached its culmination not in Iceland, but rather in the writings of the German author and theologian Wilhelm Wägner (1800-1886). Wägner was a classicist who published many popular history books – dealing with both classical and Nordic/Germanic antiquity – in order to educate the German *Volk*, and who became preoccupied with the topic of mythology. In his book *Unsere Vorzeit. Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden in Schilderungen für Jugend und Volk* (Leipzig 1874), intended for young readers and for 'the nation', he wonders why the locations of Greek and Roman mythology – like Mount Olympus, seat of the gods, and Mount Vesuvius, which inspired the myth of the Roman fire god Vulcanus – were all easily identified with actual places in Southern Europe, whereas the panoramas of 'our own' beloved Germanic myths remained unidentified and not of this world. Wägner was convinced that, just like Loch Ness had given rise to the legend of the Loch Ness Monster, and the foggy marshes of Brocken had inspired the legend of the dancing devils, the eddic myths had *also* been inspired by a certain kind of landscape, through which the anonymous poet of the mythological lays had once wandered.<sup>1</sup>

But where was this place of myth? Where could one find the actual Asgard, seat of the gods? Just like Benedikt Gröndal and Björn M. Ólsen, Wägner believed that the volcanic island of Iceland, mysterious and inaccessible, was the obvious answer, the earthly navel of the eddic world-view. To him, it was clear that this

... meerumflossene, glutreiche Island selbst der Mittelpunkt der religiösen Vorstellungen der nordisch-germanischen Völker gewesen sei, welche uns, wie auch aus dem Verlaufe unserer Darstellung erhellt, durch die Edda vorgeführt werden. Im Mittelpunkt jener Insel stellt sich der Verfasser die Göttersitze vor, dort thront Odin und überschaut den Weltlauf; dort hausen die Asen; rundum Asenheim, im meerumspülten und von der Schlange umwundenen Midgard siedeln sich die Erdensöhne an.<sup>2</sup>

The entanglement of Old Norse mythology and Iceland's gloomy and mysterious landscapes, mythical spaces, conceived as the *cradle* and dwelling place of the deities, and as the locations of non-places – like the worlds of the fire and frost giants – has become deeply engrained in both *auto-* and *hetero-images* of Iceland. The Icelandic author Þórarinn Eldjárn (b.1949) has described these sentiments as follows:

There are probably many people today, both Icelanders and others, who tend to see our country as the natural habitat of the old heathen gods. We believe, or want to believe, or act as if we want to believe that Reykjavík or Þingvellir, or Snæfellsjökull, or perhaps one of our

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Wägner, *Unsere Vorzeit. Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden in Schilderungen für Jugend und Volk*, Otto Spamer (Leipzig 1874).

<sup>2</sup> Idem., pp.15-16. However, the author also connects the eddic narratives with the Teutoburger Wald and Arminius's victory over the Romans there, claiming that Asgard once crowned the holy field of Osning (p.135). Wägner's position in this matter is quite unique and seemingly paradoxical, in that the opposing discourses of *German nationalism* – characterised by pan-Germanic ideals and cultural appropriation; *Unsere Vorzeit* – and *Icelandic nationalism* – or the 'view from Mount Hekla' (see Chapters 5.1 and 7.1) – converge in this interesting work.



many Helgafell or “holy mountains”, to name just a few candidates – has or should be given its obvious status as the combined Mecca, Jerusalem, and Hollywood of Ásatrú, the Icelandic name for Norse paganism. You sometimes even hear of pilgrims who come here for that very reason.<sup>1</sup>

Although Icelandic academics – for reasons discussed in the previous chapters – were prone to emphasise the Icelandic character of the eddic poems, no attempts were made to single out certain mountains or geographical sites of natural splendour as the actual inspiration behind a certain mythological place or event from the Eddas. However, as a poetic space, the Icelandic landscape did inspire poets like Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940), Iceland’s foremost exponent of Neo-Romanticism, to infuse their experience of nature with topoi taken from Old Norse mythology. Einar, who is widely recognised as a *þjóðskáld* (‘national poet’)<sup>2</sup>, lived and worked in an interesting and dynamic age, when Realism, Symbolism, and Neo-Romanticism, but also Nietzschean philosophy and Darwinism began to exert their respective influences on Icelandic literature.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Einar’s *oeuvre* consists of an eclectic confluence of different forms, styles and genres; he admired the Fjölismenn and their Romantic heritage, but he also composed poetry in the old rímur tradition those very same Fjölismenn despised. His poetic versatility has led to debates on how to classify him in literary history, and although he is generally labelled as a Neo-Romantic – with tendencies towards Symbolism<sup>4</sup> – it has been pointed out that, in fact, his ideas may have had more in common with classical nineteenth-century German Romanticism than with Neo-Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, Einar was a very modern and pragmatic man in many respects, who – as a lawyer – was actively involved in Iceland’s national movement, and founded Iceland’s first daily newspaper (*Dagskrá*) in 1896. Furthermore, his occupation with Iceland’s bountiful nature was not restricted to poetry, but entailed his pioneering – but in the end fruitless – attempts to harness the power of Iceland’s waterfalls to generate electricity for the nation.<sup>6</sup> In his progressive pragmatism, the pre-Romantic utilitarian conception of nature (see Chapter 2.2.1) merged with the lyrical celebration of Iceland’s ‘national landscapes’ (see Chapter 4.2.3), notably by the Fjölismenn.

Einar’s conception of Icelandic history and culture were informed by the most influential intellectual currents of his age, notably Darwinism and Nietzschean philosophy. He was one of the very few Icelanders of his age to have been inspired by the operas of Richard Wagner (see Chapter 7.1.1), and combined fashionable ideas on biological determinism and the arrival of the *Übermensch* in his treatment of Icelandic history. In Einar’s view, the Icelandic nation played a pivotal role in bringing about the next step in mankind’s universal development:

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<sup>1</sup> Þórarin Eldjárn, “The Natural Habitat of the Old Heathen Gods”, in Unnar Stefánsson (ed.), *What Ails the Æsir? Speeches at the Capital Cities’ Conference Reykjavík September 2007* (Reykjavík 2009) pp.189-194, 189.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that Einar lies buried right next to Jónas Hallgrímsson at the National Cemetery (*Þjóðargrafreitirinn*) in Þingvellir is indicative of his high status in the Icelandic pantheon. See Jón Karl Helgason, *Ódáinsakur. Helgifesta þjóðardýrlinga* (Reykjavík 2013) p.125.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Einarsson, *Íslensk bókmenntasaga 874-1960* (Reykjavík 1961) pp.321-368.

<sup>4</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.300.

<sup>5</sup> See Páll Valsson, “Hlekkir brýtur hugar. Um hugmyndaheim Einars Benediktssonar”, in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 52:4 (1991) pp.5-13.

<sup>6</sup> In 1914, Einar founded the waterfall society *Títan*, which endeavoured to construct a huge dam in the river Þjórsá. The society did not succeed, and it was not until fifty years later that the first hydropower station opened there. See Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir, *Þar sem fossarnir falla. Viðhorf til náttúru og vatnsaflsvirkjana á Íslandi 1900-2008* (Reykjavík 2010).

That is why Icelanders have to take care, in the progress of modern times, not to throw away the most precious and valuable that they possess, to replace it with that which is less in value.<sup>1</sup> The world lies at the feet of Iceland's gifted men, and all that which supports our land, the origin and history of the people, and last but not least our powerful, fair language, good provisions for the journey, are not of little value. Few nationalities prepare their children as well as this – and perhaps no equally small group has this much to win.

Like Bjarni Thorarensen and Grímur Thomsen before him, Einar believed that the Icelandic people had been hardened and sublimated by the harsh climate of the far north, and natural selection had perfected the nation. In order to demonstrate this fact, Einar also turned to Old Norse literature, but not the Eddas; unlike Grímur Thomsen, he never fashioned his climatological determinism in mythological terms. To him, the heroic characters of the Icelandic sagas were of greater interest than the Old Norse gods.<sup>2</sup> In the opening verse of his poem on Egill Skallagrímsson, the warrior-poet's superhuman character is traced back to the generations upon generations of Nordic people hardened by Scandinavia's merciless winters:

The nerves of thousands ice winters wove.  
The brow of evening skies hoofed the masses.  
Muscle power strengthened from generation to generation,  
with hard-found love, under a rushing maple.  
And century upon century the nights of the north  
bent over in pitch-black attics, where infants slept in their cradles,  
and exhaled harshness with every breath,  
and nurtured the roots of the tree of life.<sup>3</sup>

Although Einar does not seem to have suggested any direct link between Old Norse myth and Icelandic national identity, the natural arena in which this national spirit had been sculpted did indeed possess mythical qualities, in his view. An interesting expression of this can be found in his Neo-Romantic poem *Sumarmorgunn. (Í Ásbyrgi.)* ('Summer Morning. (In Ásbyrgi.)') from 1894, which deals with Ásbyrgi, a gigantic horse shoe-shaped canyon in the north of Iceland. This splendid natural location became interpreted as the footprint of Sleipnir, the eight-legged flying horse of Óðinn (see fig. 13):

Story has it, that over the high seas rode  
Óðinn, heading for a fjord.  
Sleipnir, his steed, on this glorious ride,  
galloped, paced over the isle,  
kicking his feet, causing cracks in the earth,  
left, with a hoof print, the fort on the sward.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Einar Benediktsson, in the preface to his collection of poems *Hrannir* (Reykjavík 1913) p.viii. See also Guðjón Friðriksson, *Einar Benediktsson. Ævisaga* (vol. 2; Reykjavík 1999) p.260; "Þess vegna verða Íslendingar að gæta þess vel í framsókn hins nýja tíma að varpa ekki frá sér því ágætasta og verðmætasta, sem þeir eiga hjá sér, fyrir það sem minna er um vert. Heimurinn stendur gáfumönnum Íslands opin og allt það sem afstaða lands vors, uppruni og saga þjóðarinnar og síðast en ekki sist vort sterka, fagra mál gefur Væringjum landsins í veganesti, er ekki lítils vert. Fá þjóðerni munu búa börn sín betur úr garði – og ef til vill mun hvergi jafnsmaum hóp ætlað svo mikið að vinna."

<sup>2</sup> On Einar's contribution to the construction of the narrative of Iceland's 'Golden Age', based largely on the sagas, see especially Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn. Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu* (Reykjavík 1998) pp.35-41.

<sup>3</sup> Einar Benediktsson, "Egill Skallagrímsson", in *Skírnir* 87 (1913) pp.1-4, 1. See also Friðriksson (1999) pp.260-1; Taugarnar þúsundir ísvetra ófu./Ennið kvöldhimna skararnir hófu./Vöðvanna mátt eflði kyn eftir kyn,/há kaldsóttri unn, undir þjótandi hlyn./Og öld eftir öld grúfðu norðursins nætur/í niðdimmum rjáfrum, þar vöggubörn sváfu,/og önduðu hörku í hverja sin,/en hlúðu um lífsmeiðsins rætur.

However, there is nothing to suggest that pre-Christian Icelanders ever made this connection, and the popular myth's first occurrence is exactly in this seventh verse of Einar's poem. Several years after the publication of this poem, the myth had already become part of the Icelandic experience of Ásbyrgi, and in a historical short-story in the journal *Draupnir*, the myth is presented as something the *Ásatrúarmenn* (the adherents of Ásatrú) of old had actually thought and believed.<sup>2</sup> It is virtually impossible to determine whether this piece of poetic landscape-mystification should be classified as an 'invented tradition', since Einar may have drawn his inspiration from an older, oral tradition which was simply never recorded before this time.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this example can be mobilised against Kirsten Hastrup's claim that, instead of inventing traditions, Icelanders invented their nation through already existing traditions (see Chapter 1.2.2); no Óðinn – or Sleipnir – related place names have been found on Iceland, and it seems more likely that this myth originated in modern times, as a creative etymology through which the landscape is mythologised and Old Norse mythology is 'Icelandified', and tied to the land itself. If Einar really was the inventor of this myth, he *reversed* Benedikt Gröndal's and Björn M. Ólsen's tendency to perceive Icelandic landscapes in the eddic verses, and instead discerned *new* eddic myths in Icelandic nature. Both these directions of projection served similar purposes, namely: the Icelandification of the old myths, and the mystification of Icelandic land- or mythscape.<sup>4</sup>

### 7.2.3 Jón J. Aðils and the Golden Age<sup>5</sup>

As outlined in Chapter, the study of history did not become an independent discipline in Iceland until 1965, when it was detached from the overarching and integrated discipline of what could be translated as 'Icelandic Studies' (*Íslensk fræði*), which also comprised the study of Icelandic literature, culture, and language. Due to their entangled state in this broader field of Icelandic Studies, philology and historiography were very closely linked in Icelandic academia, and shared many of the same discursive templates. The main focus of historical research was the same corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic texts that was scrutinised by philologists, and, as a result, the focus of Icelandic historiography was almost exclusively on the medieval period. In the first forty years of the University of Iceland's existence (1911-1951), four out of five historians who received tenure there were specialised in medieval and early modern history.<sup>6</sup> The fledgling research agenda of Icelandic historians was, at this time, strongly determined by the trends and developments in Icelandic philology (see Chapter 7.1) and the underlying national discourse inspiring them. As a result, large sections of Icelandic history – roughly the period spanning the centuries between 1400 and 1800 – were considered uninteresting, or unfit for academic cultivation in the discourse of Iceland's former greatness. This emphasis on Iceland's oldest past, instrumentalised to construct the

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<sup>1</sup> First published in the periodical *Sunnarfari* 3:11 (1894) p.82; Sögn er, að eittsinn um úthöf reið/Óðinn, stefndi inn fjörðinn./Reiðskjótinn Sleipnir á röðulleið/renndi, til stökks yfir hólmann, á skeið,/spyrndi í hóf, svo að sprakk við jörðin,/sporaði byrgið í svörðinn. – (verse 7). I would like to thank Kim P. Middel for her poetic translation of this verse into English, which appeared earlier in Halink (2014) p.214.

<sup>2</sup> Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Holm, "Jón biskup Arason", in *Draupnir* 6 (1902) pp.7-21, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> The canyon may have been associated with the gods in earlier times, as an etymological explanation for the Ás part in its name. Ás can, however, also refer to a ridge in the landscape, which offers a more convincing explanation for the canyon's name.

<sup>4</sup> Halink (2014).

<sup>5</sup> An essay based on the following chapter on Jón Jónsson Aðils was awarded the 2016 Nations and Nationalism Essay Prize, awarded by the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN). It appeared under the title "Noble Heathens: Jón Jónsson Aðils and the Problem of Iceland's Pagan Past" in *Nations and Nationalism* 23:3 (2017) pp.463-483.

<sup>6</sup> Guttormsson (2000) p.266. The statistic is taken from an unpublished paper by Helgi Skúli Kjartansson.

suggestion of historical continuity between the ancient ‘Free State’ and the nation’s modern independence movement, implied that Icelandic historians had to come to a new and more positive assessment of the pre-Christian religion professed by the first Icelanders, from which the ideals of the glorified ‘Commonwealth’ had sprung. In his history of Icelandic historiography, Ingi Sigurðsson observes that, in the context of this ideological reassessment, “the spirit, which characterised Ásatrú, was to some degree considered magnificent.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the historians who developed an overall positive image of Iceland’s pre-Christian religion was Jón Jónsson Aðils (1869-1920), the most influential Icelandic historian of his age. This chapter focuses primarily on the ‘pagan element’ in his national historiography; an element generally overlooked and understudied. This may not be surprising, since Ásatrú is hardly of crucial importance to the sweeping national statements of his grand narrative, and is only dealt with in the first chronological chapters of his historical works.<sup>2</sup> However, I will argue that it is exactly *because* Ásatrú is not of central importance to Jón’s national discourse, that its treatment in the texts under scrutiny constitutes an excellent showcase of the subtle ways in which history – in this case the history of religion – is re-assessed, re-moulded and transformed, in the larger process of national identity formation. When placed in the ‘narrative template’ (Wertsch) of modern nationalism, paganism and Christianity assume different roles than the ones they traditionally played in the antagonistic world-view of the Christian West.

Jón was educated in Copenhagen,<sup>3</sup> and became the first lecturer in history at the University of Iceland in 1911. In 1919, the same year in which he was promoted to the post of professor, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland. In the highly philological context in which Icelandic history was studied in those days, his study on the Danish monopoly trade with Iceland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries<sup>4</sup> was remarkable, and set him apart from the other more traditional historians. However, this original specialisation was by no means a symptom of lacking national pride. On the contrary; Jón, who had lost both his parents as an infant,<sup>5</sup> received funding from the Alþingi in order to do independent research in Danish archives and later to give public lectures (*alþýðufyrirlestrar*) – also financed by the Icelandic Parliament – on Icelandic history, to enlighten the common people. These very popular lectures, intended to supply a historical backbone for the national sentiments of the Icelandic laity, appeared in print in 1903, 1906 and 1910 under the very revealing titles *Íslenzkt þjóðerni* (‘Icelandic National Character’), *Gullöld Íslendinga* (‘The Golden Age of the Icelanders’) and *Dagrenning* (‘Dawn’) respectively.<sup>6</sup> In the winter following its publication (1903), *Íslenzkt þjóðerni* was already in general use for the education of children and youngsters.<sup>7</sup> The state-funded dissemination of Jón’s interpretation of national history, both in lectures and in writing, consolidated the

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<sup>1</sup> Sigurðsson (1986) p.96; “... að andi sá, sem einkenndi Ásatrúna, var að sumu leyti talinn hrifandi.”

<sup>2</sup> The *Christian* substratum of Jón’s work has been the subject of a recent study by Sigurjón Árni Eyjólfsson: *Trú, von og þjóð. Sjálfmynd og staðleysur* (Reykjavík 2014) pp.283-301. I will address his findings later on in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Jón did in fact study history in Copenhagen, but he never actually completed his studies, or earned a degree.

<sup>4</sup> Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Einokunarverzlun Dana á Islandi 1602-1787*(Reykjavík 1919).

<sup>5</sup> For a – rather celebratory – overview of Jón’s life and influence, see Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu, “Jón Jónsson Aðils”, in Jón J. Aðils, *Gullöld íslendinga* (second edition; Reykjavík 1948 [1906]) pp.xi-xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Íslenzkt þjóðerni. Alþýðufyrirlestrar* (Reykjavík 1903); *Gullöld Íslendinga. Menning og lífshættir feðra vorra á söguöldinni : Alþýðufyrirlestrar með myndum* (Reykjavík 1906); *Dagrenning. Fimm alþýðuerindi* (Reykjavík 1910). These works appeared under the name of Jón Jónsson, since Jón did not adopt the family name Aðils until 1917.

<sup>7</sup> Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Skýrsla um fræðslu barna og unglinga, veturinn 1903-1904* (Reykjavík 1905) p.36. Guðmundur provides a list of works used for the general education of children in the winter of 1903-1904. I would like to thank Kim Middel for pointing this work out to me.

tripartite chronology – golden age, dark ages, national revival – favoured by Romantic historicists throughout Europe (see Chapter 1.2.1), and strengthened a sense of historical *continuity*, which linked the independence movement of Jón Sigurðsson and his political heirs directly to the love of freedom professed by the Vikings, fleeing Norway’s monarchical tyranny.<sup>1</sup> In this ideological paradigm, the Alþingi of the present was perceived as essentially the *same* institution as the Alþingi established on Þingvellir in 930 AD.<sup>2</sup> The nationalist character of Jón’s writings resonated well with the ideals on which the University of Iceland was founded (as outlined in Chapter 7.1.3) and rendered him a suitable candidate for the post of history professor. The themes of the nation’s high and ancient civilisation, Iceland’s exceptionalism and, yet, its unmistakably *European* – that is: civilised and Christian – character, were employed by Jón not only to stimulate the national sentiments of his compatriots, but also in order to counter foreign stereotypes – ‘savage barbarians’ – and negative misconceptions concerning the island, which were still commonplace around 1900.<sup>3</sup> In the typical language of Romantic nationalism, Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu proclaimed – over thirty years after Jón’s death – that his historical ‘revival operation’ (*vakningarstarfsemi*), as well as his writings on the Danish trade monopoly, had enabled the nation to “break the shackles, which he of all men had described best in his writings.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than just being a distant observer, the historian is here attributed with historical agency; he or she can determine the historical causes of present circumstances more accurately than anyone else, and by doing so, provoke the appropriate state of mind and the ensuing decisiveness to remedy the situation.

Although Jón’s presentation of Icelandic history fits the traditional tripartite template of greatness, decline, and resurrection, he actually subdivided the story of his nation into four separate eras, being the ‘golden age’ (*gullöld*), the ‘era of decline’ (*hnignunarskeið*), the ‘period of humiliation’ (*niðurlægingartímabil*) and, finally, ‘restoration’ (*endurreisn*). Traditional though this model of history may be, Jón’s ideas on the origins of the Icelandic people were quite unconventional for his time. Like the poet Einar Benediktsson (see Chapter 7.2.2), Jón was deeply inspired by Darwin and related theories of biological and climatological determinism. In order to establish the exceptional nature of the Icelandic people, and its difference from the other Nordic nations – consequently depriving those nations of their imagined rights on Old Icelandic culture – Jón argued that the gene pool from which the Icelandic nation arose was decisively different from those of Norway or Denmark. Although all historical accounts of the *landnám*, from the *Landnáma*- and *Íslendingabók* onwards, had focussed solely on the heroic Norsemen arriving from Scandinavia – and primarily Norway – it was the discarded Gaelic element in Iceland’s genetic and cultural profile that would set the Icelandic nation apart from the rest of the Nordic world.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the so-called ‘Irish School’ (discussed in Chapter 6.3.2), it was not Jón’s objective to establish the Irish origin of much of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the eddic poems in particular.<sup>6</sup> Rather, he set out to demonstrate that it was the confluence of Nordic and Celtic culture that

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<sup>1</sup> On the Alþingi’s active involvement in the cultivation of national history and literature, see especially Jón Karl Helgason, “‘We who cherish *Njáls saga*’: The Alþingi as Literary Patron”, in Andrew Wawn, *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock 1994) pp.143-161.

<sup>2</sup> Hálfðanarson (2000a) p.8.

<sup>3</sup> The apologetic element in Icelandic scholarship (see Chapter 2.2.2) was still relevant enough in the twentieth century for Sigurður Nordal to refer to his seminal study on Icelandic culture (*Íslensk menning*; 1942) as a ‘second *Crymogæa*’, conceived as a ‘defense on behalf of the Icelanders’. See Loftsdóttir (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu (1948) p.xxiii; “...en vakningarstarfsemi hans átti mikinn þátt í, að þjóðinni tókst að brjóta af sér hlekki, sem hann hafði lýst allra manna bezt í fræðiritum sínum.”

<sup>5</sup> Ingi Sigurðsson (1986) pp.88-89.

<sup>6</sup> For a modern attempt to determine the level of Gaelic influence on the eddic poems, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland. Historical and Literary Contacts* (Reykjavík 2000 [1988]) pp.73-85.

could explain why, unlike any of their Nordic cousins, medieval Icelanders began writing their history, mythology, and complex indigenous narratives down in the vernacular, just like the Irish had already been doing for centuries. The peculiar nature of Icelandic culture consisted of a typically Nordic love of freedom and oral tradition, merged with the spirituality and literary qualities of the Irish:

Here in Iceland the blood of these two races mixed. Here flowed together in one spiritual strain the ingenuity and genius of the Celts, and the profound vision, determination and stamina of the Norsemen, which spawned a national life, which hardly has an equal in history. These inherited qualities of both peoples are best visible in two specific aspects of our national life, which means that both of these in themselves represent exactly the characteristics of these two races, namely: *Old Icelandic literature* and the *Old Icelandic political system*.<sup>1</sup>

Although references to Iceland's 'forgotten' Celtic past were employed by other Icelanders of Jón's generation in order to promote their nation's uniqueness<sup>2</sup>, this Gaelic narrative never made it to the forefront of Icelandic historiography, and remained in the shadow of the hegemonic national discourse, involving brave Norsemen refusing to surrender to Haraldr *hárfagri's* authoritarian rule.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the fact that any nation would rather claim descent from heroic, freedom-loving explorers than from women and slaves, the negative connotations acquired by the terms 'Celtic' and 'Irish' in the second half of the nineteenth century may have contributed to this situation. Whereas the terms 'Celtic', 'Germanic' and 'Nordic' could still be used interchangeably in the Early Modern period, the ethnic and cultural distinction between the Celtic and the Germanic peoples – including their Nordic offshoots – had become unbridgeable in the decades after Thomas Percy's influential introduction to Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* of 1770 (see Chapter 3.4).<sup>4</sup> About a century later, Darwin primordialised and biologised this distinction in a rather normative fashion, by juxtaposing the "careless, squalid, unambitious [and Catholic] Irishman" to the "frugal, foreseeing, self-respecting, ambitious [Protestant] Scot" in his *The Descent of Man* (1871). Here, he also claims that, in a land "originally peopled by a thousand Saxons and a thousand Celts", five-sixths of the population would have become Celtic after only a dozen generations – due to the Celts procreating 'like rabbits' – but "five-sixths of the property, of the power, of the intellect, would belong to the one-sixth of Saxons that remained."<sup>5</sup> These negative stereotypes – refashioned under the guise of science – were by no means new<sup>6</sup>, and were

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) pp.49-50; "Hér á Íslandi blönduðu þessir tveir kynþættir blóði. Hér rann saman í eitt andlegt fjör, hugvit og snild Keltanna, og djúpskygni, staðfesta og viljaprek Norðmannanna, og fæddi af sér þjóðlíf, sem varla hefur átt sinn líka í sögunni. Þessir erfðakostir beggja þjóðanna koma bezt í ljós í tveim sérstökum hliðum þjóðlífsins, sem heita má að hvor fyrir sig svari nákvæmlega til einkenna þessara tveggja kynþátta, en þessar tvær hliðar eru: *forníslenzkar bókmentir* og *forníslenzk stjórnarskipun*." (Italics original.)

<sup>2</sup> For Einar Benediktsson's positive view on this Irish influence, see his *Thules Beboere. Brudstykker til Belysning af Islands Forhistorie* (Kristiania 1918).

<sup>3</sup> According to Gísli Sigurðsson, in "the 1980s, it was still considered almost taboo in Icelandic studies to take up the old issue of the Gaelic influence on Icelandic tradition, to view Icelandic culture in the settlement period as a melting pot of Norse and Gaelic elements. Many scholars in the field are still inclined to ignore this aspect of Icelandic culture..." Sigurðsson (2000) p.i.

<sup>4</sup> This uncoupling of Celtic and Germanic led to wild – and ideologically charged – speculations concerning the origins of Nordic culture throughout Europe. The Polish historian Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861) claimed that the ancient Scandinavians had descended from the Scythians, thus facilitating Polish claims on the Old Norse heritage. See Baár (2010) p.175-6.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (2004 [1871]) p.164.

<sup>6</sup> Already in 1787, the Scottish scholar John Pinkerton stated that the Celts had not "even advanced to the state of barbarism [yet]; and if any foreigner doubts this, he has only to step into the Celtic part of Wales, Ireland or Scotland, and look at them, for they are just as they were, incapable of industry or civilization." In his view, the

enhanced by the anti-Gaelic cultural politics of the British in Ireland. Furthermore, the popular essentialist discourses of Social Darwinism and Racial Hygiene favoured the idea that the reified and primordial ‘race’ had to remain pure and unpolluted. Thus, Jón’s suggestion that national genius could somehow ensue from a cultural and genetic melting pot in which races intermingle, did not resonate with mainstream racial thought.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Jón’s writings enjoyed great popularity in the early twentieth century, and – although it remains difficult to establish exactly how widely his books were read – much can be said for Sigríður Matthíasdóttir’s assertion that he created “a ‘comprehensive’ self-image for the Icelandic nation”.<sup>2</sup>

The most characteristic and influential element in Jón’s rendition of Icelandic history was his emphasis on the marriage of freedom, prosperity, and cultural achievements. The Golden Age of the Icelanders (*gullöld Íslendinga*), which Jón believed stretched from the foundation of Alþingi in 930 AD to the decline of the ‘Free State’ in the thirteenth century, was exactly such an era of great cultural fruition, in which the spirit of the nation came to its fullest expression. In *Íslenzkt þjóðerni*, Jón characterises the Icelandic commonwealth in this era of great prosperity as “a society so rich, so beautiful, so splendid, that it compares to no other society in former times but to the one of ancient Greece at its highest stage of development...”<sup>3</sup> This take on the earliest phase of Iceland’s history was not an entirely new one, as can be concluded from the previous chapters of the present study. Although the very notion of a ‘Golden Age’ (*gullöld*) is generally connected to the name of Jón J. Aðils, much of the ‘gilding’ of this age had already been undertaken by earlier Romantics like Finnur Magnússon and the Fjölnismenn, who transformed the ancient past into a stick to “beat the present”<sup>4</sup> (see Chapters 3.4 and 4). Later historians have projected this ‘myth of the Golden Age’ onto Early Modern accounts – notably Arngrímur Jónsson’s two descriptions of Iceland (see Chapter 2.2.2) – although the term itself is never employed by these earlier authors, and the present is not necessarily presented as something ‘bad’ in need of inspiration from the past.<sup>5</sup> This last element is very much a hallmark of modern national narratives, and of the genre of historiography they inspired.<sup>6</sup> Like his Romantic predecessors, Jón believed that the past was more than simply the past, and that it constituted an assignment for the present nation:

When she [the Icelandic nation] looks back in time she sees before her a past so glorious, that it more than compensates for the misery and desperation of later centuries. She finds in herself the speech, disfigured though it may be after centuries of indifference and negligence, but in nature so rich and beautiful sounding, and so sinuous, that there are no thoughts or

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“Celts were so inferior a people, being to the Scythæ as a Negro to an European.” John Pinkerton, *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths, Being an Introduction to the Ancient and Modern History of Europe* (London 1787) pp. 69, 123.

<sup>1</sup> On the origins and influence of racial thought in Iceland, see Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir, *Mannkynbætur. Hugmyndir um bætt kynstofna hérlendis og erlendis á 19. og 20. öld* (Reykjavík 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Matthíasdóttir (2004) pp.44-46, quoted and endorsed in Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson, “Sagan og sjálfsmýnd(ir) íslenskrar þjóðar”, in *Glíman* 7 (2010) pp.113-135, 114.

<sup>3</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) p.238, translated in Hálfðanarson (2000a) p.15; “Hvar sem litið er, blasir við augum þjóðlíf, svo ríkt og fagurt og glæsilegt, að hvergi hefur átt sinn líka á fyrri öldum nema hjá Forn-Grikkjum á þeirra hæsta þroskastigi, ...”.

<sup>4</sup> Goffart (2005) p.254.

<sup>5</sup> The problem of interpreting Arngrímur Jónsson through the lense of later Romantic notions of a Golden Age has been addressed by Kim P. Middel (2016).

<sup>6</sup> For concise overviews of the development of these notions – and Jón Aðils’s role therein –, see Eiríkur Bergmann, *Sjálfstæð þjóð. Trylltur skrill og landráðalýður* (Reykjavík 2011) pp.35-9; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Goðsagnir íslenskrar sjálfstæðisbaráttu”, in *Þriðja íslenska sögubíngið 2006. Ráðstefnurit* (Reykjavík 2006) pp.407-19; Helgason (1998) pp.35-41.

emotions that extend beyond its reach. She finds writings in the nation's own language, which far surpass the ancient literatures of most other nations in beauty and genius. All this brings forth in her a new sense of independence and inspires a process of reconstruction and progress. She sees that she does not need to build her future in thin air; she can build it on a thousand-year-old culture.<sup>1</sup>

In this description of Iceland's ancient past, we find all the characteristics of a typical 'Golden Age' myth as defined by Anthony Smith, including the long intermediary period of emptiness and decline, and the past's immanent relevance to the present.<sup>2</sup> In the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Icelanders had awoken from their slumber, and now, in Jón's own time, the people were about to reap the political fruits of this awakening.<sup>3</sup> By comparing Icelandic antiquity with that of ancient Greece<sup>4</sup>, Jón employed the time-honored classical template of Hellas, the very pinnacle of human civilisation, and thus contributed to the 'Hellas of the North' narrative, in which the cultured Icelanders were to strive for independence and national sovereignty the same way the Greeks had done, when they stood up against their Ottoman oppressors. Although the reference to classical antiquity is less explicit than in other – e.g. Benedikt Gröndal's – renditions of the Icelandic past, Jón did contribute to the classicization of Iceland's Golden Age and its association with the 'idealised Other' (Hellas); the classical discourse "made an indelible impact on the self-image and historical conscience of Icelanders."<sup>5</sup>

What can be characterised as quintessentially Romantic in Jón's historical narrative, is his emphasis on the importance and agency of nationality, or national character (*þjóðerni*), which is reified and presented as the primordial and stable protagonist in the story of Iceland. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir identifies this cultural and linguistic self-image, in which the nation "resembles a living organism, a national person with one identity, one will and the same interests applying to all Icelanders", taken together with the myth of Iceland's Golden Age, "the primary model for the modern nation-state", as two of the most important aspects of the national myth, which became firmly established in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Even though the nation's spirit had not always been equally tangible throughout the centuries of hardship following the Golden Age, Jón argued that it had persisted, and even identified it as the life-saving strength without which the Icelandic people would not have endured the long night of their nation. National sentiment (*þjóðernistilfinning*) never died out completely, and safeguarded Iceland's unique culture and language to this day.<sup>7</sup> The topos of a national awakening, a new day after a long and dark night, is most explicitly employed in the collection of essays brought together in *Dagrenning*, in which Eggert Ólafsson (see Chapter 2.2.1) is identified as one of the most important 'awakeners' of the nation's self-awareness,

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) p.242; "Þegar hún lítur aftur í tímann sér hún fyrir sér fortíð svo glæsilega, að hún meira en vegur upp á móti eynd og örvæntingu síðari alda. Hún finnur hjá sér mál, afskræmt að vísu af margra alda tómlæti og hirðuleysi, en í eðli sínu svo ríkt og hljómfagurt og dillandi, að hún á ekki enn til í eigu sinni þær hugsanir eða tilfinningar, sem það nær ekki út fyrir. Hún finnur hjá sér rit á þjóðarinnar eigin tungu, sem bera langt af fornritum flestra annara þjóða að fegurt og snild. Þetta alt hvað með öðru elur hjá henni nýja sjálfsstæðistilfinningu og hvetur til viðreisnar og framsóknar. Hún sér að hún þarf ekki að byggja framtíð sína í lausu lofti, hún getur byggt hana á þúsund ára gamalli menningu."

<sup>2</sup> Smith (1997).

<sup>3</sup> This teleological rendition of Iceland's history became so predominant in the twentieth century, that even modern historians like Gunnar Karlsson speak about the nineteenth century in terms of a re-awakening nation. See Chapter 1.2.2.

<sup>4</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) p.238.

<sup>5</sup> Glad (2011) p.97.

<sup>6</sup> Matthíasdóttir (2004) p.371.

<sup>7</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) p.244. On the Romantic character of Jón's work, see also Eiríkur Páll Jörundsson, "Jón Aðils og rómantíkin. Rómantísk áhrif í alþýðufyrirlesturum Jóns Jónssonar Aðils.", in *Sagnir* 15 (1994) pp.18-29.



whereas Jón Sigurðsson is portrayed as the ‘awakener’ of the nation’s longing for independence.<sup>1</sup> The programmatic outlook of Jón’s lectures, in which the greatness of the nation stands or falls with its autonomy and the maintenance of its cultural and linguistic purity, was reminiscent of – and indebted to – the belligerent cultural nationalism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, as outlined in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* of 1808.<sup>2</sup> They both subscribed to the idea that, in order for a nation to survive, it had to establish its own state – a *nation* state. Like Fichte, Jón considered the love of freedom, inherent in the nation’s character, to be a valid justification for the political activism of the national movement. And where could this love of freedom be more essential, than in a nation founded by free farmers who had fled the tyrannical rule of a Norwegian monarch, and who were determined not to copy the feudal system they had left behind in their new and free society?<sup>3</sup>

The historical significance of the ancient Alþingi and the free, egalitarian and democratic society it was believed to represent was re-evaluated in the context of this radicalised notion of nationhood, in which freedom lay at the very heart of what it meant to be an Icelander. In this nationalistic discourse, some of the theories of Whig historians – who had traced the ‘Germanic’ roots of modern (English) parliamentary democracy back to the ancient tribes inhabiting the Teutonic forests – were recycled, in order to suggest a historical continuity between the Viking-age parliament and the democratic ideals of the modern independence movement. According to Jón, the establishment of the Alþingi in 930 AD formed the decisive moment in which the Icelanders became one people, and therefore, the ideals of this political institution – rather than race – determined the very essence of Icelandic national character. This type of nationalism is more akin to Jürgen Habermas’s concept of *Verfassungspatriotismus*, in which a constitution or a political contract or institution forms the basis of national unity, than to more ethnically determined national self-images.<sup>4</sup> Iceland may have been the latest land in Europe to have become permanently inhabited, but the false notion of the survival – with only a short interruption – of its central political organ, the ‘oldest parliament in the world’, meant that Icelanders could still consider their political tradition the ‘cradle’ of all modern democracies. This indigenisation and primordialisation of modern political ideals was by no means unique to Iceland, and can be found in national narratives throughout Europe; according to the Romanian historian and revolutionary Nicolae Bălcescu (1819-1852), the very pillars of Romanian nationhood and history consisted of “the egalitarian framework of [...] society, the constitutionalist tradition, and the lack of Western-type feudalism.”<sup>5</sup> Also in Czech nationalism, the modern ‘restoration of Bohemia’, *cradle* of humanism and tolerance in the era of the Hussite Reformation, was seen as a return to the ‘democracy of the ancient Slavs’.<sup>6</sup> An interesting similarity between these ‘peripheral’ national discourses, both in Iceland and in Eastern Europe, is that they tended to embed egalitarianism and democracy in the primordial spirit of their peoples, and juxtapose these to everything negative associated with the European ‘heartland’ of medieval culture, namely: inequality, centralised monarchy, feudal injustice, lack of individual rights, and religious oppression. Especially this last element is of great importance when investigating the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1910), the essays “Þjóðernisvakning: Eggert Ólafsson” (pp.3-38) and “Sjálftæðisvakning: Jón Sigurðsson” (pp.120-144) respectively.

<sup>2</sup> On Fichte’s influence on Jón J. Aðils, see Matthíasdóttir (1995).

<sup>3</sup> For this historical explanation of the Icelanders’ love for freedom, see especially Jónsson [Aðils] (1906) pp.3-5.

<sup>4</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, “Staatsbürgerschaft und nationale Identität”, in idem, *Faktizität und Geltung* (Frankfurt am Main 1992). Racial essentialism was of course no option for Jón, who saw the blending of the Celtic and Nordic races as the origin of the Icelanders.

<sup>5</sup> Trencsényi (2012) p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Matthíasdóttir (2000) p.703.

pre-Christian religion in Iceland's national narrative. How did *Ásatrú* fit into Jón's image of Iceland's Golden Age?

In Jón's view, each "nation and each period has its own moral laws and its own ethical standards, which are derived from popular beliefs and national character, from the outlook on life and the spirit of the age."<sup>1</sup> In other words, Jón considered the inner or spiritual life of a people the foundation on which its ethical outlook, and thus the very texture of its society are built. Any historical society is a reflection of the world-view that supports it, and in order to understand any historical culture, it is important to grasp its metaphysical substrata. The society Jón describes in his *Gullöld Íslendinga* is the Icelandic 'Free State', which originated in the Viking Age and is therefore to be understood as a product of the Viking spirit or world-view. This world-view, Jón argues in his *Íslandssaga* – a book for school children –, was in those ancient times called *Ásatrú*; the very same neologism that had come into fashion in the late nineteenth century (see Chapter 6.1.4).<sup>2</sup> Here, we see how an invented tradition – in this case a terminological one – can take root in popular discourse and influence an entire society's conception of its pre-Christian past within the course of only a few decades.<sup>3</sup> This *Ásatrú*, Jón explains, was not a naive form of proto-religion or a systematised collection of superstitions; the "Æsir or the gods are images of that which was considered most noble and beautiful, such as courage and bravery, intelligence and victory, achievement and nobleness. They are the champions of that which is good and noble in the battle against evil."<sup>4</sup> The Eddas offer us a clear image of this world-view, and the myths they contain are not – as some people claim – fantastic fabrications, without any foundations in older, metaphysical insights. Not even the most primitive people, occupying the "lowest level of human existence", would build its society on a metaphysical system which had been created out of the blue; the same way the Viking Age Icelanders – who had already developed an advanced culture and spiritual life – build theirs on the foundations of the ancient *Ásatrú* faith.<sup>5</sup> Just like Viking culture itself, which is generally conceived as excessively violent and drenched in blood, *Ásatrú* has suffered tremendously from the prejudices and ignorance of later generations, and deserves to be re-evaluated in a more positive light. The apologetic stance of Jón's Early Modern predecessors (see Chapter 2.2.2) still reverberates in this claim. But unlike Bishop Finnur Jónsson, Jón does not seek to improve the image of Viking Age Iceland by playing down the pagan and emphasising the Christian character of its society. On the contrary: according to Jón, Viking culture had been violent and blood-drenched, but also of a more noble nature than generally believed <sup>6</sup>, and the ancient laws of the Common Wealth, through which society was regulated and justice could prevail, had deep roots in the religious world-view preserved in the Eddas.<sup>7</sup> The old lore, Jón argues, left those living in Iceland no other choice but to be just and admirable, since it was believed that only through reputation and a good name, death could be overcome. This view is most clearly expressed in the famous 77<sup>th</sup> stanza of *Hávamál*, in which a man's good deeds

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<sup>1</sup> Jónsson [Aðils], *Gullöld Íslendinga. Menning og lífshættir feðra vorra á söguöldinni: Alþýðufyrirlestrar með myndum* (Reykjavík 1948 [1906]) p.73; "Hver þjóð og hvert tímabil á sitt siðferðislögmál og sínar siðferðiskröfur, sem spróttnar eru af þjóðtrúnni og þjóðareðlinu, af lífsskoðuninni og tíðarandanum."

<sup>2</sup> Jón Jónsson [Aðils], *Íslandssaga* (Reykjavík 1923 [1915]) p.18; "... og var trú þeirra kölluð *Ásatrú*."

<sup>3</sup> A search for the term '*Ásatrú*' in the online database of Icelandic journals, newspapers and periodicals ([www.timarit.is](http://www.timarit.is), last accessed: 2 February 2017) teaches us that the term was used only eight times in the *thirty-nine* years between 1880-1919, but fifty-four times in the *nine* years after that (1920-1929).

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.18-19; "Æsirnir eða guðirnir eru ímynd þeirra eðliskosta, sem æðstir þykja og fegurstir, svo sem hugrekkis og hreysti, vitsmuna og sigursældar, dáða og drenglyndis. Þeir eru forvígishöldar hins góða og göfuga í baráttunni gegn hinu illa."

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1948) p.70.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.69.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.73.

are celebrated as the only thing that never dies, unlike cattle, kinsmen and eventually one's self.<sup>1</sup> It is this mentality and sense of honour that have given rise to the unique character of Iceland's oldest society, which consisted primarily of *Ásatrúarmenn* (followers of Ásatrú) but which was also home to a Christian minority. Some of the original settlers (*landnámsmenn*) had been Christians, but most of their sons reverted to the heathen faith in order to assimilate into a predominantly pagan society.<sup>2</sup> However, a lively interaction with Christian culture began to take shape in the Viking Age, and in the centuries leading up to Iceland's conversion in 999/1000 AD, hybrid forms of religious life evolved, in which pagan and Christian elements were combined. Jón names Helgi 'the slim' (*magri*), whose superficial Christian faith – covering his true, pagan nature – had been thematised by Grímur Thomsen (see Chapter 6.1), as a key example of this religious hybridity.<sup>3</sup>

Like other ancient religions, Ásatrú was first and foremost a mythological system for coping with the world and its perpetual battle between opposing forces, like light and darkness, hot and cold, good and evil.<sup>4</sup> These primordial forces, Jón argues, were personified by gods, elves, fire and ice giants, just like Finnur Magnússon had maintained with his theory of 'natural mythology' (see Chapter 3.4.5). This eternal struggle between competing powers is what makes up the very heart of the Old Norse religion, and it is the narrative of the epic culmination of all battles, Ragnarök, which Jón considers to be the defining element in eddic mythology.<sup>5</sup> Primordial though the opposing forces may seem, they are not eternal, and one day they will be overcome in a final battle between good and evil. The struggle also has a clearly defined beginning, being the appearance of evil in the world, symbolised by the appearance of Loki – belonging to the race of giants – in Ásgarðr, and his acceptance into the company of the Æsir.<sup>6</sup> It is his maleficence that leads to Baldr's death, and eventually to the cataclysmic events of Ragnarök. The Old Norse myths present a cyclical world-view, in which a return to the bliss- and peaceful utopia from *before* the age of perpetual battle is expected to occur *after* Ragnarök, when all opposing forces are extinguished and the harmonious state of being is restored. In other words: the current state of affairs is merely one station in a continuous cycle of bliss, decline, battle, and restored bliss.

In his recent study on national self-images and religion, the theologian Sigurjón Árni Eyjólfsson has examined the discursive structure of Jón's national narrative, concluding that it has a strongly *eschatological* character: as a secular alternative to religion, national narratives have adopted and refashioned the chronological template of the Bible, consisting of an initial phase of paradisaic bliss (Jón's 'Golden Age of the Icelanders'), followed by an age of decline after the introduction of sin (corresponding to the cultural decline and political humiliation under foreign rule) and, eventually, the restoration of paradise through redemption (Jón's age of national rebirth, connected to the political ideals of Iceland's national movement). In Sigurjón's thorough analysis, Jón's ideal of an independent nation substitutes the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> These observations are valuable, and increase our understanding of the persistence of religious narrative templates – so deeply ingrained in the Western mindset – in secular discourses. When taking into consideration Jón's ideas on the pre-Christian faith of his forefathers, one might argue that the eschatological dimension of his writings might just as well be linked to the cyclical outlook

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.74. For the stanza in question, see Chapter 2.1.2 and Larrington (1999) p.24.

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1923) p.38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1948) p.70.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.71-2.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.70, and Jónsson [Aðils] (1923) pp.19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Eyjólfsson (2014) p.284.

of Ásatrú<sup>1</sup>; Jón argues that the beauty of the pagan world-view is best experienced in the description of this new world after Ragnarök, in which “the powerful, mighty one, he who rules over everything, will come from above, to the judgement-place of the gods” (*Völuspá*, stanza 65).<sup>2</sup> He does not consider this reference to an omnipotent godhead to be a later, Christian interpolation. On the contrary: it constitutes the very *pinnacle* of the pre-Christian world-view:

It is quite obvious, that the idea which forms the foundation of Ásatrú is both sublime and beautiful in itself, and furthermore, that it contains remarkable *life-values*. Religion and philosophy must always be in harmony with each other, and faith and life must coincide, where ever some truth can be found.<sup>3</sup>

Only when this balance between religion and philosophy, or ‘outlook on life’ (*lífsskoðun*) is realised, a healthy society – like Iceland in its Golden Age – can flourish. In fact, all that is praise-worthy about the Golden Age, is a result of this integrated world-view. The Icelanders’ inborn longing for freedom and independence could be related to their ancestors’ healthy and egalitarian relationship with the gods, who they did not submissively revere, but who they could relate to on equal terms:

The position of our ancestors in relation to the Æsir is very peculiar and fundamentally different from the position of all other ancient peoples in relation to their gods. This is based on the dual nature of the Æsir. They are admittedly regarded as higher beings, as supreme rulers of the world and the champions of the good and the noble; but on the other hand, they are not perfect, but governed by the law of death and impermanence, no less than mankind. Men admittedly subject themselves to them and consider themselves bound to them, and consider it useful to honour and worship them, but on the other hand, they stand *strong* and *without fear* before them - *free* and *independent* to the utmost. There is no trace of *humiliation* or *slavish fear*, as is the case with the peoples of the Orient, nor is there a sense of *powerlessness*, as in the case of the Greeks. They are not their servants, but *allies*, because the Æsir need the assistance of all able-bodied men to keep up the great global war. They view themselves to some extent as their equals. When they perform a sacrifice to their gods and bring offerings to them, they usually demand something in return, insisting that they deserve it. However, some consider themselves so big, that they require nothing of their gods, but view the offering as “a friend’s gift”, and thus some men came to be known as great “loved ones” of the gods. The personal sentiments of independence and dignity are so abundant, that nothing less suffices than to compete with the gods on equal terms. So it happens that this belief of theirs has advanced towards cultivating and enhancing the best and most noble material in every man.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the usefulness of cyclical mythological templates for the construction of national histories, see Trencsényi (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1948) p.71; Þá kemur inn ríki/at regindómi/öflugr ofan/sá er öllu ræðr. The translation of this verse is taken from Larrington (1999) p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1948) p.71; “Vér fáum eigi betur séð en að hugmynd sú, er liggur til grundvallar fyrir Ásatrúnni, sé bæði háleit og fögur í sjálfu sér og hafi þar á auki talsvert *lífsgildi* í sér fólgið. Trúarskoðun og lífsskoðun hljóta jafnan að vera í innbyrðis samræmi og trú og líf að samsvara hvað öðru, þar sem nokkur alvara er fyrir.” (Italics original.)

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.73; “Afstaða forfeðra okkar gagnvart Ásunum er einkennileg mjög og gagnólk afstöðu allra annara fornþjóða til goða sinna. Þetta byggist á hinu tvöfalda eðli Ásanna. Þeir eru að vísu skoðaðir sem æðri verur, yfirdrottendur heimsins og forvígshöldar hins góða og gófuga; en á hinn bóginn eru þeir ekki alfullkomnir, heldur undirorpnir lögmáli dauðans og hverfulleikans, engu síður en mannkynið. Mennirnir lúta þeim að vísu og telja sér skylt og gagnlegt að tigna þá og tilbiðja, en á hinn bóginn standa þeir *öruggir* og *óttalausir* gagnvart þeim, – *frjálsir* og *sjálfstæðir* út í yztu æsar. Þar er enginn snefill af *auðmýkt* eða *þrælsótta*, eins og hjá Austurlandþjóðunum, eða *vanmáttartilfinningu*, eins og hjá Grikkjum. Þeir eru ekki þjónar þeirra, heldur

In this revealing passage, the very soul of the nation – characterised by fearlessness, equality, and a strong longing for freedom and independence – is explained in relation to the founding fathers’ pre-Christian faith, and even declared *superior* to that of the more submissive nations of the East. Icelandic culture can even be considered ‘better’ – or more heroic – than that of the defeatist Greeks, who tended to place their fate in the hands of stronger, external deities. This view is clearly borrowed from Grímur Thomsen, who also maintained that the difference between Nordic and Greek national character was related to the nature of their relationship with their gods (see Chapter 6.1). Both Jón and Grímur considered Ásatrú to be an important historical force, and a positive one at that; its relationship with the culture in which it was embedded was a reciprocal one, in which religion is both a *product* of a specific society, and simultaneously its *shaper*. Ásatrú could only nourish the best qualities of every individual in ancient Iceland, because it was part of the texture of society as a whole.

The obvious problem that arises when glorifying a pagan past, is the historical issue of Christianity. If Ásatrú was such a noble faith, both the root and the flower of Iceland’s Golden Age, how exactly should the advent of a ‘foreign faith’, importing ideas and values which were often the exact opposite of what paganism stood for, be interpreted? In other national discourses, this problem led to antagonising stances vis-à-vis Christianity, the arrival of which was often depicted as ‘the beginning of the end’ of an unspoiled Golden Age, in which everything – including religion – had still been *indigenous*. I already mentioned the Bulgarian poet Pencho Slaveykov, who advocated a return to the pre-Christian, ‘national’ faith – reformulated in the spirit of Nietzsche – in order to shake off the shackles of Christianity and attain national greatness once again (see Chapter 7.2.1). Jón may not have known his Bulgarian contemporary Slaveykov, but he shared Slaveykov’s enthusiasm for both pagan religions and national greatness, although not his radicalism, nor his ideal of undoing Christianity. Jón was not a pagan himself, nor was any Icelander until the second half of the twentieth century, when Ásatrú was officially ‘revived’ (see Chapter 10.4). Also, the conversion of Iceland had been a relatively *peaceful* process, not nearly as traumatic as the bloodshed and atrocities associated with the coming of Christianity in many other countries. In fact, the *democratic* and *diplomatic* way in which it was generally believed the Icelanders enacted their religious transition (see Chapter 2.1.1) could be considered one of the great success stories of Jón’s Golden Age narrative.<sup>1</sup> In order to overcome this problem, Jón argues in *Gullöld Íslendinga* that the religion which had once given rise to Icelandic society, slowly evolved into a wrong direction and grew detached from its original, noble message. Instead of harvesting strength from their ‘friendship’ with the gods, Icelanders now began sacrificing (*blóta*) to lower entities like elves, trolls, and all sorts of mysterious spirits (*dularvættir*) inhabiting the landscape.<sup>2</sup> Superstition and conceit became so rampant, that

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*bandamenn, því Æsir þurfa á aðstoð allra hraustra drengja að halda í hinu mikla alheimsstríði. Þeir skoða sig því að nokkru leyti sem jafningja þeirra. Þegar þeir blóta goð sín og færa þeim fórnir, þá krefjast þeir venjulega endurgjalds, þykjast eiga heimtingu á því. Þó eru sumir svo stórir upp á sig, að þeir krefjast einskis af goðum sínum, heldur skoða fórnina eins of “vinargjöf,” enda er svo að orði komizt um suma menn, að þeir hafi verið miklir “ástvinir” goðanna. Hin persónulega sjálfstæðis- og manngildistilfinning er svo rík, að þeim nægir eigi minna en að keppa til jafns við goðin. Það verður því þessi trú þeirra hafi miðað til að ala og efla það bezta og göfugasta af efnu tagi hjá hverjum manni.” (Italics original.)*

<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.83-96. Another historian (and controversial politician), Valtýr Guðmundsson (1860-1926) was of the opinion that democratic ideals had constituted the very core of Icelandic national identity since the island’s settlement; in his book on modern Icelandic culture, *Íslands Kultur ved Aarhundredskiftet 1900* (‘Iceland’s Culture at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century’; Copenhagen 1902), written in Danish, he asserts that the Icelander “is a democrat through and through, who maintains the rights of the individual to the maximum.” In his view, the parliamentary tradition of Þingvellir was still omnipresent in contemporary Icelandic society.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.82. In this theory of deterioration – from a pure and noble creed, into mere superstition and belief in elves and trolls – we can discern a *negative* take on the Grimmian concept of continuity, in which folklore and

many Icelanders turned their backs on religion altogether and instead put their trust in their ‘own strength and power’<sup>1</sup>; a phenomenon Jón interprets as a symptom of spiritual decline, rather than an indication of strength and self-reliance, as Grímur Thomsen had interpreted it (see Chapter 6.1). In this era of spiritual inflation, brought about by circumstances rather than by the original substance of the old faith, Ásatrú ceased to fulfil the religious needs of the Icelandic people. In this climate of decline and superstition, Christianity is introduced as the next great force in Icelandic history, a way out of the metaphysical gridlock, rather than a foreign intruder. Every era has its own spirit (Hegel’s *Zeitgeist*; see Chapter 6.1), and the era of paganism had simply come to its natural end. In Jón’s opinion, there was no reason to resist the ‘new faith’, whose God appeared to be the very fulfilment of the aforementioned prophecy in *Völuspá*, concerning the new world order after Ragnarök.

Jón’s positive interpretation of historical Ásatrú dovetailed with his opinions on the *Poetic Edda*, which he considered Iceland’s oldest and most beautiful literary creation.<sup>2</sup> In *Íslenzkt þjóðerni* he points out that, nowadays, the poems’ place of origin is hotly debated, and that opinions range anywhere from Norway to Iceland and Greenland (see Chapter 7.1).<sup>3</sup> These discussions have not yet yielded any substantial results, Jón argues, but most men seem to agree that the poems originated sometime in the Viking Age, and that they are the products of the Vikings’ encounter with Christian culture. On the basis of this, Jón argues, nothing seems more likely than that the Edda’s place of origin is located somewhere in the West-Atlantic, where Nordic pagans first grew acquainted with Celtic Christianity. Jón is no philologist, and nowhere does he engage in any form of eddic exegesis in order to prove this point. According to him, the eddic world-view is the product of a confluence of Nordic and Celtic elements, just like Icelandic culture in general. The eddic poems form a unique testimony to the peculiar life view that evolved from this historical encounter, in which pagan and Christian elements were harmonised in the same fashion as they were on the runic cross of the Danish island of Møn. Also, Jón argues, the Vikings learned something else from the Celts; the poetic tradition found in Ireland inspired the Norsemen on their way to Iceland to develop their own unique poetic language and style, which could not be found anywhere else in Scandinavia. Before long, Icelandic skálds occupied the same prominent position in Nordic society as the bards – from whom they had derived their craftsmanship – had held in the Celtic world.<sup>4</sup>

Considering Jón’s emphasis on the Celtic impact on Icelandic culture, it is important to consider what he writes about Irish religious life, even *before* the arrival of the Vikings in Ireland. According to him, the Irish possessed a unique and highly developed culture in which scholarship and the fine arts went hand in hand, and in which religious life was remarkably rich and profoundly intimate.<sup>5</sup> At an early stage in history, the priestly class of the druids had come into being, whose entire world-view was organically rooted in the spirituality of the common people. A druid had to be both a philosopher and a poet at once, and not be estranged from the people he ministered. Instead of disrupting this ancient and honorable tradition, Christianity peacefully absorbed it, up to the point that previously pagan druids quite naturally transformed themselves into Christian priests, without surrendering the richness of their culture. So smooth was the replacement of paganism with Christianity, that

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popular superstitions are seen as the last authentic vestiges of an otherwise lost, indigenous pagan religion (Chapters 2.2.3 and 5.1).

<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.83. The reference is to the Old Norse formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* (‘believing in their own strength and power’), used to describe people who did not partake in the practice of *blót* (sacrifice) for the gods.

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson [Aðils] (1903) p.50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.42.

in fact, this new faith soon became just as profound and intimate as the old one.<sup>1</sup> What Jón suggests here, is that the Irish brand of Christianity that the Norsemen would encounter centuries later, was in fact an expression of a more profound and *non-denominational* Celtic spirituality, which permeated all aspects of society, and which was flexible enough to move in flowing lines from one religion into the next. It is this universalistic and adaptable strand of the Celtic mentality that Jón also experiences in the eddic poems – for instance in *Völuspá*'s emphasis on the arrival of a new and omnipotent god after Ragnarök – and which could account for Iceland's smooth and peaceful transition to Christianity, some five centuries after the Irish had done the same. The Christianisation in both Ireland and Iceland is presented as a continuation of that which already existed, rather than a traumatic fracture in the texture of history, as the conversion of Scandinavia is conceived in the poetry of Grímur Thomsen. From this historical narrative, it follows that the Ásatrú of Iceland's first inhabitants, infused with the spiritual qualities of the Celtic world, constituted something quite *different* from the pre-Christian religions of the rest of Scandinavia – where the Celtic influence was absent – and that the *Poetic Edda* had, by no means, ever functioned as a unifying 'Quran of the Scandinavians', as Grímur had maintained. It was a product of the unique cultural and spiritual melting pot, in which Celtic and Old Norse elements merged to become Icelandic. Through this characterisation of his nation's pre-Christian faith, Jón *differentiates* Iceland from the rest of Scandinavia (function five, as formulated in Chapter 1.1) while *associating* it with the rich spiritual tradition of Celtic Christianity (function number four).

Jón's very distinct interpretation of ancient Ásatrú and its role in Icelandic history can be better understood when placed in the context of his own religious convictions. He was no 'Nietzschean pagan' like some of his more radical contemporaries in Europe, nor was he an orthodox Protestant in the conventional sense; his positive interpretation of the old faith is a long cry from the traditional church teachings on paganism, as voiced by Bishop Finnur Jónsson some 130 years earlier. In 1927, seven years after Jón's death, the periodical of the Icelandic branch of the Theosophical Society (*Guðspekifélagið*), *Gangleri*, published an exposition of his on Theosophy and the Theosophical Society, based on a work by the German-Italian Theosophist Otto Penzig.<sup>2</sup> In this article, the basic tenets of Theosophy and the esoteric teachings of Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and other influential leaders of the movement, all deeply inspired by Eastern mysticism and Hindu philosophy, are explored and introduced to the Icelandic reader. The universalist template of Theosophy is applied in order to undermine the exclusivist claims of Christianity, without thereby denying Jesus' status of 'spiritual teacher':

In this way, Theosophists testify without hesitation to the tremendous significance it has had for the spiritual development and prosperity of mankind in its entirety, that the superhuman being Christ dwelt in the man Jesus of Nazareth and lived with us. But on the other hand, they do not subscribe to the teaching of the church that this coming of Christ or incarnation in the land of the Jews two-thousand years ago, constituted a completely unique event in the history of mankind. They maintain that the same has taken place in previous centuries with other peoples, and has given rise to the older religions: Hinduism in India, sun worship in Persia, the religion of ancient Egypt and the Buddhist faith, which is attributed to Gautama Buddha,

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.42-3.

<sup>2</sup> Jón Jónsson Aðils, "Guðspeki og Guðspekifélagið.", in *Gangleri* 1 (1927) pp.9-35. On *Gangleri* and Icelandic Theosophy see Chapter 8.2.2. The Icelandic Theosophical Society was officially founded in 1921. The work on which Jón based this exposition was (a translation of) Otto Penzig's *Die Theosophie und die Theosophische Gesellschaft* (Berlin 1914).

who laid its foundations in India a few centuries before Christ and who taught many things that are very similar to that which Jesus preached.<sup>1</sup>

Although Ásatrú itself is not mentioned in this article, one can conclude from this text that *every* spiritual tradition or religion can be conceived as a stage in the spiritual development of mankind, spurred by incarnated teachers like Jesus, Buddha, and contemporary prophets like Krishnamurti. In this scheme of cyclical progress, Ásatrú could be perceived as a wisdom school in its own right, rooted in the spirit of the Nordic people, until the time had come for a new religion, representing the next stage in mankind's spiritual development, to replace it. The ancient faith was in fact itself hardwired to anticipate this future redemption, as could be concluded from the prophecy concerning the great omnipotent god after Ragnarök.

Although Jón did not connect his rendition of Iceland's peaceful conversion to the Theosophical teaching of spiritual progress himself, it is tempting to consider these two as the academic and the spiritual side of the same medal. Jón's emphasis on the importance of the ethnic composition of a people in relation to its spiritual fruits are also expressed in his essay on Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), published in the year after the famous writer's death.<sup>2</sup> Jón was greatly inspired by the universalism of Tolstoy's esoteric Christianity, which could only have evolved in the Russian Empire, in which northern and Oriental culture and wisdom could meet.<sup>3</sup> Tolstoy, celebrated as a prophet rather than a writer, is therefore presented as the product of cultural hybridity, deeply rooted in the national spirit of Russia, which was formed by invading peoples from around the world and by the confluence of Slavic, Tartar, Turkish, Mongolian and Western cultures.<sup>4</sup> Jón's view that only the creative energy provoked by this ethnic melting pot could generate the spiritual insight, universality and originality which characterise Tolstoy's philosophy, is remarkably similar to his account of the hybrid, Celto-Nordic origin of the eddic poems and of Iceland's national character. In both accounts, it is not racial purity, or some uncontaminated, primordial and organically conceived *Volksgeist* from which national genius sprouts, but rather cultural interaction and racial hybridity. Jón's pluralism stands in stark contrast to the puritanism of mainstream Icelandic nationalism, which cultivated the image of Iceland as the purest representative of a primordial Nordic spirit. But this more constructivist approach to national character did not diminish Jón's commitment to the nation, nor did it have detrimental effects on his belief in the *reality* of a national spirit; the mere fact that Iceland's national character was the outcome of a historical process – rather than 'God given' – did not imply that that it was therefore less 'real' or less admirable. In fact, the unique nature of Celto-Nordic interaction in Iceland had led to an equally unique, *national* culture and literary heritage, of which all Icelanders had good reason to be very proud. In his grand narrative of the Icelandic nation, the pre-Christian faith is not of central importance; Jón's most lasting contribution to the development of the island's collective identity lies in his glorification of the *constitutional* and *cultural* achievements of the Golden Age, as well as his emphasis on the correlation between 'independence'/'foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.14-15; "Þannig viðurkenna guðspekingar hiklaust þá afarmiklu þýðingu, sem það hafði fyrir andlegan þroska og velgengi mannkynsins í heild sinni, að hin yfirmenska vera Kristur tók sér bústað í mannum Jesú frá Nazaret og bjó með oss. En að hinu leytnu tilfallast þeir ekki á kenningar kirkjunnar um það, að þessi koma Krists eða holdtekja á Gyðingalandi fyrir 2 þúsund árum hafi verið alveg einstæður viðburður í sögu mannkynsins. Þeir halda því fram, að slíkt hið sama hafi átt sér stað fyr á öldum með öðrum þjóðum og hafi gefið tilefni til hinna eldri trúarbragða: Hindúatrúarinnar á Indlandi, Sóldýrkendatrúarinnar á Persalandi, hinna fornu egypzku trúarbragða og Búddhatrúarinnar, sem kend er við Gautama Búddha, er grundvallaði hana á Indlandi fáum öldum fyrir Kristni og kendi margt svipað því er Kristur hélt fram."

<sup>2</sup> Jón Jónsson [Aðils], "Léo Tolstoj. 28. ág. 1828 – 20. nóv. 1910.", in *Skírnir* 85 (1911) pp.1-24.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp.1-2. Jón's 'Nordic perspective' in this matter can be discerned in his use of the opposition East – North, rather than East – West.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.4.



rule' and the welfare of the nation. It is exactly for that reason, that the very interesting but mostly implicit *religious* views embedded in this national discourse are generally ignored or overlooked; a situation I have sought to redress in this chapter.

#### 7.2.4 Views on Iceland's Conversion

The most tangible historical encounter with pre-Christian Icelandic society is undoubtedly the remarkable account of the island's official conversion to Christianity, which occurred at the Alþingi of 999 or 1000 AD (see Chapter 2.1.1). The relatively peaceful and gradual transition to Christianity, characteristic of what can be considered the Icelandic *Sonderweg*, was conceived by nineteenth and twentieth century historians as a defining moment in the development of Iceland's national identity.<sup>1</sup> What role did the historical conversion play in Icelandic cultural memory? And how did it tie into the grand narrative of Iceland's Golden Age? In the context of the ideological re-signification of the pre-Christian faith, new views on the historical significance of the Christianisation process were bound to arise. The conversion was now no longer simply a transition from 'spiritual darkness' to religious enlightenment, as generations of pre-modern Christian chroniclers could maintain; now that *Ásatrú* had been connected to the *indigenous* and authentic character of the Nordic settlers and the 'democratic' society they founded, Christianity – an *external* force, applied by the Norwegian kings to extend their grip on the island's community – became an ideological problem in itself, which could now no longer be tackled by simply (over-) emphasising the Christian faith of (some of) the earliest settlers, as Bishop Finnur Jónsson had done. Throughout Europe, Romantic nationalists associated the advent of Christianity with the tragic demise of more indigenous world-views; in Slovenia for instance, the national poet France Prešeren (1800-1849) composed a famous epic poem entitled *Krst pri Savici* (The Baptism on the Savica, 1836), in which the coming of Christianity is linked to the loss of Slavic authenticity. The re-evaluation of pre-Christian religion was a Europe-wide phenomenon, but it appears to have been of greater significance to national movements which perceived themselves as 'peripheral' and 'suppressed'; they tended to associate the forceful imposition of Christianity with the despotic and feudal rule of the – historical and present – oppressor, or significant other. In this paradigmatic re-assessment of the pagan past, the historical or legendary 'last defenders' of heathenism against the advent of Christianity were celebrated as tragic national heroes; from Oehlschläger's *Hakon Jarl* (see Chapter 3.2.2), to the Saxon chieftain Widukind (eighth century AD), who was refashioned as the guardian of Germany's indigenous belief system in the face of Charlemagne's destructive Christianisation campaigns.<sup>2</sup> How did Icelandic historians in the early twentieth century, generally members of the Lutheran state church, come to terms with this delicate issue? Since a full analysis of all historical renditions of Iceland's conversion from this period would yield enough material for a separate book-sized study, I will limit myself to some of the most influential and most outspoken historical writings on this topic.

The year 1900 marked the nine hundredth anniversary of Iceland's formal conversion to Christianity, and was seized by Icelandic historians as an opportunity to express their ideas on this historical event. A jubilee publication by Björn M. Ólsen (see Chapter 7.1.3), who was not merely a trained philologist but a historian as well, set the tone, and provoked a discussion on Iceland's religious character which would spill over into the next year. The

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<sup>1</sup> For a modern assessment of Nordic and Christian identity in the age of conversion, see Orri Vésteinsson, "Shopping for Identities: Norse and Christian in the Viking-Age North Atlantic", in Ildar Garipzanov and Rosalind Bonté (eds.), *Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age* (Turnhout 2014) pp.75-91.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, Widukind's eventual conversion to Christianity was simply overlooked, downplayed, or interpreted as a result of Carolingian coercion.

booklet in question, *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000 og tildrög hennar* ('On the Conversion to Christianity in the Year 1000 and its Causes'), published by *Hið íslenska bókmentafélag*, was dedicated to Konrad Maurer (see Chapter 5.1.1), to whose works on Icelandic history and on the Christianisation of Scandinavia in particular Björn was greatly indebted.<sup>1</sup> Rome was not built in one day, Björn writes in his introduction, and likewise, the causes for Iceland's eventual conversion had deep roots in Icelandic history, possibly reaching back all the way to the Settlement Age itself.<sup>2</sup> Many of the first settlers were already Christians when they arrived in Iceland, and many of them even carried Gaelic names, indicating their intimate relationship with the Christian culture of Ireland and the British Isles. In the first part of the book, Björn provides an elaborate enumeration of all the Christians and *possible* Christians mentioned in the annals of Iceland's most ancient history.<sup>3</sup> He maintains that there may have been many more Christians than the *Íslendingasögur* lead us to suspect, and also that much about Iceland's Christian beginnings may have been left out of *Íslendingabók*.<sup>4</sup> A kernel of Christian culture may have persevered in Iceland, and borne fruit several generations later, in the tenth century, when a Christian faction was formed and the Christianisation took off.

The cause for this sudden rise of Christian activism in the ninth century was, in Björn's opinion, wholly political; changes in the political infrastructure of the Alþingi – entailing the establishment of a court of appeals next to the four already existing courts, and the creation of new chieftainships (*goðorðs*) – caused political upheaval in the land, which fused with Christian fears concerning the anticipated end of times in the year 1000. The power system of the original Alþingi, with its traditional pagan oaths and customs, was built entirely on the marriage of worldly and religious power, vested in the person of the chieftain/priest (*goði*: a term itself closely linked to the word *goð*, meaning (pagan) god).<sup>5</sup> By taking on a Christian identity, the so-called 'new chieftains' made a clear statement, and distinguished themselves from the old, pagan order:

It becomes clear, that the Christian party is essentially a true revolutionary party. The confrontation hardens, every hand is raised against another, the holiest bonds are broken, complete anarchy is looming. During the Alþingi of the year 999, they directly instigate an uprising and attempt to provoke judgments by force. The pagan chieftains found themselves under serious threat, although victory would be theirs in the end. Thus, Christianity and paganism, the crucifix and the sacrificial ring, Christ and Þór, ridiculed and duelled each other in Iceland at the end of the tenth century.<sup>6</sup>

In this very political account of Iceland's conversion there is no space for normative qualifications, pertaining to a Christian triumph over 'spiritual darkness'. Both paganism and Christianity, Christ and Þórr, are political forces – both equally indigenous – locked in a struggle over political future of the Free State. In this light Björn reconsiders the meaning and function of the *Völuspá* poem, which he believed to have been composed in Iceland in this

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<sup>1</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000 og tildrög hennar* (Reykjavík 1900), 'Formáli' (without page number).

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Björn's predilection for the history of the *landnámsöld* is also expressed in the many articles he wrote on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> Ólsen (1900) pp.3-4, 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, 106-7.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.56; "Það kemur í ljós, að kristni flokkurinn er í raun og veru sannar biltingaflokkur. Rímman harðnar, hver höndin er upp á móti annari, hin helgustu bönd slitna, fullkomin óstjórn kemst á. Á alþingi 999 gerir kristni flokkurinn beinlínis uppreisn og reinir að hleippa upp dómum með ófriki, og áttu heiðnu goðarnir þar mjög í vök að verjast, þó að þeir hefði sigur að lokum. Svo háði kristnin og heiðnin, róðukrossinn og blótbaugurinn, Kristur og Þór hið ramma einvig í lok 10. aldarinnar á Íslandi."

same turbulent era of religious turmoil (see Chapter 7.1.4). The writer of this most famous of eddic poems, Björn concludes, was not a pagan influenced by Christian eschatology, but rather a *Christian*, applying pagan themes to further the Christian (political) cause:

I presume that it was in this era, that the most profound poem that we possess in our literature, *Völuspá*, was composed. As we have demonstrated earlier, this poem stands halfway between paganism and Christianity and must date from this revolutionary age. But it is so near to Christianity, that it seems to be composed by a Christian, who wanted to demonstrate that Christianity's triumph over paganism would be inevitable and necessary, that the pagan religion – although respectable in and of its self – carries within itself its own death sentence, its own Ragnarök, and that after her would come the eternal kingdom of the “wielder of godly power descends in might, ruler of all things”. The whole poem is laid in the mouth of a heathen seeress. Therefore, the prophecy of Ragnarök, the rebirth of the world and the coming of Christ is provided with more power of conviction, also because this prophecy determines the whole poem, as can be seen in its title as well, the *Prophecy of the Seeress [Völuspá]*.<sup>1</sup>

According to Björn, the most profound poem of the eddic corpus was first and foremost a political pamphlet, serving a very specific purpose, namely winning pagans over to the ‘Christian camp’. Not through overtly Christian propaganda, but through pagan poetics, pointing forwards to a better future *beyond* paganism. The heathen images of *Völuspá* only serve to mask the very Christian motives behind its composition. Only when placed in its proper historical and political context does the poem and its enigmatic hybridity begin to make any sense at all.<sup>2</sup>

After Iceland's formal transition to Christianity, this political side to the conversion story sank into oblivion, and the role the ‘new chieftains’ had played in making Iceland's conversion such an exceptionally smooth one has been overlooked ever since:

Thus, the party of the new chieftains, the revolutionary party from the year 1000, disappears little by little from history. The waves, which rose so high during that monumental year, lowered as time progressed, as is usually the case. The Christian faith united the whole land under its wings, peace and tranquillity increased and the political system of the land became ever more fixed after the events of the eleventh century. But the party of new chieftains has fulfilled its important part in Iceland's history, for it was largely thanks to their efforts and following that Christianity entered so readily in the year 1000, without bloodshed or civil war.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.56-7; “Um þessar mundir higg jeg að til hafi orðið hið djúpspakasta kvæði, sem til er í bókmentum vorum, *Völuspá*. Eins og vjer höfum áður tekið fram, stendur þetta kvæði miðja vega milli heiðni og kristni og hlítur að vera frá þessum tímamótum. Þó stendur það að því leiti nær kristninni, að það virðist vera ort af kristnum manni, sem vildi sína, að sigur kristninnar ifir heiðninni væri óhjávæmilegur og nauðsinlegur, að heiðin trú – þó að hún sje virðingarvarð á sjálfri sjer – beri í sjer sinn eigin dauðadóm, sín eigin ragnarök, og að eftir hana muni koma hið eilífa ríki hins “ríka, sem kemur að regindómi öflugur ofan, sá er öllu ræður”. Kvæðið alt er lagt í munn heiðinni völu. Þess vegna kemur spádomurinn um ragnarök og endurfæðingu heimsins og komu Krists fram með því meira sannfæringaraffli, enn að þessum spádómi miðar alt kvæðið, eins og líka sjest á heiti þess, *Völuspá*.” (Italics original.)

<sup>2</sup> Compare this interpretation of *Völuspá* to Björn's later lectures on the same poem, collected in *Til Eddakvadene: til Völuspá* (Lund 1914).

<sup>3</sup> Ólsen (1900) p.108; “Þannig hverfar flokkur hinna níja höfðingja, biltingaflokkurinn frá árin 1000, smátt og smátt úr sögunni. Öldur þær, sem risu svo hátt á þessu minnisstæða ári, lægir, þegar fram líða stundir, eins og eðlilegt er. Hin kristna trú safnar öllum landslíð undir vængi sína, friður og spekt for vaxandi og stjórnarskipun landsins kemst í fastara og fastara horf, eftir því sem líður á 11. öldina. Enn flokkur hinna níju höfðingja hafði unnið sitt mikilvæga hlutverk í sögu landsins, því að það var að miklu leiti einbeittni hans og filgi að þakka, að kristnin komst svo greiðlega á árið 1000, án blóðsúthellingar og innanlandsófríðar.”

Not surprisingly, this new reading of historical events – and especially its philological implications – caught the attention of professor Finnur Jónsson, who had been engaged in a polemic with Björn – regarding the origin of the eddic poems – some five years earlier (analysed in Chapter 7.1.4). He voiced his reservations against Björn’s theories in the journal *Einreiðin*, and begins his article with praising the erudite ‘principal’ and his writings.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Finnur accuses Björn of having broken the ‘golden rule’ of their mutual teacher in Copenhagen, the classical philologist Johan Nicolai Madvig (1804-1886) – who stated that one should always stay close to the original sources, and never build elaborate ‘castles’ of speculation by over-interpreting them, or by straying too far away from them –, by claiming, on no grounds whatsoever, that the sagas and *Íslendingabók* are wrong in suggesting that there were only fairly few Christians in Settlement Age Iceland. There is no reason to assume that there were more Christians in Iceland than these sources suggest, and most of these men later reverted to paganism so that the number of Christians dwindled even further.<sup>2</sup> There was, in other words, no historical link between these early settlers and the Christian faction of the year 1000, and the presence of Christianity was a very new phenomenon in Iceland in the late tenth century.<sup>3</sup> Due to Finnur’s strong belief in the sacrosanct historicity of the *Íslendingasögur* and other medieval sources, he was convinced that there was hardly any Christian continuity to speak of, and that the decline and fall of paganism in the late tenth century was caused by other, more internally pagan developments:

Belief in the heathen gods and their power had grown weak, and had entirely disappeared for many: men did not care what they believed in. Many believed in their own power and strength. That comes as no surprise, from these men who left behind their feudal lord, the king, who lured, enticed and begged, and who ordered a new faith for the people. [...] That which in my opinion supported and enhanced Christianity the most in Iceland, was the general *carelessness* in matters of religion. It did not take more than some men who were zealous, fit and fierce enough to Christianise the country. “The fruit was ripe”.<sup>4</sup>

Like Jón Aðils, Finnur was convinced of the *internal* decline of the once powerful pagan faith, which caused a general disinterest in, and even dislike of everything religious. Only due to these circumstances could Christianity, sponsored by the Norwegian king and foreign missionaries, gain a foothold in Iceland. Finnur sees little in the idea of a well-organised Christian faction of ‘new chieftains’, and rejects Björn’s theory that the Christian revolutionaries almost took over control during the Alþingi of 999. In fact, Finnur argues that there is no reason to suspect any internal Christian activism in Iceland before the return of Iceland’s most fervent advocates for Christianity from the royal court in Norway, not long before the Alþingi of 1000.<sup>5</sup> Indicative of the general disinterest in religious matters is the fact that the Icelandic pagans are unorganised, and lack a convincing leader figure. Even de law-speaker Þorgeir Þorkelsson, a heathen himself, was not committed to his ancestral faith and thus became a useful instrument of the Christian faction. Once he had officially proclaimed that Iceland was to become a Christian land, there was little resistance from the

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<sup>1</sup> Finnur Jónsson, “Kristnitakan á Íslandi.”, in *Einreiðin* 7 (1901) pp.1-16, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp.3-7.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.6-7; “Trúin á hin heidnu goð og mátt þeirra var orðin veik, og hjá mörgum algjörlega horfin; mönnum stóð á sama, á hvað þeir trúðu. Margir trúðu á mátt sinn og megin. Hvað var að undra það, þótt þessir menn létu eftir lánardrotnum sínum, konungunum, er löðuðu og lokkuðu, báðu og skipuðu mönnum nýja trú. [...] Það sem að minni hyggju langmest studdi og flutti fram kristnina á Íslandi, var hið almenna *kærleysi* í trúarefnum. Það þurfti því ekki nema nógu duglega, lægna og harðsnúna menn til þess, að kristna landið. “Aldinið var þroskað.” (Italics original.)

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.12-14.

pagan camp, not least because many of the leading heathens' sons were held hostage by the Norwegian king and would likely be executed if their fathers would instigate a rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

Björn's elaborate theory of a connection between the political reforms of the Alþingi and the conversion, which occurred around the same time, is also rejected and dismissed as redundant.<sup>2</sup> Finnur is no historian by training and wastes few words on Björn's political speculations. What *does* however excite his philological sentiments, is the principal's claim that *Völuspá* was intended, first and foremost, as Christian propaganda:

To conclude I will however point out, that it is absolutely inconceivable to me, with how much persistence the author maintains that the poem was composed by a Christian. Even if it would have been composed in the period indicated by the author, it is absolutely unthinkable that its composer was a Christian. No matter from what perspective the poem is seen; I am inclined to say it is physically impossible. This view is empty dogma, or a fixed doctrine, and that is most often a very bad thing.<sup>3</sup>

Finnur is seemingly at loss for words to express his disbelief in Björn's conception of *Völuspá*, and thus connects this new discussion on the conversion of Iceland to their previous polemic on the origin of the eddic poems. But Finnur tempers his outrage, and concludes his essay by claiming that he did not write this article with the intention of causing disharmony between himself and the 'esteemed writer'; he knows that Björn will understand that everyone wants to stand up and defend that which he considers most likely and true, and that by doing so, both men actually express their admiration for each other and their work. Agreeing to disagree may sometimes be the best thing to do, because, in the end, everyone 'finds his own bird beautiful'.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, Björn did not agree. In his reply to Finnur's assessment of his book, which he published in the journal *Andvari*, he argues that, instead of looking at one's own bird and praising its beauty, this discussion should be undertaken in the name of beauty of the *truth*. He praises his friend's sincerity, but reprimands him for accusing him of sinning against Madvig's 'golden rule'; in fact, it was Finnur himself who had done so, by dismissing the strong Irish – and thus *Christian* – presence in early Icelandic culture, as attested by all historical sources.<sup>5</sup> Finnur's theory of 'pagan decline' and a general dislike of religion prior to the arrival of Christianity has no solid foundations in the sources, and even Þorgeir Þorkelsson, the pagan law-speaker himself, maintained in his speech that there were sincere agitators in *both* the heathen and the Christian camp. Also the fact that humans were sacrificed to the Æsir in the pagan camp, in order to invoke the gods' help against the Christians, serves as an argument against Finnur's theory.<sup>6</sup> The causes for Christianity's sudden rise to power had nothing to do with pagan decline, but were of an entirely political nature. What the conversion came down to, was an opportunistic deal between the upcoming new chieftains, who had successfully broken the ties between institutionalised paganism and the chieftainship, and the conservative chieftains of the pagan camp, who were, by

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.15; "Að endingu skal ég þó geta þess, að það er mér algjörlega óskiljanlegt, með hve miklum þráa höf. fylgir því, að kvæðið sé ort af kristnum manni. Þótt það væri íslenzkt og ort á þeim tímum, sem höf. ætlar, er það alveg fráleitt, að kristinn maður sé höfundur þess. Slíkt er, hvernig sem annars á kvæðið er litið, mér liggur við að segja líkamlega ómögulegt. Þessi skoðun er tóm kredda eða kreddufesta, og hún kemur oftar við og það meinilla."

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, "Um kristnitökuna árið 1000.", in *Andvari* 26 (1901) pp.136-159, 137-9.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.140-1.

recognising the new faith, allowed to retain their political power.<sup>1</sup> All great historians of the past and the present – Björn self-confidently lists Herodotus, Thucydides, Snorri Sturluson, Macaulay, Carlyle, Ranke and Mommsen among his illustrious predecessors – had always agreed, that nothing ever happens for no reason; every historical event has a clear cause, and unlike Finnur – who was, after all, *not* a historian – Björn had demonstrated a sound, political cause for Iceland’s conversion.<sup>2</sup> In this intimidating passage, Björn is clearly marking his territory, and implying that the question of Iceland’s conversion should be dealt with by *professional* historians, firmly rooted in esteemed historiographical traditions, and not by outsiders like Finnur; a clear example of the fierce disciplinary territorialism, which was symptomatic of the professionalisation trend in the humanities around 1900 (see Chapter 7.1.1). This implicit statement is reinforced by Björn’s unwillingness to dive into the – very philological – *Völuspá* question, which he simply lists as one of the many less essential topics the two men do not agree on, and in which both are entitled to their own opinions.<sup>3</sup> It seems like Björn had grown tired of the perpetual discussions on the Edda, and refused to revive the arguments he had already thrown at Finnur five years earlier. But, just like their scholarly feud on the origin of the eddic poems, the arguments mobilised in *this* discussion are to be understood in the context of the collision of the book-prose and the free-prose paradigm (see Chapter 7.1.2), and revolve around the attested historicity and literary value of the sagas.

Another, shorter review of Björn’s book on Iceland’s conversion was published in the same issue of *Andvari*, and was composed by the celebrated poet Matthías Jochumsson (see Chapter 8.1.2). Matthías opens his musings on the book by praising Björn for writing in his native language – unlike Finnur Jónsson – and for his emphasis on the Icelandicness of the eddic poems, which could only have originated in Iceland, since no fragments of this corpus are extant in Norway or any other country.<sup>4</sup> Matthías also praises Björn’s writings on the conversion, but concludes that the principal’s emphasis on political causes is not entirely compelling. The poet does not consider himself the right man to counter Björn’s arguments, but he does propose that there was more going on than only the political developments. “World history is world judgement”, Matthías quotes Friedrich Schiller<sup>5</sup>, in order to substantiate the idea of history as an independent agent, operating on its own terms.<sup>6</sup> He also refers to Snorri Sturluson’s description of the defeat and fall of Hákon Jarl (see Chapter 6.1.4), which occurred simply because Hákon’s ‘time had come’, and the pagan faith had to make place for a new and better faith.<sup>7</sup> Matthías’s historical determinism, reminiscent of that of Hegel and Grímur Thomsen, was certainly connected to his own deep religiosity – his liberal and unconventional world-views gravitated towards Unitarianism – which caused him to look at history as the ongoing unfolding of God’s plan (see Chapter 8.1.2). Christianity, this “glorious new faith”<sup>8</sup>, came to Iceland because that was what was destined to happen at that time.

Matthías feels that the importance of one of Iceland’s three most committed advocates of the new faith, namely Hjalti Skeggjason, has been unjustfully downplayed by Björn and by most Icelandic historians before him, most likely because the most famous of these three advocates, Gizur *hvíti* (‘the white’), was the grandfather of the influential historian Ari *inn fróði* (‘the wise’, see Chapter 1.2.2) and therefore came to overshadow the other two in

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.157.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.158.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.159.

<sup>4</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, “Athugasemdir við ritið ‘Um kristnitökuna’”, in *Andvari* 26 (1901) pp.213-9, 213-4.

<sup>5</sup> “Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht”, the famous last strophe of Schiller’s poem *Resignation* (1784).

<sup>6</sup> Jochumsson (1901b) p.215.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.216.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, p.217; “dýrðlega nýja siðar”.

Icelandic historiography.<sup>1</sup> Hjalti had been blessed with all the qualities of what one would nowadays call a ‘genius’, and combined wisdom and humour in the same way Luther, Jan Hus, and even the Apostle Paul had done.<sup>2</sup> The charisma of this one man, a hero of Christianity, constitutes a more compelling explanation for the triumph of Christianity in Iceland than Björn’s political theory. In the end, Icelanders were moved to embrace the new faith because Christ had a ‘better Valhöll’ and a more glorious faith to offer than Óðinn, and the warrior spirit of the Vikings was by no means consumed by this transition. On the contrary: the well-mannered crusading knights of later centuries were no less courageous than their pagan berserker ancestors, and the Christian army of king Ólafr Tryggvason showed more courage in the Battle of Swolder – which took place in the year of Iceland’s conversion – than any Scandinavian army had ever done before.<sup>3</sup> All in all, Matthías’s essay can be considered a plea in favour of Christianity and its role in Nordic culture, in which the common Nietzschean dichotomy of pagan/martial versus Christian/weakness is subverted; Christianity did not destroy the Nordic spirit, but *preserved* it and magnified its most positive elements. In the final paragraph of the essay, the poet returns to Björn M. Ólsen and his love for the Eddas, by teasingly asserting that Björn would undoubtedly wish for his readers to turn to *Völuspá* for all those matters of the spirit, which he has left untouched in his writings, since they are of little relevance on this level of learnedness.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to grasp what the poet is aiming at in this final sentence, but it appears to be a kind reprimand of Björn’s predilection for all things heathen, and simultaneously, a call to focus on the more *spiritual* dimension of the conversion, to which scholars too often turn a blind eye.

The positive interpretation of Ásatrú and the Viking Age culture and morality it inspired was popularised in dozens of periodicals and cheap publications, and found its way to historical overviews, intended for primary and secondary education. It was through schoolbooks that this popular conception became cemented in the Icelandic imagination for generations. Sigurður Þórólfsson (1869-1929), who served as the principal of a school in Borgarfjörður, published the first of two volumes of his educational *Minningar feðra vorra* (‘Memories of our fathers’) in 1909, which the historian and nationalistic politician Valtýr Guðmundsson considered – despite its many flaws and inaccuracies – the most complete historical overview to date, suitable for school-going children of all ages.<sup>5</sup> Following the example of Jón Aðils, Sigurður refers to the Viking Age, in which the history of the Scandinavian peoples truly took off and enriching encounters with other peoples first occurred, as the ‘Golden Age’ of the Nordic world.<sup>6</sup> The Ásatrú of Iceland’s first settlers is described in some detail, and the Þórr, Óðinn and Freyr are identified as their central deities.<sup>7</sup> The old faith was not simply ‘spiritual darkness’, awaiting its immanent annihilation by

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.218.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp.218-9.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.219; “Vill höfundurinn eflaust, að menn lesi sér til í Völuspá alt það andlegra, er hann hefir undanfellt sem sínu ‘plani’ miður viðkomandi.”

<sup>5</sup> Valtýr Guðmundsson, “Minningar feðra vorra” (review) in *Eimreiðin* 17 (1911) pp.70-72.

<sup>6</sup> Sigurður Þórólfsson, *Minningar feðra vorra* vol. 1 (Reykjavík 1909) p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, pp.31-45. In his review of this work, the historian Valtýr Guðmundsson points out several flaws in Sigurður’s depiction of Icelandic paganism. For instance, *Náströnd* (‘Corpse Shore’, a place in Hel) is described as part of *Gimli*, the most splendid hall in all of Ásgarðr (see Þórólfsson (1909) p.44). This he considers no less ridiculous than claiming that hell is actually a corner of heaven (V. Guðmundsson (1911) p.71). Furthermore, Valtýr does not agree with Sigurður’s claim that the ‘almighty god’ (*hinn almáttki áss*; see Chapter 2.1.4) invoked in ritualistic formulas was actually Óðinn, since Þórr was far more central in Icelandic paganism. Sigurður’s theory that, in Iceland, the belief in Valhöll was declining and replaced by more chthonic conceptions of an afterlife in hills and rocks (Þórólfsson (1909) p.125) is dismissed by Valtýr, who asserts that these animalistic beliefs predate the belief in Valhöll, and that they existed alongside each other in Viking Age Iceland (V. Guðmundsson (1911) p.71).

Christianity; in fact, in its very core, it possessed a great spiritual insight into the *condition humaine*:

Some argue, that the innermost core of Ásatrú is our forefathers' perspective on human life, and its struggle from the cradle to the grave. The gods would thus signify various qualities of the soul, and the battle between gods and giants symbolised the battle between opposing elements of our psyche. In the psyche of man are various good and bad forces, passions and impulses, moving in different directions. It appears to be the normal law of necessity, that there is a perpetual battle between these opposing forces of the psyche, between "flesh and spirit", and our forefathers understood that. But here, we will concern ourselves with this subject any further.<sup>1</sup>

This very concise exposition on the metaphysical core message of Ásatrú, and especially the conclusion that any system dealing with the general truths of the human condition would by necessity revolve around the binary opposition of 'flesh and spirit', serves a clear purpose in Sigurður's programmatic rendition of Iceland's past. First of all, it normalises Ásatrú and renders it a Nordic manifestation of the universal truth of the perennial battle between spirit and matter. Furthermore, the ancestral religion is presented as, at its very core, *not* significantly different from the Christian faith that replaced it; like Jón Aðils, Sigurður emphasises the *continuity* of universal truths in Icelandic spiritual life, which – stripped of all pagan superstitions – simply took on a Christian guise after the island's conversion. In this way, the wisdom of the ancient ancestors could be celebrated *without* automatically condemning Christianity as a result. Due to the educational format of the book, Sigurður does not go into detail about the significance and historical necessity of the conversion – as Jón Aðils did – but simply deals with the Christianisation of Iceland in fairly neutral terms.<sup>2</sup> The account runs along the historical lines set out by *Kristni saga* and other historical sources, and culminates in a quote attributed to Hjalti Skeggjason – one of the chieftains who played a key-role in the conversion of Iceland – who, upon baptising a pagan compatriot, proclaimed triumphantly that the old gods were now a thing of the past.<sup>3</sup> Several chapters later, when Sigurður introduces his readers to the greatest treasures of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, it is maintained that most Icelandic specialists now agreed that the eddic poems are of Icelandic origin, as Björn M. Ólsen had demonstrated so convincingly. The competing Norwegian theory of Finnur Jónsson is more or less dismissed on the grounds of it being outdated.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the view that *Eddukvæði* was essentially a product of Iceland's literary culture was enshrined in the schools' curriculum, and eventually became a self-evident fact to the young minds who first got to know their nation's past through this book.

A more influential rendition of the island's history, also intended for school-going children, was the popular two-volume *Íslandssaga handa börnum* ('Icelandic history for children'; 1915-1916) by Jónas Jónsson 'from Hrifla' (1885-1968). No other primer has contributed more significantly to instilling the nationalistic reading of Icelandic history into

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<sup>1</sup> Þórólfsson (1909) p.44-45; "Sumir halda, að insti kjarninn í Ásatrú sé skoðun forfeðra vorra á mannlífínu, baráttu þess frá vöggunni til grafarinnar. Væri þá goðin ímynd ýmsra sálareiginleika, en baráttan milli goða og jötna táknæði baráttu milli gagnstæðra afla sálarlífsins. Í sálarlífi mannsins eru ýms góð og vond öfl, ástríður og hvatir í ýmsar áttir. Það virðist eðlilega nauðsynja lögmál, að óslitin baráttu sé milli þessara andstæðu eiginleika sálarlífsins, milli "holdsins og andans", og forfeðrum vorum hafi skilist það. En hér skal ekki farið frekara út í það mál."

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp.59-66.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.66.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, pp.206-7.



the minds of the general audience.<sup>1</sup> Jónas, who was no trained historian but rather an educator, a writer of textbooks<sup>2</sup> and an influential politician – he later served as the country’s minister of justice and of education – intended to cultivate the idea that the Icelanders constituted a brave, strong, and independent people, since they were descendants of the Norwegian farmers brave enough to stand up against King Haraldr *hárfagri*. The strength of their spirits only improved after they settled on Iceland, where difficult living and weather conditions forged them into the hardened and unique nation they eventually became.<sup>3</sup> In Jónas’s very simplistic representation of the Old-Icelandic pantheon, he pays special attention to the deities connected to farming (Freyr and Þórr, notably), which was in his view the beating heart of the nation. This may be interpreted as a political statement as well, since Jónas was a prominent member – and later leader – of the centre-right Progressive Party (*Framsóknarflokkurinn*), which represented the farmer class. The structure of this national narrative is profoundly teleological, and works towards the inevitable conclusion that Iceland’s national health depends on the nation’s independence from Denmark. In this template, the Alþingi is presented as the institutional embodiment of Iceland’s sovereignty, and the ‘democratic’ proceedings of the independent Free State are perceived as rational, just, and beneficial to the common good. This of course includes goði Þorgeir Þorkelsson’s decision to make Christianity the official creed of the land. The conversion is not simply interpreted as a result of external and internal pressure, or as a result of Norwegian attempts to gain control over the island; Ásatrú, a religion for ‘Vikings and warriors’, had served its purpose in a previous age, and had brought out the best in those who wanted to earn their place in Valhöll and assist the gods in their final battle against the forces of Ragnarök.<sup>4</sup> But times had changed, and around the year 1000 the heroic faith was in decline:

The period in which Iceland was being settled constitutes a historical milestone in the Nordic lands in matters of religion. The religion of the Æsir was in rapid decline. Many men had become of mixed faith and observed the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the Ásatrú faith halfheartedly. Of some men, especially those who considered themselves great men, it is said that they believed in their own power and strength. By that time, Christianity had spread out over the whole continent to the south.<sup>5</sup>

Like Jón Aðils before him, Jónas thus considers the *internal* weakness of a deteriorated pagan belief system – a world-view that is not necessarily considered ‘worse’ or ‘better’ than Christianity, but simply ‘outdated’ – to be the historical justification for the Alþingi’s decision to move forwards, in the spirit of a new age. In order to render this epochal break with the past more tangible to his young readers, Jónas concludes the chapter on Iceland’s conversion with the dramatic tale of Þorgeir Þorkelsson throwing the statues of his pagan gods into a waterfall in the Skjálfandaflljót-river in northern Iceland, which hence came to be known as the ‘Waterfall of the Gods’ (Goðafoss).<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that this story does not

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<sup>1</sup> Jónas’s *Íslandssaga* was reprinted up until 1935, and was used in schools everywhere in the country until well into the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Jónas also published textbooks on animal biology, and wrote on the life and poetry of Einar Benediktsson, among many other things.

<sup>3</sup> Jónas Jónsson [frá Hriflu], *Íslandssaga handa börnum* (vol. 1; Reykjavík 1915) pp.1-49. See also Hálfðanarson (2000a) p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Jónsson [frá Hriflu] (1915), pp.44-5.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.79; “Um það leyti sem Ísland byggdist voru á Norðurlöndum tímamót í trúarlegum efnum. Ásatrúin var óðum að hnigna. Margir menn voru orðnir blendnir í trúnni og fylgdu blótunum og öðrum helgisiðum ásatrúarinnar, með hálfum huga. Um suma menn, einkum þá sem miklir voru fyrir sér, er sagt að þeir hafi trúað á mátt sinn og megin. Þá hafði kristna trúin breiðst út um alla álfuna sunnanverða.”

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.86.

occur in any of the medieval sources on Iceland's conversion, and that the connection between Þorgeir's waterfall and the waterfall in the Skjálfandafljót-river was first made in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 7.2.2). But due to the impact of Jónas's books on the general understanding of Icelandic history, Goðafoss is now generally considered the actual place where this 'historical event' took place.

As can be concluded from the discourse analysis above, the pagan past played a complex ideological role in Iceland's Christian society. An interesting parallel case in Icelandic historiography, in which we can discern the same 'indigenous tradition' versus 'intruding foreign concept' template at work, is the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, which was – again – a relatively peaceful process. The Lutheran creed was imposed on Iceland by King Christian III of Denmark, and was not welcomed with great enthusiasm. Due to its great distance from Rome, Icelandic Christianity had always been relatively independent, and the implementation of strict canonical law – for instance clerical celibacy – had been fairly lax. The Reformation was perceived as an end to this relative freedom, and as a political instrument to strengthen the king's grip on the island.<sup>1</sup> Jón Aðils even went so far as to claim that the advent of Protestantism signified the uprooting “of the last leftovers of the nation's independence”<sup>2</sup> and the beginning of Iceland's great humiliation. The central figure in the story of Iceland's Reformation is Jón Arason (1484-1550), the defiant bishop of Hólar, who resisted the imposition of Protestantism and was therefore beheaded together with two of his sons. Despite the fact that Iceland became entirely Protestant after this event, the beheaded bishop did evolve into something of a popular hero; all theological reservations aside, Jón became the protector of 'Icelandic Catholicism' – which had absorbed much of the nation's popular culture, traditions and folklore – against the intrusive and *Danish* Lutheran creed. As such, the bishop came to represent *authentic* and *indigenous* Iceland, and became a (Catholic!) 'cultural saint' in the national imagination of Lutheran Iceland. Jón Sigurðsson even referred to him as 'the last Icelander', and the tragic event of his execution became the subject matter of Romantic poetry.<sup>3</sup> In this nationalistic discourse, pre-Reformation Christianity – personified by Jón Arason – played essentially the same semantic role as Ásatrú, in that it represented the authentic and undefiled nature of Icelandic independence and spirituality. The association with Iceland's primordial *Volksgeist* even went so far, that Gísli Brynjúlfsson portrayed the bishop as a martyr whose sad fate had been decided by the Norns (the Old Norse deciders of destiny) themselves.<sup>4</sup> In this poem, the historical event of the execution has lost all its theological meaning, and instead, the bishop is presented as a semi-messianic figure, a martyr for the nation, whose violent death ushered in three hundred years of misery, and whose fate should serve as a reminder to modern patriotic Icelanders.<sup>5</sup> The resemblance to the positive Ásatrú discourse – think for instance of Grímur Thomsen's

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Karlsson has pointed out that historians of the later twentieth century have debated the island's Christianisation along very similar lines; whereas scholars of the nationalistic school, such as Jón Jóhannesson, argued that the Icelanders accepted the new faith in order to “escape interference in their domestic affairs by the Crown of Norway to preserve the independence of the country”, others like Sigurður Línal “have seen the acceptance of Christianity as an acknowledgement of the king's power in Iceland. By substituting Christ for Þórr, it is maintained, the Icelanders were not evading the king but pleasing him and in some way subjecting themselves to him.” See Karlsson (2003) p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Jónsson (1903) p.241; “... upprætir síðustu leifarnar af sjálfstæði þjóðarinnar.” This statement is somewhat compensated by the observation that Icelanders had possessed the fortitude to stand up against the suppression of the Catholic Church.

<sup>3</sup> See Ingi Sigurðsson (1986) p.96.

<sup>4</sup> Brynjúlfsson, “Jón Arason (brot)” (1852), in Brynjúlfsson (1955) pp.115-6. The 'trauma' of the Reformation had already been fashioned in eddic terms by Jón lærði, who compared the island's transition to Protestantism to Ragnarök, and who represented a conservative resistance similar to that of Jón Arason (see Chapter 2.2.1).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* The story inspired many Icelandic poets and authors, such as Matthías Jochumsson, whose tragedy in five acts, *Jón Arason*, was published in 1900 (Ísafjörður).

poems on Hákon jarl, defender of the old faith, whose death provoked the departure of the gods and the decline of the North (see Chapter 6.1.4) – is obvious, and both pre-Christian paganism and pre-Reformation Christianity could be considered historical manifestations of the abstract concept of national authenticity. The distinction between pagan and Christian, or Catholic and Protestant, was only of secondary importance in this secular cultivation of indigenous, ‘home-grown’ Icelandicness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of comparison: the Faroese Viking Þrándr í Gøtu (Faroese: Tróndur í Gøtu; 945-1035), one of the protagonists of the Icelandic *Føreyinga saga* (‘Saga of the Faroemen’), strongly opposed the advent of Christianity in the Faroe Islands and resorted to magical incantations to protect the old faith. This active opposition against Christianity was enough to render him ‘the bad guy’ in the original saga, but in nineteenth-century Faroese culture he soon became a national hero, and the defender of Faroese independence vis-à-vis the Norwegian king. Also in this case, the hero’s explicit paganism was not considered an ideological obstacle to his modern, Lutheran admirers. See Kim Simonsen, “Færøske erindringssteder og erindringspolitik: Mellem trauma og sakralisering. Nationalisme og kristendom i færøskerindringskultur, set gennem brugen af Færø Saga i nyere mindehøjtideligheder”, in *Den jyske historiker* 124 (2010) pp.75-97. See also the transformation of Hagen von Tronje in the German national discourse, briefly discussed in Chapter 3.1.

## 8. Metaphysical Approaches (1860-1918)

### *8.1 Poetry and Psychologisation: From Romanticism to Symbolism*

#### 8.1.1 Noble Heathens

In all Old Norse accounts of the life of Haraldr *hárfagri* ('Fairhair'), the ninth and tenth-century ruler who united all the petty Norwegian kingdoms under his power and thus created a unified Norway (see Chapter 2.1.1), the solemn oath in which he swore not to cut his hair until he ruled supreme over all of Norway, takes centre stage. King Haraldr's oath was a defining moment in Norwegian history, but also a problematic one for later – Christian – chroniclers, writing some three centuries after the event; Haraldr was a pagan, and so was the oath on which Norway was built. In order to overcome this inconvenient problem, medieval chroniclers have granted themselves considerable literary freedom, and transformed Haraldr's sacred oath into the most noble testimony of faith a pagan oath could possibly be. In one rendition of the event, extant in the *Fagrskinna* manuscript, the king complements his first political oath with a second religious one, and swears never to worship any of the petty gods and idols of the heathen pantheon again, and to restrict himself to the service of one god only: the creator of the sun, the 'only true god who created all things'.<sup>1</sup> This was still a far cry from actually accepting Christianity, but at least it could now be claimed that this pagan king, the founding father of the Norwegian state, had renounced polytheism and experienced a glimpse of the one true God, through the merits of pure 'natural religion'. This set the king apart from the other heathens of his age, and rendered him what has been referred to as a 'noble heathen'.<sup>2</sup> From the monastic perspective of medieval historiography, the nobility of a pre-Christian hero depended largely on the spiritual proximity of the pagan's world-view and actions to Christianity; the more 'Christian' – or rather: monotheistic – his behavior and ideas appeared to be, the nobler he must have been. This proto-monotheism is often characterised as prefiguring, or anticipating the coming of the *true* God. Heathenism could not be admired on its own terms, since it was generally considered a euhemeristic or even demonic distortion of the natural religion which God had planted in every man's nature (see Chapter 2.1.3). In other words: the standards of nobility applied to pre-Christian heroes was itself profoundly Judeo-Christian.

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated how the study of mythology was revolutionised in the nineteenth century, and how Romantic concepts of pre-Christian, *indigenous* or *national* religions evolved along with it. Although the actual 'revival' of Old Norse paganism did not occur in Iceland until the 1970s, when the *Ásatrúarfélag* ('Ásatrú Society') was formally established<sup>3</sup>, many of the protagonists we have encountered in the present study so far founded their admiration for 'noble heathens' not so much on their proto-

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln (2014) pp.5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Lönnroth (1969).

<sup>3</sup> On the origins of the modern Ásatrú religion in Iceland, and the question whether this should really be considered a 'rebirth' of the pre-Christian faith, see especially Strmiska (2000). See also the epilogue to the present study.

Christian characteristics, but rather on the Nordic character of their pagan faith (e.g. Bjarni Thorarensen) or even on their violent *defiance* of Christianity (e.g. Grímur Thomsen's Hákon Jarl). This nationalistic reappraisal of pre-Christian religion was a pan-European phenomenon, and was – as we have seen earlier – in some cases inspired by an aggressive anti-Christian primitivism, with strong Nietzschean leanings. Icelandic pagan sympathies never grew into anything serious enough to actually threaten the established order of Iceland's Lutheran society. But pagan virtues were celebrated publicly, and connected to the very origin and – consequently – character of the Icelandic nation. This called for a more existential, spiritual reappraisal of the ancestral faith, and endowed the ancient trope of the 'noble heathen' new, national significance. In this chapter, I will delve into the further psychologisation and existentialisation of Old Norse mythology in the works of Matthías Jochumsson and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, two of Iceland's most influential poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when national Romanticism was transformed into, and succeeded by new literary movements like symbolism and realism. How are these literary developments reflected in their representations of paganism? And how did their work contribute to the development of a more metaphysical approach to *Ásatrú*? In the present section, I will scrutinise the resignification of the myths in the context of the new and fashionable spiritual current of Theosophy, which made its way to Iceland in the early twentieth century, and which influenced the symbolic universe of Iceland's most celebrated sculptor, Einar Jónsson.

In the era under scrutiny in this chapter, the revolutionary ideas of the previous Romantic generations had been absorbed by Icelandic society, and their nationalistic ideals and historicist imagery had – as will become apparent in the following chapters – become *commonplace* in the Icelandic imagination. Omnipresent symbols of the nation permeated Iceland's public space, and the 'banal nationalism' they represented constituted an integral part of the nation's collective subconscious.<sup>1</sup> As a result of its embeddedness in everyday life, the national discourse and its symbols were no longer reserved for Romantic idealists or political activists, actively campaigning for national autonomy or independence. The wide distribution and universal acceptance of the basic tenets of nationalism – stage C in Hroch's conceptual model of evolving national movements – resulted in an inflation of the discourse's originality and popularity among the more eccentric elements in society. One could argue that the language of Romantic nationalism, which Jónas Hallgrímsson had helped to introduce in Iceland, had now attained the same level of 'uninspired triviality' as the *rímur* tradition that same Jónas had sought to overthrow.

Motivated by their perpetual quest for originality, poets and artists around the turn of the twentieth century were exploring new modes of expression, and pioneering innovative ways of attributing meaning to the Old Norse heritage they grew up with. Whereas their Romantic predecessors had combined their creative efforts with political activism and social engagement, the dispersed group of Icelandic poets collectively known as the 'Neo-Romantics' turned inwards, and generally eschewed political or socially engaged activities.<sup>2</sup> The great diversity of styles and poetic genres which characterised the works of this new generation was considered by some to indicate that Iceland had finally matured artistically and reached the level of cultural refinement other European nations had achieved a century

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<sup>1</sup> On banal nationalism, see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London 1995). An example of banal nationalism in Iceland is the myriad journals and periodicals appearing under Old Norse titles, derived from the Eddas or sagas. I will elaborate further on the topic of banal nationalism in Chapter 9.1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Guðni Elísson, "From Realism to Neoromanticism", in Daisy Neijmann (ed.), *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln 2006) pp.308-356, 328. Einar Benediktsson, who is generally also considered to belong to this group, constitutes a significant exception to this generalisation.

earlier.<sup>1</sup> This countermovement of ‘new poets’ looked to its cultural counterpart in Denmark and drew inspiration from modern literary movements like realism and symbolism. Especially this last movement, inspired by the philosophy of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), was founded on the idea that the internal universe of the poet could not be expressed *directly*, but only through the use of symbols and symbolic language, through which the reader could then connect to that which the poet sought to convey. In combination with the highly fashionable spiritism of the *fin de siècle* era, and a waxing interest in mythology as a key to penetrating dreams and the human subconscious – Freud’s *Traumdeutung* first appeared in 1899 –, the symbolic language of the Eddas acquired – yet again – new layers of significance to poets and visual artists, who now moved from the national historicism of their predecessors to a more metaphysical, mystical, and psychological cultivation of the material. Nevertheless, the link between Old Norse myth and national identity, firmly established by previous generations, would remain an important element in their work, as will be demonstrated especially in the chapter on Einar Jónsson. How did the cultural modernism of the turn of the century manifest itself in Icelandic representations of eddic mythology? In what ways did they differ from earlier interpretations of the myths? And what message do the protagonists of this chapter seek to convey regarding the Icelandic nation, and its primordial links with the gods of Ásgarðr?

#### 8.1.2 ‘Is that Mímir by his Well?’: Matthías Jochumsson

Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920) practiced a wide variety of professions before enrolling at the Latin School in Reykjavík, aged twenty-four. He went on to complete the Icelandic training for priesthood, and subsequently became a priest in Reykjavík.<sup>2</sup> Matthías was the youngest exponent of the Romantic movement in Iceland, and his very moderate level of education – virtually all protagonists of the previous chapters attended university – was occasionally ridiculed by his contemporaries. A central theme throughout all his works was his belief in progress, which sometimes expressed itself in attacks on the blind admiration of former times, which flourished in Iceland at that time. Matthías’s own literary works based on Old Norse-Icelandic themes “certainly do not spring from uncritical nationalistic fervour, although their principal purpose was undoubtedly to inspire the Icelandic nation on its path to progress.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout his life, Matthías remained openminded and committed to progress in modern culture, experimenting with new literary forms and styles. He worked as a journalist and edited the influential news journal *Þjóðólfur* (started in 1848) for many years. He translated works by Ibsen and Tegnér, but also by Shakespeare and Byron into Icelandic. He was a successful playwright, and turned to Icelandic folktales for his play *Útilegumennirnir* (‘The Outlaws’, 1864)<sup>4</sup>, which was written with Sigurður málari’s ideal of a national theatre in mind – Matthías was a member of Sigurður’s Kvöldfélag (see Chapter 5.2) – and which is still well known. The play’s protagonist Skugga-Sveinn, an outlaw doing battle with the hardships of life, formed the inspiration for Einar Jónsson’s statue *Útlagar* (‘Outlaws’), which in turn formed the inspiration for Bjartur í sumarhúsum (‘Bjartur of the Summer Houses’): the protagonist of Halldór Laxness’s *Sjálfstætt folk* (‘Independent People’; 1933-5) and a personification of the proud and stubborn Icelandic nation itself.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, Matthías is better remembered for his lyrical poetry, often composed in the revived Old Norse meters,

<sup>1</sup> Sigurjón Friðjónsson, “Hið nýja skáldakyn”, in *Norðri* 33 (3 August 1906) p.131.

<sup>2</sup> Matthías later laid down the priesthood as a result of serious religious doubts, resulting to his second wife’s premature death in 1873.

<sup>3</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.184.

<sup>4</sup> This influential play was renamed *Skugga-Sveinn* in 1898.

<sup>5</sup> See Helgason (1998) pp.8-13.

and dealing with prominent Icelanders like Eggert Ólafsson (see Chapter 2.2.1) and Grettir ‘the strong’ from *Grettis saga*. He is, however, best known for composing the poem *Lofsöngur* (‘Hymn’, 1874)<sup>1</sup> which later became Iceland’s national anthem.<sup>2</sup>

One of Matthías’s first great triumphs on the literary stage consisted of a very successful translation of Esaias Tegnér’s international ‘bestseller’ *Frithjof’s saga* (1820-5): a long poem based on the Icelandic *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, dating from ca. 1300. The impact of Tegnér’s creation can hardly be overstated, and the poem was soon translated in many languages. Matthías was not the first Icelander to try his hand on an Icelandic translation of the work, but he was by far the most successful one. According to contemporary sources, his translation was so successful with all layers of Icelandic society, that “every farmhand and maidservant learned the verses and sang them at the top of their voices.”<sup>3</sup> The widespread popularity of Matthías’s translation – published in 1866 – can be interpreted as an example of the general dissemination of national historicism – embedded in Tegnér’s poem – associated with Hroch’s second phase in the development of national movements. However, in Matthías’s introduction to the translation, he voices some strong reservations regarding modern nationalism: “there is no point in gazing through a magical mirror of exaggerated sagas to long-gone centuries, and saying that one sees nothing but irreplaceable beauty and fame.”<sup>4</sup> It followed from his belief in human progress that modern literature was infinitely more advanced than ancient literature; no Old Norse saga or classical poetry from Greece or Rome could touch the modern heart in quite the same way as the modern works of Schiller, Walter Scott or Esaias Tegnér could.<sup>5</sup> Matthías’s historical philosophy – which differed significantly from the once revolutionary but now mainstream and ‘banal’ glorification of the Saga Age – is also expressed in the choice of topics of his poetry; although the poems he composed for public events are permeated with cliché references to the island’s Viking past, his more personal works tend to focus on other, less cultivated chapters of Icelandic history, such as the Middle Ages (Snorri Sturluson), the Reformation (Bishop Jón Arason) and the eighteenth century (Eggert Ólafsson). Unlike most of his contemporaries, Matthías saw little reason to glorify Iceland’s most ancient past, characterised by barbarism and paganism:

You murdered the sick, you exposed children,  
to maintain the prosperity of the wealthy,  
heart and speech were hard as steel,  
and blood was your wedding finery.

Heathen times, spitefully cold,  
moon eve of human life,  
fare thee well with frost and death.  
Thank God we live in different times.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The poem was composed for the occasion of the great millennial celebrations of 1874. See Chapter 7.1.1.

<sup>2</sup> An authoritative overview of Matthías’s life and work is Þórunn Erlu Valdimarsdóttir’s biography *Upp á Sigurhæðir. Saga Matthíasar Jochumssonar* (Reykjavík 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Friðrik J. Bergmann, in his *Áttæðisafmæli síra Matthíasar Jochumssonar* (1916), quoted and translated in Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.185.

<sup>4</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, “Ávarp til lesendanna og formáli fyrir Friðþjófssögu”, in Esaias Tegnér, *Friðþjófssaga, norræn sögoljóð í 24 kvæðum* (translated by Matthías Jochumsson; Reykjavík 1866) pp.vii-xxiv, ix. Quoted and translated in Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.186.

<sup>5</sup> Jochumsson (1866) p.ix.

<sup>6</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, “Ísland og önnur lönd” (1882), in *Ljóðmæli. 3. heildarútgáfa, mikið aukin* (Reykjavík 1936) pp. 65-66; Þú myrtir sjúka, þú barst út born,/svo bú hins auðuga stæði,/hjarta og mál var hart sem stál,/og blóð var þitt brúðkaupsklæði./Heiðin tíð heiftar köld,/mannlífsbrautar mánavöld,/far þá vel með frost og hel./Guð sé lof, nú er önnur öld. (Quoted and translated in Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.189.)

Matthías's protest against the blind glorification of the Saga Age was clearly a reaction against the historical culture of his time – revolving around Jón Aðils's image of a 'Golden Age' – and forms an exceptional dissonant in the contemporary discourse. His positive view on the conversion of Iceland, scrutinised in Chapter 7.2.4, should be seen in the context of this intellectual protest. At the advanced age of seventy-eight, Matthías published a collection of essays on Iceland's ancient past in reaction to Jón Aðils's public lectures, which had appeared in print in the previous years. In this work, which is written in an unacademic fashion and intended for a broad audience, Matthías deconstructs Jón's glorification of the barbarism of the Saga Age, and places the ideal of a 'higher universal civilisation' in its place, in which all nations would be united and which cannot co-exist with the barbarism of previous ages.<sup>1</sup> This powerful statement stands out as a counter voice against national historicism, and is unique in its sharp criticism of contemporary historical culture in Iceland.

Negative though his views on historical paganism may have been, Matthías was a great admirer of the Eddas. His admiration for the eddic poems is expressed in both his application of eddic metres and the frequent employment of mythological allegories. Especially in his more patriotic poetry, the gods figure prominently. The poem *Ísland*, composed in Copenhagen in 1872, relies heavily on the mystical language of *Völuspá*, and opens with the phrase "Of old was the age", which is repeated in the thirteenth stanza of the poem.<sup>2</sup> Here, the phrase does not refer to a primordial age 'before creation', as it does in *Völuspá*, but to the beginnings of Icelandic history, when the first people settled in this beautiful land of 'sun mountains', 'sharp glaciers' and 'silvery gaze'. The cosmogony of the ancient poem is thus employed as a narrative template to convey the story of the Icelandic nation. Matthías's celebration of Icelandic nature continues in short sentences and archaic terms, reminiscent of *Völuspá*, and unfolds in the same *fornyrðislag* meter. Eddic characters like the sea god Ægir, the dwarf Dvalinn and the giant Gýmir are invoked to emphasise the epic character of the island's landscape, and in the final stanza of the poem, the connection between Icelandic nature and the divine world of the gods is solidified:

Throw, Allfather  
almighty one  
cast your part  
in earth's womb;  
shine sun-rays  
runes of the gods,  
the light-elves sang  
the spirits of the land replied.<sup>3</sup>

The spirits of the land, or *landvættir*, represent the island itself and animate its nature in a pantheistic sense. Their musical response to the elevated song of the Light Elves (*ljósálfar*) signifies that the land is itself in perpetual communion with the divine, in this case personified by the most Christian ('almighty All-father') representation of the supreme god Óðinn. It is the spirit of the Æsir themselves which, since times immemorial ('Ár var alda') had inhabited and sanctified the sacred space of Icelandic nature, and which was infused into

<sup>1</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Smáþættir um bygging Íslands og vora fornu siðmenning* (Reykjavík 1913) p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Ljóð. Úrval* (edited and introduced by Ólafur Briem; Reykjavík 1980) pp.105-9. The phrase 'Ár var alda' ('Of old was the age') is taken from the third stanza of the *Völuspá*, in which the seeress speaks of the time when Ýmir was alive and nothing, sea nor sand nor earth nor grass, existed yet. See also Chapter 6.1.5.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.109; Varp Alfaðir/almáttugri/hendi hlut/i hauðurs skaut; glóðu sólgeislum/guða rúnir,/sungu ljósálfar/svöruðu landvættir.



the Icelandic *Volksgeist* ever since primordial(ised) times. The historical event of the landnám thus acquires mythological significance, and becomes as event in mythical timelessness rather than historical time; it is incorporated into the Seeress's cyclical account of creation and destruction, de-historicised, and *primordialised* (the first function of myth, as outlined in Chapter 1.1).

The identification of land and gods continues in Matthías's poem *Minni kvenna* ('A Toast to Women'), composed on the occasion of the king's birthday in 1875, which opens with the following stanza:

Freyja of the fatherland,  
Fair goddess of the Vanir [*Vanadís*],  
mother, woman, maiden,  
receive our praise and admiration!  
Blessed be your tenderness  
smile and golden tear;  
you are the light of the land and the people  
for a thousand years.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, these lines echo many of the themes that are also cultivated in Matthías's *Lofsöngur*, which would become Iceland's national anthem. Both poems thematise 'Iceland's thousand years', both contain a call of praise to the divine, and both refer to a tear.<sup>2</sup> On these grounds, Helga Kress has argued that *Minni kvenna* should be considered the feminine counterpart – or complementation – of the *Lofsöngur*, which was composed around the same time.<sup>3</sup> The goddess Freyja is portrayed as *being of* the Fatherland (first line), and as the light of the land for a thousand years – that is: since the beginning of Icelandic history. But, unlike the (male) God of the *Lofsöngur*, this Icelandic Freyja serves as a metaphor, namely of womanhood itself.<sup>4</sup> She is simultaneously mother, woman and maiden, and represents – as a feminised Holy Trinity – the eternal feminine; Goethe's 'Ewig-Weibliche'.<sup>5</sup> As in Gísli Brynjúlfsson's poem *Lofn* (see Chapter 6.2.3), Freyja is first and foremost an archetype, and the embodiment of all the positive qualities generally ascribed to women. Both Gísli and Matthías have looked at Goethe's *Faust* for their representations of the archetypal female<sup>6</sup>, and Matthías's trinity bears a strong resemblance to Goethe's "Jungfrau, Mutter, Königin", who together comprise 'das Ewig-Weibliche'.<sup>7</sup> An important difference between Gísli's and Matthías's Freyja is her national character; whereas the first one clearly represents universal womanhood, the latter is clearly an *Icelandic* Freyja, not unlike Benedikt Gröndal's Freyja in the poem *Brisingamen* (see Chapter 6.3), and – like Fjallkona – an allegory of the feminine element in Iceland's national character.

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<sup>1</sup> Fósturlandsins Freyja,/Fagra Vanadís,/móðir, kona, meyja,/ meðtak lof og prís!/ Blessað sé þitt blíða/ bros og gullið tár;/þú ert lands og líða/ ljós í þúsund ár.

<sup>2</sup> For the full text of the *Lofsöngur* – inspired by Psalm 90 –, see Jochumsson (1980) pp.99-100.

<sup>3</sup> Helga Kress, "Móðir, kona, meyja: Matthías Jochumsson og skáldkonurnar", in *Skírnir* 181 (2007) pp.5-35, 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> An etymological justification for Freyja's representation of universal womanhood is supplied by Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, the first book of his *Heimskringla*. In this euhemeristic account, Freyja – the human descendant of the equally human conqueror-king Óðinn – was held in such high esteem by the people, that they began to call all their noble women after her. That was the origin of the word *frú* ('lady'; compare German *Frau* and Dutch *vrouw*), which is used for women who rule their own property. A woman who takes care of someone else's household is, on the other hand, called *húsfú* ('house wife'). See *Ynglinga saga*, chapter 11. In modern Icelandic, 'the lady of the house' is revealingly still called *húsfreyja*, and a stewardess is called *flugfreyja*.

<sup>5</sup> Kress (2007), pp.11-12.

<sup>6</sup> See Goethe's *Faust II*, lines 12104–12111.

<sup>7</sup> Kress (2007) p.11.

Surprisingly, most poems of Matthías's hand in which eddic elements actually form the central theme, all occurred in a book on *Danish* rather than Icelandic culture. In his *Frá Danmörku* ('From Denmark'), published in 1905, Matthías supplements essays on different aspects of Danish life with appropriate poems, often referring to Old Norse themes and connecting them to contemporary Denmark. In the chapter on the island of Zealand (Sjælland), he ponders upon the mythical origin of the island – as recounted in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* – and includes his poem on Gefjun's famous ploughing of Zealand, cutting the landmass off from Sweden (see Chapter 3.2.4).<sup>1</sup> The poem's claim that Gefjun lives on in the floral splendour of 'her island' is a long cry from Bjarni Thorarensen's grim description of Zealand's boring flatness, composed almost a century earlier (see Chapter 4.1.1). Matthías is decisively positive about Denmark and Danish culture, and also about King Kristian VIII (1786-1848), whom he praises for having restored Iceland's Alþingi.<sup>2</sup> The most explicitly mythological poems in the book both revolve around material from the eddic poem *Grottasöngur* ('The Song of Grotti'), which is not found in the *Codex Regius* manuscript but is nevertheless included in most editions of the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>3</sup> *Grottasöngur* tells the story of two giant female slaves, who are forced by the legendary Danish king Fróði to grind out wealth and peace from a magic grind stone. When the king refuses to grant the girls any rest, they turn against him and grind an army, after which the grind stone breaks and the proverbial peace of Fróði's reign comes to an end.<sup>4</sup> The poem would acquire new layers of contemporary significance in 1891, when the Swedish writer and mythologist Viktor Rydberg (see Chapter 6.3.2) published *Den nya Grottesången* ('The New Song of Grotti') in which he criticises the harsh labour demands on the modern, industrial working class.<sup>5</sup> In Matthías's poems *Grotti* and *Grotta-söngur Norðurlanda* ('Grottasöngur of the Nordic Lands')<sup>6</sup>, the same mythological material is reinterpreted for entirely different purposes; both poems appear in the chapter on South Jutland, and should be seen in the context of the Dano-Prussian conflict over Slesvig/Schleswig-Holstein. In the chapter itself, Matthías recounts how King Frederik VII (1808-1863) was celebrated as a hero after he abolished absolutism in 1848, and how – after having subdued a three-year insurrection in the southern duchies – it seemed like a peaceful 'Golden Age' was upon Denmark. However, the conflict in Slesvig-Holstein was far from over, and with the peace, Denmark also lost its southern territories to Prussia.<sup>7</sup> In the poem *Grotta-söngur Norðurlanda*, there are no direct references to these historical events. But the previous reference to a Golden Age renders a link between Frederik's reign and the legendary 'Peace of Fróði' quite obvious. Also, the poem leaves no doubt about the identity of those responsible for ending the holy peace:

Right now, from the lands of the East  
resounds the harmful grinder;  
take up, people of the northern shores –  
take his poem, children of time!

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<sup>1</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, "Gefjun", in idem., *Frá Danmörku. Nokkrir fyrirlestrar til fróðleiks og skemtunar, ásamt kvæðum og myndum* (Copenhagen 1905) pp.30-32.

<sup>2</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, "Kristján áttundi.", in idem. (1905) pp.94-95.

<sup>3</sup> The story of *Grottasöngur* is also found in one manuscript of Snorri's *Prose Edda*, and oral versions of the narrative have been recorded by the Norwegian folklorists Jørgen Moe and Peter Christen Asbjørnsen.

<sup>4</sup> According to the prose prologue to the poem and other sources, the universal peace that prevailed everywhere in the world when Christ was born – during the reign of emperor Augustus – was in the North attributed to Fróði, and consequently referred to as the *Fróðafriðr* ('Peace of Fróði').

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Rydberg, *Den nya Grottesången*, appeared in his second collection of poems, *Dikter* (Stockholm 1891).

<sup>6</sup> Jochumsson (1905) pp.59-63 and 63-65 respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, pp.58-59.

Let us understand what his galore proclaims,  
do not the nations point to the gods' goodness?  
Let us prepare for sudden destruction  
let us not quarrel over "signet" and "toll"!<sup>1</sup>

Like Grundtvig before him (see Chapter 3.2.3), Matthías considered the enemy from the East (Prussia) a threat to the entire Nordic world, and to Fróði's peace. As I have already demonstrated in the chapter on Gísli Brynjúlfsson's poetry, in which the Russians are equated with evil giants (see Chapter 6.2), the East is generally associated with the forces of chaos and destruction in the eddic mindset. Matthías greatly admired Grundtvig, who had "raised himself even above Prussia's eagle" and represented to the Icelander the very culmination of everything Nordic; "All that was and will be Nordic / found a stronghold in his chest".<sup>2</sup> His poetic genius is likened to that of the *Völuspá*, and his great soul will remain with the Nordic peoples, as long as 'Snorri's saga' sings.<sup>3</sup> In Matthías's experience, Snorri, *Völuspá* and Grundtvig were all expressions of one and the same, primordial Nordic spirit.

This admiration for Danish culture did not interfere with Matthías's loyalty to Iceland's national movement, and – like Finnur Magnússon – he combined his affection for the king with nationalistic praise for Iceland's great liberator, Jón Sigurðsson. Over a period of twelve years, Matthías composed three poems to celebrate the father of the fatherland<sup>4</sup>, and it is the last one of these – composed in 1877, on the occasion of Jón's final departure from Iceland<sup>5</sup> – that is of special interest for the purposes of the present study. This poem, titled *Minni Jóns Sigurðssonar forseta Íslendinga 2. september 1877* ('Toast to Jón Sigurðsson, President of the Icelanders 2 September 1877') originally consisted of only three stanzas, but an extra verse was added in the version of 1884, which appeared in his collection of poems *Ljóðmæli*.<sup>6</sup> The first stanza appears to be, at first glance, a piece of nature poetry, in which the reader is summoned to look upon the 'silver beauty' of the Snæfellsjökull glacier – situated at the end of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, and visible from Reykjavík on clear days – while the day dies in the West. Soon, the beautiful summer will take place on the glacier throne.<sup>7</sup> This melancholic image, laden with metaphorical expressiveness, has been interpreted by Sigurður Nordal as a metaphor for Jón's own approaching end. The Snæfellsjökull is personified by *Snæfells ás* ('Snæfell's god'), and is believed to represent the great leader himself.<sup>8</sup> The character of Snæfell's god is no invention of Matthías's, and originates in the medieval saga of Bárðr Snæfellsás (*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*; late fourteenth century), in which Bárðr – who is half human, half giant – migrates from Norway to Iceland, and eventually vanishes into the Snæfellsjökull glacier. There, he became a guardian spirit or local deity, worshipped by the locals and helping them in all sorts of matters.<sup>9</sup> In the opening

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, pp.64-65; Einmitt nú, frá Austurlöndum/ymur sú hin skæða kvörn;/nemi þjóð á Norðurströndum – /nemið ljóð hans, tímans börn!//Skiljum hvað hans býsnir boða,/benda' ei þjóðum goðin holl?/Búumst móti bráðum voða,/

bítumst ei um "merki" og "toll"!

<sup>2</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Grundtvig*, in idem. (1905) pp.165-8; Því að skáldið hóf sig hærra/heldr en sjálfur Prusslandsörn; (p.168) Allt sem norrænt var og verður/vígi fann í brjósti hans, - (p.165).

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.165, 168.

<sup>4</sup> See Egilsson (1999) p.285.

<sup>5</sup> Jón left Iceland for Copenhagen, where he died in 1879.

<sup>6</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Ljóðmæli. Úrval* (Reykjavík 1915 [1884]) pp. 199-200. Because by this time it had become clear that this had been Jón's final departure, the extended poem was renamed *Til Jóns Sigurðssonar. Við síðustu burtför hans frá Íslandi 1877* ('To Jón Sigurðsson. Upon his final departure from Iceland 1877').

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.199, first verse.

<sup>8</sup> Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Hirðskáld Jóns Sigurðssonar* (Reykjavík 1961) p.111.

<sup>9</sup> *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, chapter six.

lines of the next stanza – which begins with the same call to look upon the silver beauty – this local demi-god is sublimated, and becomes *Snælands ás*, rather than *Snæfells ás*.<sup>1</sup> *Snæland* ('Snow Land') is an old name for Iceland, and *Snælands ás* should hence be understood as the god – or guardian spirit – of Iceland. Here, the story of *Bárðr* – who merged with the land and became its protector – is sublimated, and endowed with national significance. In his treatment of this poem, Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson maintains that *Sigurður Nordal* had not grasped the poem's deeper meaning, when he wrote that *Snæfellsjökull* merely served as a *metaphor* (*samlíking*) for *Jón Sigurðsson*; in fact, Sveinn Yngvi claims, the figure of Iceland's god is an allegorical mirror, and the leader is "mirrored directly in a supernatural being or a god."<sup>2</sup> The mythologisation of *Jón* – achieved by linking him to the supernatural and protective powers lurking in the nation's ice caps – is indeed of a more radical and proactive nature than mere metaphor, as diagnosed by Sveinn Yngvi. The rhetorical force of *Matthías's* poem lies in the direct link it forges between *Jón*, the beauty of the land, ancient literature, and the supernatural world of gods and spirits; a link reminiscent of the earliest stages of deification, as explained in *Snorri Sturluson's* euhemeristic account of the *Æsir* people (see Chapter 2.1.3). But in this case, the deification process already began while the hero was still alive, standing at the doorstep of eternity. By merging the image of *Jón* with that of the god of the glacier, the great man and the ideals he represented are *indigenised* (function number one).

One of *Matthías's* longest poems, *Víg Snorra Sturlusonar* ('The Slaying of *Snorri Sturluson*'; 1879), contains a similar deification of a great Icelander. It deals with the tragic death of the famous *skáld* in 1241, at his homestead in *Reykholt* (see Chapter 2.1.3). The poem is not overtly patriotic, and even has *Snorri* – sitting by his geothermal pool, contemplating his life before the arrival of his banes – confessing that the wind of fate is now finally blowing all the 'black smoke' of his avarice and pungent counsel back into his own eyes.<sup>3</sup> The scrupulous chieftain is portrayed as being responsible for the violence and chaos of the Age of the *Sturlungs*, and is therefore not necessarily a 'hero' deserving of great admiration.<sup>4</sup> Not from the political perspective, at least. But, just like *Sigurður Nordal* forty years later<sup>5</sup>, *Matthías* admired *Snorri* the writer and the sage, just as much as he disapproved of *Snorri* the politician; two sides of the same man, which have proven extremely difficult to reconcile. In his poem, *Matthías* weaves *Snorri* into the mythological fabric that the *skáld* himself created in his writings, by letting him reflect on his life and the situation in eddic metres. His fate is a cold fate, woven by the *Norns* (*nornir*): the female deities of Old Norse myth who rule over the fate of gods and men.<sup>6</sup> After having set the scene by describing the landscape and the historical and weather conditions, *Matthías* introduces the protagonist as follows:

Who is this, that the ring of heaven  
looks upon at *Snorri's* pool,  
the creator's clear and glorious image  
registered on the crystal well of water,  
he sits tucked away under his cloak,  
his chin resting on his hand?

<sup>1</sup> Jochumsson (1915) p.199, second verse.

<sup>2</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.301; "... speglaður á beinan hátt í yfírnátúrlegri veru eða goði."

<sup>3</sup> *Matthías Jochumsson*, "Víg Snorra Sturlusonar" (1879), in *Jochumsson* (1980) pp.143-7, 144.

<sup>4</sup> On the role of *Snorri Sturluson* in Icelandic national culture, see especially *Helgason* (1998) pp.169-207.

<sup>5</sup> *Nordal* (1973 [1920]).

<sup>6</sup> The *Norns*, the Norse goddesses of fate, figure prominently in *Matthías's* poetry, and also play a part in his poem *Jón Arason á aftökustaðnum* ('*Jón Arason* at the Scaffold'), about the execution of *Bishop Jón Arason* (see Chapter 7.2.4).

Is that a god by the wave of Urður?  
Is that Mímir at his well?<sup>1</sup>

Although the identification with Mímir, the god of wisdom, occurs in the form of a question rather than a statement, it sublimates this scene from earthly history into pure myth, and the god's dwelling place into a place beyond place, where a mere pool – Snorri's pool (*Snorraaug*), which can still be found in Reykholt – becomes Mímir's primeval well of wisdom (*Mímisbrunnr*), for a nip of which Óðinn sacrificed one of his eyes (see Chapter 4.1.1). Matthías projects Old Norse mythology on Icelandic history, and thus endows the scene with an extra dimension of signification. Through the physical identification with the god and the link between the pool and *Mímisbrunnr*, the sage Snorri merges with the eddic archetype of the wise man, Mímir, who was also beheaded, and who also remained 'alive' – his severed head provided Óðinn with wise counsel – after his decapitation.<sup>2</sup> In much the same way, Snorri remains of great importance to Iceland, long after his death. Despite his questionable political actions, Snorri is deified through identification with Mímir, and thus included into the pantheon of great sages, just like Finnur Magnússon in the poem *Til Finns Magnússonar* composed by Bjarni Thorarensen, forty-five years earlier (see Chapter 4.1.1). Snorri's semi-divine status in Romantic poetry is in itself not surprising, considering that the divine allegory of history, the eddic goddess *Saga* – to whom Snorri was 'devoted' through his writings – figures so prominently in nineteenth-century Icelandic literature.<sup>3</sup>

Matthías's most ambitious poetic undertaking is undoubtedly his cycle of thirty-four poems – and an introduction in verse – based on the famous saga of Grettir the Strong (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*). This work, *Grettisljóð* ('Poems of Grettir'), embodies Matthías attempt to follow Tegnér's example – thirty years after his translation of *Frithjof's saga* – and to build a bridge between the past and the present. Instead of merely providing his audience with a 'window on the past' – as the sagas did, and the Romantic poets inspired by them claimed to do – he sought to actively harmonise the spirit of the saga with that of the modern age.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not Matthías succeeded in this remains a matter of discussion; for the most part, the poems' narrative remains rather loyal to the original story, and even Matthías himself admitted in a letter from 1895, that, so far, he was not quite happy with the results of his great attempt.<sup>5</sup> He was overwhelmed by the complexity of bringing the distant past to life, and of maintaining the abstract idea of Grettir as a symbol of the Icelandic nation throughout the composition. Nevertheless, the style of the poems is remarkably modern, and has little in common with earlier poetic re-renderings of saga material in the rímur tradition; Matthías does not resort to archaic kennings, and tries to avoid the use of 'eddic ornamentation' – used here in a very negative sense, reminiscent of the Romantic dislike of formulaic obscurantism – all together.<sup>6</sup> Other modern elements which set the cycle apart from the medieval saga are the Romantic emphasis on landscape descriptions, and a deeper psychologisation of the protagonists; unlike the Grettir of the saga, Matthías's Grettir comes across as an emotional man, who – rather unheroically – laments the fate of his own victims.

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<sup>1</sup>Jochumssen (1980) p.144. Urður is one of the three Norns, and is associated with that which has already come to pass, or that which has become. Her 'wave' is the well of destiny (*Urðarbrunnr*) in Ásgarðr, dwelling place of the Norns; Hver er sá, sem himinbaug/horfir á við Snorra-laug,/skaparans dýrðar skíra mynd/skráða' á vatnsins krystals-lind,/að sér feld hann sveipar sinn,/sit'r og styður hond við kinn?/Er það goð við Urðarunn?/Er það Mímir við sinn brunn?

<sup>2</sup> See *Völuspá*, stanza 46.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Egilsson (1999) p.189.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.187.

<sup>5</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Bréf Matthíasar Jochumssonar*, edited by Steingrímur Matthíasson (Akureyri 1935) p.402.

<sup>6</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Grettisljóð* (Ísafjörður 1897) p.1. See also Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.193.

Furthermore, Matthías's poems are influenced by the nationalistic enthusiasm for folklore and folktales, and contain countless references to supernatural beings that do not appear in the original saga.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, the Icelandic wilderness in Matthías's poems "is inhabited by what almost amounts to a whole nation of heathen guardian spirits, who protect Icelandic nature."<sup>2</sup> Just like the saga itself, *Grettisljóð* provides very little information about Icelandic society in the Saga Age, since most of the narrative revolves around Grettir's life as an outlaw, roaming the inhospitable and remote inlands of the island. And it is there, far away from society, that he does battle with the supernatural creature Glámur, who is in the end defeated by the hero, but leaves him psychologically damaged and fearful of darkness for the remainder of his life.<sup>3</sup> Grettir is a problematic figure and has an unruly character, not unlike the other outlaw – Skugga-Sveinn – of Matthías's earlier play. And both outlaws represent the Icelandic nation, with its equally unruly character:

You Grettir, are my nation,  
there I saw your spectres:  
though the light illuminates your dream,  
you will not easily be rid of Glaumur!<sup>4</sup>

Just like Grettir after his victory over the ghost Glámur/Glaumur, the Icelandic nation was still being haunted by its 'old ghosts', by which Matthías meant everything that stood in the way of progress, including blind admiration for a glorified but barbaric past. Grettir, who represents the nation and Christianity, is held back by evil spectres from a heathen past. In a letter to bishop Valdimar Briem, Matthías explains that he had used the scene of Grettir's struggle with the ghost to present "a backdrop on which Christ and Óðinn of the Middle Ages are shown in conflict."<sup>5</sup> The outlaw's struggle is a struggle for the very soul of Iceland itself, between Christian light and pagan darkness, between modern progress and barbaric regression, between good and evil. Nevertheless, Matthías position regarding the heathen entities in his poems remains ambivalent; although Óðinn here clearly represents everything that is detestable about Iceland's past, the heathen guardian spirits that animate the land are portrayed in a positive light. Their blissful presence on the island is not troubled by the coming of 'new gods', and they will continue to guard Iceland for as long as its inhabitants love 'truth, freedom and peace'.<sup>6</sup> So, although *Grettisljóð* may be considered a protest against anti-Christian heathenism (Óðinn), it does not attack all remnants of the pagan world-view, and even embraces those pantheistic elements that can easily be accommodated by (mystical) Christianity, on the basis of their eternal validity. In a way, these timeless beings embody the non-denominational ideals of a 'higher universal civilisation', which will one day – when narrow-minded nationalisms have been abandoned – unite all nations.<sup>7</sup>

Characters and themes from the Eddas do not figure prominently in Matthías's plays, but one of his theatrical works does deserve closer consideration in this respect. On New

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<sup>1</sup> *Grettis saga* differs from the more 'classical' Íslendingasögur (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga* etc.) in that it contains relatively many references to supernatural beings and phenomena, and was therefore deemed 'inferior' to the more realistic sagas by influential literary scholars like Jónas Kristjánsson. See Kristjánsson (2007) p.237.

<sup>2</sup> Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.195.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the saga author, Matthías equates the ghostly Glámur with Grettir's companion Glaumur, who is partially responsible for Grettir's tragic end.

<sup>4</sup> Jochumsson (1897) p.3; Þú ert Grettir, þjóðin mín, þarna sa jeg fylgjur þín: þó að ljós þinn lýsi draum, losast muntu seint við Glaum! (Quoted and translated in Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.192).

<sup>5</sup> Jochumsson (1935) p.403; (Quoted and translated in Gunnlaugsson (2008) p.196).

<sup>6</sup> Jochumsson (1897) p.140.

<sup>7</sup> Jochumsson (1913) p.8.

Year's Eve 1900, Matthías's short play – although Matthías preferred to call it a performance of poems, with pageant<sup>1</sup> – *Aldamót. Sjónleikur með kvæðum og kórum* ('Turn of the century. A performance with poems and choirs') premiered in Akureyri. The entire plot of the performance is built on the principle of allegory, and the characters carry revealing names such as 'Old Century', 'New Century', and the Pauline trinity of 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Love', leaving little to the spectators' imagination. Also, the three Norns Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld ('Fate', 'Becoming' and 'That which needs to occur'), appear on stage. In the first section of the performance, 'Old Century' – that is: the female personification of the nineteenth century – is called forward, and looks back on the hundred years of her life – the nineteenth century. She recounts – in poetry – the harsh beginning of the century, when the nation was in a delirium: unfree and unaware of herself. Now, by the end of the century, that same nation had acquired a certain degree of freedom and self-respect. But still, the Icelandic people had to take good care of themselves and not let go of the ideals – that is: the strife for national independence – of the last century.<sup>2</sup> When the old lady sits down in a chair and falls asleep, the maleficent Norns enter the stage, and give her bad dreams as they pass hard judgment on her life. At the same time, three *Christian* counterparts to the *pagan* Norns – the goddesses Faith, Hope and Love – enter the stage from the opposite side, and defend Old Century against the Norns' merciless attacks. After the goddess Love has called out: "God's fire will burn you!", the Norns scream and disappear.<sup>3</sup> When New Century – the daughter of the old one – enters the stage, she receives advice from her waning mother. The old queen contemplates the age of Napoleon, and the birth of violence from violence. Now, at the turn of the century, China, Armenia and South Africa are all in the grip of violence, and although she swears that blood and tears will dwindle and disappear, too much optimism is to be avoided; the pagan Norns still rule over much of what is going on in the world, and so Yggdrasil, the world tree, will continue to suffer, as already indicated in the Eddas:

Through the tree of life blows a biting storm,  
through its roots penetrates a snake,  
the three fury-norns shake the trunk.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the employment of eddic imagery, the message of the work is clearly Christian; the pagan Norns are themselves part of the suffering of the world tree – comparable to the 'groaning of creation' in Romans 8:22 – and their reign is contrasted negatively to the Christian values of the three goddesses. In other words: all suffering in this world is caused by that which is unmoral, or un-*Christian*, and will endure for as long as unmoral powers (the Norns) will rule. Only through faith, hope and love can the cruel and blind fates of paganism be overcome. Eventually, the Old Century dies a peaceful death in the arms of her daughter, and the twentieth century commences. In order to underline the religious message of the performance, the play ends with the choir and the Christian goddesses urging the members of the audience to preserve their faith, hope and love, and to apply them in their dealings with everything the new age brings on their path. All in all, this work can be considered an expression of both the priest-poet's deep religiosity, and his sincere belief in progress.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ólafur Briem, "Skáldið Matthías Jochumsson", in Jochumsson (1980) pp.9-94, p.38. See also Egilsson (1999) p.303.

<sup>2</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, *Aldamót. Sjónleikur með kvæðum og kórum* (Reykjavík 1901), pp.16-19.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.24; "Eldur Guðs skal ykkur brenna!"

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.33; "Gegnum lífstréð gjóstar napur stormur,/gegn um rót þess smýgur ormur,/stofninn hrista heiftarnornir þrjár." See also Egilsson (1999) pp.306-7.

<sup>5</sup> On Matthías's very positive account of Iceland's Christianisation, see Chapter 7.2.4.

In his treatment of Matthías's *Aldamót*, Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson claims that this work takes stock of all of nineteenth-century literature, and combines all the characteristic elements of Icelandic Romanticism; it harks back to Old Norse culture in its application of Norns, knights, Yggdrasil and Saga (the personification of history), it applies Old Norse metres like dróttkvætt and fornryðislag, it touches upon contemporary politics – both at home (the independence movement) and abroad –, and it gives rise to *new* myths by combining multiple historical and literary themes.<sup>1</sup> Still, Sveinn Yngvi argues, this work represents the last stage of the Romantic tradition, and its poetry shows that “Romanticism has run the race together with the nineteenth century.”<sup>2</sup> Although one can easily debunk the view that Romanticism came to an end together with the century in which it flourished,<sup>3</sup> it is undeniably true that new ideals and styles were entering the Icelandic imagination around the turn of the century.

Symptomatic of the ambivalence which characterises the Icelandic *avant-garde*'s stance vis-à-vis their Romantic predecessors, is the literary journal *Verðandi*, which was founded in Copenhagen in 1882. Only one volume of the journal would ever appear, but its publication is generally considered a turning point in Iceland's cultural history, and marks the introduction of new literary currents – especially realism (*raunsæi*) and naturalism – to the Icelandic imagination.<sup>4</sup> The journal's four editors Hannes Hafstein (see Chapter 7.1.3), Bertel Porleifsson (1857-1890), Gestur Pálsson (1852-1891), and Einar Hjörleifsson (1859-1938) were all inspired by the influential lectures of the literary critic Georg Brandes (see Chapter 8.1.2), and turned against the aesthetic principles of Romanticism, and the xenophobic primitivism of national historicism. Paradoxically, these iconoclasts also identified themselves with the Fjölnismenn, fashioning themselves as the heirs of Jónas Hallgrímsson and his co-editors of the journal that is generally credited with kick-starting the Romantic movement in Icelandic letters.<sup>5</sup> The *Verðandi* group may have rejected the Romantic cultivation of Old Norse culture, but nevertheless, they followed the Fjölnismenn's example in naming their journal after a character from eddic mythology<sup>6</sup>; Verðandi is one of the three Norns, the goddesses of fate, weavers of destiny, and is associated with that which is ‘coming into being’. By associating themselves with this allegorical figure, a symbol of that which is unfolding *right now*, the editors of *Verðandi* could distance themselves from the – in their eyes – paralyzing addiction to the sagas and the medieval past, which had become mainstream in Icelandic culture (see Chapter 9.1.1). It is of course rather paradoxical that, in order to emphasise their intention to innovate, they turned to a character from Old Norse myth. However, when we keep in mind the Janus-faced model of national movements, and my related hypothesis of the different functions of cultivating the sagas and historical narratives on the one hand (the backward-looking face), and mythology (the forward-looking face) on the other, this choice for an eddic allegory begins to make sense. The Eddas may be ancient heritage, but unlike the *Íslendingasögur*, their narratives transcend history and time itself, and can therefore serve as narrative templates for rejuvenation and progressive modernism, as ‘charters for contemporary action’ (Malinowski; see Chapter 1.1), both politically and culturally. Simultaneously, an international *avant-garde* and abstract new concepts like realism and naturalism could be indigenised (function two), rooted in the Icelandic experience of the world, by linking them to the eddic allegorisation of the ‘present’.

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<sup>1</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.307.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> On the long – and never complete – fade-out of Romantic nationalism, see Leerssen (2014).

<sup>4</sup> In the decades around 1900, these new currents would only have a fairly limited effect on Icelandic culture; Neo-Romanticism would remain the dominant current in Icelandic literature throughout the early twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> The paradox is treated by Jón Karl Helgason in Dović and Helgason (2017) p.161.

<sup>6</sup> On the practice of couching Romantic topoi in anti-Romantic rhetoric, see Trencsényi (2012) p.5.



### 8.1.3 A Christ before Christ: Steingrímur Thorsteinsson

Indicative of the exciting developments in Icelandic literature during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, is the oeuvre of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913), who is generally considered an exponent of late Romanticism. Steingrímur was born only a few years after Benedikt Gröndal (1826) and Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827), and eleven years after Grímur Thomsen (1820). After having completed his education at the Learned School in Reykjavík in 1851, he moved to Copenhagen, where he soon gave up his study of law to pursue his studies of classical languages, history, and Old Norse. He returned to Reykjavík in 1872, where he acquired a teaching position at the Learned School and worked his way up to become its rector; the position he held for the rest of his life. Steingrímur was a prolific translator, who acquainted his readers not only with modern works like the writings of the Grimm brothers, the fairy-tales of H.C. Andersen and Oehlenschläger's historical tragedy *Hakon Jarls Död* ('The Death of Hákon Jarl'; see Chapter 3.2.2), but also to the exotic sensuality of the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Púsund og ein nótt*, first published in 1857). His own poetry is, to a large extent, influenced by the Romantic poets he translated, and his glorification of Icelandic nature is characteristic of Late Romanticism. What distinguishes his poetic works from those of his contemporaries, is their religious dimension, which is more pronounced than that of most poetry associated with this movement.<sup>1</sup> It is exactly this metaphysical dimension that sets Steingrímur apart from the others, and which renders him interesting for the purposes of the present study.

In Copenhagen, Steingrímur was in close contact with his compatriots, and in 1860 he published a collection of poems together with Gísli Brynjúlfsson – who also wrote the introduction to this volume – and Benedikt Gröndal.<sup>2</sup> With Benedikt – and Matthías Jochumsson – Steingrímur shared a tendency towards idealism, at some occasions of a profoundly religious nature, which led him to criticise the materialism of his age and modern society, founded on this materialistic outlook.<sup>3</sup> He was a fervent supporter of the national movement, and expressed his nationalistic sentiments in poems like *Vorhvöt* ('Urge of Spring'; 1875), in which he glorifies the boundless freedom of a future Iceland, tempered only by Ægir, god of the sea:

So be free, mother, like the wind on a bay,  
like your waters with strong currents,  
like your heaven's poetic flame of the northern lights,  
and the poem on the tongue of the poet.  
And, \*never, \*never may fetters bind you  
except for the blue fetters of Ægir on the rocky beach.<sup>4</sup>

Steingrímur also wrote plays, and sympathised with Sigurður málari's ideal of a national theatre. He was closely affiliated with Sigurður's *Kvöldfélagið* (see Chapter 5.2) and had his portrait painted by the painter.

<sup>1</sup> Páll Valsson, "Hylling náttúrunnar og ljóðrænn innileiki", in Halldór Guðmundsson (ed.), *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* vol.3 (Reykjavík 1996) pp.367-376, 369.

<sup>2</sup> *Svava. Ýmisleg kvæði*, Louis Klein (Copenhagen 1860).

<sup>3</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.280. For a comparison of Benedikt's and Steingrímur's idealism, see also idem., "Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, Benedikt Gröndal og rómantísk heimsskoðun", in *Mímir: Blað félags stúdenta í íslenskum fræðum* 21:1 (1983) pp.19-32.

<sup>4</sup> Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, *Vorhvöt*, in *Ljóðmæli. Heildarútgáfa frumsaminna ljóða* (Reykjavík 1958) p.106, final verse; Svo frjáls vertu, móðir, sem vindur á vog,/sem vötn þín með straumunum þungu,/sem himins þíns bragandi norðljósa log/og ljóðin á skáldanna tungu./Og \*aldrei, \*aldrei bindi þig bond/nema bláfjötur Ægis við klettótta strönd.

Apart from plays, translations and poetry, Steingrímur also tried his pen at the genre of popular mythography; in 1859, when he was in his late twenties, he published a handbook of Old Norse mythology in Danish, together with the poet and literary historian Kristian Arentzen (1823-1899).<sup>1</sup> This work became very popular in Denmark, and experienced multiple reprints. The book was intended for a general audience and for use in Danish schools, and a verse from the eddic poem *Skírnismál*, printed on the title page in both Old Norse and Danish, invites the reader to drink from the “crystal cup, full of ancient mead”.<sup>2</sup> Just like the Swedish king Gylfi, who called himself *Gangleri* (‘Wanderer’) and received instructions on the gods and the worlds from Óðinn himself, “[w]e have [...] heard about the powerful Æsir and want, just like him, to travel to Asgard, to learn how to find that which is more profound.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the reader is invited to embark on a journey to the world of the Nordic myths, and to acquaint him- or herself with the mythological heritage of Iceland. Somewhat surprisingly, Steingrímur’s enthusiasm for Old Norse mythology can hardly be discerned in his creative writings, which are – apart from the sporadic, obligatory and superficial reference to eddic deities like Ægir, as a metaphor for the sea – void of anything mythological. Not only does Steingrímur not actively engage with mythological themes and narratives, he even avoids the use of the fashionable eddic meters, in both his translations and his own verses. This distinguishes him from virtually all other Icelandic Romantics of his time, who, if not actively cultivating eddic themes, at least contributed to the revival of the ancient meters.

One short poem of Steingrímur’s hand, which was published in Valtýr Guðmundsson’s periodical *Eimreiðin* in the year 1900, forms a notable exception to this general ignorance of the Eddas. The title of the poem, *Baldursbráin*, refers both to the flower of that name (sea mayweed) and to the god Baldr, whose eye – or brow, eyelashes (*brá*) – formed the inspiration for the white flower’s Icelandic name. This link, between the purest and Christ-like deity of the Norse pantheon and a characteristic element of Icelandic nature, inspired Steingrímur to explore the Sublime through the story of Baldr and his beloved wife Nanna. In the opening verse, the connection between the god and the flower is established:

You, *Baldursbrá!* I behold,  
 You smile at me, yellow and white,  
 With light colours bright,  
 The wind is lulling you,  
 Still you grow in fair earth  
 As before in the time of *Baldur*’s realm,  
 Then from *Breiðablik* he rode  
 And with his tenderness beheld you.<sup>4</sup>

The magical pantheism that characterises earlier Romantic poetry reverberates in these lines, and is directly connected to the ethereal world of the ancient gods, and with the most ethereal of them all – Baldr – in particular. The flower, which is in the present and which can be

<sup>1</sup> Kristian Arentzen and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, *Nordisk Mythologi* (Copenhagen 1859).

<sup>2</sup> Idem, title page without page number. The verse in question, which the giantess Gerðr recites for Skírnir towards the end of the poem, reads as follows: Heill ver þú nú, sveinn!/ok tak við hrímalkki,/fullum forns mjaðar. (In translation: Be welcome now, lad, and receive the crystal cup,/full of ancient mead; Larrington (1999) p.67.)

<sup>3</sup> Idem, without page number; “Vi have, ligesom den svenske Konge, hørt om de mægtige Aser og ville, ligesom han, vandre til Asgaard, for at lære dem nøiere at fjende.”

<sup>4</sup> Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, “Nokkur kvæði.”, in *Eimreiðin* 6 (1900) pp.28-34, 28-29; Þig, *Baldursbrá!* eg lít,/Þú brosir við mér gul og hvít,/Með ljóssins litum skær,/Er lofts þér vaggar blær,/Enn grærðu á foldu fríð,/Sem fyr á *Baldurs* ríkis tíð,/Þá *Breiðabliks* frá reit/Með blíðu hann til þín leit. (Italics original.)

found everywhere, serves as a bridge to a less historical time and age; it still grows and blossoms the same way it did when the god of peace resided in his palace of *Breiðablik* ('Broad-gleaming') in Ásgarðr, and thus harks back to a more blessed age, *before* Loki's treacherous act which ended Baldur's life and ushered in the sequence of events leading to Ragnarök. Although Baldur resides in the underworld, awaiting the day of his return after Ragnarök, something of this primordial age of innocence can still be experienced today, in the timelessness of nature, and in the beauty of the baldursbrá. The flower is thus an expression of the Sublime, just like the 'blue flower' of Novalis served as an emblem for the Romantic quest for sublimity in nature (see Chapter 4.1.2). By centring the story of Baldur around the image of a sea mayweed, the narrative becomes something instantly tangible and relevant to Icelanders of Steingrímur's day.

The love between Baldur and his wife Nanna forms a central theme in Steingrímur's poem. In the second verse, the poet describes this love that remained true even in Hel<sup>1</sup>, and wonders whether it was Nanna who gave the flower its name, since it reminded her of her husband's radiance. The most explicit exclamation of Romantic idealism appears in the fifth verse, where Steingrímur endows the flower's *beauty* with epistemological significance:

Your light god has passed  
 And another light god we will ennoble,  
 Who contains a higher brightness,  
 However, still Baldur is dear to us  
 Although most of us feel changed,  
 The beautiful, good and true are one  
 In all ages of the world,  
 And nothing known an evening.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Holy Trinity' of beauty, goodness and truth already had a long tradition in Romantic thought when Steingrímur wrote these words, and can be traced back to Platon's ideal philosophy (see Chapter 1.3). By equating beauty with truth in this manner, the poet implies that the 'truth' of the ancient myth – or the values represented by Baldur and the love between him and Nanna – is eternal, and still validated by the beauty of the flower that carries his name. It is in this beauty that past truths become timeless, so that they still make sense even after the light god of old (Baldur) has passed and made way for the 'another light god' (Christ). The idealism of this statement is characteristic of the generation of Icelandic poets Steingrímur belonged to<sup>3</sup>, which was to a large extent influenced by the same aesthetic ideals as those of Benedikt Gröndal, who had argued that poetry should be concerned with higher truths, more dignified and noble than everyday life (see Chapter 6.3.1). Benedikt's anti-realism, and his ideal of transcending the quotidian, clearly reverberate in Steingrímur's quest for the Sublime in the beauty of a flower. But is not only the banality of the everyday that is transcended in *Baldursbráin*; even time itself is rendered insignificant in the poem's central message. The actual existence of the flower in the present serves as a testimony to the light god's timelessness, and erases the historical chain of generations and events separating us from the mythical age of Baldur. In this respect, the poem is reminiscent of John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819), in which the poet famously proclaims that "Beauty is truth,

<sup>1</sup> Hel – not to be confused with the Christian *Hell* – was the Old Norse underworld, to which Nanna followed Baldur after he was murdered.

<sup>2</sup> Thorsteinsson (1900) p.29; Þinn ljósguð liðinn er/Og ljósguð annan göfgum vér,/Sem æðri birtu bjó,/En Baldur kær er þó,/Þó flest oss finnist breytt,/Hið fagra, góða og sanna er eitt/Um alla heimsins öld/Og ekkert þekkir kvöld.

<sup>3</sup> Óskarsson (2006), p.287.

truth beauty, – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”<sup>1</sup> It is the *beauty* of the ancient Grecian urn, its ‘Attic shape’ and ‘fair attitude’, which draw the viewer’s attention to eternity, and to the fact that this urn will still be admired, long after “old age shall this generation waste”.<sup>2</sup> But, whereas the beauty of Keats’s urn makes the reader aware of antiquity’s presence in the present and his or her own historical insignificance, Steingrímur’s Baldursbrá does *more* than merely eradicating historical time; the flower is a reminder of perennial *metaphysical* truths, which transcend the historical divide between pagan past and Christian present. By bridging the fault line between heathen and Christian, Christianity is *indigenised* and *primordialised* (functions one and two), whereas pagan culture is emancipated through *association* (function four) with Christian topoi.

Steingrímur was, according to himself, not exactly a devout church-goer; unlike Matthías Jochumsson, who was an adherent of the Unitarian faith, Steingrímur hardly concerned himself with Christian doctrine in his poetry.<sup>3</sup> However, the poem *Baldursbráin* clearly reflects a very personal spirituality; unconventional and unorthodox, but not hostile towards the Christian creed in itself. Steingrímur treats both Baldur and Christ as light deities, and considers both expressions of the same Platonic idea, or archetype. Both light-bringers represent the same divine principle, and the old god – who made way for the new one, but who nevertheless remains dearly beloved – *prefigured* the Christian truth in pagan times. The idea of ‘Christian intuitions’ in pre-Christian culture became quite a popular one in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and served to justify the salvation and cultivation of pre-Christian, ‘national’ mythologies.<sup>4</sup> It enabled intellectuals and poets to re-connect to the long-lost religion of their ancestors, without estranging themselves from the Christian establishment of their own age. By recognising the spiritual value of pre-Christian mythology – and its similarity to Christianity –, the metaphysical *continuity* between pagan and Christian times is emphasised, rather than the *exclusivity* of the Christian message and the traditional juxtaposition of ‘pagan darkness’ and ‘Christian light’. Especially the more pantheistically inclined Romantics of Steingrímur’s age saw no contradiction in combining Christian themes and mythological narratives in their celebration of the Sublime in nature. Steingrímur’s own religious views can be characterised as profoundly pantheistic<sup>5</sup>, and intimately mystical rather than dogmatic:

Believe in two things in the world,  
Magnificence which is the highest,  
God in cosmic space,  
God inside yourself.<sup>6</sup>

The *unio mystica* of nature and God is expressed in Steingrímur’s exclamation that all of nature is a ‘universal church’, in which the sun serves as God’s image, the mountains are the ‘high altar’, the sky the ‘vaulted ceiling’ and the rivers the ‘organ’.<sup>7</sup> Nature itself creates the very terms and conditions for our spiritual development, and if only Icelanders could be

<sup>1</sup> John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819), fifth verse. Retrieved on the website <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173742> (last accessed: 13 November 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hannes Pétursson, *Steingrímur Thorsteinsson. Líf hans og list* (Reykjavík 1964) pp.148, 219.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most vocal proponents of this theory was C.S. Lewis, who explores the possibility of Christian intuition in pre-Christian times in his *Mere Christianity* (1952). See Shippey (2001) p.258.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on Steingrímur’s world-view, see Óskarsson (1983), and Pétursson (1964) p.148.

<sup>6</sup> Steingrímur Thorsteinsson in his poem *Lífshvöt*, in Thorsteinsson (1958) p.92; Trúðu á tvennt í heimi,/Tign sem hæsta ber,/Guð í alheims geimi,/Guð í sjálfum þér.

<sup>7</sup> Óskarsson (2006) p.280. Similarly, Benedikt Gröndal proclaimed that a glacier is not merely a glacier, but “God’s sacred temple” (ibid.).

‘worthy’ of nature, and reflect its sublime qualities in their spiritual lives, than things would be as they ought to be and life would be less ‘awry and askew’.<sup>1</sup> Steingrímur shares this Romantic idealism with his contemporaries Benedikt Gröndal and Matthías Jochumsson, but in terms of mythology, Steingrímur’s has more in common with Grundtvig. Benedikt primarily cultivated eddic themes in order to create a new cultural framework for Iceland (see Chapter 6.3.5), and Matthías’s strong commitment to the idea of human progress prevented him from finding too much of value to the modern man in Old Norse myths (see Chapter 8.1.2). But, like Grundtvig, Steingrímur acknowledged the *metaphysical* value of the Baldur myth, and uses its similarities with the Christian Gospel to present a story his modern readership can relate to.<sup>2</sup> Steingrímur is offering his readers an alternative to the sectarian dogmatism of Lutheranism, and presents a more poetic, natural and hence more primordial and *authentic* re-telling of the perennial story of light, love, and salvation. Myth and Gospel are not at odds with each other, but they complete each other, and myth could be mobilised to regenerate the spiritual instincts of a Christian nation. Like Grundtvig before and Einar Jónsson after him, Steingrímur cultivated the rich imagery of the Edda’s first and foremost as a symbolic language, with which to illustrate and express spiritual ideas that go *beyond* paganism. The old myths suited the pantheistic ideals of the Romantic generation, and were considered an enrichment of the Christian faith. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how – under the influence of Eastern mysticism and Theosophy – this Romantic internalisation of Old Norse myths evolved into new forms of spirituality and eddic exegesis.

## 8.2 The Gods in Sculpture: Einar Jónsson and his Mythological Universe

### 8.2.1 A New Mythological Language

In the previous chapters, the visual representation of Old Norse mythology in Icelandic culture appears to have been somewhat neglected, in favour of the multitude of written sources at hand. This may seem like quite a shortcoming for a study that claims to be interdisciplinary in its approach to culture, but the fact of the matter is, that there are hardly any visual sources to neglect in the period stretching from the end of Sigurður málarí’s active life (see Chapter 5.2) and the beginning of Einar Jónsson’s career as a painter and sculptor. Einar Jónsson (1874-1954) was not only Iceland’s very first sculptor<sup>3</sup>, he was also the first Icelandic artist to reject classical naturalism and to embrace new and experimental forms of artistic expression like symbolism. The year of Einar’s birth (1874) was the year in which Sigurður málarí died, and in which the nation celebrated the one-thousandth anniversary of the landnám. In the early twentieth century, when Einar was finding his voice as a sculptor, Reykjavík was rapidly expanding and in need of rootedness in the ancient past, solidified in monuments for the city’s growing public space. Due to Einar’s position as Iceland’s only sculptor, the task of creating a visual identity for Reykjavík and the entire nation was largely given to him, and the popular image of Iceland’s heroic past is still largely determined by his iconic statues. However, Einar’s unorthodox views and interpretations of Icelandic history did not always resonate with the more traditional tastes of the urban elite who commissioned

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<sup>1</sup> Pétursson (1964) pp.212.

<sup>2</sup> This acknowledgement of the Edda’s metaphysical value differs remarkably from the ‘noble heathen’ of for instance Esaias Tégner, who is merely anticipating the arrival of a *greater* religion, which will render his own paganism redundant. See also Wawn (2008).

<sup>3</sup> According to Guðmundur Finnbogason, Einar’s work cannot be clarified by comparing it to previous Icelandic sculptors, because there are none to speak of; Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Einar Jónsson myndaskáld* (Reykjavík 1982) p.3. Even though the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen was celebrated as a ‘son of Iceland’, he can hardly be considered an Icelandic sculptor. See Chapter 5.2.1.

the works, and led to fierce debates on the national significance of Iceland's first inhabitants, and their heathen gods.

Einar Jónsson was born in a rural municipality (*hreppur*) and, as a child, developed a sense of profound connectedness to the mountains and valleys of the land he grew up in. In his memoirs (*Minningar*; first published in 1944), he later wrote that his eyes opened at a very early age for the beauty of nature, the cycle of the seasons, and for the flowers and species of birds which appeared in summer and spring.<sup>1</sup> He experienced every mountain in the surroundings of his home as a separate individual, incomparable to any of the other mountains, and their strength and dignity were interpreted by young Einar as expressions of the wisdom of a long life, in which they witnessed the “hidden power in Ýmir’s knuckles”.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to determine whether Einar already experienced a mythical, eddic dimension in Icelandic nature as a child, or whether this Romantic association was projected onto these childhood memories by the reminiscing sculptor, writing his autobiography. But for Icelanders of Einar’s generation, growing up in the late 1800s, the Romantic notions of mythology and nature as developed by previous generations were commonplace, and the great poets of the nation had become objects of Romantic veneration themselves. In his memoirs, Einar gives a lively description of his first encounter with one of these living legends, Grímur Thomsen, when Einar was himself still a youngster:

He appeared to me all grey, a grey coat, a grey, firm hat, grey pants and grey gloves on his hands; then there was his greyish beard; and his eyes were grey, so that at first I believed him to be blind. All his clothes were neat, and the man appeared distinguished. – After a long time and lively conversation, he said goodbye and rode off in an instant. – I asked my father who this man was, and he told me that I had there seen the poet Grímur Thomsen of Bessastaðir.<sup>3</sup>

This passage reveals how, in the imagination of successive generations, the Romantic poets were merged with their oeuvre and mythologised; the mysterious grey man, disappearing in the mountains as suddenly as he had appeared from them, wandering through the land with his ‘grey eyes’ – blindness, or the suggestion thereof, is in myths often associated with wisdom or ‘inner sight’ – bears a remarkable resemblance to the *Wanderer* Wotan/Óðinn of Richard Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. This living emblem of national Romanticism is here sublimated into an expression of the eddic mythology he had himself cultivated in his poetry. Einar perceived the world around him through eddic glasses, one might say, and not only the Icelandic world for that matter. In his student years, he travelled far and wide, and when he was on his way to Budapest, he was very excited about visiting the ‘capital of the Magyars’, to whom he felt connected through the heroic lays of the Edda and the *Völsunga saga*:

I imagined that she [Budapest] would have preserved a wondrous mixture of Asian and European culture, of east and west. Stories and adventures of bygone ages now entered my mind. Home of the Niflungs and Gjókungs, the weight of the far-away and the ancient, filled with magic; Budli’s daughter Brynhild and Sigurður slayer of Fafnir, to whom I once tried to

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<sup>1</sup> Einar Jónsson, *Minningar/Skoðanir* (Hafnarfjörður 1983 [1944]) p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p.5; “hinn hulda kraft í kögglum Ýmis”. On the frost giant Ýmir and the creation of the world from his body, see Chapter 2.2.1.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.71; “Sýndist mér hann allur grár: í grárri kápu, með gráan, harðan hatt, í gráum buxum og með gráa fingravettlinga á höndum; þá var gráleitt skeggið; og augun voru grá, svo að fyrst hélt ég, að hann mundi blindur vera. Öll voru klæði hans góð, og maðurinn hinn fyrirmannlegasti. – Eftir langan tíma og fjörugar skeggræður kvaddi hann og reið á brott sem örskot. – Innti ég þá föður minn eftir, hver sá hefði verið, en hann sagði, að ég hefði þar séð skáldið Grím Thomsen að Bessastöðum.”

trace my own bloodline; Attila and Apard, – all this I thought to see in this ethereal space of antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

In the adolescent's imagination, Hungary was charged with eddic significance, and therefore linked to his own Icelandic identity. It is not unthinkable that the young artist first encountered the notion of Magyar-Icelandic brotherhood in the 'Hungarian poetry' of Gísli Brynjúlfsson (see Chapter 6.2).

Between 1896 and 1899, Einar studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. One of his teachers, the Danish-Norwegian sculptor Stephan Sinding (1846-1922), taught Einar how to work with marble and instilled in him a fascination for mythological themes and symbolism. Sinding resorted to eddic myth for his statue *Valkyrie* – Copenhagen, 1908 – and expressed his spiritual affiliation with Mother Earth (*Moder Jord*) in a statue group exhibited in the courtyard of the *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek* in Copenhagen (1900). Einar received a grant from the Alþingi to study in Rome for two years (1902-3), and it is there that he developed his own style as an artist, after renouncing classical aesthetics and naturalism altogether.<sup>2</sup> This rejection of the hegemonic ideals of classical culture is reminiscent of N.F.S. Grundtvig's rebellion against 'Rome' (see Chapter 3.2.3), and stemmed from similar Romantic ideals. Under the influence of esotericism and mysticism, Jugendstil and – primarily German – symbolism, he set off to develop his own symbolic language, in which the Old Norse gods would play a very different role than that of the classicised Æsir of Sigurður máleri (see Chapter 5.2.2).<sup>3</sup> After having travelled through Europe, Einar returned to Copenhagen and became influenced by an avant-gardist artists' collective known as 'The Free Sculptors' (*De frie Billedhuggere*), who rebelled against any form of censorship and were inspired by Auguste Rodin and the Nietzschean concept of individual originality.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his entire career, he drew his inspiration from the Icelandic landscape, which he experienced as animated and filled with emotion. The Romantic pantheism of his childhood persevered, and – inspired by folktales dealing with supernatural beings and with trolls turning into stone – he expressed his experience of the Sublime in paintings and sculptures of geological persons, higher beings composed entirely of the typical black basalt columns that make up many of Iceland's rock faces and coastlines; very robust and very ethereal at the same time. These columns form a recurrent theme in Einar's paintings and sculptures, and take the shape of supernatural cathedrals or thrones, or make up the face of a woman. In his painting *Húm* ('Twilight') from 1907 (see fig. 20), a typical Icelandic coastline is depicted from sea, and the flat-topped mountains are dwarfed by a colossal white mountain-ridge, consisting of a seemingly endless, uninterrupted line of face-less shining entities – or deities? –, standing shoulder to shoulder, towering over the land. Real mountains blur into mountains of the spirit, which represent a more spiritual rendition of Bjarni Thorarensen's *Lady of the Mountain* (see Chapter 4.1.1). The national pantheism of works

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.133; "Ég hugsaði mér, að hún [Budapest] hefði að geyma undarlegt sambland af Asíu- og Evrópumeningu, austri og vestri. Sagnir og ævintýri löngu liðins tíma flugu mér nú í hug. Heim Niflunga og Gjúkunga, þunginn seiðmagni fjarska og forneskju; Brynhildi Buðladóttur og Sigurð Fáfnisbana, sem ég vart einu sinni að reyna að rekja ætt mín til; Attila og Apard, – allt þetta fannst mér ég sjá í furðukennda fornaldarhúmi."

<sup>2</sup> Jón Auðuns, "Einar Jónsson myndhöggvari eftir séra Jón Auðuns", in *Einar Jónsson myndhöggvari* (Hafnarfjörður 1982) pp.15-49, 31-32. An interesting parallel can be found in the biography of the German painter and founder of the *Germanische Glaubens-Gemeinschaft* Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867-1952), who also renounced classical artistic ideals while in Rome.

<sup>3</sup> Although Einar's work may not be understood through comparison with previous Icelandic sculptors – since there are none –, it may certainly be worthwhile to compare his work to the sketches and ideas of Sigurður in order to determine the radical shift in approach to the same Old Norse-Icelandic themes.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Nielsen, *De frie Billedhuggere: 1905-1913* (Vejen 1996).

like these, rooted in the “organicism of the Romantics”, can be seen as a means of naturalising the nation<sup>1</sup>, and elevating the idea of natural Icelandicness to a spiritual plane. The national dimension of Einar’s sculptures was – much later – also sensed by outsiders, like the members of an expedition to Iceland, organised by the SS in 1936. In the euphoric tone characteristic of German *völkisch* nationalism, these artworks are celebrated as the purest expressions of Iceland’s – quintessentially *Germanic* – national character:

Man begreift diesen dichtenden Bildhauer nur aus der Geschichte und der Natur Islands heraus. Kein Bildhauer irgend einer anderen Zeit und Gegend ist ein Vergleichsmaß. Die kämpfvolle Freiheitsgeschichte dieser Naturkraft-durchtobten Insel ist der Hintergrund, auf dem die Werke Einar Jonssons sieghaft leuchten.<sup>2</sup>

Iceland’s struggle for independence is not only seen as flowing from the island’s national character and love for freedom, but as an actual ‘force of nature’, inhabiting not only the people and Einar’s creations, but also the land itself. However, much in Einar’s world-view may have been less ‘indigenous’ than the Nazis would have wanted to believe. In order to fully understand his relationship with nature, and with the mythical creatures he saw embedded in the rock, it is essential to explore the sculptor’s spiritual outlook on life, and the transformation of mythology in the most innovative spiritual movement of its age: Theosophy.

### 8.2.2 The Quest of Gangleri: Ásatrú and Theosophy

In Chapter 7.2.3, we already explored the influence of Theosophical ideas – pertaining to universalism and spiritual inclusivism – on Jón Aðils’s positive interpretation of the Old Norse faith. The new religious paradigm, based to a large extent on Oriental philosophies, offered new ways for Westerners to internalise non-Christian belief systems, both exotic and pre-Christian. Up until the very end of the nineteenth century, the Eddas could be celebrated as national heritage, or presented as ‘disguised history’ – as the Danish-Norwegian historian Peter Frederik Suhm (1728-1798) had attempted – and even as ‘disguised science’ – see Finnur Magnússon –, but not as a fully-fledged system of religious thought, or a ‘national Old Testament’, equal to the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> Even N.F.S. Grundtvig – who was himself a Protestant priest – had to constantly re-emphasise that he was *not* proposing a return to paganism in his writings, fearing that he might be reprimanded for his heathen inclinations.<sup>4</sup> But around the turn of the century, things had changed; new artistic and literary currents such as Symbolism had kindled a lively interest in the symbolic language of myth, and closer contacts with non-Christian cultures increased the West’s fascination with the primordial nature of its own spiritual heritage.<sup>5</sup> In Central Europe, the *Lebensreform* movement propagated a return to nature, and self-proclaimed mystics like Guido von List (1848-1919) began to experiment with more primeval, ‘Germanic’ forms of natural spirituality. In 1912, the German writer and painter Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867-1952) founded the *Germanische*

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<sup>1</sup> Zimmer (1998), p.645.

<sup>2</sup> That is also why, according to the expedition team, no other sculptor was more qualified to create the statue of Iceland’s first settler, Ingólfr Arnarson. Paul Burkert, *Insel erforscht, erschaut, erlebt! Eine erlebnismäßige Schilderung der Insel am Polarkreis* (Zeulenroda 1936), pp.45-6. On Burkert’s expedition, see Halink (2010) pp.394-8.

<sup>3</sup> Lundgreen-Nielsen (1994) p.62.

<sup>4</sup> Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen identifies Grundtvig’s modern/Christian interpretation of the myths as “simply too daring for its time”, and as one of the reasons why his ideological experiment eventually failed. See idem., p.62.

<sup>5</sup> On the beginnings of a more subjective interpretation of Old Norse mythology, see Chase (2000).



*Glaubens-Gemeinschaft*: a pagan society which took Germanic and eddic mythology as its central creed.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, pseudo-scientists like the Austrian engineer Hanns Hörbiger (1860-1931) contributed to the ideological promotion of the mystical far North, by combining Germanic myth and ‘modern science’. In 1913, Hörbiger published his *Welteislehre* – or *Glazialkosmogonie* –, the central thesis of which was that the universe had evolved through a series of cataclysmic collisions between bodies of ice and fire, and that our moon and our entire *Eismilchweg* are essentially made of ice. His theory served as a Germanic alternative to ‘Jewish scientists’ like Albert Einstein, and was soon linked to the ‘ancient wisdom’ of the ‘Germanic’ Eddas.<sup>2</sup> This anti-Semitic strand of Germanic mysticism never played an important role in the Icelandic treatment of the Eddas. But, although there were no self-professed followers of *Ásatrú* in Iceland until the second half of the twentieth century – the *Ásatrúarfélag* was formally established in 1972 –, the fashionable esotericism of the turn of the century *did* pave the way for a more pagan-styled spirituality.<sup>3</sup> This may shed light on the Icelandic reception of modern Theosophy.

The Theosophical Society was formally established in New York in 1875, by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and her fellow Theosophists. In her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky claims to have unveiled the ultimate synthesis of science, religion and philosophy, based on ancient Hindu wisdom and occult Tibetan manuscripts. Metaphysical truth was not restricted to one specific religious tradition, but could be found in ancient traditions and mythologies around the world. The ‘secret doctrine’ had been revealed by wisdom masters throughout the ages, and some of these prophets achieved such supernatural qualities, that they were eventually deified and encapsulated in elaborate mythologies. Óðinn, who brought his people the wisdom of the runes, is interpreted as one of these initiated masters:

These personages [the ‘Thirty-five Buddhas of Confession’], however, though called in the Northern Buddhist religion “Buddhas”, may just as well be called Rishis, or Avatars, etc., as they are “Buddhas who have preceded Sakyamuni [the founder of historical Buddhism]” only for the northern followers of the ethics preached by Gautama. These great Mahatmas, or Buddhas, are a universal and common property: they are *historical* sages – at any rate, for all the Occultists who believe in such a hierarchy of Sages, the existence of which has been proved to them by the learned ones of the Fraternity. [...] The day when much, if not all, of that which is given here from the archaic records, will be found correct, is not far distant. Then the modern symbolists will acquire the certitude that even Odin, or the god Woden, the highest god in the German and Scandinavian mythology, is one of these thirty-five Buddhas; one of the earliest indeed, for the continent to which he and his race belonged, is also one of the earliest. So early, in truth, that in the days when tropical nature was to be found, where now lie eternal unthawing snows, one could cross almost by dry land from Norway *via* Iceland and Greenland, to the lands that at present surround Hudson’s Bay.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Markus Wolff, “Ludwig Fahrenkrog and the Germanic Faith Community: Wodan Triumphant”, in *Tyr* 2 (2004) pp.221-240.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Georg Hinzpeter, *Urwissen von Kosmos und Erde; Die Grundlagen der Mythologie im Licht der Welteislehre* (Leipzig 1928). On the influence of Hörbiger’s work in the Third Reich, see especially Brigitte Nagel, *Die Welteislehre. Ihre Geschichte und ihre Rolle im “Dritten Reich”* (Berlin - Diepholz 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Compare William H. Swatos Jr. and Loftur Reimar Gíssonarson, *Icelandic Spiritualism. Mediumship and Modernity in Iceland* (New Brunswick – New Jersey 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, Vol. II (New York 1888), online edition at [http://turtlegang.org/history/metaphysical/The\\_Secret\\_Doctrine\\_Vol\\_2.pdf](http://turtlegang.org/history/metaphysical/The_Secret_Doctrine_Vol_2.pdf) (last accessed: 1 September 2015) p.380. Italics original. Blavatsky took many of her ideas on Old Norse mythology from Wilhelm Wägner, to whom she refers regularly (see Chapter 7.2.2).

As we have seen in previous chapters, the identification of Óðinn with the Buddha was by no means Blavatsky's invention (see especially Chapter 3.4.4). But what is interesting in the Theosophical interpretation of the North's supreme god, is the emphasis on his historicity and, simultaneously, on his role as an *Avatar*: an embodiment of abstract metaphysical concepts. Since the early nineteenth century, these two theories had been considered in opposition to each other and mutually exclusive, associated with euhemerism and the Indo-European theory respectively. Blavatsky's historical Óðinn was more than just a 'remarkable human being', but an enlightened Buddha, who appeared in Northern Europe in a time before time, when it was warm and the Northern hemisphere was not yet divided by the Atlantic Ocean. This way, the spiritual founding father of Europe could easily be associated with mythical lost continents, like Atlantis, Hyperborea and Thule, which play an important part in the Theosophical world-view.

The North is essential in Blavatsky's conception of *anthropogenesis*. She claimed that mankind had evolved through a sequence of five so-called 'root races', the first one of which evolved millions of years ago and was entirely ethereal. The second root race, which first acquired physical qualities, lived in Hyperborea. These Hyperboreans were, however, still pure beings, and immanently more advanced than the later root races. The fifth root race, the Aryan race, and juxtaposed to the more animalised, debased non-Aryan races.<sup>1</sup> It is the task of the Aryans to elevate mankind from the prison of materialism, and lead it back to the more ethereal planes, into the sixth and seventh root races of the future. This spiritual evolution towards a lost state of perfection is expressed in Nordic mythology, where Þórr's magic hammer Mjöllnir – presented as a swastika – symbolises the Aryans' battle against the 'pre-cosmic Titanic Forces' which stand in the way between mankind and its ethereal homeland.<sup>2</sup> The story of Ragnarök and the appearance of a new and purified world after the destruction, is interpreted as a 'poetical allegory', recounting the coming of the perfected seventh root race once Mjöllnir has completed its mission.<sup>3</sup> The lure of this Theosophical outlook was considerable, and allowed Europeans to combine their infatuations with the mystical East with national pride and notions of racial supremacy. It also constituted an incentive for Scandinavians to reconsider their pre-Christian heritage, and to approach the Eddas from a more metaphysical perspective.<sup>4</sup>

In 1912, Icelandic Theosophists founded the first Icelandic branch, and in 1921, the fully-fledged Icelandic department of the Theosophical Society – *Íslandsdeild Guðspekifélagsins* – followed. An Icelandic periodical dedicated to the promotion of Theosophy – *guðspeki* in Icelandic – has been published from 1926 onwards. Icelandic Theosophists were inspired by Blavatsky's interpretation of *their* pre-Christian heritage, and actively indigenised her exotic world-view through association with the Eddas, with which all Icelanders were familiar. They named their periodical *Gangleri*, or 'Wanderer', which is a reference to the Swedish king Gylfi, who – in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* – receives teachings directly from Óðinn himself, manifested in the form of three men called *Hár* ('High'), *Jafnhár* ('Just-As-High') and *Priðji* ('Third'). In the introduction to the first issue of the journal, the editor explains why this eddic name was chosen:

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<sup>1</sup> Blavatsky's racial discourse, which inspired much of the *völkisch* esotericism in Germany and Austria, is too complex and paradoxical to be fully explained here. Although the term 'Aryan', which up to that point had only been applied in the context of Indo-European studies, acquired a normative and metaphysical quality in the *Secret Doctrine*, Theosophy also emphasises that all humans belong essentially to the same race. See: Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions. A Historical Introduction* (Oxford 2008) pp.211-228.

<sup>2</sup> Blavatsky (1888) p.88.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.89.

<sup>4</sup> For a modern Theosophical reading of the Edda, see Elsa-Brita Titchenell, *The Masks of Odin: Wisdom of the Ancient Norse* (Pasadena 1985).

The story is recounted here, so that both of us, you, will benefit from it more than may be expected. The story of Gangleri is the story of both of us. We have covered ourselves in the cloak of a wayfarer and have gone forth from the king's court to find education. We are Gangleris and so are all men.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Snorri's account of Sweden's king is endowed with universal significance, and a metaphysical message for every seeker of truth in the world. Just like Óðinn appears to Gylfi in the form of a triad (see fig. 1), so too does knowledge of the divine come in three different guises, namely science, philosophy and religion. Those who seek to integrate and unify these three 'altars' of truth, they are Theosophists in the true sense of the word.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on eddic motives in Icelandic Theosophy can be interpreted as an attempt to accommodate and embed foreign concepts, inspired by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, in the Icelandic mind. Before Icelanders could be ready to embrace Theosophy, its central concepts had to be de-exoticised through association with the familiar – but non-Christian – world of Old Norse-Icelandic culture.<sup>3</sup> In a way, this process of de-exoticisation is the mirror image of what Snorri Sturluson and Finnur Magnússon tried to achieve when they embedded Old Norse mythology in popular international discourses – Trojan myth and Indo-European philology respectively. They attempted to emancipate and enhance their cultural heritage – and their cultural capital – in this way (see Chapter 3.4.6), whereas Icelandic Theosophists simultaneously cultivated their national heritage in order to naturalise exotic metaphysical concepts and ideas.

In Iceland, the task of harmonising Ásatrú and the wisdom traditions of the Far East was taken on by Sigurður Kristófer Pétursson (1882-1925), who was a respected self-taught translator, language expert, and poet. He was also one of Iceland's most prominent Theosophists, authored several works on the subject, in which he sought to synthesise Christianity, spiritism, and the world's mythological and religious systems.<sup>4</sup> In 1924, he published the first Icelandic translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, under the revealing title 'The Hávamál of India' (*Hávamál Indíalands*).<sup>5</sup> This spiritual equation of the Gita and the 'Sayings of the High One' from the *Poetic Edda* makes sense, if one sees Óðinn – the 'High One' – as an Avatar, an incarnation of the supreme Being, just like Sri Krishna. Just like the *Bhagavad Gita* – in which the charioteer Krishna imparts spiritual instructions to prince Arjuna –, the *Hávamál* constitutes a collection of profound – and less profound – insights and instructions on how to live an honourable life, taken directly from the mouth of the 'High One' himself. In Sigurður's mind, the two texts contained the same noble message, which transcended time and culture. This implied that the songs of the Edda were in essence no less profound and holy than the sacred writings of the East.

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob Kristinsson, "Guðað á glugga.", in *Gangleri. Tímarit um guðspeki og andleg mál* 1:1 (1926) pp.1-6, 3-4; "En fyrir því er sagan rifjuð upp hér, að hún mun koma báðum okkur, þér, meira við en augljóst kann að vera. Saga Ganglera er saga okkar beggja. Við höfum steypt yfir okkur förumannskufli og gengið úr konungsgarði til að leita okkur fræðslu. Við erum ganglerar og svo eru allir menn."

<sup>2</sup> Idem, pp.4-5.

<sup>3</sup> This tendency to indigenise Theosophical ideas has persevered, as can be deduced from the name of the Theosophical publishing house *Hliðskjálf* – Óðinn's high seat in Ásgarðr, from where he can oversee all worlds –, and from the title of the digital newsletter of the Icelandic Theosophical Society, *Mundilfari*: the father of Sun and Moon. See also the website of the Icelandic Theosophical Society: [www.gudspekifelagid.is](http://www.gudspekifelagid.is) (last accessed: 3 September 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Jakob Kristinsson, "Sigurður Kristófer Pjetursson. Minningarorð.", in *Morgunblaðið* (6 Sept. 1925) p.5., and Gunnar Stefánsson, "'Hið stærsta í mannsál stendur ávallt þöglult': Aldarminning Sig. Kristófers Péturssonar", in *Gangleri* 57:1 (1983) pp.5-10, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Sigurður Kristófer Pétursson, *Hávamál Indíalands: Bhagavad-Gíta* (Reykjavík 1924).

Sigurður's most extensive writing on the Theosophical value of Ásatrú, *Fornguðspeki í Ásatrúnni* ('Ancient Theosophy in Ásatrú') appeared in 1922, two years before his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>1</sup> In this long essay, he expands on the similarities between the faith of 'our forefathers' and the wisdom of Hinduism. The origin of the Edda may have been the subject of much philological debate, but the origin of Ásatrú itself – the religious world-view which gave rise to the poems – remains a mystery, according to him. Sigurður argues that it is very likely that the religion originally hailed from the East – here he shares the view of the euhemerists, that the term Æsir is connected to Asia –, and that in its very kernel, Ásatrú may have preserved some of its original Eastern wisdom.<sup>2</sup> This exploration of Old Norse Theosophy is by no means an academic undertaking, he claims, and none of the similarities with other mythologies will be dissected in a scholarly sense. Some of these similarities are obvious in his view, like the primeval cow Auðumbla from Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* (chapters 7-8) and the sacred cow – called Kamadhuk – in Hinduism. Óðinn and his mysterious brothers Vili and Vé, who created the world from the giant Ýmir's body, are interpreted as a divine triad, representing the three qualities of God: divine wisdom (Óðinn), omnipotence (Vili) and divine love (Vé).<sup>3</sup> Sigurður theorises that the name Ýmir itself provides essential clues about the nature of the created universe, since it refers to the initial stir or motion – associated with the syllable *Om* in Hinduism, and the *Logos* of Christianity – from which all matter originated. This initial unity, represented by the frost giant, was subsequently murdered by Óðinn and his brothers, and shattered into many pieces from which all things were made. On the basis of this identification, Sigurður reaches the conclusion that there was *nothing* else – that is: *Ginnungagap* – before Ýmir, and that *Völuspá*, in which creation begins with Ýmir, is more accurate than Snorri's later account in *Gylfaginning*, in which other beings already existed before the giant.<sup>4</sup>

The division of the universe into three worlds, or 'planes', to use the more Theosophical term, can be found in both Old Norse – Ásgarðr, Miðgarðr and Útgarðr – and Hindu cosmology. The compound Sanskrit-Tibetan term for the highest of these planes, *Devachan*, was introduced by Blavatsky in the *Secret Doctrine* and means literally 'dwelling of the gods'. Sigurður points out that this is the exact same meaning of the term Ásgarðr, which can be translated as the 'enclosure' – or simply 'place' – of the Æsir.<sup>5</sup> According to Theosophy, it is from this ethereal plane that the soul descends to take material form and undergo physical life, with the aim to evolve and to learn the lessons which can only be learned in an earthly body. This journey of the soul is the subject of many myths, and Sigurður demonstrates this through an elaborate analysis of Þórr's journey to the land of the giants and the court of the giant *Útgarða-Loki*, where the Thunderer takes part in several contests.<sup>6</sup> According to Sigurður, Þórr – who descends from the highest plane in order to do battle with giants on the physical plane (Útgarðr) – symbolises the human soul, which is divine in its essence. His human travel companions, the girl Röskva and the boy Þjálfi, are metaphors for physicality/emotions and vitality respectively. Loki, the mischievous shape-shifter who accompanies Þórr on many of his journeys, symbolises the earthly body, which is

<sup>1</sup> Sigurður Kristófer Pétursson, *Fornguðspeki í Ásatrúnni* (Reykjavík 1922). This essay, an offprint from the journal *Óðin*, was later reprinted in two parts in the Theosophical journal *Gangleri*, 57:1-2 (1983), pp.84-96 and pp.50-62 respectively. It is this reprint in *Gangleri* that I will refer to in the footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem* (part 1), p.84.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem* (part 1), p.85. Also in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, the 'High One' answering Gylfi's questions (Óðinn) is presented as a trinity. Sigurður does not believe that this should be attributed to Christian influence, and quotes Sigurður Nordal to state his case (*idem*, p.86).

<sup>4</sup> *Idem* (part 1), p.89-90.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem* (part 1), p.92.

<sup>6</sup> This famous story is recounted in *Gylfaginning*, chapters 44-47.

already ‘conceived’ the moment a soul decides to descend from Ásgarðr. This explains why Loki, despite his inferiority, lives with the gods on the highest plane.<sup>1</sup> He represents our most basic instincts our animal behaviour, and therefore it is he who agrees to take part in the first contest at Útgarða-Loki’s court, which is an eating contest. Consuming food meets our most basic and materialistic needs.

After all three travel companions have taken part in different contests – which they all mysteriously lost from members of Útgarða-Loki’s household – it is Þórr’s turn. This means, according to Sigurður, that now the soul itself is about to be tested. The god, who was famous for his consumption of alcohol, does not manage to accomplish the seemingly simple task of emptying the drinking horn that was handed to him, and thus loses the drinking contest. When asked to lift Útgarða-Loki’s cat, he only manages to make the animal lift one paw. Since the giants are beginning to lose faith in Þórr, they propose a wrestling contest between him and an old lady named *Elli*. But even this appears too much for the raging giant-slayer, and Þórr loses again. It is only later that he discovers that he has been fooled; the drinking horn was secretly connected to the sea – from which Þórr had drunken so much, that the sea level dropped dramatically – and the cat he tried to lift was in fact the great serpent Jörmungandr, who encircles all of Miðgarðr. Finally, the old woman named *Elli* – which means ‘old age’ – had in fact been old age and impermanence personified, whom nobody – not even a god – could ever defeat. These tribulations of the soul (Þórr) in the physical world are seen by Sigurður as proof of the great spiritual insight of ‘our forefathers’, and interpreted as expressions of ancient Theosophy in the old North. The fact that *Elli* did not manage to throw Þórr on the floor immediately, indicates that this particular soul is so spiritually advanced that it can even defy – if not defeat – the most undefeatable force on Earth, which is death.<sup>2</sup> The fierce serpent, which Sigurður considers a metaphor for limitation – which is the cause of all suffering, but also necessary for the soul to learn important lessons in the physical world<sup>3</sup> –, is believed to be invincible, and the fact that Þórr managed to make him lift one paw, indicates that even absolute limitations can be subverted by our divine souls. Although Þórr felt like a loser, he had actually accomplished some remarkable feats, without realising it.

Finally, the drinking horn that cannot be emptied, is interpreted by Sigurður as an indication that the Old Norse actually believed in the law of karma and reincarnation, just like Hindus and Buddhists; it is in this present life that we have to empty the ‘cup of destiny’ (*örlagabikarinn*), the contents of which extends to the wide ocean of the past, which remains hidden to us. Sigurður argues that the forefathers did not believe in an infinite cycle of rebirths, but – depending on the ethical development of the soul – it took between one to three lives to empty the cup of accumulated karma.<sup>4</sup> He provides his reader with several other instances of presumed reincarnation in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and interprets *Völuspá*’s account of a new world after Ragnarök in the context of a cyclical world-view, in which death and destruction are never as final as they may seem.<sup>5</sup> As a Theosophist, Sigurður believed that all religious systems contain veiled expressions of the universal, ‘secret doctrine’. Christianity is therefore generally invoked to provide mystical parallels and

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<sup>1</sup> Pétursson (1983) part 2, p.52-3.

<sup>2</sup> Idem (part 2), p.59.

<sup>3</sup> Sigurður points out that the snake, although thought of in negative terms in Christianity and Ásatrú, was a symbol of wisdom in many ancient countries (idem., pp.55-9). The official logo of the Theosophical Society also contains a snake, encircling the central symbol by biting its own tale, just like Jörmungandr.

<sup>4</sup> Idem (part 2), p.54. Here, Sigurður indicates that Zoroastrians believe in a similar model of limited reincarnation.

<sup>5</sup> Idem (part 2), p.60. See also Chapter 3.4.4, on Finnur Magnússon’s thoughts on reincarnation in Old Norse culture.

remarkable conceptual similarities – like the one between Om, Ýmir and Logos – in order to strengthen the Theosophical message. However, when it comes to our understanding of death, Sigurður claims that ‘our forefathers’ were actually *more advanced* than their Christian descendants, who had lost all understanding of reincarnation and the cyclical regeneration of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this philosophical advantage of Ásatrú over Christianity, Sigurður was no heathen in the way later Icelanders would claim to be followers of Ásatrú, and nowhere does he call for a return to the old faith. Although Óðinn, the enlightened teacher who brought the esoteric wisdom of the runes (*rúnaspeki*) to the North, had a profound influence on Nordic life and the spiritual development of the forefathers, it has to be acknowledged that the wisdom school he founded is now a thing of the past. Óðinn’s enlightenment is associated with a tree (*Vingameiðr*; ‘Swaying Tree’), from which he hung for nine nights in order to sacrifice his lower self to his higher, divine self.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the enlightenment of the Buddha and that of Christ are also associated with trees, namely the Bodhi Tree and the Holy Cross respectively. But, whereas the Bodhi Tree and the Christian Cross are still worshipped by millions of people every day, Óðinn’s tree has been uprooted in its entirety, and every “twig and every leaf has lost all its life, its fragrance and colour.”<sup>3</sup> This is not something to be mourned, since the Christian faith is not inferior to the old religion. But Sigurður urges his readers to consider the spiritual value of Ásatrú from a Theosophical perspective, and its great importance to their forefathers; in *Vingameiðr*’s shadow, “many of our ancestors have flowed into the blood essence of those divine “brothers”, Óðinn, Vili and Vé, – and have grown in wisdom, bravery and manliness.”<sup>4</sup>

In the more personal artworks of Einar Jónsson, a very similar spiritual, symbolic hybridity can be discerned; Einar never promoted the actual reconstruction of Old Norse paganism, and the metaphysical value of the Edda lies for him primarily in its function as a *symbolic language*, in which he could express his abstract religious and artistic views – which were themselves not ‘eddic’ in origin – in a more visual fashion, as can be expected from a sculptor. Although he did not consider himself one of the happy few who could hold on to the “Paradise of their childhood belief” all their lives<sup>5</sup>, his autobiography seems to suggest that the natural mysticism of his youth greatly influenced his later development as an artist. Einar became deeply inspired by the Christian mysticism of the Swede Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1771), who opened his eyes to the more profound and unorthodox message of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> Einar came to despise the superficial and literal interpretation of the Bible by mainstream Christianity, and clarified the two opposing strands of Christianity – the ‘letter’ versus the ‘spirit’ – by using a narrative from *paganism*, namely that of Baldr’s death by the hand of his blind and misled brother Höðr (see Chapter 9.2).<sup>7</sup> This may seem paradoxical at first, but it made perfect sense to Einar, to whom the story of Baldr and Höðr was simply the Nordic equivalent of that of Cain and Abel; in both narratives, the enemies were not enemies from the beginning, but *brothers*. And in both stories, the pure and the good – spirit, mysticism – is murdered by its brother – literalism, dogma –, who had

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<sup>1</sup> Idem (part 2), p.60.

<sup>2</sup> See *Hávamál* (in the *Poetic Edda*), stanzas 138-9.

<sup>3</sup> Pétursson (1983) part 2, p.62; “Hver grein og hvert blað hefur misst allt líf sitt, ilm og lit.”

<sup>4</sup> Idem (part 2), p.62; “Í skjóli hans hefir mörgum forfeðrum vorum runnið í blóð eðli hinna guðdómlegu “bræðra”, Óðins, Vilja og Véa, – hafa vaxið þar að visku, hreysti og drengskap.”

<sup>5</sup> Jónsson (1983; *Skóðanir*) p.247; “Það mun fáum vera gefið að lifa til æviloka í Paradís barnatrúar sinnar, ...”

<sup>6</sup> On Einar’s religious views and their relation to Theosophy, see Oddný Björk Danielsdóttir, *Einar Jónsson og guðspekin* (Reykjavík 2011), master’s thesis at the University of Iceland, accessible online through <http://skemman.is/en/item/view/1946/8508> (last accessed: 3 September 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Jónsson (1983; *Skóðanir*) p.317.

turned malicious, and who remains undefeated in the present world.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this reference to the myth of Baldr, the Eddas play no significant role in Einar's writings. But in his more intimate sculptures and designs, mythological themes are abundant.

### 8.2.3 The Past in Public Spaces: Heathen Heroes

When Einar returned to Iceland, he made an arrangement with the Alþingi, to the effect that he would donate all his work to the country, and that the Alþingi would provide him with a house and studio in return. The monumental building which Einar co-designed for himself on the hill Skólavörðuholt in Reykjavík, in which he lived and worked, became Iceland's first public museum in 1923. By this time, the Romantic image of the heroic Viking past had become so mainstream and even 'banal' (see Chapter 9.1.1), that it was no longer necessary to convince anyone of the almost self-evident grandeur and greatness of the island's 'Golden Age'. The legacy of Romantic nationalism had become a cliché, "unobtrusively, unremarkably present in the ambient background noise of the contemporary nation [...]’s public sphere".<sup>2</sup> The development of visual culture in Iceland was greatly influenced by the influx of foreign depictions of Icelandic culture and nature; in 1885, Iceland received a large collection of foreign art from the magistrate Björn Bjarnason, containing among others the Danish painter Otto Bache's (1839-1927) heroic and realistic painting of Skarphéðinn – one of the heroes of *Njáls saga* –, wielding his axe while sliding over the frozen Markarfljót river (1862). The Romantic depictions of famous saga scenes by the Norwegian Andreas Bloch (1860-1917), which originally appeared in popular Norwegian saga editions but were widely distributed in the form of postcards and coffee cards, were also well known in Iceland, and may have contributed to the heroic self-image of Icelandic nationalists around 1900.<sup>3</sup> A growing urban middle class, rooted in the idea of national progress and Jón Sigurðsson's principle of Icelandic autonomy, felt the need for a modern public sphere, in which these commonly held conceptions of the nation are expressed in monuments and public works, just like in other European capitals. A good illustration of this change in aesthetic perspectives is the lukewarm response to the Danish suggestion of presenting a bronze caste of Bertel Thorvaldsen's neo-classical statue *Jason* to the Icelandic nation, in 1906. Even though Thorvaldsen was considered by many one of Iceland's most talented sons (see Chapter 4.2.2), enthusiasm increased significantly when the Danes proposed to donate a statue of Ingólfur Arnarson, Iceland's first settler, instead; the periodical *Ísafold* applauded the change of plan, and emphasised the importance of this statue not commemorating a "southern, Greek mythical hero" – like Jason –, but a Norse, *Icelandic Viking*.<sup>4</sup> The general opinion had shifted decisively in favour of Romantic primitivism, at the expense of classical, southern refinement. Grundtvig's controversial rebellion against 'Rome' had now, almost a century after the publication of his influential *Nordens Mytologi* (1808), become commonplace in Scandinavia, and had taken root in the popular self-image of the Icelanders. Einar, who had exchanged the ideals of classical realism for a more 'authentic' language of symbolic images, was eventually considered the right artist to translate this univocally Nordic identity into evocative works of art.

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<sup>1</sup> However, in the Edda, Höðr – who was not himself evil, but who was easily misled by evil Loki because he was blind – is cured from his blindness by Baldr, when he returns from the underworld and 'spirit' is victorious after all.

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.30.

<sup>3</sup> On the sagas in Icelandic art, see especially Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, "The saga tradition and visual art", in Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds.), *The Manuscripts of Iceland* (Reykjavík 2004) pp.157-169.

<sup>4</sup> "Jason eða Ingólfur?", in *Ísafold*, 25 August 1906, p.218; "suðræna, gríska goðfræðishetja". See also: Júlíana Gottskáldsdóttir, "Monuments to Settlers of the North: A Means to Strengthen National Identity", in Sumarliði Ísleifsson (ed.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec 2011) pp.205-227, 210-1.

Einar's public statues, commissioned by different societies and associations, offer heroic depictions of national heroes, both old and new, and can be found throughout downtown Reykjavík on key locations in the city's topography. His first public statue, *Útlagar* ('Outlaws', 1901) was based on old Icelandic folktales about outlaws making their living in the uninhabited inlands of the island; a popular theme in Icelandic folklore (see Chapter 8.1.2). Figureheads of the national movement – Jón Sigurðsson<sup>1</sup>, Jónas Hallgrímsson, and Hannes Hafstein – were immortalised in Einar's public projects, and could now literally be lifted on a pedestal for the first time. Casts of his statue of the Viking explorer Þorfinnr Karlsefni (1920), who followed in Leifr Eiríksson's footsteps and attempted to colonise the New World, were placed both in Iceland and in Philadelphia, where the Viking discovery of America was being cultivated ideologically by those who preferred a Nordic hero to a southern Catholic in the role of America's discoverer.<sup>2</sup> Einar's statues were often recycled in other media – such as postcards and stamps – and would thus come to determine the visual representation of Iceland's heroic national self-image. As 'silent proclamations'<sup>3</sup> of the nation's historical rootedness, these island-wide disseminations of Einar's historical imagination were very much embedded in everyday-life, and soon became an integral part of 'being Icelandic'. But not all of his creations resonated with the unproblematic aesthetics of banal nationalism, and his unconventional pieces – in which he sought to communicate his more intimate feelings – formed a constant topic of public debate. Even if the person immortalised in the statue was no-one less than Ingólfur Arnarson, the 'first Iclander'.

Already in the 1860s, members of the so-called Kvöldfélag in Reykjavík (see Chapter 5.2) believed that the city was in need of a statue of its founder: 'Iceland's Columbus', surpassed in fame only by Snorri Sturluson.<sup>4</sup> Among Sigurður málari's many unrealised projects is a – rather clumsy – sketch of Ingólfur, raising a torch with his left arm, while his right hand rests on the sword hanging from his belt.<sup>5</sup> Sigurður proposed the hill Arnarhóll, where Ingólfur's high-seat pillars were said to have washed ashore, as the location for the heroic statue, and he mentioned American initiatives to erect a statue for Leifr Eiríksson as well as Iceland's upcoming millennial anniversary in 1874 as key motivations for the project.<sup>6</sup> But the Kvöldfélag was internally divided on the issue, and eventually the idea was abandoned. That is, until 1906, when the aforementioned cast of the statue *Jason* by Thorvaldsen triggered a discussion on more appropriate subjects for Icelandic statues. Rather than simply receiving a statue of the first settler from Denmark, Icelandic societies and organisations such as the Reykjavík Association of Craftsmen (*Iðnaðarmannafélag Reykjavíkur*) took it upon themselves to finance the project<sup>7</sup>, and to purchase the statue from Einar Jónsson, who had exhibited a statue of Ingólfur at an exhibition in Denmark that same year. Einar had already realised a miniature statue of Ingólfur while studying in Rome (1902-3), and he accepted the offer.<sup>8</sup> However, although Einar managed to complete the requested monument in 1907, it would take another seventeen years until the statue was finally revealed on Arnarhóll in 1924. What was the cause of this long delay?

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<sup>1</sup> A cast of this statue was also erected in Winnipeg, Canada, where many Icelandic migrants settled (see Chapter 9.3).

<sup>2</sup> On the American cultivation of Old Norse culture, see Wawn (2002) pp.321-5.

<sup>3</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.30.

<sup>4</sup> "Jason eða Ingólfur?", in *Ísafold*, 25 August 1906, p.218.

<sup>5</sup> The drawing can be retrieved in Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Við fjörð og vík. Brot úr endurminningum Knud Zimsens fyrrverandi borgarstjóra* (Reykjavík 1948) p.166.

<sup>6</sup> See Gottskálksdóttir (2011) pp.208-9.

<sup>7</sup> On the role of these societies in cultural life, see Matthíasdóttir (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Jónsson (1983; *Minningar*) p.247.



In order to answer this question, we have to take a closer look at the designs for the monument themselves. Einar's ideas on how to represent Iceland's first settler differed remarkably from those of Sigurður málari, and were influenced by symbolism and Einar's own metaphysical theories. The statue portrays Ingólfr standing, leaning on a halberd with his left arm, and on a shield, standing upright against a dragon-headed object, with his right arm. The stylised dragon-headed object represents Ingólfr's high-seat pillar, thrown overboard in order to let the gods wash them ashore on the place where they wanted the Viking to settle.<sup>1</sup> The prominence of this object in Einar's composition already indicates that, in the sculptor's imagination, it has become more than merely a high-seat pillar; it has acquired extra layers of symbolic significance, linked to notions of destiny and the divine will behind the landnám. In order to emphasise this supernatural function of the pillar, Einar adorned it with themes and characters from the Eddas. Óðinn can be seen, holding a small round shield and wearing a helmet, while his two ravens accompany him on his shoulders (see fig. 21). Their spread wings give the impression that Óðinn is a winged, angelic being himself. Also, the tree Yggdrasil is depicted here, underscoring the organic, pagan character of the nation's very beginning.

In Einar's original design, the pillar was adorned with the motto *Sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig* ('Lead Thyself'), which attracted the attention of the committee overseeing the project. None of the people involved could deny the fact that the first Iclander had been a pagan, but that was no reason to portray him as a *godless* man, relying on himself alone. In a lecture on Ingólfr, delivered by the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873-1944) in 1906, the founding father is characterised as a man of faith, who undertook his expedition under the guidance of the gods. He never wavered in his obedience to Þórr, and can therefore be considered a man of virtuous and loyal character.<sup>2</sup> Although he may not have been an actual Christian, Ingólfr had at least these Christian values in common with his Lutheran descendants, and could therefore be considered a *virtuous* heathen. The sacrilegious motto Einar attributed to him, on the other hand, did not resonate with the committee, and seemed to contradict the image of a loyal and deeply religious settler. Einar's preference for exactly this slogan stemmed from his admiration for Nietzsche and his call for individuality, originality and self-reliance, and hence reflected Einar's artistic self-image. He was a pioneer, just like Ingólfr had been, and he had only himself to rely on. He considered it "progress to lead oneself, instead of being led and following in the footsteps of others. And because this is primarily the motto of the North Germanic race – perhaps not officially, but it lives tacitly in the nature of the Northern peoples."<sup>3</sup> Anyone who failed to grasp this was, obviously, not in tune with the very essence of the 'Nordic race', which was a serious accusation towards a committee overseeing the erection of Ingólfr's statue. Bjarni Jónsson *frá Vogu* ('from Vogur'; 1863-1926), a politician and author sympathetic to Einar's work, tried to remedy the situation by reconciling the two conflicting images of Ingólfr in a lecture, published in the year after the statue was completed. He argued that the problematic motto had been part of the pagan religion itself – expressed by Óðinn, in the eddic poem *Grógaldur* – and that it was therefore part of the Nordic culture loyal Ingólfr had 'conserved and protected' by bringing it with him to Iceland.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this piece of pagan theology does not seem to have convinced anyone.

<sup>1</sup> It took Ingólfr's slaves approximately three years to find the pillars, according to *Landnámabók*.

<sup>2</sup> Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Huganir* (Reykjavík 1943) pp.30-35.

<sup>3</sup> Kristjánsson (1948) p.172; "... framför að leiða sjálfan sig í staðinn fyrir að láta leiða sig og feta í fótspor annarra. Líka af því, að þetta eru first og fremst einkunnarorð norður-germannska þjóðflokksins, ekki máske opinberlega, en það lifir þegjandi í eðlisfari Norðurláfbúna". Translated by Anna Yates, in Gottskálksdóttir (2011) p.218.

<sup>4</sup> Bjarni Jónsson, "Listir og vísindi", in *Huginn* (2 Jan. 1908) p.1. See also Gottskálksdóttir (2011) p.218.

Even more unsettling than the Nietzschean motto however, was one of the base reliefs Einar had in mind for the monument. All that remains of Einar's design for this piece is a photograph of the plaster, which was itself destroyed.<sup>1</sup> It is entitled *Flótti guðanna til Íslands fjalla* ('Flight of the gods to Iceland's mountains'), and depicts a multitude of manlike gods landing on Iceland's shore, seemingly fleeing from a big open hand, standing upright at the horizon, with an open-armed man – reminiscent of the crucified Christ – in its palm (see fig. 22). The sculptor clarified this mysterious scene as follows:

The gods come speeding on a cloud through the air, and far in the east they see in the rosy dawn the symbol of Christianity, the great hand of God. In God's hand is Christ, who willingly extends his arms (not nailed). The gods flee, not in fear, but because their day is past. They hasten towards the land of sunset, "Iceland" – and tread their final walk on their white feet, from the mountains of Iceland into the fiery red of the setting sun.<sup>2</sup>

Einar wrote this clarification of the piece after it had been criticised by the statue committee, which was – again – concerned about the sculptor's 'pagan' interpretation of the landnám. Its members argued that he distorted history by turning the settlement into a pagan undertaking, and that it was certainly not Christianity – but political oppression – the first settlers were fleeing from. Furthermore, they were not fleeing from a Christian land, because paganism would persevere in Norway for at least another century after Ingólfr's departure. The committee decided that, in due time, the base relief could be added to the monument, on the condition that Einar would re-arrange the scene in accordance with the historical account of *Landnámabók*.<sup>3</sup> But, as in religious matters, Einar was not a man of the 'letter' but rather of the 'spirit', when it came to interpreting the deeper message of both the Bible and *Landnámabók*. He did not aspire to historical correctness (the 'letter'), but rather to a more spiritual interpretation of the landnám narrative through allegorical images. The entrance of the gods, as envisioned by Einar, is a sublimated re-rendering of the landnám trope which is so dominant in Iceland's historical narrative, and lends deeper, metaphysical significance to Ingólfr's 'mission' to Iceland. His departure from Norway could be understood in teleological terms, as a project ordained by divine provenance itself, intended to salvage that which is authentically Nordic – or 'North Germanic' – for future generations.

In previous chapters, we explored the popular folkloristic theme of the 'wild hunt', which acquired new meaning in the Romantic arts and literature of Northern Europe, and which was also cultivated by Grímur Thomsen in his poem *Ásareiðin* (see Chapter 6.1.5). After the death of Hákon jarl, heathendom's last champion, the Æsir depart from Scandinavia in solemn procession, towards an unknown destination. It is tempting to analyse Grímur's blend of historical and mythological narrative in tandem with Einar's – much younger – base relief, on which history (the landnám) and mythology are blended as well. The artwork can actually be seen as a *sequel* to Grímur's poem – and to the popular theme of the 'departing gods' in general –, in that it demonstrates where the westwards procession, towards the 'land of sunset' led them. To both the landnámsmenn and the pagan gods, Iceland was a place of refuge from royal tyranny, and a final bastion of heathen authenticity, where the Æsir evaporated into the 'fiery red of the setting sun' after their very last march through the mountains. It is tempting to interpret this base relief as an extension to, or as the second half

<sup>1</sup> The photograph can be found in Gottskálksdóttir (2011) p.217.

<sup>2</sup> Kristjánsson (1948) p.173-4; "Guðirnir koma á skýi þeysandi í gegnum loftið, lengst í austri sjá þeir í morgunroðanum 'Symbol' kristinnar, sú mikla guðshönd. Í hendi guðs sést Kristur, sem breiðir úr faðminn af eigin vilja (ekki negldur). Guðirnir flýja, ekki hræddir, heldur af því, að þeirra dagur er runninn, þeir flýta sér til sólseturslandsins 'Íslands' – og ganga á sínum hvítu fótum sína síðustu göngu af Íslandsjökulfjöllum inn í þá eldrauðu kvöldsól, er hún gengur til viðar." Translated by Anna Yates, in Gottskálksdóttir (2011) p.216-7.

<sup>3</sup> Kristjánsson (1948) p.173.

of a diptych in combination with the painting *Kristus i Dødsriget* ('Christ in the Realm of the Dead'; 1891-4), by the Danish Symbolist Joakim Skovgaard (1856-1933). This painting depicts Christ's descent into the underworld after the crucifixion, to redeem the souls of those who awaited His arrival since the beginning of time, with Adam and Eve actually heading this congregation of the dead (see fig. 23). There are two movements in this composition: first the central one, namely that of the dead turning towards Jesus in admiration. But in the top-left corner of the painting, one can discern some dark, unarticulated demonic shapes, 'fleeing' the scene and flying away from Christ, away from redemption. Almost naturally, they (or it) flee(s) towards the west, the direction of the sunset, away from the light of the rising sun/Son. Whether Einar ever saw this particular painting or not, he captures the same westward movement of the expelled pagan elements, albeit in a more positive light.<sup>1</sup>

Although Einar thus recognises that the gods have met their historical end, the description of Iceland as the 'land of sunset' suggests that the presence of the gods occurs beyond time and *still* animates the Icelandic landscape, providing it with the pantheistic quality that characterises Einar's countless paintings and sculptures of 'living basalt'. The gods may be of a thing of the past, but they are also primordial, and they constitute the very reason why Iceland's mountainscapes are not only physical, but also ethereal, metaphysical spaces. Just like Grímur, Einar does not blame Christianity *an sich* for the decline of the Æsir; the sculptor is decidedly positive about Christ's voluntary sacrifice for mankind. Rather, the age of heathenism had simply come to an end, and the gods had to make way for the spirit of a new, Christian age. Again, this interpretation of history is reminiscent of Grímur's outlook, and his interpretation of Hegel's dialectical *Zeitgeist*.

Eventually, the statue was revealed on Arnarhóll in 1924, finally, without any motto or base relief, but *with* Óðinn and Yggdrasil on the high-seat pillar. After that, all the controversy surrounding its creation was soon forgotten, and the monument evolved into an emblem of Icelandic identity in general, and Reykjavík identity in particular. Its encapsulation into the conventional, mainstream national narrative began already in the writings connected to the statue's festive unveiling, as can be seen in this quote from a short piece on Ingólfr, intended for children: "And then you should first and foremost thank God for giving Ingólfur and us, his descendants, this fair and good land, and also for giving Iceland Einar Jónsson, the artist, who was able to create such a sculpture of Ingólfur."<sup>2</sup> For all its controversial 'heathenness', the iconic statue very quickly became an unproblematic image, in perfect harmony with traditional, Christian notions of Icelandicness.<sup>3</sup> Iceland was the promised land, to which the virtuous founding father Ingólfr had been sent by divine provenance in order to establish a new society, and an elect people. And what is more: Einar Jónsson, the artist who managed to capture the heroic spirit of the ancestors, consequently also deserved a position in the nation's pantheon of cultural saints.

Another one of Einar's allegorical, mythologically inspired base reliefs – entitled *Brautryðjandinn* ('The Pioneer') – aroused less controversy, and can still be seen on the pedestal of Einar's statue of Jón Sigurðsson, situated in front of the House of Parliament (*Alþingishúsið*) on Austurvellur square in downtown Reykjavík. The relief does not depict the national hero himself, but rather an archaic, bearded and naked man, who is performing the hard work of clearing the ground ahead of him of impassable basalt rocks, thus creating a pathway for the masses – the nation – standing behind him. The analogy with Jón's political

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Kim Simonsen for pointing this painting out to me.

<sup>2</sup> From "Ingólfur Arnarson", in *Ljósberinn. Smárit barnanna* (1 March 1924) pp.65-7, 66-7; "Og þá skuluð þið fyrst og fremst þakk [sic] Guði fyrir að hann gaf Ingólfi og okkur niðjum hans þetta fagra og góða land og gaf Íslandi líka Einar Jónsson, listamanninn, sem gat búið til svona líkneski af Ingólfi."

<sup>3</sup> Helgason (2013) p.105.

path-clearing for the nation is hard to miss, and – as on the envisioned relief for the statue of Ingólfr – the historical significance of the hero’s achievements is expressed in non-historical, mythological imagery. Although this allegory is not directly linked to one specific character or event from eddic mythology, its mythical overtones – the naked and bearded hero, the great struggle with the elements, the promise of a brighter future – are clearly indebted to the national symbolism of the nineteenth century, in which the treasure trove of Old Norse myths was cultivated on a large scale. Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson maintains that, in this allegory of national liberation, Einar could just as well have used the image of a “hawk or a falcon; a freedom sword or a freedom tree; Sigurður Fáfnisbani or a valkyrie; the god Heimdallur or the Snæfells-god.”<sup>1</sup> In more than one sense, Iceland’s great liberator had himself acquired the status of a semi-divine being, no longer truly belonging to the realm of mere history.<sup>2</sup>

#### 8.2.4 The Gods in Sculpture

Compared to Einar’s commissioned works, intended for the public sphere, the more personal works he created on his own accord are more intimate, and of a mystical nature. Without the opinion of any committee to worry about, Einar was free to express his world-view in images inspired by Old Norse mythology. Especially in the later part of his life, the sculptor gravitated increasingly towards spirituality and mysticism. His cultivation of eddic themes is more explicit in his private works, and generally serves to convey more profound and existential messages than for instance the heathen references in his statue of Ingólfr Arnarson.<sup>3</sup> An interesting example of Einar’s direct use of eddic themes is his *Ýmir og Auðhumla* (‘Ýmir and Auðhumla’; 1907-9), which shows the primeval frost-giant Ýmir, ancestor of all the giants, lying under the primordial cow Auðumbla – alternatively spelled as Auð(h)um(b)la (see Chapter 3.4.4) – sucking milk from her udders. The scene depicts the two first living creatures according to eddic cosmogony, and does not thematise the wickedness of Ýmir, which is attested in the Eddas. The composition is striking in its simplicity, and makes the giant and the cow look like a natural unity, united in the closed, rectangular space of the sculpture. It conveys a relationship of dependence, in which the naked man – Ýmir – depends on the abundance of nature, symbolised by Auðhumla’s udders.

As demonstrated in the above, Einar was by no means an advocate of pre-Christian paganism; he used eddic motifs first and foremost as a *figurative language*, which enabled him to express profound ideas and experiences that are in themselves not directly linked to Old Norse mythology. A very abstract and foreign concept like *karma*, a central principle in Oriental philosophy, is personified by Skuld – the eddic goddess of fate and one of the three Norns (see Chapter 8.1.2) – in the sculpture *Skuld* (‘Fate’). The idea for this work first appears in drafts from 1900, but it was not until 1927, after Einar’s final return to Iceland, that the sculpture reached its completion. The work centres around a young man, seated on the back of a collapsed horse that can no longer continue its journey (see fig. 24). Between the horse’s front-legs lies the lifeless body of another man, whose death resulted from the horseman’s relentless race towards the future. The horseman wants to continue his journey forwards, but the fallen horse is struggling to get up, and the reins are no longer in his hands, but in those of an eerie, ghostly figure whose face is shrouded, sitting behind him and whispering in his ear. Karma has caught up with the rider, and now Skuld prevents him from

<sup>1</sup> Egilsson (1999) p.302; “...haukur eða fálki; frelsissverð eða frelsistré; Sigurður Fáfnisbani og valkyrjan; guðinn Heimdallur eða Snæfellsásinn.” On Jón’s identification with the semi-deity Bárður Snæfellsás, see Chapter 8.1.2.

<sup>2</sup> On the secular canonisation of Jón Sigurðsson, see especially Björnsson (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Einar’s predilection for the myths is not only testified by his completed artworks, but also by his many sketches, which are preserved in his notebooks and which can be accessed on the superb website of the Einar Jónsson Museum in Reykjavík: <http://www.lej.is/>.

moving on, telling him the debt he must pay for his immoral deed. The man is stuck in the moment, fettered by the forces of karma, and his will to move forwards is frustrated by his loss of control over the horse. In this work, Einar professes his belief in a moral universe, governed by the laws of cause and consequence, and in the influence of our past deeds on our current condition. Einar's treatment of the principle of divine justice detaches it from the Christian and Oriental cultural context in which it usually occurs, and connects it in a very dramatic fashion to the Old Norse character of Skuld. Not only did Einar thus transform something highly abstract and intellectual into something tangible, intimate and experiential, he also managed to indigenise the concept of karma through the cultivation of eddic mythology.

A more dynamic interplay of multiple symbolic languages and metaphysical ideas can be found in the sculpture *Fæðing Psyche* ('The Birth of Psyche'), which Einar completed in the year 1918 (see fig. 25). The work does not immediately strike the viewer as particularly indebted to Old Norse myths, and also its title suggests a stronger link with Greek mythology. It shows the creation of the human soul (Psyche), who is chiselled from the rock by a sculptor, whose face is shrouded – like that of Skuld in the previous sculpture – and represents Earth, or the creative principle of the divine. From all sides, a female figure emerging from the rock is animated by antropomorphous allegories of the natural forces air, water and fire, the last one appearing in the guise of an angel, tenderly kissing Psyche's forehead. As in the sculpture of Ýmir and Auðhumla, mankind's dependence on – and origin from – nature is again testified. However, the most profound message encrypted in this sculpture lies not in its separate components, but rather in its composition as a whole. When observed from a distance, the four panels together form the sign of a solar cross, or a cross inside a circle, which seems to be turning like a wheel due to the suggested movement of the clouds in the top and the waves at the bottom of the sculpture. The symbol of the solar cross, closely related to the swastika, was in Theosophical writings connected to Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir, and had become the ultimate symbol of creation and the mission of the Aryans.<sup>1</sup> This identification of Mjöllnir with the principle of creation is further amplified by the actual hammer in the hand of the shrouded sculptor, with which the human soul is chiselled into existence. In one of his notes on this work, Einar explains how the stylised solar cross is the symbol of all fiery origin; not only of the human soul, but of the material universe as a whole. In this shape, Einar believed to have found the key to understanding the relationship between matter and spirit, since it symbolises the “birth of the material as housing for the spirit and its development towards exalted worlds, the birth of the spirit into the material.”<sup>2</sup> *Fæðing Psyche* forms Einar's artistic interpretation of a philosophical idea, in which a symbol from Old Norse mythology acquired universal and metaphysical significance, reaching far beyond the usual national and political significations of Þórr's hammer.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Norse mythology is *universalised* (function three) while foreign, theosophical ideas are *indigenised* (function two). In this and many other works, Einar introduces the viewer to a symbolic universe in which landscape, folklore, history and complex esoteric concepts are merged. In that respect, his works bears resemblance to the symbolic artwork of the English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827).

However, the eddic stories did not only serve to convey metaphysical grand narratives and Theosophical ideas; especially in his later years, Einar's approach to the old gods became more intimate, and entangled with his own experience of coming of age. In 1939 and 1940,

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<sup>1</sup> Blavatsky (1888) p.88.

<sup>2</sup> Einar Jónsson, quoted and translated on the website of the Einar Jónsson Museum: <http://www.lej.is/news/27/80/The-Birth-of-Psyche-1915-1918/d.nodate/> (last accessed: 15 March 2017).

<sup>3</sup> For Mjöllnir as a political symbol in Iceland, see Chapter 9.1.3, and on its political uses in Europe, see Zernack (2011b) pp.163-176.

he worked on a sculpture entitled *Elli og Þór* ('Elli and Þór'), which takes up the same eddic theme of Þór's ordeal at Útgarða-Loki's court as explained in the light of Theosophical teachings by Sigurður Kristófer Pétursson (see Chapter 8.2.2). But Einar's – much later – interpretation possesses little of the metaphysical complexity of Sigurður's discourse, or of the symbolic intricacy of *Fæðing Psyche*. The work shows the mighty god wrestling intimately with Old Age (Elli), presented as an old woman with closed eyes, leaning over the seemingly helpless god like a heavy mountain (see fig. 26). Although the scene depicts a struggle, there is no air of aggression, and overall the interaction between Þór and Elli looks more like an embrace than anything else. It is tempting to interpret this as the sculptor's – who was now far into his sixties – own attempt to come to terms with death and old age, rather than fighting it. The mountain underneath Elli's body is unmistakably an *Icelandic* mountain, consisting largely of characteristic black sand-slopes. But, as in the painting *Húm* from 1907, the mountain is made up primarily of people, standing figures emerging from the sand-slopes, who are all hidden under Elli's pithless body and subjected to the same laws of death and decay that Þór had tried to subject.

The resignation expressed in this composition is of great psychological depth, in which Old Norse myth reaches a level of internal existentialisation it had never reached before in Icelandic art. Rather than applying the myths in order to cultivate national identity or any other form of ideological consciousness – as most of my previous protagonists did –, they represent first and foremost a set of indigenous symbols, through which universal truths and experiences can be expressed. In his private creations, the grand themes of national heroism and Romantic historicism – which figure so prominently in his public works – are virtually entirely absent. *Ásatrú* was, in Einar's world-view, a local expression of cosmic wisdom and the *condition humaine*. Due to this psychological perspective, his visual representations of the old gods are very dissimilar to those of his European contemporaries, like the Danish painter and illustrator Lorenz Frølich (1820-1908), whose mythological works are firmly rooted in the Romantic historicism and Wagnerian paradigm of his age. Einar's treatment of Old Norse mythology stands on its own in Iceland, and only very few Icelandic artists of the early twentieth century ever embarked on artistic adventures that would lead anywhere beyond landscape painting.<sup>1</sup> Only later on in the twentieth century would painters like Jóhann Briem turn to the Eddas again for inspiration (see Chapter 10.2).

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of Icelandic painting, see especially Guðmundur Oddur Magnússon, *Íslensk myndlist: hundrað ár í hnotskurn* (Seyðisfjörður 2008).



## 9. New Mythscapes (1880-1918)

### 9.1 Eddic Themes in Everyday Life

#### 9.1.1 Romanticism and Banality

In this final chapter of the present research, the focus of attention shifts from the cultural and intellectual elite – scholars, poets, politicians and artists – to the everyday experience of Icelandicness in the public sphere, and quotidian expressions of Icelandic identity. How was the cultural cultivation of Old Norse mythology, as examined in the previous chapters, reflected in the way Icelanders perceived themselves, and in their ‘performance of nationhood’ in a rapidly changing and industrialising society? As indicated in the previous chapter, there are no clear cut boundaries between the Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century and the ‘banal nationalism’ of the twentieth, in which the symbols and themes cultivated by the Romantics reverberated, and had become the all-pervasive but largely unnoticed ‘background noise’ of the contemporary nation.<sup>1</sup> Romantic nationalism was not simply *replaced* by something new, but rather *spilled over* into modern and more banal expressions of identity, which Joep Leerssen divides into two separate – but interconnected – spheres, namely: state-endorsed expressions and popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

By embedding the people in an urban – state-endorsed – infrastructure of street names, general education, and public works – like the statues of Einar Jónsson –, amplifying the grand narrative of historical continuity and a Viking ‘golden age’, these motives became firmly rooted in Iceland’s collective subconscious, and even *self-evident*. The official reading of Icelandic history, as supported by the Alþingi (see Chapter 7.2), was thus disseminated and consequently internalised by most Icelanders, living and breathing as it were inside the national discourse. This then led to individual, bottom-up incentives, which gave shape to popular trends and popular culture. Together, both the state-endorsed and popular banalisation of the nineteenth-century themes can be identified as the third and final phase of Hroch’s model, explaining the development of national consciousness (see Chapter 1.2.1). In Iceland, the transition from ‘classical’ Romantic nationalism to the national ‘mass movement’ – or popular culture – of the early 1900s is closely linked to the popularisation of the concept of an Icelandic ‘golden age’, as disseminated first and foremost in the writings and public lectures of Jón Jónsson Aðils (see Chapter 7.2.3).<sup>3</sup>

The first two decades of the twentieth century did not only witness the rapid modernisation of the island’s rural society, but are also the era in which the decisive chapter of Iceland’s struggle for independence unfolded. Iceland had acquired home rule in 1904, and in the negotiations leading up to Iceland’s full independence – in personal union with the King of Denmark – in 1918, arguments for independence based on the island’s ancient culture are presented with a certain sense of obviousness:

The Icelandic nation is the only Germanic nation to preserve the ancient language, which was used in all the Nordic countries 900-1000 years ago, with so small changes that all Icelanders

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.30. Traditionally however, Icelandic Romanticism proper is demarcated chronologically as the dominant cultural movement between the first issue of *Fjölnir* in 1835, and the first and only volume of the journal *Verðandi* in 1882 (see Chapter 8.1.2).

<sup>2</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.22.

<sup>3</sup> See on Iceland’s changing historical culture in this period especially Matthíasdóttir (2004) pp.41-74.



still understand and can use perfectly the literary treasures of both our own ancient culture and the one of the other Nordic countries. With the language, people have preserved a distinctive nationality, distinctive customs, and distinctive culture. And, with the language, the consciousness of the country's special status in relation with our kindred nations has always lived with the nation. We deem that these circumstances, a particular language and distinctive culture, give us a *historical and natural* right to total independence.<sup>1</sup>

In these self-confident opening lines, the Icelandic committee triumphantly proclaimed what had become 'common knowledge' in the century preceding the negotiations of July 1918; it politically reinforced the myth of historical continuity – interrupted for a couple of centuries due to foreign intervention – and the Iceland's unique position in the larger family of Nordic – or even Germanic – peoples. Iceland had *preserved* all that was authentic and which had been lost elsewhere, and could on those 'historical and natural' grounds alone claim total independence from Denmark. In this passage, the cultural-political agenda which first began to take shape in the writings of Jónas Hallgrímsson, and which was further developed in the works of all the protagonists whose works have been examined in the previous chapters, has achieved its most political manifestation; the historicism of the Romantics had now become a valid argument in favour of independence, and one which seemed reasonable, something opposite party could relate to.<sup>2</sup>

But how deeply were these ideas rooted in Icelandic society as a whole? Could common Icelanders, without any scholarly background or intellectual intentions, relate to this type of argumentation? Questions of this nature are notoriously difficult to answer, and analysing the publication, distribution and editions of literature containing these national ideas is simply not sufficient.<sup>3</sup> Even someone who has never picked up a book in his or her life is immersed in – and subconsciously influenced by – the omnipresent celebration of the nation's historical grandeur in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> How did this historicist environment influence the people's 'practice of everyday life', and how was the cultivation of Iceland's idealised antiquity appropriated and altered by Icelanders, in order to – as Michael Certeau described it – position themselves in society, and the world at large?<sup>5</sup> And how exactly does Old Norse mythology tie into this development?

### 9.1.2 Eddic First Names

One of the most obvious – and easily quantifiable – invented traditions signifying a new interest in the Old Norse myths, is the proliferation of eddic first names in Iceland, taking

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<sup>1</sup> The opening declaration of the Icelandic committee, during their meeting with a Danish delegation in Reykjavík, July 1918. The statement is quoted and translated in Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Icelandic Nationalism: A Non-Violent Paradigm?", in idem and Ann Katherine Isaacs (eds.), *Nations and Nationalities in Historical Perspective*, (Pisa 2001) pp.1-13, 12-13 (italics added); "Íslenska þjóðin hefir ein allra germanskra þjóða varðveitt hina fornu tungu, er um öll Norðurlönd gekk fyrir 900-1000 árum, svo lítið breytta, að hver íslenskur maður skilur enn í dag og getur hagnýtt sér til hlítar bókmenntafjárjósði hinnar fornu menningar vorrar og annarra Norðurlandþjóða. Með tungunni hefir sérstakt þjóðerni, sérstakir siðir og sérstök menning varðveist. Og með tungunni hefir einnig meðvitundin um sérstöðu landsins gagnvart frændþjóðum vorum ávallt lifað með þjóðinni. Þessi atriði, sérstök tunga og sérstök menning, teljum vér skapa oss sögulegan og eðlilegan rétt til fullkomins sjálfstæðis."

<sup>2</sup> On the declaration of the Icelandic Kingdom (*Konungsríkið Ísland*, 1918-1944) and its effect on Iceland's political identity, see Hálfðanarson (2007) pp.135-145.

<sup>3</sup> By this I do by no means imply that studies of this nature, like Böðvar Kvaran's *Auðlegð Íslendinga. Brot úr sögu íslenzkrar bókaútgáfu og prentunar frá öndverðu og fram á þessa öld* (Reykjavík 1995), have no value in themselves. Quite the contrary: they can be very usefull in reconstructing the 'paper trail' of certain ideas, and in estimating the range of their impact.

<sup>4</sup> Billig (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Certeau (1984).

place in the first decades of the twentieth century. Before the second half of the nineteenth century, personal names identical to those of the Æsir or the Vanir are virtually absent in the Icelandic records.<sup>1</sup> The data in the chart below are extracted from the Icelandic censuses (*manntöl*) conducted roughly every ten years between 1860 and 1920<sup>2</sup>, which are digitally available at the website of the National Archive of Iceland (*Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands*).<sup>3</sup> The number in every field represents the *total number* of people carrying the name in question – as their first or second name – *at the time of the census*, so *not* only the number of people who have received this name since the last census. For this purpose, I have selected six names of Old Norse gods and goddesses, as well as the enigmatic name Edda itself, which are now still in common use as given names:

	1870	1880	1890	1901	1910	1920
<b>Óðin(n)</b>	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Freyja</b>	1	2	2	6	10	24
<b>Bragi</b>	0	1	1	4	10	39
<b>Edda</b>	0	0	0	0	1	2
<b>Iðunn</b>	1	2	0	2	6	8
<b>Ægir</b>	0	0	0	0	1	4
<b>Baldur</b>	0	5	8	17	47	126

The demographics show that, prior to the year 1880, the selected names of eddic gods and goddesses were not in common use in Iceland. The name Freyja occurs for the first time in the census of 1860 (two individuals), and the name Iðunn is the only one in this selection that actually occurred as a given name in pre-modern times.<sup>4</sup> Although ‘Þór’ persevered – and remained incredibly popular – as a pre- and suffix in many Icelandic names – such as for instance Þorsteinn, Þorbergur, Þorgrímur, Þorgeir and Bergþór – after the conversion, but no one was called after the god proper until the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Most remarkable is the – for Icelandic standards – meteoric upswing of the name Baldur, from 5 persons in the census of 1880 (0.007% of the total population) to 126 in the census of 1920 (0.14% of the total population). Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to retrieve the exact motivations of people to name their sons after the pagan deity of light and purity, since no personal documents containing these motivations have survived. However, it can hardly be considered surprising that, in a cultural climate of banal nationalism based on the glorification of the Old Norse, pagan past, the Eddas became – like the sagas – a treasure trove of very ancient and ‘authentic’, yet highly original names. The apparent predilection for the name Baldur can be explained by the fact that this particular god was the most radiant and pure one of all the

<sup>1</sup> Names of the human – or semi-human – protagonists of the heroic poems of the Edda, like Sigurður or Guðrún, were often in common use in the Viking Age, and continued to be used up to the present day. I will therefore focus solely on the names of gods and goddesses. See on the history and an overview of mythological names in Iceland especially Andrea Þ. Guðnadóttir and Þóra Jenny Benónýsdóttir, *Askur Yggdrasill? Tíðni norrænna goðafræðinafna í nafnavali Íslendinga frá aldamótum 1900-2007* (Reykjavík 2007), B.Ed. dissertation at the Kennaraháskóli Íslands, retrieved online at <http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/222/1546/1/Heildarskjal.pdf> (last accessed: 9 December 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The first national census was conducted in 1703, and between 1835 and 1860 there was one held every five years.

<sup>3</sup> All the censuses can be accessed via this link: <http://www.manntal.is/> (last accessed: 9 December 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The name of the goddess of eternal youth is already attested as a given name in the ninth century, and remained in use after the Christianisation. Source: the online genealogical database Íslendingabók, at [www.islendingabok.is](http://www.islendingabok.is) (last accessed: 9 December 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Guðrún Kvaran and Sigurður Jónsson frá Arnarvatni, *Nöfn Íslendinga. Ný útgáfa* (Reykjavík 2011 [1991]). The prefix ‘Ás’ – as in Áshildur, or Ásbjörn – is equally a surviving relic from pagan times.

Æsir, beloved by all, and possessing qualities which could be deemed timeless and universal, very similar even to those attributed to Christ. The name becomes very popular around the turn of the century, around the time when Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's popular poem *Baldursbráin* (1900) was first published, and when ideas about the perennial truth underlying the Eddas were taking hold of Icelandic intellectual life (see Chapters 8.1.3 and 8.2.2). Surely, it is highly unlikely that *all* parents baptising their sons Baldur were directly influenced by Steingrímur's poem, or by Theosophy, and as with all fashions, ninety per cent of them were simply followers of this newly set trend. In a 're-awakened nation', where names from the Eddas were permeating all layers of cultural production, and periodicals, societies, streets and buildings proudly carried the names of ancient gods, the people themselves could not lack behind. Naming one's child after the ancestors' god of purity could be considered an act of national authenticity, through which the next generation was re-connected to the nation's pagan past, and simultaneously to the nation's golden future, rooted in that same glorified antiquity. As ideological acts, names form therefore a good catalyst of cultural developments in society.

Most remarkable about this proliferation of pagan names, is the fact that naming children after gods and goddesses was, to a large extent, an entirely new phenomenon; parents may have experienced the act of naming as a form of reviving an ancient tradition, but even in pre-Christian times, people were generally spoken not named after the gods and goddesses. Apart from Iðunn<sup>1</sup>, none of the seven names in the above chart was actually in use in Viking Age Scandinavia. These pagan given names therefore represent a "selective construction of the past which resonates with contemporary influences", in which the – in this case pagan – past is not simply revived, but rather "used as a resource".<sup>2</sup> The names are statements in and of themselves, and 'charters for contemporary action' (Malinowski; see Chapter 1.1). Because these 'ancient names' generate a sense of primordial tradition, while at the same time representing an entirely innovative custom, this naming trend can – despite the anthropological reservations against the term<sup>3</sup> – be classified as an invented tradition, an act of *primordialisation* (function one), contributing to the construction Iceland's historicist identity.

### 9.1.3 Between Mjölnir and the Cross

As markers of self-assigned identity, names function – on a personal level – much in the same way as flags do on the collective level of the imagined community. Designing a flag may be the most profound act of self-fashioning imaginable, and no modern 'identity kit' is complete without one specific symbol and/or combination of colours for the collective it embodies to swear allegiance to. The modern flag of Iceland – a white-fimbriated red Nordic cross on a blue field – was officially recognised by royal decree in 1915, and became the official flag of the Icelandic Kingdom in 1918. Before this flag was adopted, Iceland had an unofficial flag – a white Nordic cross on a blue field, affectionally known as *Hvítbláinn* ('the White-blue') – which had been designed by Einar Benediktsson (see Chapter 7.2.2), and which was first shown in a parade in 1897. Unlike most other narratives of national independence movements, Iceland's 'struggle' for independence was an exceptionally peaceful one, and no martyrs ever fell for the national cause.<sup>4</sup> One of the most heroic episodes in this non-violent narrative concerns the 'violation' of the Blue-white, after a young

<sup>1</sup> Iðunn and Bragi are the only names of deities that are actually in use since ancient times.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen (1985) p.99.

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists like Anthony Paul Cohen have avoided the term because of the 'contrived character' it attributes to the described processes, and prefer to interpret mythology "as an expression of the way in which people cognitively map past, present and future." Idem, p.99.

<sup>4</sup> Hálfðanarson (2001).

man hoisted the controversial flag on his rowing boat in the harbour of Reykjavík in 1913. The Danish authorities were not opposed to the use of this flag on the Icelandic mainland, but waving another flag than the Danish one *at sea* was an entirely different matter. Hence, the man was apprehended by the coast-guard while his flag and ship were confiscated. Although not a single drop of blood was shed in this – rather minor – incident, it sent shockwaves through the nation, and everywhere the Blue-white was hoisted in protest against this unacceptable violation of a national symbol.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of this stir, the issue of an *official* national flag was raised in the Alþingi, and the White-blue was rejected on the basis of its confusing resemblance to the Greek flag. An official flag committee, appointed by Hannes Hafstein, was responsible for proposing an alternative. The committee received several suggestions for a new flag from the public, and decided to organise an open plebiscite on the matter; in 1914, thirty-five Icelanders submitted a total of forty-six designs, which provide us with a very rare and fascinating glimpse into the national self-image of a small group of creative citizens.<sup>2</sup>

As could be expected, the great majority of these designs – thirty-five of them – displayed a cross in one form or another. The Nordic cross, which characterised all the national flags of Scandinavia and also the Blue-white, is not only a symbol of Christian, but also of Nordic identity. The first Nordic cross-flag, the Danish *Dannebrog*, is said to have miraculously fallen from heaven during the battle of Lyndanisse, Estonia, in 1219. Consequently, the Nordic cross was introduced on the flags of all the territories controlled by the Danish crown, and it became a potent symbol of Nordic unity. The fact that this motif figures so prominently in the proposals of 1914, signifies not only a sentimental attachment to Einar Benediktsson's White-blue, but also a strong awareness of Iceland's Nordic identity. In Norway, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsson praised the 'pure Norwegian flag', stripped of all the emblems of Danish and Swedish overlordship, as the ultimate symbol of the nation, displaying both Þórr's great hammer – the blue inner cross – and the holy cross of Christianity – the white outer cross –, set against a red background symbolising Norwegian blood.<sup>3</sup> The original, *Christian* meaning of the Nordic cross was thus harmonised with the *pagan* origin of the nation, symbolised by the hammer of Þórr, who had by now become something of a 'heathen patron saint' of the Nordic nations.<sup>4</sup> To nationalists like Bjørnsson, there was no ambivalence in this combination of Christian values and pagan national authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

Such pagan reinterpretations of the Nordic cross did not occur in Iceland, and from the proposals of 1914 it becomes apparent that, at least to some Icelanders, Mjöltnir was – as a symbol of national authenticity – the more appropriate symbol to adorn the flag, rather than the time-honoured symbol of the cross. In two of the submitted designs, a stylised, white Mjöltnir is depicted against a light-blue backdrop; once with, and once without a five-pointed white star in the left upper-corner.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, these submissions were done anonymously, and the exact motivation of the designer will never be known. But the design retains the 'national colours' of the White-blue, and the cross is replaced by a hammer; the

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<sup>1</sup> The public demonstrations ensuing from this incident were the first ones in Iceland's struggle for independence; see Karlsson (2003) p.282.

<sup>2</sup> The proposals were first collected and published one century later, by the graphic designer Hörður Lárusson, in his little booklet *Fáninn/The Flag. Tillögur almennings að hönnun íslenska fánans árið 1914./Suggestions from the public for the design of the Icelandic flag in the year 1914.* (Reykjavík 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsson, *Samlede værker* (Kristiania 1910) part 1, p.133. See also Zernack (2011b) p.163.

<sup>4</sup> Zernack (2011b) p.163.

<sup>5</sup> This was, by no means, the first time that the Christian cross and Mjöltnir were fused; archaeologists have discovered Viking Age pendants, seemingly representing both symbols at the same time in an age of religious transition.

<sup>6</sup> Lárusson (2014), without page number.

nationalistic cultivation of Old Norse mythology has rendered Mjöllnir an acceptable – and even logical – alternative to the cross that *connects* Iceland to the other nations of the Nordic world. As such, this ‘return’ to pre-Christian imagery signifies a movement away from supra-national interconnectedness, and towards national authenticity. Mjöllnir serves as a symbol of strength and political self-determination (see Chapters 6.2 and 10.1), and constitutes a revolutionary – and yet very primordial – emblem of national exclusivity and autonomy.<sup>1</sup> In this polarised discourse, paganism *equals* national authenticity, whereas the cross stands for cultural universalism. Pagan symbols are therefore, in their secularised form, powerful political weapons in the hands of nationalists: completely detached from their initial religious significance, and without detrimental effects on their wielders’ Christian identity.

## 9.2 Downtown Asgard: Mythology in the Urban Space

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Iceland was still predominantly an agrarian society. Reykjavík, the only town with cosmopolitan aspirations, had come a long way since the days of Jónas Hallgrímsson, who had considered her little more than an un-Icelandic, *Danish* merchant town (see Chapter 4.2.4). The capital had been the seat of the Alþingi since 1845, the centre of higher education since 1911, and the epicentre of the nation’s cultural memory and monumentalisation of the past (see Chapter 8.2.3). Although Reykjavík is hardly mentioned in medieval literature – except sporadically for its grasslands –, it was still the homestead of the ‘first settler’, Ingólfr Arnarson, and hence arguably of equal historical importance as Þingvellir. Be that as it may, Reykjavík had never been a city before, and the transformation from a handful of farms in the nineteenth century, to a developing national capital in the early twentieth century, was experienced by many as an abrupt and meteoric one.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, the city retained its unfavourable reputation of an ‘unhistorical’, even ‘artificial’ town, only *pretending* to be a real city. No poet had yet considered the city, with its eight-thousand inhabitants and moral decadence, an appropriate subject for poetic glorification, and history itself seemed – despite Einar Jónsson’s patriotic sculptures – eerily absent in this place, where everything appeared to have happened only yesterday.<sup>3</sup> A past was not present, or: “more accurately, it [the past] could be accommodated conveniently in grandma and grandpa, who had the house in which we now live built. Before that, there was only empty, marshy grassland, the same as in the days of the first settler.”<sup>4</sup> The poet Steinn Steinarr (1908-1958) compared his city to the great capital cities of Europe, and proudly proclaimed that Reykjavík was by no means inferior to London, Rome or Paris.

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<sup>1</sup> A modern equivalent of this proposed design is the so-called *Þórsfrónvé*, an alternative flag of Iceland used by the small ‘High Icelandic’, or ‘hyper-Icelandic’ (*Háfrónska*, or *Háíslenska*) movement, which has been active since the 1990s. The colours of this flag are the same as those of the modern Icelandic flag, but the Nordic cross is replaced with a highly stylised, white-fimbriated red Mjöllnir. The aim of the High Icelandic movement is to purge the language of all foreign influences and loanwords (ultra-purism), and to radicalise the program of linguistic purification as instigated by the Fjölismenn. In this discourse, the cross is interpreted as a symbol of foreign influence (Christian/Scandinavian) and contamination, whereas Mjöllnir serves as an emblem of Iceland’s authenticity and pre-Christian, cultural and linguistic independence. As such, the hammer signifies national *exclusivity*, as opposed to Christian or Nordic *inclusivity*. This replacement is thus not a statement of a religious, but rather of a cultural nature.

<sup>2</sup> The greatest demographic from rural areas to more urban areas did not occur until after World War Two, when thousands exchanged their farms for a life in the city. See: Jóhannsdóttir and Eysteinnsson (2010) p.137.

<sup>3</sup> Pétur Gunnarsson, *Reykjavík* (Berlin 2011 [Reykjavík 2010], translated into German by Betty Wahl) p.27.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.41.

The only thing he found entirely lacking in Reykjavík however, was history.<sup>1</sup> For obvious reasons, this ‘lack of history’ rendered the city a controversial subject in the nationalistic discourse, which still centred around the themes of nature and a Viking ‘Golden Age’; the ‘real Icelander’ was to be found out on the fields and in the fjords, not in the muddy streets of Reykjavík.<sup>2</sup> The flight from the countryside was considered something of a moral and spiritual threat to all of Icelandic society; the Romantic discourse on the superiority of rural life was a dominant one throughout Europe, but it has been stated that it “had an unusually strong appeal in Iceland, with its complete lack of traditional urban culture and extraordinary rapid urbanization.”<sup>3</sup>

Urban culture was something entirely new to the Icelanders, and ‘making sense’ of the newly evolved urban space – within the parameters of Iceland’s national identity – formed an ideological challenge in the early twentieth century. The town was no longer simply evolving ‘naturally’, and new quarters had to be laid out collectively and constructed with rational foresight.<sup>4</sup> And, as with everything that is planned as an integrated system, the new cityscape could be used as a means to spatialise and reinforce a central set of convictions about Icelandic identity; the city’s street plan may have been very new, but the historical discourse expressed in its fabric was not. To the trained eye, a city plan can be read like a palimpsest, on which every new layer of ideological city planning rewrites the preceding layers underneath.<sup>5</sup> Through the practice of selecting one specific theme for every new quarter under construction – as for instance ‘the Íslendingasögur’, or ‘eddic characters’ –, and placing the street names in a meaningful constellation or network *vis-à-vis* each other, meaningless or neutral spaces become semiotised, urban geographies of spatialised significance. A street plan can become a network of meaning, in which the people inhabiting the city are – consciously or not – physically embedded. Like the invention of pagan given names, dedicating streets to characters from national history should be seen as “a fervent, deliberate affirmation of the nation’s continued viability from its fondly recalled, inspiring past into and beyond the present.”<sup>6</sup> As such, this practice cannot be considered ‘banal’. But the all-pervasive impact of this development on the quotidian experience of these semiotised spaces by the people who populate them, is of a far less deliberate or even *conscious* nature, and is therefore clearly part of what Michael Billig has dubbed ‘banal nationalism’ (see Chapter 9.1.1).

In the Nordic countries, Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the Viking past formed the obvious fountainheads of national themes and characters, suitable for this kind of urban cultivation. Copenhagen was the first expanding city to draw inspiration from the sagas and Eddas in its quest for street names, and Stockholm soon followed suit.<sup>7</sup> The first street in

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.37.

<sup>2</sup> This was not only the view of many Icelanders, but also that of foreigners visiting the island, expecting to encounter a rural society untouched by the vices of modernity. See Halink (2010) pp.392-3.

<sup>3</sup> Karlsson (2003) p.292. On the other hand, one could also argue that the idealisation of rural life is a result of, and a reaction to a well-developed urban culture; see Hálfðanarson (2000a), and Chapter 5.1.2.

<sup>4</sup> To this end, the Alþingi appointed the first ‘State Architect’ (*húsameistari ríkisins*) – the prolific architect Guðjón Samúelsson – in 1920. On the grand ideas for Reykjavík’s transformation into a neo-classical, monumental capital, see especially Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin. Menning, fagurfræði og pólitík í upphafi tuttugastu aldar* (Reykjavík 2013).

<sup>5</sup> For an evaluation of political – and *anti*-political – ideals in the modern fabric of urban spaces, see especially Yvonne Whelan, *Reinventing Modern Dublin. Streetscapes, Iconography and the Politics of Identity* (Dublin 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.31. In this passage, Leerssen refers to the new ‘bourgeois streets outside the just-demolished city ramparts’ of nineteenth-century cities. In Reykjavík, there were no such ramparts to demolish, and the belatedness of Iceland’s urbanisation places this development in the first half of the twentieth, rather than the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> On the cultivation of Old Norse motives in Sweden’s public space, see especially Mjöberg (1968).

Reykjavík to be named after a character from the Viking Age was *Ingólfsstræti* ('Ingólfr's Street'), in honour of Iceland's first settler and the founder of Reykjavík. This name was formally accepted in 1880, and in the first three decades of the twentieth century, a large number of streets was named after Iceland's most prolific saga heroes.<sup>1</sup> The first saga-character to have a street called after him in Reykjavík was Grettir the Strong, protagonist of *Grettis saga*, in 1898. The city council considered the sagas a healthy antidote to the much-feared moral and cultural effects of urbanisation, and sought to incorporate them in the city plan so that – in the words of a recent guide to the city – “the folk of Reykjavík wouldn't turn into a mob devoid of all culture.”<sup>2</sup> In the 1930s and 40s, when the city was undergoing its most profound planological transformation, the eastern part of the downtown area – Austurbærinn – became the ‘saga neighbourhood’, in which the plot of *Brennu-Njáls saga* is spatialised, or ‘retold’ in the street plan. The way in which the streets are organised and positioned towards each other is indicative of the relations between the characters in the saga, and one could – with some imagination – stroll through the storylines, and experience the dramatic narrative in a non-verbal way.<sup>3</sup> The street name committee responsible for this layout was very well aware of the power of naming<sup>4</sup>, and sought to actively ‘upgrade’ a problematic and contested urban space, by ‘importing history’ through the medium of street names.<sup>5</sup> This practice served at least three ideological causes; first of all, it endowed this ‘place without history’ with the kind of heroic prestige generally attributed to the countryside, and gave rise what one could call surrogate, or ‘instant *lieux de mémoire*’, which incorporate the city into the fabric of Iceland's grand national narrative. In other words: the urban space is *primordialised* (the first function of myth, as identified in Chapter 1.1).

Second, this practice contributed to the *integration* of the city's population, which – in the first half of the twentieth century – originated from all the corners of the island. In 1901, the city had approximately 6.700 inhabitants. In 1940, this number had increased almost six-fold, to about 40.000 inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> Most of these new city-dwellers were not born in Reykjavík, and grew up in old farms and rural settlements where the sagas had – at least in their experience – *actually* taken place. By interweaving the storylines of all these sagas in the city's street plan, the very local, *regional* dimension of these stories – connected to *certain* farms and a *certain* corner of the country – was downplayed in favour a more integrated, *national* perspective; every saga hero represented in the capital's street names – and thus every new inhabitant of Reykjavík – was first and foremost an *Icelander*, and only on the second place either from the Westfjords, the Eastfjords, or from Rangárvallasýsla. In Reykjavík, all the regionalities of the island were molten and moulded into one single nationality, in the same way Sigurður málari's *national* costume (see Chapter 5.2.3) was

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<sup>1</sup> The first heroes to have streets named after them in Reykjavík were Njáll (Njálsgata) and Grettir the Strong (Grettisgata). Egill Skallagrímsson, Eiríkr rauði and Leifr Eiríksson received their own streets as late as 1932 (Egilsgata, Eiríksgata and Leifsgata). See Helgason (1998) p.175. For a historical overview of the development of Reykjavík, see especially Páll Línal, *Reykjavík. Sögustaður við Sund* (4 vols.; Reykjavík 1986-91), and Guðrún Kvaran, “Öllum götum skal nafn gefa”, in *Orð og tunga* 12 (2010) pp.25-40.

<sup>2</sup> Guðjón Friðriksson, *Reykjavík Walks. Explore the Old City Centre and Neighbourhood* (Reykjavík 2014) p.123-4.

<sup>3</sup> A particularly moving detail in this piece of literary city planning, is the fact that a kindergarten was opened on the plot of land *between* Njálsgata and the parallel street named after Njáll's wife, Bergþóra, symbolising their little grandchild Þórðr, who lied – and died – *between* his grandparents in their bed, when their farm was burnt down. See Helgason (1998) pp.177-180.

<sup>4</sup> I have avoided use of the term ‘christening’ in this context, due to its religious connotations.

<sup>5</sup> This import of national history – which, in Iceland, *per definition* took place *outside* the city – occurred in tandem with the ‘import of nature’ into the architecture of the urban space, both with the intention of making the city more authentic and ‘national’. See Jóhannsdóttir and Eysteinnsson (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Helgason (1998) p.177.

essentially a creative pastiche of many local styles and ornaments. Living in the city was by no means something to be ashamed of. In fact, the urban glorification of history's great men and women seemed to indicate a certain *continuity* between the rural past and the urban present and future; just like the heroes of old had established a great and *independent* republic, the urban heroes of modernity would lay the foundation of a *new* independent republic, this time governed from Reykjavík rather than Þingvellir. Thirdly – and closely connected to this second cause –, it served the philological purpose of *nationalising* the entire corpus of Icelandic family sagas, and to detach them from local and regional chauvinisms. By enshrining their storylines and characters in the very fabric of the nation's capital, the Íslendingasögur are presented as an integrated unity, irrespective of where they may have been composed and what – local – political purpose they may have served.

The central road *Snorrabraut*, named after Snorri Sturluson, received its name in 1948<sup>1</sup> and runs – like a central spine – straight through the city's 'saga neighbourhood', flanked on both sides by streets named after heroes and heroines from Iceland's earliest history and the Íslendingasögur.<sup>2</sup> From a bird's perspective, this layout provides with a schematic rendering of the *book-prose* interpretation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature (see Chapters 7.1.3 and 10.1); together, these streets form an intricate network of plots and interrelated narratives, but they all sprout from the same, central stem, namely the medieval *Icelandic* genius – epitomised by Snorri –, the 'Homer of the North'. Few people who cross this street on a daily basis will be aware of this philological statement, embedded in the city's infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

Slightly more to the west in Reykjavík's downtown, around the hill Skólavörðuhóltið – which today is crowned with Iceland's biggest church, Hallgrímskirkja –, there is a cluster of fourteen streets and alleys which carry names inspired by Old Norse mythology. Among the deities represented in this part of town are Óðinn, Bragi (god of poetry), Freyja, the blind god Höðr (see Chapter 8.2.2), Njörðr, Baldr and his wife Nanna, Týr, the norn Urðr (see Chapter 8.1.2), Váli – who killed Höðr to avenge Baldr –, Þórr, and, somewhat surprisingly, Loki, the shape-shifting deceiver.<sup>4</sup> Most of these streets received their names in 1919 or later – the last one in 1929 –,<sup>5</sup> but the oldest ones, Óðinsgata ('Óðinn's Street') and Óðinstorg ('Óðinn's Square'), date from 1906.<sup>6</sup> In dedicating the first eddic street to the supreme god Óðinn, Reykjavík was no different from the neighbourhood Ydre Nørrebro in Copenhagen, where – since 1860 – many streets were named after eddic gods, beginning with Odinsgade. The first eddic street in Stockholm was also Odengatan (1885), which formed a kind of pagan

<sup>1</sup> This street was previously part of the city's *Hringbraut* ('Ring Road').

<sup>2</sup> *Snorrabraut* does *not*, as Nancy Marie Brown maintains, run through the 'eddic neighbourhood', where the streets are named after Æsir and Ásynjur; see Brown (2012) p.190. On *Snorrabraut* and Snorri Sturluson, see especially Helgason (1998) pp.169-184.

<sup>3</sup> The cult of the Icelandic genius is also manifested in the architecture of Reykjavík's *Þjóðmenningarhúsið* ('House of National Culture', nowadays *Safnahúsið* or 'Culture House'; Hverfisgata 15), inaugurated in 1909 and designed by the Danish architect Johannes Magdahl Nielsen. The building is adorned with crests bearing the names of Iceland's greatest writers, including Snorri Sturluson. Therefore, the façade can be considered Iceland's fairly modest version of a national *Panthéon*.

<sup>4</sup> In 2007, the Nordic Society in Reykjavík published a brochure called *Goðahverfið* ('Neighbourhood of the gods'), containing information in multiple languages on the street names' origin, as well as a walking route through all its streets and alleys. It was available in tourist information centres throughout the city, but is hard to come by nowadays.

<sup>5</sup> Kvaran (2010) pp.31-2.

<sup>6</sup> An architectural and planological history of this block – and many other blocks – can be found on the website of the Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland: [http://www.minjastofnun.is/media/husakannanir/skyrsla\\_144.pdf](http://www.minjastofnun.is/media/husakannanir/skyrsla_144.pdf) (last accessed: 16 December 2015), *Húsakönnun. Skólavörðustígur – Njarðargata – Þórsgata – Baldursgata – Lokastígur – Týsgata* (Reykjavík 2009; skýrsla nr. 144). On the names of the separate streets, see pp.22-23. According to Kvaran (2010), the construction of Óðinsgata commenced in 1908 (p.32).



trinity with Þórr and Freyr (Torsgatan and Freijgatan). Towards the close of the nineteenth century, Oslo followed with its own, slightly different trinity, consisting of Odins gate, Tors gate and Balders gate. Baldr, god of light, was arguably the Edda's most popular figure – together with Óðinn –, also beyond Iceland (see Chapter 8.1.3). A possible explanation for the Swedish predilection for Freyr – rather than Baldr – is that Þórr, Óðinn and Freyr were traditionally considered the 'holy trinity' of Sweden's high temple in Gamla Uppsala, and Freyr – or Yngvi – was considered a quintessentially Swedish god (fig. 4).<sup>1</sup> But the superiority of Óðinn, established by Snorri Sturluson (see Chapter 2.1.3), was confirmed and reinforced by planologists in all the Nordic countries.

However, apart from the pan-Nordic agreement on Óðinn's – and Þórr's – central importance in the Old Norse pantheon, there are relatively few similarities between Reykjavík's 'district of the gods' and that of the other Nordic capitals; fairly prominent deities like Sif, Frigg and Heimdallr are mysteriously absent in Reykjavík's street plan<sup>2</sup>, whereas relatively obscure or downright *negative* ones – Váli, Höðr and Loki – were deemed appropriate characters to dedicate streets to. The fact that one of the streets is named after a more obscure character from the Eddas is *Fjölnisgata* ('Fjölnir's street'), Fjölnir being one of Óðinn's many names, but also the name of a mythological king of Sweden (see Chapter 4.2.1) may not come as a surprise; because of the eponymous journal and its importance to Iceland's national movement, this character had become an 'Icelandic god', a mythological character which the Icelanders could claim exclusively for themselves, not unlike Freyr-Yngvi in Sweden. By including Fjölnir on the list of street-worthy deities, the city council incorporated the Fjölnismenn and the Romantic nationalism they represented into the mythological fabric of the nation itself.

What is more surprising, is that some of the other streets in this neighbourhood are dedicated to 'negative' deities, like Loki. This may seem strange, if the practice of naming streets after – either fictional or historical – characters is considered a sign of respect and veneration. However, there is another approach to naming streets, which is less commemorative and requires a broader perspective, encompassing the entire district – characterised by a certain 'theme' – as a narrative whole. Only then can 'negative street names' like *Lokagata* ('Loki's Street') be understood in the right context.<sup>3</sup>

Although the narrative coherence of this neighbourhood is less explicit than that of the younger saga district<sup>4</sup>, many of the gods represented here are related to one of the Edda's most evocative and central narratives, namely that of Baldr's death and its aftermath (see Chapter 8.1.3). It seems hardly coincidental that Baldr's street (*Baldursgata*) merges with the street named after his wife Nanna (*Nönnugata*), who died of grief during her husband's funeral and joined him in the underworld. Óðinsgata and *Baldursgata* are the two longest streets in this district, and they are flanked and crossed by other eddic streets, varying in length. The shorter alleys named after Váli and Höðr – *Válastígur* and *Haðarstígur* – run parallel to each other and, for a short stretch, with *Baldursgata*.<sup>5</sup> The blind god Höðr is

<sup>1</sup> The three Royal Mounds (*Kungshögarna*) in Gamla Uppsala were, according to folklore, the barrows of these three deified kings, and Freyr-Yngvi became the progenitor of the legendary royal dynasty of the Ynglings; see Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, the first section of his *Heimskringla*.

<sup>2</sup> Heimdallr, the 'whitest of the gods', has a street called after him in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of this is the World War Two-themed neighbourhood in the Dutch city of Groningen, where *positive* street names like *Overwinningsplein* ('Victory Square') and *Laan van de Vrijheid* ('Freedom Lane') are, for the sake of completeness, interspersed by negative ones like *Deportatiestraat* ('Deportation Street') and *Bezettingslaan* ('Occupation Lane').

<sup>4</sup> No masterplan underlying this district's arrangement of street names has been preserved.

<sup>5</sup> Between *Válastígur* and *Haðarstígur* lies *Bragastígur*, named after Bragi, god of skaldic poetry. All three of them are, just like Baldr, considered sons of Óðinn. But apart from that, Bragi's presence in this constellation is not justified by the myth of Baldr's death.

tricked by Loki into murdering Baldr, and – although he did not commit this crime willingly or even consciously – justice is served when he in turn is killed by Váli, Baldr’s brother and avenger. It is tempting to interpret the fact that Baldursgata continues far beyond these minor parallel alleys – all the way to the end of the gods’ district – as an indication of the light-god’s continued existence in the underworld, and his eventual return after Ragnarök. Interestingly, the alley named after Loki (Lokastígur) – who so maliciously instigated the whole tragedy – lies further down Baldursgata, parallel to Þórsgata. In a book of city walks through Reykjavík, this is explained as yet “another whimsical invention from the people who picked names for the streets of Reykjavík”, since Loki was often close to Þórr’s side during his heroic travels to the lands of the giants.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the eddic neighbourhoods in other Scandinavian cities – where the mischievous shape-shifter is *not* honoured with his own street –, Reykjavík could justify ‘Loki’s alley’ on the basis of this two-men fellowship; without Loki, the literary motif would simply be incomplete.<sup>2</sup>

The cultivation of eddic themes and eddic names in the public sphere was first and foremost an act of national, cultural self-fashioning, and as such perfectly justifiable. The other Nordic nations had set an example which the Icelanders – always the *epigones* when it came to the cultivation of mythology – were bound to follow. But the status of the Eddas in Iceland’s national discourse was – as I have demonstrated in previous chapters – more contested than that of the Íslendingasögur, and the presence of a ‘heathen neighbourhood’ in the very heart of this Lutheran nation’s capital was not applauded by everyone. To some, this secular veneration of the pre-Christian gods amounted to nothing less than downright sacrilege.<sup>3</sup> However, to most city-dwellers, the street names were little more than just that: street names, without any ideological or religious ramifications. The unruliness of the ‘common folks’ is demonstrated by the naming commission’s failed attempt to impose the name *Ásgarður* for the whole neighbourhood; this official name was never picked up in quotidian speech, whereas the informal term *Goðahverfið* (‘the Neighbourhood of the Gods’) quickly became commonplace. This name first appears in print in an article in the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* (1923)<sup>4</sup>, and pops up in advertisements – “Goðahverfið buys everything in Óðinsgata 3.”<sup>5</sup> – and articles ever since. The street names became fully integrated in the city-dwellers’ day-to-day experience, along with the growing number of pagan motifs and references incorporated in Reykjavík’s streetscape. The nineteenth-century trend of naming journals and societies after characters or objects from the Eddas (see Chapter 3.3.1) intensified in the early twentieth century, and rendered the obvious eddic symbols of national potency – primarily Þórr’s hammer Mjöllnir – almost commonplace, and banal. When Iceland’s first steamship company – *Einskipsfélagið* – was founded in 1914, Samúel Eggertsson designed the company’s logo, consisting of Mjöllnir in the guise of a swastika.<sup>6</sup> When the company’s monumental headquarters – designed by Guðjón Samúelsson – opened its doors in the very heart of the city (1921), this logo was prominently displayed on the building’s façade.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Friðriksson (2014) p.158.

<sup>2</sup> In other cases, the choice for a certain eddic street name is motivated by the location of the street itself; the boulevard *Ægisíða* (‘Ægir’s side’) is called after the god of the sea, simply because of its seaside location.

<sup>3</sup> Árni Óla, “Nafngiftir gatna í Reykjavík”, in idem., *Reykjavík fyrri tíma. Sögukaflar* (vol. 2; Reykjavík 1985) pp.270-281, p.279.

<sup>4</sup> Áki: “Skipulag bæja”, *Morgunblaðið* (5 September 1923) p.1.

<sup>5</sup> This advertisement was often reprinted, but appears for the first time in *Alþýðublaðið* of 23 March 1926, p.6; “Goðahverfið verzlur alt á Óðinsgötu 3.”

<sup>6</sup> On the link between Þórr’s hammer and the swastika, see Chapter 8.2.

<sup>7</sup> This public display of the swastika was not considered problematic – not even by the British and American forces on Iceland – during World War Two, but Eimskip did change its logo in 1989, and the swastika on the

Knud Zimsen (1875-1953), engineer and major of Reykjavík, commissioned the construction of his own luxurious residence in the city's centre – on Lækjargata – and adorned it not only with a castle-like tower with historicising merlons, but also with the name *Gimli*, displayed on the tower's white façade (1906; see fig. 27). Zimsen, who dedicated his entire active life to the urban development of Reykjavík<sup>1</sup>, delivered a clear statement by naming his house – where he lived until 1911 – after the shining house of Baldr in Ásgarðr. According to the *Völuspá*, the halls of this palace 'with tiles of gold' will host neither grief nor evil, and will be the home of the righteous ones who will survive Ragnarök, when Baldr has returned gloriously from the underworld.<sup>2</sup> Like no other term from the Eddas, Gimli – alternately known as *Gimlé* – signifies the joyful anticipation of a utopian future, beyond hardship and suffering, and the beginning of a new, unspoiled chapter in the endless cycle of history. Through the cultivation of this mythological concept, entrepreneurs like Zimsen could express their optimistic outlook on Iceland's future, and the society's revolutionary transformation into a modern, industrialised and urbanised nation, firmly grounded in its ancient history and culture. Mythology offers the best tools to root the nation in the future, by ancient means; Gimli is simultaneously a very *ancient* (Old Norse) and *primordial*, a *futuristic* (eschatological), and *timeless* concept, and epitomises as such the very 'Janus-faced character' of modern nationalism. It embodies both the glorious past and the promising future. Its implementation in modern spaces – like urban space – contributes to the appropriation, or 'conquest' of these new terrains, in the name of the nation. The creation of mythscapes serves to make national sense of the 'new world' of the city. And mythology would serve a very similar purpose on the other side of the ocean, where Icelandic emigrants were trying to make sense of their existence in the actual New World.

### 9.3 Beyond Ragnarök: New Iceland

#### 9.3.1 Confronting the Unknown

One of mythology's primary functions, is embedding the very bewildering and confusing experience of being in a symbolic network of narratives that conveys 'sense'. Especially when confronted with the great unknown, this mythological way of sense-making becomes an essential survival strategy: "Myth is [...] about that for which initially we have no words."<sup>3</sup> It is the dynamic quality and semiotic adaptability of myth, that render it a useful tool in the process of coming to terms with new situations and experiences, especially if they are of a catastrophic or uprooting nature.<sup>4</sup> Mythological narratives are more readily de-contextualised than for instance historical narratives – like the sagas –, in order to be *re*-contextualised and applied to a new world, even if that new world is entirely disconnected from the old one in which the myths first came into being. No other kind of community is more likely to cling to its ancestral heritage in order to position itself in a changing environment than a *diasporic* community; even when disconnected from the actual nation itself, "the nation remains the paramount space within which identity is located."<sup>5</sup> Like small pockets of self-ness, these communities are constantly adrift in an endless and unpredictable ocean of otherness. This

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building's façade is no longer visible. See "Fyrsta hús landsins sem hafði lyftu", in *Morgunblaðið* (24 August 2004).

<sup>1</sup> His autobiography, which appeared in 1952, is quite appropriately titled *Úr bæ í borg* ('From Town to City').

<sup>2</sup> *Völuspá*, stanza 61.

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong (2005) p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Which is why Björn M. Ólsen argued that the *Völuspá* was composed in a period characterised by eschatological uncertainties, related to the prophesied 'end time' around the year 1000; see Chapter 7.1.

<sup>5</sup> Edensor (2002) p.65.

experience of uprootedness calls for a process of continual reaffirmation of the group's origins, and of adjusting the cultural heritage in such a way, that it serves the specific needs connected to the process of 'taking root' in new lands, without losing touch with the old. This process demands a more abstract and flexible concept of national identity, which is viable and can be sustained even if the *geographical* nation is thousands of miles away. In cultural terms, a diaspora entails cultivating "dense networks of association which are based upon national identity", no longer solely located in the fatherland.<sup>1</sup> The old stories have to be appropriated anew, reinvented, in order to incorporate the immigrant experience into the national narrative, and to position the group in the new ethnic reality of the identities patchwork of the new world.<sup>2</sup> How did the Old Norse myths fulfil this task in the Icelandic diaspora, mainly to the United States and Canada? Did the cultivation of eddic themes and characters convey a sense of Icelandicness in these strange lands? And which stories best captured the experience of leaving the fatherland behind, and creating a new beginning elsewhere?

In the period between 1870 and 1915, roughly twenty thousand Icelanders – or one quarter of the island's population – left the harsh living conditions in their fatherland behind, in search of a more prosperous future elsewhere. The first wave of Icelandic emigration consisted primarily of people from the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*), who had converted to Mormonism and migrated to the United States – Utah primarily – and Canada.<sup>3</sup> However, the main episode of the Icelandic diaspora began when Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood (1826-1902) – better known as Lord Dufferin –, Governor General of Canada, granted the Icelanders their own 'Free State' at Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, which would become known as 'New Iceland'. The first Icelandic settlers arrived here in 1875, and especially in the 1880s and 1890s, thousands of Icelanders fled their island, plagued by volcanic eruptions and harsh winters, and flocked to the new Free State.<sup>4</sup> However, the worries of the *Vestur-Íslendingar* ('West-Icelanders', as the Icelandic colonists are usually known in Icelandic) were far from over once they reached their new home; the community saw itself confronted with hunger, floods, smallpox epidemics, and winter temperatures of minus forty degrees Celsius. Furthermore, a religious dispute between two of the community's pastors led to an exodus within the exodus, when a considerable group – led by one of the pastors – left New Iceland for other parts of Manitoba and North Dakota. All these hardships nearly destroyed the small community of approximately fifty families, which would eventually overcome the suffering, and retain its distinctly Icelandic identity to this very day.<sup>5</sup>

The Icelandic community in Manitoba quickly assimilated with Canadian society, and adapted to Victorian culture. The newcomers even developed a reputation as fervent supporters of the British royal family, and the community's first steamship –which transported passengers and supplies between New Iceland, Selkirk and Winnipeg – was even

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.65. For the research Edensor refers to in this context – on 'Irishness' beyond Ireland –, see: J. Nugent, *Networks of Ethnicity. A Cybernetic Study of the Second-Generation Irish in Birmingham* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Staffordshire, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> On Michel de Certeau's concept of appropriation, see Chapter 1.2.1.

<sup>3</sup> Halldór Laxness's famous novel *Paradise Reclaimed (Paradísarheimt)*; Reykjavík 1960) deals with this 'Mormon migration' from Iceland. A considerably smaller number of Icelanders migrated to Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> The community would retain its exclusive status of Free State, open only to Icelandic settlers, until 1897, when the area was opened up to Ukrainian, Polish and Hungarian immigrants as well. For historical overviews of the Icelandic settlement in the New World, see especially Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America. The First Settlers* (Winnipeg 2002), and Guðjón Arngrímsson's two volumes *Nýja Ísland. Örlagasaga vesturfaranna í máli og myndum* (Reykjavík 1997) and *Annað Ísland. Gullöld Vestur-Íslendinga í máli og myndum* (Reykjavík 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Redekop (2015).

christened *Victoria*.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, many West-Icelanders appear to have experienced the whole enterprise as a *re-enactment* of Iceland's earliest history, rather than the first chapter of something entirely new. Upon arrival in the New World, the newcomers began their correspondences with family-members and friends back in Iceland, seemingly motivated by the historical awareness that these letters would amount to a second *Landnámabók* ('Book of Settlements'), recording the epic achievements of the first *landnámsmenn*.<sup>2</sup> The "dynamics of immigration"<sup>3</sup> form a key-ingredient of Iceland's national self-image (see Chapter 1.2.2), and the heroic *landnám* narrative almost naturally became the dominant narrative template for accounts of carving out a new existence in New Iceland. The *landnám* served as a 'prototypic model', perfectly suitable to any account of headstrong, Nordic settlers who refuse "to knuckle under", when others – less heroic individuals – would surrender to the tyranny of kings or the hardships of nature.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the epic dimension of the Icelandic diaspora, acquired through association with the *Landnámsöld*, is comparable to the religious vocabulary with which American Puritanists and other religiously-motivated colonists fashioned their colonisation to the New World as a 'second exodus'; an undertaking of apocalyptic significance.<sup>5</sup> Although the exodus model is thoroughly confessional, whereas the *landnám* narratives is secular, both narrative templates serve as a repository of topoi and motifs, passionately re-activated in order to make sense of the migratory experience.<sup>6</sup> Rather than turning to biblical narratives, the Icelandic immigrants found inspiration in their own books, and in the 'invisible religion' (see Chapter 1.1): the Romantic nationalism they brought with them from Iceland. Although the very act of abandoning the fatherland met with considerable criticism from nationalists like Benedikt Gröndal<sup>7</sup>, it has been maintained that migrating to the New World was in fact often *inspired* by Icelandic nationalism, and seen as an act of patriotism. To be sure, the idea of exploring new lands and harvesting its riches for the benefit of the own community did resonate with the Viking ideals on which Iceland was believed to be founded.<sup>8</sup> And many of the settlers' insistence on establishing a purely

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> A beautiful and voluminous collection of these letters has been published by Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga* (2 vols; Reykjavík 2001-2002).

<sup>3</sup> Daisy L. Neijmann, *The Icelandic Voice in Canadian Letters. The Contribution of Icelandic-Canadian Writers to Canadian Literature* (Ottawa 1997 [1994]) p.4-8.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln (2014) p.32. The author is here not referring to New Iceland, but rather to an earlier activation of the same prototypic model in the thirteenth century, when the king of Norway became increasingly influential in Iceland, and the islanders had to reaffirm their historical anti-monarchism. However, in the postscript of the same monograph, Lincoln does reflect on his own immigrant ancestor who migrated to America from Russia, and on the influence of this family narrative on his later interest in Icelandic history and the *landnám*.; pp.121-124. This goes to show that the narrative template of the *landnám* is universal, and not reserved for those with ethnic ties to Iceland.

<sup>5</sup> Biblical topoi in the medieval sources on the original *landnám* seem to indicate that this is not at all a new practice; the three ravens of *Hrafna-Flóki* ('Raven-Flóki'; the first Norseman to sail to Iceland on purpose) mentioned in *Landnámabók*, which helped him navigate his way to Iceland, are reminiscent of the biblical doves which helped Noah navigate his ark to promised, dry land.

<sup>6</sup> On the motifs of migration and human mobility in Early Modern thought, see especially Stefan Donecker, "The Ambivalence of Migration in Early Modern Thought: Comments on an Intellectual History of Human Mobility", in Michi Messer, Renée Schroeder and Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Migrations. Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Vienna 2012) pp.227-237.

<sup>7</sup> On Icelandic authors' opinions on New Iceland, see Úlfar Bragason, "Images of North America in Writings by Three Icelandic Authors. Matthías Jochumsson, Jón Ólafsson, and Einar H. Kvaran.", in Gunilla Florby, Mark Shackleton and Katri Suhonen (eds.), *Canada: Images of a Post/National Society* (Canadian Studies 19; Brussels 2009) pp.235-244.

<sup>8</sup> For a certain period of time, families in Iceland did benefit significantly from financial support from relatives in Canada.

Icelandic ethnic community, with its own independent political structure and ecclesiastical institutions, are indeed indicative of the group's rootedness in Iceland's national movement.<sup>1</sup>

### 9.3.2 Stephan G. Stephansson: Poet without Fatherland

The experience of being uprooted, or being torn between the old and the new, is one of the great themes in the poetry of Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927), the autodidact poet-farmer who was born as Stefán Guðmundur Guðmundsson in Skagafjörður, and migrated to the New World – first to the United States and eventually Alberta in Canada – at the age of nineteen.<sup>2</sup> Although the ‘Poet of the Rocky Mountains’ (*Klettafjallaskáldið*), as he was commonly known, was dedicated to his new life and composed several poems in praise of his new motherland Canada, he continued to write exclusively in Icelandic and never quite cut all bands with his native soil:

Somehow it has come upon me,  
I've no fatherland;  
Though my heart with love is bounded  
With a lasting band  
To my native soil that blessed me  
As a growing boy,  
When the world its shining glory  
Gave me hope and joy.

Never could my foster mother  
Take my mother's place;  
Always there was something lacking,  
She could not replace.  
I have yet to know the meaning  
Of her legacy,  
Always there's an awkward feeling  
'Twixt herself and me.<sup>3</sup>

Stephansson is generally not considered an exponent of Romanticism, and many features of his poetry link him to more modern schools of thought, primarily Realism (*raunsæisstefnan*); his poetry is often of a polemical nature, turning his pen against the clergy – the exact nature of his religious convictions is disputed, but on occasion he did exhibit atheistic leanings – and free enterprise, and criticising the horrors of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> He was inspired by the

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<sup>1</sup> Thor (2002) p.5. On the development of a Canadian identity among Icelandic immigrants – especially in the second generation –, see Martha Lilja Marthensdóttir Olsen, “Jeg er fædd í Canada og því canadísk að ætt. Einsögurannsókn á lífi tveggja vestur-íslenskra kvenna”, in *Sagnir* 24 (2004) pp.82-89.

<sup>2</sup> He would not return to Iceland until he was sixty-four years old. See for a thorough examination of Stephansson's life and work Viðar Hreinsson, *Wakeful nights. Stephan G. Stephansson: Icelandic-Canadian poet* (Calgary 2012), and idem., *Ævisaga Stephans G. Stephanssonar* (vol. 1: *Landneminn mikli* and vol. 2: *Andvökuskáld*; Reykjavík 2002-2003).

<sup>3</sup> Stephan G. Stephansson, *Útlegðin* ('The Exile'; 1891) verses one and two, in his collected poems *Andvökur* ('Wakeful Nights') edited by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík 1980 [1939]) pp.219-220, 219. The translation is by Paul Sigurdson, in Stephan G. Stephansson, *Selected Translations from Andvökur* (Edmonton 1982) p.6; Ég á orðið einhvern veginn/ekkert föðurland,/þó að fastar hafi um hjartað/hnýst það ræktarband,/minn sem tengdan huga hefur/hauðri, mig sem ól,/þar sem æskubrautir birti/björtust vonarsól//Fóstran gekk mér aldrei alveg/í þess móðurstað./Það var eitthvað, á sem skorti –/ekki veit ég hvað –/og því hef ég arfi hennar/aldrei vera sagst./Þó hefur einhver óviðkynning/okkar milli lagst.

<sup>4</sup> Elísson (2006) p.318.

American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, and influenced the development of literary Realism back in Iceland considerably, where his poetry enjoyed great popularity.

But what distinguishes Stephenson from the other Icelandic representatives of literary modernity is his elaborate employment of themes and images from Old Norse-Icelandic literature and history, and not least from the Eddas. In Iceland, literary innovators turned against the all-pervasive influence of Romantic historicism, and followed the examples of foreign Realists like Émile Zola and Georg Brandes instead. But in the cultural climate of the Canadian-Icelandic community, the medieval sources remained a strong link with the old land, and Stephansson's predilection for Old Norse themes could be considered a symptom of his nostalgic longings for the Motherland. The poet's cultivation of familiar eddic themes is markedly different from that of the Romantic school, and often serves the purpose of addressing and criticising very contemporary issues.

News of the atrocities of global warfare made a deep impact on the convinced pacifist Stephenson, who did not subscribe to the black and white division between good and evil, guilty and innocent, which characterised all wartime propaganda. Instead, it was innocence itself that was brutally murdered, by all the belligerent parties involved. In one of his poems, he has Fjallkonan address the returning (Icelandic-Canadian) soldiers with a heavy heart, saying that the "greatest favour she [Iceland] received was when Denmark forbade her children to bear arms."<sup>1</sup> In the same poem, composed when World War I was at its peak (1917), the blindness of those on the battlefield is compared to that of the blind god Höðr, who was deceived by Loki into killing his brother Baldr, god of light and innocence, without knowing it (see Chapter 9.2):

But thrice accursed be the knaves  
My [Fjallkonan's] errant sons beguile  
To war, with blinded eyes, upon  
A neighbor's domicile;  
As Hoth [Höðr], with tragic innocence,  
Obeyed a tempter's wile.<sup>2</sup>

The belligerent governments with their propaganda machines are thus identified with the 'tempter' Loki, tricking 'blinded' young men into battle where their inner Baldr, namely their innocence, is the war's first victim. In order to reach a full understanding of the infinite number of ideological potentials that one and the same myth contains, it is worthwhile to compare this fiercely political activation of the myth of Baldr's death to the spiritual interpretation of Einar Jónsson, briefly analysed in Chapter 8.2.2. The battlefield also features in some of Stephansson's other poems, not least as a metaphor for life itself. In his poem *Hjaðninga-víg* ('Battle of the Hjaðningar') he refers to a legendary, unceasing battle attested in a great number of medieval sources, in which the combatants come back to life immediately after having fallen in order to continue their fight for eternity.<sup>3</sup> Stephansson uses this ancient theme as a metaphor for the perpetual conflict between the will to move forward and the longing for stability and steadiness. This was a conflict most West-Icelanders, caught between tradition and progress, could certainly relate to.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephansson (1982) p.79.

<sup>2</sup> Stephan G. Stephansson, "Fjallkonan til hermanna sem heim koma" (third strophe), the last poem in his cycle *Vígslóði* (Reykjavík 1920) pp.50-51, 50. Translated by Paul Bjarnason in Stephansson (1982) p.80; En vei sé þeim! og vei sé þeim,/sem véla knérunn minn,/Að vega blindra höndum/í grannaflokkinn sinn,/Eins hermilega og Höður,/til óráðs auðsvikinn!

<sup>3</sup> This theme occurs in *Ragnarsdrápa*, *Sörla þáttur*, Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, and Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*.

### 9.3.3 Establishing Gimli

In the uprooted state of the Icelandic colonists, memories of ‘back home’ formed a solid foundation, and a means of distinguishing oneself from the others, whose intimidating proximity created a stronger need for self-definition than in isolated Iceland. This urge to establish an explicitly Icelandic identity away from Iceland is expressed in the toponyms which emerged in this new *landnám*. In North Dakota, one of the earliest Icelandic communities in the United States named their township Thingvalla, in honour of Þingvellir. Often, as in the case of Reykjavik in the municipality of Alonsa in Manitoba, the land was claimed by simply copying Icelandic space, and transposing it toponymically. A river in New Iceland was named the ‘Icelandic River’, and some of the settlers turned to Icelandic nature for inspiration and christened their new land Hecla Island – after the volcano Hekla – or Geysir District. Apart from Icelandic nature and Icelandic toponyms, Old Norse-Icelandic literature constituted a rich repository of potential place names. Some of the immigrants named their farms after famous farmsteads from *Brennu-Njáls saga* or any of the other *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>1</sup> In her seminal study on Icelandic-Canadian literature, Daisy Neijmann establishes that, to the West-Icelanders, “Norse mythology merely provides an interesting body of images and interesting material from an Icelandic past.”<sup>2</sup> Although Neijmann notices that much of the Icelandic familiarity with the eddic stories was lost in the New World, the gods retained their status as important markers of Nordic identity, and symptoms of “the lingering influence of a distant past.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that eddic topoi could be employed solely as *secular* markers of Nordic identity – without the ideological burden of being pagan – is evidenced by the small town of Valhalla Centre, situated in Peace River County in Canada. This is where, in the early twentieth century, a group of Norwegian settlers led by a Lutheran priest – Halvar Ronning – settled down and set up their community. It was the Reverent Ronning himself who, despite his profession and commitment to the Lutheran faith, decided to name this town in honour of Óðinn’s hall of the slain, rather than turning to Biblical sources for inspiration. As this example indicates, the contraposition of paganism and Christianity was easily overruled when it came to the formulation of a district, ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, the reason for naming a town after one of the Æsir was of a rather arbitrary nature; when, in 1890, Sigurður Kristofersson could not find a suitable flower to name a new railway town in Manitoba after, he decided that it should be called Baldur, simply to reflect its inhabitants’ Icelandic heritage. In this context, the pagan gods reassumed their ancient function as markers of a “Norse sense of separateness”, which they had once fulfilled in Viking Age Scandinavia vis-à-vis Christian Europe.<sup>5</sup> This is clearly a manifestation of the fifth function of myth: cultural *differentiation*.

A more interesting case of spatial mythology is the rural municipality of Gimli in Manitoba, which is situated on the west side of Lake Winnipeg and functioned as the cultural heart of New Iceland. Just like Knud Zimsen’s residence in central Reykjavík of the same name (see Chapter 9.2), the township was named after Baldr’s shining palace *after* Ragnarök, signifying the hopes and aspirations of those who left Iceland behind in desperation. In his controversial poem *Níðkvæði um Ísland* (‘Hate Poem about Iceland’; 1888), Matthías Jochumsson paints a dire image of the hardships these migrants were fleeing from:

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<sup>1</sup> David Arnason, “The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings”, in idem and Vincent Arnason (eds.), *The New Icelanders. A North American Community* (Winnipeg 1994) pp.1-8, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Neijmann (1997) p.286.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Jón Karl Helgason for bringing this example – and other interesting places called Valhalla – to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> Jones (2001) p.394.



Afflicted land,  
our shitty dwelling places,  
beggary's faithful mother,  
afflicted land!  
(...)  
Land of trouble,  
Crooked like a half rhyme verse.  
Did God create you in His wrath?  
land of trouble!

Killing land,  
equipped with our courage and our core,  
oppressing the marrow of your children,  
killing land!<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to imagine that these verses were composed by the same man who wrote Iceland's national anthem, in which this 'afflicted' and 'killing' land is praised as the 'Land of God' (see Chapter 8.1.2).<sup>2</sup> The horrible living conditions on this hellish island are described in apocalyptic terms, reminiscent of the dark Ragnarök narrative in *Völuspá*. The strong eschatological language of this narrative formed a convenient rhetorical tool in modern discourses, especially when a sense of – political or literary – doom and urgency was implied.<sup>3</sup> Iceland as described by Matthías, and experienced by those who decided to leave it, certainly met the requirements of an apocalyptic world nearing its destruction, and the association with the eddic end time would have been an obvious one. According to oral tradition, the idea to name the Icelandic settlement in Canada after Baldr's post-Ragnarök hall also arose quite naturally, during the West-Icelanders' long and exhausting quest for a suitable location to found their colony:

The day after, they reached Fisher's Landing near Grand Forks, North Dakota. Here they again boarded a ship, an old-fashioned sternwheeler called the "International", then on its last voyage, with two barges in tow. On these the people with their baggage were huddled together for several days under the open sky. During the conversations that enlivened their depressing voyage came a proposal from Olafur Olafsson from Espiholl (Aspen Hill) the leader of the Milwaukee group, that the first Icelandic town built in America, which was then expected to be on the banks of the Icelandic River, should be named Gimli. This suggestion received unanimous support, and the name was later given to the town established that fall where the Icelanders first landed, in the south part of the colony.<sup>4</sup>

In a short explanatory note following this passage, the reader is informed that, according to the *Völuspá*, a "new and better world" would rise after the old one – by then "completely

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<sup>1</sup> Matthías Jochumsson, "Níðkvæði um Ísland" (verses one, seven and eight of eleven), in *Ísafold* 40 (29 August 1888) pp.159-160; Volaða land,/horsælu hjervistar slóðir,/húsgangsins trúfasta móðir,/volaða land!/(...)/ Vandræða land,/skakkt eins og skothendu kvæði./Skapaði guð þig í bræði?/vandræða land!// Drepanði land,/búið með kjark vorn og kjarna,/kúgandi merg þinna barna,/drepanði land!

<sup>2</sup> It is very likely that this poem was not intended for Icelanders in Iceland, since it was first sent to *Lögberg*, the newspaper of the Icelandic community in Canada. See idem, p.159.

<sup>3</sup> On the employment of the Ragnarök theme in Danish literature, see Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, "Ragnarok-temaet i dansk litteratur", in Annette Lassen (ed.), *Det norrøne og det nationale* (Reykjavík 2008). For Jón lærði's ideological use of the theme during the Protestant Reformation in Iceland, see Chapter 2.2.1.

<sup>4</sup> The Gimli Women's Institute, *Gimli Saga. The History of Gimli, Manitoba* (Altona 1979 [1974]) pp.12-13. The general overview of Gimli's history contained in this work is mainly based on Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson's *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheima* (five volumes; 1943-1953), comprised and translated by Sigurbjörg Stefánsdóttir (idem, p.7).

destroyed in the flames of war” –, “inhabited by just and good people, who will live forever at peace in their heavenly abode of Gimli.”<sup>1</sup> This very Christian-sounding conception of a heavenly, post-apocalyptic world seemed particularly appropriate when the homeless migrants were undergoing their greatest ordeal, and endowed the group with a collective sense of pride and identity; *they* were the chosen ones, the ‘just and good people’ who would live forever in a new world, untouched by the atrocities of the old one. In a sense, the eschatological mindset of these settlers was not that different from that of other colonists who selected equally utopian but *biblical* names for their townships. The only difference is that these Icelandic settlers fashioned the same hopes and aspirations in eddic terms, in order to cultivate the connection with their ancestral culture, and to distinguish themselves from their non-Nordic neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, this ancient heritage is used to set the tone for the *future*, and to *primordialise* (function one) – or mythologise – the Icelanders’ epic landnám in Canada *a priori*. The ‘unanimous support’ for Ólafur’s suggestion seems to suggest that the Ragnarök narrative was deeply engrained in the group’s cultural identity, and that there was a shared awareness of the historical – or even eschatological – significance of their undertaking. However, not all of the Gimli colonists were entirely certain about how to interpret this new name, and some even thought that this overtly idyllic toponym might have been intended as a joke. In a rather gloomy letter from 1876, one of them writes:

However suitable the name Gimli may be here or whether it was first named as a joke, or in earnest, I do not know; perhaps it is for the same reason that Eric the Red named Greenland, saying that more would seek to go there if the name were attractive.<sup>3</sup>

Further explanation for the name Gimli is provided by David Arnason (b. 1940), a Canadian author of Icelandic descent, in his book on the ‘New Icelanders’. His writings clearly indicate that the mythological dimension of the community’s ‘myth of origin’ was by no means a joke, but rather an integral part of the story of hardship and ordeals endured by the settlers. Not surprisingly, the book opens with Arnason’s free translation of *Völuspá*, flanked by a nineteenth-century depiction of the Lady of the Mountain (*Fjallkonan*; see Chapter 4.1.1, and fig. 6), personification of the Icelandic nation.<sup>4</sup> According to Arnason, *Völuspá* helped the colonists to make sense of their troublesome journey:

The myth of beginnings is important to understanding the experience of the Icelandic community. Other prairie communities were named after people (MacGregor, McCreary) or old-country places (Balmoral, Sans Souci) or Indian place names (Winnipeg, Pinawa). Gimli, the site of the first settlement was named for the great Hall of Gimli in Norse mythology. [...] All the best of men, of giants, of gods and the creatures of outer darkness will be gathered here [after Ragnarök]. (It’s a tough place to get into: only a few gods will make it.) That post-apocalyptic vision is a perfect naming for people whose homes have literally disappeared under fire [of Icelandic volcanoes].<sup>5</sup>

New Iceland’s ‘myth of beginnings’ was thus a distinctly eddic one, product of a cultural memory forged by Romantic nationalism. The traumatic experiences of volcanic eruptions,

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> On the religious dimension in the Icelanders’ migration narrative, see Úlfar Bragason, *The New Adam and the Icelandic immigrants* (unpublished paper, presented at the *Tiennial Nordic Association for Canadian Studies Conference* in Tromsø, August 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Elva Simundsson, *Icelandic Settlers in America* (Winnipeg 1981) p.36.

<sup>4</sup> David Arnason, “Preface: Sibyl’s Song”, in idem and Vincent Arnason (eds.), *The New Icelanders. A North American Community* (Winnipeg 1994) p.vii.

<sup>5</sup> Arnason (1994a) p.4.

disease, uprootedness and hardship are endowed with teleological significance when wrapped in this mythological template; this is simply what it took for a predestined community of ‘only a very few’ to make it into this very ‘tough place to get into’. The migration is seen as a story of transition, from historical suffering to mythological, or timeless bliss. One of the most fascinating sides to this cyclical narrative is the way in which historical discourses – the Icelandic *landnám* – and mythology – Ragnarök and Gimli – are intertwined; motifs taken from the story of Iceland’s settlement are infused with the mythological anticipation of not merely a *second*, but rather a *better*, or more *metaphysical* *landnám*. History is thus *elevated* to mythology. The ethereal ideal of Gimli, signifying eternal peace after the chaos of Ragnarök, is spatialised and hence ‘realised’.<sup>1</sup> In this semiotisation of space, the dimension of time fades away, and past – Old Norse-Icelandic literature – and future – the new world after Ragnarök – become fused in the now. Gimli is a toponymical expression of the Janus-faced, schizophrenic character of nationalism, looking backwards and forwards at the same time; the future accomplishment of current ideals is deeply rooted in the mythology of the forefathers. Just like Iðunn had become an allegory for national rejuvenation through ancient sources (see Chapter 3.3.1), and just like Benedikt Gröndal’s return of Óðr harmonised Nordic culture with contemporary progressive ideals (see Chapter 6.3), so too did the spatialisation of mythological themes serve the purpose of overcoming the ambivalence, bridging the gap between tradition and innovation.<sup>2</sup> It constitutes a special kind of *indigenisation* (the second function of myth) which we could call *self-indigenisation*: the act of rooting oneself culturally in new, unfamiliar territory.

Nowadays, Gimli – nicknamed the ‘Home of the Gods’, and even ‘Heavenly Abode’ or ‘Place of Peace’<sup>3</sup> – forms the very heart of the Icelandic community in Manitoba, and serves as the location of the annual Icelandic festival called *Íslendingadagur* (‘Icelanders’ Day’); “the central event of the Icelandic experience in North America.”<sup>4</sup> Here, people of Icelandic descent from all over Canada and beyond – most of whom have lost touch with the Icelandic language, if not with Icelandic culture – come together to celebrate their ethnicity. The day is intended to “celebrate our heritage, to honour the settlers and their achievements and contributions to Canada, and to reaffirm our commitment to preserve and strengthen our heritage and traditions.”<sup>5</sup> These annual gatherings are manifestations of what one could call ‘exaggerated’, or Hyper-Icelandicness, and form a powerhouse in which new ‘national traditions’ are invented. It is often in small communities far away from the fatherland that the fatherland is most passionately re-fashioned; just like the figure of the *Fjallkona* was first conceived in the flatness of far-away Denmark (see Chapter 4.1.1), so – well over a century later – the tradition of crowning an actual girl or woman ‘Fjallkona of the year’ – now an annual tradition in Iceland, practised on the seventeenth of June – was first performed in Gimli, in August 1924, on the occasion of the *Íslendingadagur*.<sup>6</sup> The creative impulses of these Icelanders far away from Iceland, either in nineteenth-century Copenhagen or twentieth-century Manitoba, have had a profound effect on the way in which modern Icelanders in Iceland experience and perform their ethnic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> This conception of Gimli as a spatialised ideal can be compared to a passage in Oehlenschläger’s *Der er et yndigt land* (1819), Denmark’s civil anthem, in which Denmark as a whole is identified with Freyja’s Hall, symbol of love (see Chapter 3.2.2).

<sup>2</sup> Another attempt to ‘bridge the gap’ toponymically is the town of Bifrost in Manitoba, named after the rainbow-bridge (Bifröst) connecting our world (Miðgarðr) to that of the gods (Ásgarðr).

<sup>3</sup> See the Gimli advertisement in the Canadian-Icelandic newspaper *Lögberg-Heimskringla* (24 July 1998) p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Arnason (1994a) p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Susie Erickson-Jakobson (President of the Festival Committee of 1998), “President’s Message”, in *Lögberg-Heimskringla* (24 July 1998) p.3.

<sup>6</sup> This invented tradition can be compared to the honorary position of national *Marianne* in France, which originated in 1969 when Brigitte Bardot became the first model to serve as the embodiment of the Republic.

### 9.3.4 Halldór Briem and *Framfari*

The use of eddic narratives to familiarise this new, empty landscape is indicative of “the mixed feelings of [...] Scandinavian immigrants, whereby, on the one hand, the redemptive image of Christ correlates with the immigrant’s hopes for a better future in the US [or Canada], while on the other, the ancient claims of Thor correlate with their nostalgic yearnings for the homeland.”<sup>1</sup> However, as I have demonstrated in the above, this yearning for the ancestral gods was by no means at odds with the colonists’ Christian identity, and should be considered an expression of the group’s *invisible* religion (see Chapter 1.1), or their secular cult of Icelandic origins, rather than an actual re-paganisation. As noted earlier, the Eddas constituted merely a convenient and “interesting body of images”<sup>2</sup>, an ethno-symbolic treasure trove, which could be applied to solidify the West-Icelanders’ Nordic identity. The settlers never seem to have considered themselves at risk of losing their Christian religion in the New World, surrounded by other European communities and Native American tribes. But many of them had a nearly existential fear of losing their Icelandic identity, so far away from the homeland, and nourishing the link with their ancestral heritage and language was perceived as something of a holy mission by some.<sup>3</sup> But how does one go about salvaging an ancient tradition, imported and cherished by a small community, in the vastness of a big and constantly changing new land?

A particularly productive agent in the preservation of Icelandic culture in Canada was the theologian and teacher Halldór Briem (1852-1929), who led a group of Icelandic settlers to Manitoba and started editing the community’s first printed newspaper, *Framfari* (‘Progress’), in 1877. He served as the community’s priest, and later became a teacher in Möðruvellir and Akureyri after his eventual return to Iceland, before becoming a librarian in the National Library in Reykjavík. During his time in the New World, Halldór was dedicated to *both* the Icelanders’ integration into Canadian society – he published an English study guide for New Icelanders in 1873 – *and* the preservation of their own language and culture. His accessible publications, including an overview of Icelandic history and Icelandic grammar, were intended for the general public and school-going children, both in Iceland and in Canada. He participated in the heated theological disputes which caused division in the colony, using *Framfari* as a pulpit in print.<sup>4</sup> He considered it his responsibility to look after the colony’s spiritual well-being, and the preservation of proper Christianity, as it had been practised in the old land.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, some basic knowledge of the old faith, practiced by the ancestors before the coming of Christianity, was also considered necessary. In 1886, Halldór published a concise and matter-of-fact overview of Old Norse mythology, intended as a ‘key to the Eddas’<sup>6</sup> for a general readership and school-going children. It contains short versions of the Eddas’ most important narratives, and descriptions of the most prominent gods and goddesses. The tone of the booklet is rather neutral, and nowhere is the subject matter instrumentalised to make an ideological point. But sporadically, the author attributes considerable moral value to the heathen world-view of the ancestors; to his rendition of the

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold (2011) p.141.

<sup>2</sup> Neijmann (1997) p.286.

<sup>3</sup> Thor (2002) p.4.

<sup>4</sup> On Halldór’s role in this dispute, see *idem*, pp.116-120.

<sup>5</sup> In his overview of Icelandic history, the pre-Christian faith of the ancestors is not described in negative terms, but some of the wisest men of the Saga Age either converted to the new faith, or remained ‘noble heathens’, practicing a form of proto-monotheism without discarding the faith of their ancestors; the wisest of all the Lawspeakers, Þorkell máni Þorsteinsson, grandson of Ingólfr Arnarson, commanded his soul to the ‘god who had created the sun’. Halldór Briem, *Ágrip af Íslandssögu* (Reykjavík 1903) pp.14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Halldór Briem, *Yfirlit yfir Goðafræði Norðurlanda*. (Akureyri 1886), without page number.

story of *Gullveig* ('Gold Drunk') – a goddess of the Vanir who annoyed the Æsir with her obsession with gold up to the point that they had to kill her<sup>1</sup> – he adds that the ancestors obviously considered greed or avarice the root and origin of all evil.<sup>2</sup> At the very end of the booklet, when the 'new world' after Ragnarök is described, both a theological statement and an up-beat vision of the future are implied:

However, a new generation of gods appears, descendants of the old gods, who enjoy the same life, peace and delights the gods enjoyed in the beginning on *Iðavöllur*.<sup>3</sup> These gods can indeed be seen as rulers of the earth, but not in the same way the old gods were, because after Ragnarök, the almighty god, who resides in Gimli, assumes jurisdiction; it is he, who creates the new, pure and unspoiled existence, and ever since, that and everything it contains stands under his direct command. This has been the case since then, and will be for all eternity.<sup>4</sup>

Ásgarðr may be repopulated by the descendants of the previous Æsir after Ragnarök – signifying continuity between the old and the new –, but things are not the same; rather than 'Baldr's Hall', Halldór interprets Gimli as the hall of the 'almighty god', prophesied in the famous and controversial 65<sup>th</sup> stanza of *Völuspá* (see Chapter 7.2.3), and self-evidently identified as the God of Christianity. By emphasising the reduced status of the new Æsir in this new world order, dominated by one god only, Halldór places the utopian vision of Gimli in a Christian context, justifying the cultivation of this heathen concept in a Lutheran 'new world'. In a sense, this vision of Gimli strikes the perfect balance between tradition and progress – the two faces of Janus –, between respect for Iceland's ancestral culture and the eternal truths of Christianity. The link with the Icelandic colony in Canada is not made explicit, but considering the author's involvement in the settlement's cultural and theological establishment, this overtly Christian rendition of the post-Ragnarök world can be read as a concise ideological blueprint for New Iceland.

The newspaper *Framfari* was founded by three of the colony's leading personalities – Sigtryggur Jónasson, his brother-in-law Jóhann Briem, and Friðjón Friðriksson – and appeared seventy-five times in the course of only two complete years (1877-1880), after which the first Icelandic periodical west of the Atlantic Ocean came to an end.<sup>5</sup> In the first issue of the newspaper, the editors published *Framfari*'s mission statement:

As soon as Icelanders started emigrating to this continent in appreciable numbers, they began to voice the fear of losing their language and national identity here unless something special was done to preserve them. They have ever agreed that two things were necessary in order to maintain this precious heritage: one, that the Icelanders should form their own colony, and the

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<sup>1</sup> According to *Völuspá*, this killing marks the beginning of evil in the world and the end of the peaceful Golden Age. It also unleashed the very first war, between the Æsir and the Vanir (stanzas 21-23).

<sup>2</sup> Briem (1886) p.12.

<sup>3</sup> *Iðavöllur* (possibly 'plain of splendour') is described in *Völuspá* as the original meeting place of the gods, a place of initial bliss.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p.55; "En hins vegar kemur fram ný goðakynslóð, niðjar hinna eldri goða, er nýtur sama lífs, friðar og unaðar og goðin í upphafi á *Iðavelli*. Þessi goð er að vísu að skoða sem ráðendur jarðarinnar, en þó ekki í sama skilningi og hin eldri goð skoðuðust þannig, því eptir Ragnarökkur tekur hinn almáttki guð, sem á Gimli ríkir, við öllum umráðum; það er hann, sem framleiðir hina nýju, hreinu og flekklausu tilveru, og síðan stendur hún og allt, er hún innibindur, beinlínis undir stjórn hans. Þetta ástand helzt síðan um aldur og æfi." Compare also idem, p.10.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the newspaper's history, see George Houser's "Forword" to his complete English edition of the periodical's two volumes; *Framfari. 1877 to 1880* (Gimli 1986), pp.iii-iv.

other, that a journal be published in Icelandic here in America. These two are so intimately related that it was scarcely thinkable that one could prosper without the other.<sup>1</sup>

In this spirit, the newspaper published contributions on every imaginable subject, ranging from farming techniques to the water ways around Gimli, book reports, international news, the national identity of Canadian Icelanders, and – increasingly – the theological disputes tearing the tiny community apart, and eventually leading to *Framfari*'s demise. All the articles were in Icelandic, but they were often accompanied by English summaries in order to encourage the readers to learn the language of their new homeland.<sup>2</sup> The optimism and progressive, forward-looking approach implied by the periodical's title, was reflected in this two-fold emphasis on Icelandic heritage as well as adjustment to Canadian culture and nature. It is not known who functioned as the editor of the first eight issues of the newspaper, but from the ninth issue until *Framfari*'s end, this position was held by Halldór Briem, who was a kinsman of Jóhann Briem.

As was the custom in Icelandic periodicals from the nineteenth century, *Framfari* was inaugurated with a celebratory poem in its first issue, a salute to 'Progress'. The poem – composed by a certain 'J.P.' – expresses the hope that the newspaper will strengthen the Icelandic community, and serve as a messenger between the old land and the new:

Hail to you, Framfari  
Hail all those  
Who support your well-being;  
With Hrímnir's energy  
Cheer and enliven our minds.  
May our homes be yours.

In the breasts of heroic men  
Rekindle the love of fellowship,  
The love of truth.  
Thus you will be honored  
By Óðin  
Through the years and ages to come.<sup>3</sup>

By invoking the giant Hrímnir, who is frequently mentioned in eddic sources – like *Skírnismál*, *Völsunga saga*, *Hyndluljóð*, and the *Nafnapulur* of Snorri's *Prose Edda* –, the poet emphasises his wish for an energetic endeavour by mythological means, while simultaneously underlining the cultural mission of *Framfari*: maintaining and cultivating Iceland's national heritage. Óðinn, an emblem of Nordic strength and heroism, echoing a distant and native past, is represented as blessing this undertaking, initiated by 'heroic men', treading the same adventurous paths as their ancestors from the Age of Settlement. Both the

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<sup>1</sup> "Til kaupenda og lesenda Framfara.", in *Framfari* 1:1 (10 September 1877) p.1. English translation in Houser (1986) p.iv; "Strax og Íslendingar fórn að flytje til heimsálfu þessarar að mun, fór að hreyfa sjer meðal þeirra ótti fyrir því, að þeir mundu tína tungu sinni og þjóðerni hjer, nema þeir gjörðu eitthvað sjerstakt til að viðhalda því. Hefir þeim ætíð komið saman um, að tvent væri nauðsynlegt til að viðhalda þessu dýrmæta erfða fje sínu. Annað var að Íslendingar mynduðu nýlendu úthaf fyrir sig, en hitt að hjer í Ameríku væri gefið út tímarit á íslenzku. Þetta tvent stendur nú svo nánú sambandi hvað við annað, að varla var hugsandi að annað gæti án hins þrífist."

<sup>2</sup> Houser (1986) p.v.

<sup>3</sup> J.P., "Kveðja til Framfara." (verses one and five of five), in *Framfari* 1:1 (10 September 1877) p.4. English translation in Houser (1986) p.10-11; Heill þjer Framfari/Heill sje þeim öllum/Er heill þína stidja;/Í Hrímnis-móði/Hress og fjorga/Hugi okra;/Hús vor sjeu/Heimili þín./(...)/Endur-lífga í/Brjóstum bragna/Ást á fjelagsskap,/Ást á sannleika;/Svo muntu Ódni/Öldnum framar,/Tignadur vera,/Um ár og öld.

giant and the supreme god appear to be included in the poem merely to endow it with a veil of primordial Icelandicness and authenticity; the name Óðin could easily be replaced by Þórr or Baldr, without altering the message of the verses. This goes to show that the Æsir were indeed, first and foremost, markers of Nordic identity, rather than meaningful metaphors in a complex mythological language. They form a tantalising lifeline running to the homeland and its Golden Age, long before Ragnarök, when brave men still put their trust in the gods when faced with the great unknown.

## 10. Epilogue: Gods and Men in Modern Iceland

Where does one end an account of a historical development that, in reality, never ended? The problem of demarcation is one many a historian struggles with, and experience has taught me that striving for completeness leads in all likelihood to an illegible monstrosity, in which all lines of argumentation are eventually blurred and from which no general conclusions can be drawn. The end date of the present research, Iceland's independence from – and personal Union with the King of – Denmark is an entirely artificial one in this context, since the national cultivation of eddic mythology did not come to a sudden halt after this political accomplishment. If anything, the cultural processes described in this book only *increased* in the decades leading up to the establishment of the Republic of Iceland in 1944, and have generated interesting research topics up to the present day. My initial plan to trace these developments all the way up to 1944, and to include in-depth analyses of the cultural debates and feuds of the 1930s and 40s, had to be abandoned once I began to realise that the sheer amount of relevant research material from the nearly one-hundred years before 1918 would prove an enormous task to analyse. I intended to do full justice to the period under scrutiny, without falling into the trap of writing a general overview of everything that could possibly be mentioned about the subject. Much has been left out, and many of the chapters' tantalising 'loose ends' – for instance: the cultural afterlife of Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði (see Chapter 2.1.1), or that of Snorri Sturluson – will, I am afraid, have to wait for later occasions.<sup>1</sup> Since the present research opens with a quote from Friedrich Schiller, it seems only appropriate to conclude with the much-cited adage of his Weimar friend Goethe: “In der Beschränkung zeigt sich der Meister.” Fully aware of the implications of this proverb, I will still allow myself to present the reader with a very concise, fragmentary and kaleidoscopic overview of the developments which evolved from those described in this research, and the 'fate of the gods' in modern Iceland up to the present day.

### *10.1 Philology and Politics After 1918*

As mentioned in the above, 1918 constituted by no means a clean cut with the past; some of the protagonists of the previous chapters – like Einar Jónsson – remained productive until well beyond the time frame of this study, and the Eddas remained a fertile source of inspiration when it came to original and national names for periodicals, societies, enterprises and public spaces. The four *landvættir* ('land wights'), portrayed in Snorri's *Heimskringla* as the guardian spirits of Iceland – symbolised by a giant bull in the Southwest, an eagle or griffin in the Northwest, a dragon in the Northeast, and a mountain giant in the Southeast –, adorned the new coat of arms of the Kingdom of Iceland, which was officially taken into use in 1919.<sup>2</sup> These supernatural forces are described by Snorri as scaring off a wizard, disguised as a seal and sent to Iceland by king Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark, to establish whether the free island could be conquered. After his confrontation with the spirits, the wizard had to disappoint his master on this matter, and Iceland remained free. By selecting this medieval

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<sup>1</sup> On the cultural afterlife of Snorri Sturluson, see my forthcoming publication “Hero or Traitor? The Cultural Canonisation of Snorri Sturluson in Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Beyond”, in Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason (eds.), *Great Immortality: Studies on European Cultural Sainthood* (Leiden, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> These *landvættir* replaced the earlier coat of arms, consisting of a white falcon against a blue background, and still adorn the coat of arms of the Republic.



theme as the symbol of the nation – the four allegorical figures flank a crowned, shield-shaped Icelandic flag – the new state firmly established its national independence from Denmark – despite the personal union with its king –, rooted in both ancient literature and the land itself, animated by the spirits safeguarding the nation’s freedom.<sup>1</sup> The *landvættir* formed an integral part of Iceland’s pre-Christian religion, and their incorporation in the official logo of the nation can be interpreted as a political instrumentalisation of the island’s ethereal heritage.

In the 1910s, the Old Norse myths were infused with political and ethnic significance in Germany and the German speaking lands. In the spirit of Richard Wagner, the *Æsir* had become emblems of German/Germanic identity, and in Otto von Bismarck, whose political willpower Gísli Brynjúlfsson had already compared to Þórr’s strength (see Chapter 6.2.1), was identified with Wagner’s *Wotan* in nationalistic propaganda from the First World War.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction volume to a collection of German translations of Old Norse-Icelandic literature (the *Thule* collection, published by Eugen Diederichs), the philologist Felix Niedner (1859-1934) praises the saga heroes’ “kraftvolle Menschennatur, die sich in allen Widerwärtigkeiten des Schicksals durchsetzt”<sup>3</sup>, and which was by no means a thing from the past: “Alles in allem leuchtet hier wie ein Sinnbild aus ältester Zeit der Genius großen Germanentums, dessen willenstarkes Walten wir in dem Zeitalter Bismarcks so lebendig verspürten.”<sup>4</sup> In *völkisch* circles, Nordic mythology was fused with racism and Social Darwinism, and Germanic mysticism endowed the *Lebensreform* movement with an alternative, often anti-Judeo-Christian, and ‘indigenous’ world-view. The further *ethnification* of the Eddas did not only occur in Germany, but also in Scandinavia, where the gods served alternately as emblems of Nordic cooperation and/or national identity. The racial interpretation of Old Norse culture has been touched upon in Chapter 8.2, where the influence of the Theosophical philosophy of race – and its link with the Eddas – is analysed.<sup>5</sup> As the swastika became the dominant symbol of Aryan activism in Europe, the link with Mjöllnir was easily made in Iceland. Several periodicals had already carried the name of Þórr’s powerful hammer, but when the anti-Marxist and pro-Hitler ‘magazine for nationalistic students’ (*Blað þjóðernissinnaðra stúdenta*) *Mjöllnir* adopted the swastika as its logo in 1934, an ideological union of National Socialism and Old Norse mythology was solidified. *Mjöllnir* remained the mouthpiece of Nazi students until 1938, but Nazism never became a significant player in Iceland’s political arena; the Icelandic ‘Nationalist Party’ (*Flokkur þjóðernissinna*) never acquired more than 0.7% of the votes in any election.

A very interesting case of artistic resistance against the *völkisch* and National Socialist perversion of the Eddas was orchestrated by the internationally acclaimed Icelandic composer and conductor Jón Leifs (1899-1968), who studied and lived in Germany and was married to a woman of Jewish decent. Jón began his composing career with piano arrangements of Icelandic folk-songs, but from the 1930s onwards, he focussed on composing large orchestral works, inspired by Icelandic nature – the explosive eruption of Mount Hekla, and the powerful waterfall Dettifoss among others – and Old Norse-Icelandic literature.<sup>6</sup> His avant-garde compositions inspired by mythology constitute the very *first* musical reception of eddic

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of Iceland’s coat of arms, see especially the website of the Prime Minister’s Office: [https://www.forsaetisraduneyti.is/upplýsingar/Skjaldarmerki/Saga\\_merkis/](https://www.forsaetisraduneyti.is/upplýsingar/Skjaldarmerki/Saga_merkis/) (last accessed January 2016).

<sup>2</sup> On the political cultivation of the Eddas in Germany, see especially Zernack (1994; 2008; 2011a-b).

<sup>3</sup> Niedner (1913) p.125.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, vi. See also Halink (2010).

<sup>5</sup> On the development of racism and eugenics in Iceland, see Karlsdóttir (1998).

<sup>6</sup> The most thorough overview of Jón Leif’s life and work is Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Jón Leifs. Líf í tónum* (Reykjavík 2009).

material by a modern Icelander<sup>1</sup>, and initiated a musical tradition which lasts to this day. His compositions are relatively inaccessible and outspokenly *un*-Romantic, and hence stylistically challenging the Romantic – or German – claims on Iceland’s national heritage. Both the Icelandic landscape and the ancient myths are expressed in very forceful, non-sentimentalistic music. During his student years in Leipzig, he had closely studied Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*, and he had come to the conclusion that the Maestro had “grossly misunderstood the Nordic character and the heritage of the North”, and that a new eddic tetralogy was needed “in protest against Wagner”.<sup>2</sup> He considered *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* the most appropriate texts to accompany his Icelandic folk-song compositions, and his occupation with the Eddas culminated in his *Edda* oratorio: a monumental cycle of four independent works, dealing with the creation of the world, the lives of the gods, twilight, and resurrection respectively. The compositions reflect its composer’s conception of Nordic culture as raw and authentic, just like the waterfalls and volcanoes of Iceland; a far cry from Wagner’s Romantic ‘distortion’ of the material. Jón completed the score in 1939, at the brink of war, and finding a publisher for this work proved difficult.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the work’s un-German character, Jón’s Jewish wife rendered him suspicious in the eyes of German publishers. Jón was allowed to migrate to Sweden with his family, and eventually moved back to Iceland after the war. Ensuing generations of aspiring Icelandic composers, including Jón Ásgeirsson and Jón Þórarinnsson, followed Jón’s example, and turned to the Eddas to create something new and authentic.

During World War Two, Iceland was occupied by British and American troops respectively, as a preventive measure against potential German plans to conquer the strategic island. The experience of being occupied became a traumatic one in Iceland’s cultural memory, but in the midst of the ‘blessed war’, the Icelanders obtained full independence from the Danish crown and established their own republic on the seventeenth of June – Jón Sigurðsson’s birthday – 1944. The ceremony took place in the symbolic heart of the nation, at Þingvellir, in order to strengthen the popular notion that Iceland had finally, after almost seven centuries of foreign suppression, returned to its initial and natural state of a free republic. This achievement triggered a new wave of nationalistic triumphalism, which amplified many of the cultural and intellectual developments of the previous decades, as described in this study. In this context, the book-prose interpretation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature – as outlined by Konrad Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen (see Chapters 5.1.1 and 7.1.3) – became the dominant, *national* paradigm for Icelandic philologists and historians. This development should be attributed first and foremost to the works of Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974), Iceland’s most influential philologist of the twentieth century and somewhat of a ‘cultural pope’ – an image cultivated by Halldór Laxness –, dedicated to the canonisation of his own perspective on Icelandic culture. Sigurður studied in Copenhagen, Berlin and Oxford, and became professor of Icelandic language and literature at the University of Iceland in 1918. Björn M. Ólsen, who was his predecessor there, greatly influenced his conception of Old Norse-Icelandic culture. Sigurður spent most of his active life disseminating his ideas on the literary character of the sagas, dismissing many of the earlier

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<sup>1</sup> One of Jón’s contemporaries, the Norwegian composer Geir Tveitt (1908-1981), conducted his own symphonic ballet *Baldurs draumar* (‘Baldr’s dreams’) in 1938 in Oslo. This performance is considered one of the greatest musical events in Norway before World War II.

<sup>2</sup> Jón Leifs, quoted and translated by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson in *Jón Leifs*, in the multi-lingual booklet accompanying the world premier recording of Jón’s *Edda*, Part 1: *The Creation of the World* (BIS-SACD-1350, Ingo Petry 2007) pp.3-7, 4 (Icelandic original: idem, p.9); “... sem andmæli gegn Wagner, er misskildi svo herfilega norræna listarfleifð.”

<sup>3</sup> This work is notoriously difficult to perform, and the first integral performance of the *Edda* oratorio did not take place until nearly seventy years after its completion.

notions concerning the stories' historicity.<sup>1</sup> He succeeded largely in promoting this theory – which became known simply as the theory of the 'Icelandic school' – primarily in his function as general editor of the influential *Íslenzk fornrit* series of modern Icelandic editions of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Sigurður held this position in the years between 1933 and 1951, and channelled the book-prose reading of the sagas into Icelandic living rooms through his introductions and comments to the works, as well as his selection of editors and scholars involved in the project.<sup>2</sup> The now commonly accepted *canon* of Old Icelandic literature is to a large extent the result of Sigurður's preferences and decisions as the series' editor.<sup>3</sup> *Íslenzk fornrit* remains the most complete and scholarly collection of Old Norse-Icelandic literature to date<sup>4</sup>, and the philological assumptions on which it was founded would retain their hegemonic position in Icelandic philology for many decades.

Sigurður's approach to medieval literature was highly normative and programmatic, and since the *Íslendingasögur* play the most significant part in the book-prose rendition of Iceland's literary history, he spent relatively little attention to other genres like the Eddas. Nevertheless, he did publish a monograph on Snorri Sturluson (1920) and his own edition of *Völuspá* (1923), in which his views on eddic mythology and their role in Icelandic culture are expressed.<sup>5</sup> There is not a shred of doubt in Sigurður's mind, that *Völuspá* constitutes a distinctly Icelandic creation, as could be expected; just like Benedikt Gröndal and Björn M. Ólsen before him, he points to geographical phenomena – like the much-discussed *hveralundr* (possibly: 'grove of hot springs') in the thirty-fifth stanza of *Völuspá*<sup>6</sup> – to prove this point. Another important aspect of Sigurður's treatment of Iceland's 'pagan' heritage, is the clear distinction he makes between the actual pre-Christian world-view on the one hand, and the eddic literature it may or may not have inspired on the other. In his seminal work on Icelandic culture, *Íslenzk menning* (1942), he explains how the heathen religion had already been in decline long before Iceland's conversion, and that it never had a profound effect on the development of Icelandic society and culture. Actually, the stories contained in eddic poetry are *artistic* rather than religious or devotional, and could therefore only have taken shape in a society in which actual belief in the gods was no longer of significance.<sup>7</sup> It can be said that Sigurður was, as far as his philological activities are concerned, a true heir of the Romantic movement; not only did he attempt to present Old Norse-Icelandic literature as true

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<sup>1</sup> Byock (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Sigurður's sophisticated approach to the *Íslendingasögur* – he did not rule out the possibility that certain elements in the sagas *did* have historical value – is well outlined in his prologue to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Reykjavík 1933), pp.iii-cv.

<sup>3</sup> On Sigurður's influence on the image of Icelandic culture, see also Jón Karl Helgason, "Hver á íslenska menningu? Frá Sigurði Nordal til Eddu – miðlunar og útgáfu", in *Skírnir* 176:2 (2002) pp.401-422.

<sup>4</sup> *Hið íslenska fornritafélag* ('The Old Icelandic Text Society') was founded in 1928, and has published twenty-seven *Íslenzk fornrit* volumes in the first eighty years of its existence. The society is still going strong, and continues to publish highly valued editions of Old Norse-Icelandic literature at a steady pace.

<sup>5</sup> Respectively Nordal (1973 [1920]) and idem, *Völuspá: gefin út með skýringum af Sigurði Nordal*. (Reykjavík 1923).

<sup>6</sup> In this stanza, it is said that Loki is bound *undir hveralundi* ('under hveralund'), and since the trickster's sudden shivers in this state – which occur whenever his loyal wife Sigyn has to empty the bowl with which she catches the snake poison which constantly drops in his face – were associated with earthquakes, the poem seems to imply a link between Iceland's hot springs and the occurrence of earthquakes there. For a thorough discussion on this problematic term, see Kees Samplonius, "Undir hveralundi: notes on *Völuspá* 35.", in Annelies van Hees and Harry Perridon (eds.), *Noordse letters. Opstellen over Scandinavische taal- en letterkunde aangeboden aan An Duits* (Amsterdam 2000) pp.111-122.

<sup>7</sup> Nordal (1942) p.160. Nevertheless, Sigurður does not share Björn M. Ólsen's view that the author of *Völuspá* was probably a Christian.

and original world literature, as valuable cultural capital<sup>1</sup> – and by extension Iceland as a real *cultural nation* (see Chapter 6.3.2) –, he also shared Jónas Hallgrímsson's intense dislike of that other strand of mythological poetry: the *rímur*. These versifications, which he deemed the “most absurd example of literary conservatism”<sup>2</sup>, did not fit into his grand model of great Icelandic literature, and were therefore considered unworthy of scholarly attention. Together with Jón Jónsson Aðils and Jónas Jónsson frá Hríflu (see Chapter 7.2), Sigurður Nordal determined the way in which twentieth, and even twenty first-century Icelanders experience(d) their own national past and culture.

## 10.2 Contemporary Art and Literature

An alternative view of the Old Norse past was represented by the famous author Halldór Kiljan Laxness (1902-1998), who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. In his great novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* ('Independent People'; 1934-5) he caricatured the overtly nationalistic spirit of triumphalism and progress that affected the whole nation, and in his controversial novel *Gerpla* (1952), he ridicules the whole idea of an Icelandic 'Golden Age' by 'retelling' the thirteenth-century *Fóstbræðrasaga* ('The Saga of the Sworn Brothers') and *Ólafs saga helga* ('The Saga of St. Olaf') in a way that makes the great achievements and battles of these epics seem quite ridiculous and arbitrary. Halldór's lack of respect for the nation's heritage rendered him an *enfant terrible* in the eyes of conservative nationalists, and even of the Alþingi, which in 1941 nationalised the copyrights on all Icelandic literature predating 1400, thus preventing 'dangerous socialists' like Halldór from publishing modern editions of the sagas to serve their own, anti-national purposes.<sup>3</sup> Although this state monopoly did not last long, it does indicate exactly how crucial the Eddas and especially the sagas were believed to be in Iceland's national discourse. Halldór was a linguistic innovator, creating his own rules and poetic language in his works, and his relationship with the philologists of his day was therefore rather ambivalent.<sup>4</sup> He was – just like most modern Icelandic authors – not very concerned with the Eddas and Old Norse mythology, but from the immense collection of essays and articles he left behind, we do know that he held the eddic poems in great esteem. For instance, in his “Inngangur að Passíusálmunum” – an introduction to the immensely popular *Passion Psalms* of the priest-poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674) –, Halldór draws a comparison between these Lutheran verses and the 'pagan' Edda, concluding that there are many similarities between these two and that they are both great works of literature.<sup>5</sup>

In contemporary Icelandic literature, the Old Norse myths play a decisively different role than in the period under scrutiny in this study. In post-World War II literature, references to the gods and other mythological beings are less explicit than before, but their very subtlety renders them interesting research material for literary scholars. One of the more openly eddic

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<sup>1</sup> Other commentators, like the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason, went so far as to compare the life and works of the Viking Age warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson to those of Goethe: both had suffered from suicidal depressions, and both had found solace in composing literature dealing with this suffering – the poem *Sonatorrek* in the case of Egill, and *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* in the case of Goethe. As the first 'subjective' poet, Egill could actually be considered Goethe's predecessor, and hence a worthy representative of world literature. See Guðmundur Finnbogason, “Egill Skallagrímsson”, in *Skírnir* 129 (1905) pp.119-133.

<sup>2</sup> Neijmann (1996) p.28. However, at times, Sigurður's judgement was quite a bit milder and even positive; he valued the continuity in Icelandic literary culture the *rímur* represented, and considered *Skíðaríma* (see Chapter 2.2.1) a great piece of art.

<sup>3</sup> See Helgason (1999) pp.119-136.

<sup>4</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, “Halldór Laxness og íslenski skólinn”, in *Andvari* 121:1 (1996) pp.111-125.

<sup>5</sup> Halldór Kiljan Laxness, “Inngangur að Passíusálmunum”, in *Iðunn: nýr flokkur* 16 (1932) pp.83-146.

Icelandic works of the later twentieth century is *Gunnlaðar saga* ('The Saga of Gunnlöð') by the feminist and modernist author Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930-2004). This novel is set in two different but interacting eras, namely the present – in which an Icelandic girl named Dís ('Goddess') is arrested in the National Museum Copenhagen for smashing one of the museum's glass cases – and the distant, mythical past, in which Óðinn steals a golden vessel from its guardian Gunnlöð, daughter of the giant Suttungr. Dís claims to have been Gunnlöð in a previous life, and only smashed the window to reclaim the ancient golden vessel behind it, which the supreme god had once stolen from her. In Snorri Sturluson's account of Óðinn's theft of the mead of poetry, kept in three separate vessels, the god has to penetrate the cave in which the mead was kept, seduce and spend three nights with the guard Gunnlöð, and in return devour the mead of all three vessels in three gigantic sips. But Svava mainly based her story on stanzas 104-110 of the poem *Hávamál*, in which it appears that Gunnlöð was not tricked by the god, but assisted him in his theft. According to the author, who compared this narrative to ancient Irish sources, the story refers to an ancient and long-lost ritual in which kings were 'made' by priestesses or temple goddesses, from whom they acquired their power and initiation. The end of this practice also marked the end of feminine power, and the beginning of the inferior position of women in Western society.<sup>1</sup>

The link between Old Norse mythology and the Icelandic nation, forged in the nineteenth century, is still discernible in Icelandic fiction of the twentieth, and becomes prominent in writings on the Second World War. In the 1940s, Jóhannes úr Kötlum (1899-1972) turned to Iceland's ancient heritage in order to come to terms with these confusing times. In his book *Verndarenglarnir* ('The Guardian Angels'), published at the height of the war in 1943, the main characters are all family members inhabiting the same farm, which serves as a symbol for Iceland as a whole. Every character has his or her own ideas about the occupation and its effects on the nation, and these standpoints are reflected in the literal meanings of their names. The youngest daughter in the household, pure and innocent, is named Embla, after the very first female (the Old Norse equivalent of Eve), created by Óðinn and his brothers from a tree (see Chapter 2.1.2). This eddic name reflects the girl's innocence and purity; she serves as an embodiment of the Icelandic nation itself – not unlike the figure of the *Fjallkona* – who, in her innocence, is seduced by an officer of the British army. The occupation itself is described in terms reminiscent of the Ragnarök narrative: the navy ships are mythological wolves, and the airplanes are birds from Hel.<sup>2</sup>

The traumatic experience of the allied occupation reverberates in Icelandic literature of the twentieth century, and forms the central theme of the novel *Drekar og smáfuglar* ('Dragons and small birds'; 1983) by Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson (1918-1988). The protagonist Páll struggles with his memories of the final year of the war, while his wife is embroidering a mythological image of Sigurðr, doing battle with the dragon Fáfnir (see Chapters 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). While Páll attempts to come to terms with the past by writing down his memories, the embroidered image becomes increasingly important, and a metaphor for Páll's own internal dragon.<sup>3</sup> Other interesting examples of the use of eddic themes in modern literature are Guðmundur Daniélsson's novel *Sonur minn Sinfjötli* ('My Son Sinfjötli'; 1961), as well as poetry by contemporary poets like Hannes Pétursson (b. 1931), Þórarinn Eldjárn (b. 1949) and Gerður Kristný (b. 1970). In recent years, the myths have also become a source of

<sup>1</sup> Svava clarifies these theories behind her novel in her article "Gunnlöð og hinn dýri mjöður", in *Skírnir* 162 (1988) pp. 215-245. For another thorough analysis of this work, see Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, "Grasaferð og ljóðagerð í *Gunnlaðar sögu*", in idem (2011) pp.237-294.

<sup>2</sup> Jóhannes úr Kötlum, *Verndarenglarnir. Saga* (Reykjavík 1943).

<sup>3</sup> See for a comparison between these two works on the Second World War Daisy Neijmann, "Norse Mythology in Icelandic Fiction on the Second World War", in Simon Halink (ed.), *Northern Myths, Modern Identities. The Nationalisation of Northern Mythologies Since 1800* (Leiden, forthcoming).

inspiration for children book writers; the popular book *Þín eigin goðsaga* ('Your Own Myth'; 2015) by Ævar Þór Benediktsson (b. 1984), intended for children between the ages between six and twelve, is presented as the world's first 'interactive' children's book, in which the young reader can decide for him or herself how the storyline will develop.<sup>1</sup>

The most popular genre in contemporary Scandinavian literature is however crime fiction, and Icelandic authors have contributed to this Nordic tradition in their very own, Icelandic fashion. One of the most prolific – and internationally acclaimed – Icelandic crime-writers is undoubtedly Arnaldur Indriðason (b. 1961), who often turns from Icelandic history and culture for inspiration. In his *Konungsbók* ('The King's Book') from 2006 – part of his successful series on the fictional detective Erlendur –, the medieval manuscript *Codex Regius* ('The King's Book'), which contains the most complete version of the *Poetic Edda*, is itself the centrepiece of a complicated plot. In 1971, this codex was one of the first Icelandic manuscripts to finally return 'home' from Denmark, and to be welcomed and venerated as one of the nation's most precious crown jewels.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist of the story is a young Icelandic philologist from the 1950s who studies in Copenhagen, where he and his professor become absorbed into the mystery of the so-called 'great lacuna' of eight missing pages in the *Codex Regius*.<sup>3</sup> In the style of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2003), the duo embarks on a dangerous and complicated quest, which leads them to many different countries and into a world of conspiracy and long hidden secrets.<sup>4</sup> This work of fiction is unique in Icelandic literary history, in that not the *contents* of the eddic poems but rather their *physical carrier* form the main theme, and that an old philological puzzle is used to unfold a story which is clearly inspired by the world-wide success of Brown's mystery novels.

Beyond the realm of literature, the Æsir have continued to inspire painters, sculptors and musicians alike up to the present day. In 1974, when Iceland celebrated the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the landnám, the first complete opera in Icelandic, Jón Ásgeirsson's *Þrymskviða* – based on the eponymous poem from the *Poetic Edda* – was performed in Reykjavík's National Theatre (*Þjóðleikhúsið*). For the same festive occasion, the city council commissioned the choral work *Völuspá*, composed by Jón Þórarinnsson (1917-2012). Both works provided the celebrations of 1974 with a mythological dimension, befitting the solemn occasion. Since then, the poems of the *Poetic Edda* have been put to music by composers and musicians of all different musical genres proliferating in Iceland's very vibrant music scene. To name but a few: the post-rock band *Sigur Rós* (active since 1994) from Reykjavík has cooperated with Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson (b. 1958), composer and leader of Iceland's Ásatrú Society, on a musical project called *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* ('Óðin's Raven Magic'), which was first performed in 2002 and received the music award of the Nordic Council in 2006.<sup>5</sup> The work is based on the eponymous poem which is now no longer considered an authentic eddic poem (see Chapter 2.2.1), but which continues to inspire artists less concerned with these philological reservations. In Iceland's metal scene, the formation *Skálmöld* ('Age of Swords'; active since 2009) has been most successful in combining traditional Icelandic music styles with metal. The band's debut album was called *Baldur* (2010), and its follow-up *Börn Loka* ('Children of Loki'; 2012). In their lyrics and the artistic designs of their album covers, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ævar Þór Benediktsson, *Þín eigin goðsaga* (Reykjavík 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For Arnaldur's interesting view on the value of *Codex Regius* for the Icelandic people, see the article "Gagnrýnir efnishyggju Íslendinga" on RÚV (10 October 2013): [http://www.ruv.is/frett/gagnrýnir-efnishyggju-islendinga?fb\\_action\\_ids=10202184495560128&fb\\_action\\_types=og.likes&fb\\_source=other\\_multiline&action\\_object\\_map=%7B%2210202184495560128%22%3A207775292734695%7D&action\\_type\\_map=%7B%2210202184495560128%22%3A%22og.likes%22%7D&action\\_ref\\_map](http://www.ruv.is/frett/gagnrýnir-efnishyggju-islendinga?fb_action_ids=10202184495560128&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=%7B%2210202184495560128%22%3A207775292734695%7D&action_type_map=%7B%2210202184495560128%22%3A%22og.likes%22%7D&action_ref_map) (last accessed: 2 March 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The mystery of the missing verses also aroused the imagination of later writers like J.R.R. Tolkien, who 'recomposed' them in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* (first published posthumously in 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Arnaldur Indriðason, *Konungsbók* (Reykjavík 2006). This book was translated into many languages.

<sup>5</sup> Other Icelandic artists were involved in this project as well.

band draws heavily on Nordic mythology, Viking motives, and international metal culture. Like latter-day skalds, the band members mould their complex lyrics according to the strict ancient metres, thus representing a whole new phase in the revival of this poetic tradition, and a link between contemporary music and formal skaldic poetics. *Skálmöld*'s infatuation with everything Viking and eddic is not unique, and is characteristic of metal bands everywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup>

But metal is not the only contemporary musical genre inspired by these themes: a new annual, three-day festival in Reykjavík, called *Secret Solstice* (first edition: June 2014), celebrates the summer solstice in the midnight sun with modern dance music ranging from “heavy house, techno, deep bass and trip hop, as dozens of artists and revellers from around the world join in a modern interpretation of this country’s proud Norse traditions and historic mythology, creating a unique party atmosphere.”<sup>2</sup> *Secret Solstice* is not intended as a religious, Neopagan festival, but *Ásatrúarmenn* were actively involved in the organisation of the festivity, and the festival terrain was adorned with a larger than life, artificial ‘pink tree’ representing Yggdrasil, for the party people to dance around.

In the visual arts, the Eddas have always been somewhat overshadowed by the overbearing genre of landscape painting. After Einar Jónsson (see Chapter 8.2) there have only been a handful of painters and sculptors who have actively concerned themselves with mythological motives. The most interesting of these is arguably Jóhann Briem (1907-1991), whose colourful paintings show impressionistic as well as expressionistic influences and often portray human and animal figures. His works *Sál sér hún standa* (‘A hall she sees standing’, comp. *Völuspá* stanza 65; 1964), *Valkyrjur* (Valkyries; 1969) and *Úr Völsungakviðu hinni fornu* (‘From the Ancient Poem of the Volsungs’; 1975), along with his illustrations for two popular editions of the eddic poems, draw directly from Nordic mythology. In 2003, a special edition of Snorri’s *Prose Edda* was published by the publishing house Iðunn, containing photographs of a multitude of both old and new artworks by Icelandic and foreign artists inspired by the Eddas.<sup>3</sup>

### 10.3 Names and Language

In other fields of Icelandic culture, like religion, name-giving, and the public sphere, the Eddas have remained an important factor, albeit in a different way than in the previous century. During Iceland’s economical heydays of the Post-war era – which lasted until the financial crisis of 2008 –, epic-sounding names from the Eddas became somewhat detached from the nationalistic sentiments which had brought about their revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As observed by Gylfi Gunnlaugsson<sup>4</sup>, these names now began to serve the exact opposite purpose, namely of *internationalising* Icelandic companies and banks, and integrating them into the globalised world of industry and finance. The best example of this strategy is that of the bank *Íslandsbanki*, which changed its name to the more pronounceable *Glitnir*: the great hall of Forseti, son of Baldr and Nanna and god of justice, attested in

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<sup>1</sup> On Viking themes in (popular) music, see Helgason (2017) pp.133-152. Another poetic tradition which has been revived in the twentieth century is that of the *rímur*, dispised by the leading figures of Icelandic Romanticism. In 1929, a group of *rímur* enthusiasts founded the *Kvæðamannafélag* (‘Poets’ Society’) *Iðunn*, appropriately named after the goddess of eternal rejuvenation (see Chapter 3.3.1). The composer and Neopagan high priest Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson has also contributed significantly to the revaluation to this genre: see Andersen and Hilmarsson (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Description of the festival on the website of Festicket: <https://www.festicket.com/festival/secret-solstice-2014/> (last accessed: 2 March 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* (Reykjavík 2003). This monumental edition was simultaneously published in English.

<sup>4</sup> In an unpublished paper he was kind enough to share with me.

*Grímnismál* (stanza 15) and Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (ch. 17 and 32). The allure of this resounding name, both international and very indigenous at the same time, soon faded after the financial crisis, and in 2009 the bank changed its name back to *Íslandsbanki*. In this specific case, material from the Eddas was instrumentalised to build bridges with the world at large, and to break the age-old isolation of the island nation symbolised by the name *Íslandsbanki* (Iceland's Bank). Failure on the international stage eventually led to a renewed fixation on the nation and its ancient heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Icelandic children are still named after the gods (see Chapter 9.1.2), but new eddic names – which would have been absolutely rejectable a hundred years ago – have joined the ranks of Icelandic given names. The most remarkable of these is the name Loki, which first occurred in 1990 and has been growing in popularity ever since. Currently, there are about sixty Icelanders carrying the name of the mischievous trickster, either as their first or their middle name.<sup>2</sup> But also Fenrir, the ferocious wolf which is unleashed during Ragnarök, has had multiple namesakes in Iceland since 1979. This interesting development should be seen in the context of the protest cultures of post-war Europe, in which authority is no longer uncritically accepted and 'the underdog', demonised by his superiors, has been gaining respect. In contemporary Scandinavian literature, Loki has been portrayed as an outsider, an asylum seeker, an unwanted and illegal immigrant, conceived by the arrogant Æsir as *not* one of their own, offspring of a giantess rather than a god, and a *Fremdkörper*.<sup>3</sup> After the great tragedies of the first half of the twentieth century, caused by a similar discriminative and elitist mind-set as that of the Æsir, naming your child Loki could be seen as an ideological statement: in favour of equality and individualism, against the established order and its biased, narrow-minded ideas about 'the other'. Interestingly, the – overall rather conservative – Icelandic naming commission no longer considers naming one's child after a notorious villain from the Eddas problematic. However, when a name is in violation of the strict rules of Icelandic grammar, it is usually rejected. The name Skaði for instance, a giantess and goddess associated with skiing and bow hunting, and briefly the spouse of the sea god Njörðr (see *Gylfaginning*, ch. 23-24), has always been rejected because, as a masculine word, it would not make any grammatical sense as a female name: no Icelandic girl's name could ever end on -i. Only in January 2016 did the naming commission yield and formally allow – for the first time in its history – for a girl to receive a name subject to masculine declension: Skaði.<sup>4</sup> The only reason for this name to be permitted is its attestation – as a *female's* name – in both the Eddas, and who are contemporary grammarians to argue with such a source? In this case, linguistic puritanism was overruled by arguments based on ancestral mythology and national heritage.

The linguistic puritanism which has characterised Icelandic national culture since at least the days of the Fjölnismenn has crystallised into a set of official institutions – like the aforementioned naming commission –, committed to keeping the language pure.<sup>5</sup> And almost as if heeding Finnur Magnússon's advice to look upon the *Poetic Edda* as a benchmark for

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<sup>1</sup> On Icelandic national identity since the financial crisis, see especially Eiríkur Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis. Boom, Bust and Recovery* (Basingstoke – New York 2014). A similar gravitation towards the nation can be seen in Iceland's heavily polarised debate on EU membership.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.islendingabok.is](http://www.islendingabok.is) (last accessed: 2 March 2016). The name is also used in philosophically interesting combinations, such as Baldur Loki.

<sup>3</sup> On the Scandinavian re-interpretation of Loki in contemporary literature, see Katja Schulz, "Crossing the Borders. Loki and the Decline of the Nation State", in Simon Halink (ed.), *Northern Myths, Modern Identities. The Nationalisation of Northern Mythologies Since 1800*, Brill (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Jóhann Óli Eiðsson, "Fyrsta íslenska kvenmannanafnið sem fylgir veikri kerlkynsbeygingu", published on the news site Vísir.is (20 January 2016): <http://www.visir.is/fyrsta-islenska-kvenmannsnafnid-sem-fylgir-veikri-kerlkynsbeygingu/article/2016160129866> (last accessed: 3 March 2016).

<sup>5</sup> On the development of linguistic puritanism, see especially Wahl (2008).



everything national and authentic (see Chapter 3.4.3), clear eddic overtones can be discerned in their policy and language planning.<sup>1</sup> Icelandic neologisms are constantly being invented for foreign terms entering the language, with variable success. An interesting example in case is the Icelandic word for computer, *tölva*, which took hold in daily parlance and completely expelled the English term. This particular neologism was invented in 1965 by Sigurður Nordal, who applied his knowledge of Old Norse Icelandic literature to counter the seemingly unstoppable invasion of foreign words. It is actually a very sophisticated combination of two pre-existing Icelandic words, namely *tala* (number) and *völva*: the Old Norse term for ‘seeress’, ‘prophetess’ or ‘Sybil’, synonymous with ‘vala’ as in *Völuspá* (‘The Prophecy of the Vala’). In effect, this neologism constituted a precise and *indigenous* description (the first function of myth) of a machine which predicts – or calculates – the future through numbers.

#### 10.4 *Ásatrú as a Living Faith*

Arguably the most significant and fascinating development in the last fifty years of Iceland’s ‘eddic consciousness’, is the establishment and steady growth of the world’s first officially recognised Neopagan Ásatrú Fellowship (*Ásatrúarfélagið*). In previous chapters, I explored the metaphysical potentials of the Eddas in the poetry of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, the sculptures of Einar Jónsson, and the writings of Icelandic Theosophists. However, this recognition of the primordial wisdom of the Eddas never inspired a pagan revival, or a separate Ásatrú community until the second half of the twentieth century. In mainland Europe – and especially Germany and Austria – ‘Germanic mystics’ like Guido von List and the painter Ludwig Fahrenkrog already experimented with new forms of *völkisch* – and distinctly anti-Semitic – spirituality based on the Eddas around the turn of the twentieth century (see Chapter 8.2.2). This early phase of Germanic Neopaganism has been called the ‘first Odinic experiment’ by Richard Rudgley, who situated the so-called ‘second Odinic experiment’ in the spiritual upheaval and explorations of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>2</sup> The first experiment never seems to have affected the shores of the isolated, deeply Lutheran farmer society. The second one however, can be said to have started in Iceland. It was in a Reykjavík café that the farmer and poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson (1924-1993), the infamous hippie Jörmundur Ingi Hansen (b. 1940), and the journalist Þorsteinn Guðjónsson – a member of Iceland’s Theosophical Society – decided to establish a religious organisation based on Old Norse mythology and Icelandic folklore. Sveinbjörn, who was an authority on *rímur* poetry and a skilled versifier in his own right, became the group’s first leader or *allsherjargoði* (‘all-warring chieftain’): a ceremonial title originally reserved for the offspring of Ingólfr Arnarson in the age of the Commonwealth.<sup>3</sup>

The *Ásatrúarfélag* was formally established on the first day of summer in 1972, and already in the following year, the fellowship was recognised by the Icelandic state as an official religious organisation, with rights to a portion of the collected church tax. It is interesting to observe how the story of the organisation’s official recognition very quickly evolved into a myth of eddic proportions itself; the story goes, that Sveinbjörn and Þorsteinn had a meeting with Iceland’s minister of justice and ecclesiastical affairs, Ólafur Jóhannesson, to discuss the matter of official recognition. Many members of the establishment – including Iceland’s Lutheran bishop, Sigurbjörn Einarsson – were not thrilled

<sup>1</sup> On Mjöltnir as a symbol for linguistic ultra-puritanism (*Háfrónska*), see Chapter 9.1.3.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rudgley, *Pagan Resurrection. A Force of Evil or the Future of Western Spirituality?* (London 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this colorful and ‘grandfatherly’ personality, see his biography authored by Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson and Berglind Gunnarsdóttir, *Allsherjargoðinn* (Reykjavík 1992).

by the prospect of becoming the first modern country to not only recognise, but even subsidise polytheistic, pagan practices. The minister initially thought that Sveinbjörn's request was a joke, and requested additional paperwork when this did not appear to be the case. Just as the two Ásatrúarmenn were leaving the ministry, a heavy thunderstorm broke out over the city – in itself a rare event in Iceland – and a stroke of lightning left the centre of Reykjavík without light. This event was quite naturally interpreted as a sign from Þórr – who obviously supported the Ásatrúar's case –, and urban legend has it that it played a part in the minister's rapid decision to formally recognise the new faith.<sup>1</sup> No one seems to seriously believe that the thunder god literally interfered in Icelandic politics, and the whole anecdote is first and foremost just that: a funny anecdote. But due to continuous repetition, it has evolved into something of a 'founding myth' of the Ásatrú Fellowship, apart from its humorous overtones not that different from the founding myths of previous ages. *Mythopoesis* was, and still is, the most potent way of creating a collective identity, rooted in a shared body of endlessly recycled narratives.

During the 'chieftainship' of Sveinbjörn, which lasted until his death in 1993, the number of members never exceeded one-hundred. However, under the leadership of his successor Jörmundur Ingi – which lasted until 2002 – numbers started to rise, and the fellowship became an increasingly important and recognisable factor in Icelandic society. The aforementioned composer Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson became the fellowship's fourth allsherjargoði in 2004, and currently leads an organisation of more than three-thousand members, making it the largest non-Christian religious organisation in Iceland. Hilmar, a mediagenic spokesman with very clear opinions on what Ásatrú *is* and is *not*, has on multiple occasions explained that Ásatrú is not an exact reconstruction of the historical faith of the ancestors, nor an actual, literal belief in the external existence of the Æsir.<sup>2</sup> It is a way of life, built on the wisdom of the *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* poems primarily, and centred around the eternal cycles of nature.<sup>3</sup> In Hilmar's own experience of the faith, the gods and goddesses of Ásgarður are primarily psychological archetypes, symbols of both internal and natural forces, which help the pagans to reconnect to nature and to themselves. There are no holy books, no dogmas and no external authorities, and the faith is very individualistic in nature. According to the allsherjargoði, that is exactly why it suits the Icelandic mentality so well: "Well it's certainly not a revealed religion and like you see in the monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, we don't have any rules that have been hewn in rock saying 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not', and it is more like a mild code of conduct, which is telling you it would be better if you did this." He sees the old sources as "practical advice, but with a lot of good stories", and is opposed to any *so-called* Ásatrúarmenn who propose a more dogmatic approach, which in Hilmar's view "does not really fit in with how we read the sources, and certainly not with the Icelandic *national character*, which is not very good at organised religion."<sup>4</sup> These views are representative of the metaphysical and moral relativism which characterise the postmodern approach to religion, and emphasise the Romantic image

<sup>1</sup> For a contemporary and somewhat humorous report, see "Hverju reiddust goðin?", in *Vísir* (2 January 1973) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> For a more scholarly examination of contemporary Ásatrú, see Strmiska (2000). On the state of Icelandic Ásatrú in the early twenty-first century, see the unpublished dissertation by Eggert Sólberg Jónsson, *Ásatrú á Íslandi við upphaf 21. aldar. Uppruni, heimsmynd og helgiathafnir* (Reykjavík 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See the website of the Ásatrúarfélagið: <http://asatru.is/hvad-er-asatru> (last accessed: 3 March 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson in a recorded video interview for the website of the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* (mbl.is), retrieved on Youtube (24 April 2015): "Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson: The Upcoming Temple of the Icelandic Ásatrú Association", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4H-kk8r1U> (last accessed: 3 March 2016). Italics added. See for his interpretation of Ásatrú also Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, "Old beliefs and modern Iceland", in Unnar Stefánsson (ed.), *Hvad er med Asar?/Mikä aasoilla on?/What ails the Æsir? Speeches at the capital cities' conference Reykjavík September 2007* (Reykjavík 2009) pp.155-8.

of Iceland as a nonconformist, individualistic and freedom-loving nation. Similar ideas are expressed by self-proclaimed Ásatrúar, like a twenty-five-year-old environmentalist, who believes that, “in a world that is quite artificial, here there seems to be an interest in the real, something authentic – whether that’s searching for some older wisdom or the truth about how society was, or whether it’s [our] commitment to nature, I can’t really say. [...] Also, the group is so incredibly inclusive. You get a really unpretentious group of people for some reason. Nobody would pretend to be having a conversation with Thor, for example.”<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the Ásatrúarfélag has been in the Icelandic media due to their involvement in social and environmental issues; the organisation played an active role in the legalisation of same-sex marriage – gay and lesbian couples from around the world come to Iceland to be married in a pagan ceremony by a recognised priest of the society – and organise protest marches and ceremonies whenever the government has taken a decision that may harm the island’s living landscape. Ásatrúarmenn are generally environmentalists at heart, and are usually found on the left-hand side of the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> The organisation has an inclusive and tolerant philosophy, which does not resonate with the anti-Christian, racist or white-supremacist rhetoric of Neopagan organisations and individuals elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> True to the principles of individualism and personal development, many Ásatrúarmenn have found their own very unique paths in expressing their religious views. An interesting example is the artist and author Guðrún Kristín Magnúsdóttir (b. 1939), who in a still expanding body of drawings and writings in both Icelandic and English explores the “profound edda, science of heathenry”, by revealing the “allegory, metaphor [*sic.*], abyss, etymology, beauty, and profound [*sic.*] understanding of our priceless spiritual ancient heritage”.<sup>4</sup> Guðrún claims to have revealed much of the primordial wisdom of the Eddas by comparing the myths with similar stories and concepts from Hindu mythology, and by tracing the true meaning of eddic concepts through etymological comparison with their Sanskrit equivalents. In her view – which is in this respect not that different from the Theosophical views explored in Chapter 8.2.2 – the eddic poems are best described as Icelandic *Puranas* or *Vedas*. This can be seen as an emancipation of Norse culture through *association* (function four) and *universalisation* (function three), and a cultural *indigenisation* of exotic metaphysical concepts (function one).

In the course of its existence, the Ásatrúarfélag has issued a small number of publications, including its own edition of *Hávamál*, with an introduction by the organisation’s representative in the Westfjords (*Vestfirðingagoði*) Eyvindur P. Eiríksson.<sup>5</sup> In this introduction the author strikes an interesting balance between scholarship and devotion: a precarious balance devout scholars of theology have held for centuries. He is aware of the fact that the views expressed on these pages may not be the same as those of other Ásatrúar, but that this is – given the religion’s emphasis on personal insight – not an issue:

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewed in Esther Addley, “Back to Thor: how Iceland is reconnecting with its pagan past”, on the website of *The Guardian* (6 February 2015): <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/06/back-for-thor-iceland-reconnectinbg-pagan-past> (last accessed: 3 March 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Strmiska (2000).

<sup>3</sup> In order to differentiate between racist and non-racist heathens, the first group is sometimes referred to as *Odinists*, as opposed to the rest of the Germanic Neopagan community. This division is however quite artificial, since not all racist Neopagans worship Odin, and many non-racist heathens also consider themselves *Odinists*.

<sup>4</sup> Guðrún’s project is called *Óðsmál*, and has spawned many books and publications on the ‘correct’ understanding of the myths. Much of this material can be retrieved on the project’s websites: <http://www.mmedia.is/odsmal/> and <http://odsmal.org/> (last accessed: 3 March 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Eyvindur P. Eiríksson, “Inngangur”, in *Hávamál með skýringum* (Reykjavík 2007) pp.5-21. *Hávamál* is by many Ásatrúarmenn considered the authoritative source on heathen ethics and moral conduct, whereas *Völuspá* is the central text on religious philosophy and world-view.

The introduction that follows here conveys first and foremost the views of the one who wrote it, since he is not a spokesman of pagans in general. His views should, however, fit into the wide framework of the world-view, which our tradition sets out for those among us who want to associate themselves with it. We have no religious creeds, but rather greater freedom to develop our own interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of the present study, a more interesting publication of the Ásatrúarfélag is the first Icelandic edition of Finnur Magnússon's *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse* ('The Eddic Lore and its Origin', see Chapter 3.4), issued on the occasion of the organisation's thirtieth anniversary in 2002. In the introduction to his translation, the second allsherjargoði, Jörmundur Ingi Hansen, explains why this old book is still relevant to Ásatrúarmenn today:

The *Eddufræði*, that great and remarkable work by Finnur Magnússon, which is here presented for the first time in Icelandic translation, was essentially the starting point of an entirely new academic discipline, the study of Icelandic and Old Norse paganism. [...] While translating a work like this, that which has actually been most surprising to the translator is the fact that the newest books on this subject contain virtually no new information. [...] Newer books are seemingly dry enumerations of facts compared to the *Eddufræði*. In other words, Finnur's book is written by a man who is not only religious, but also searching in his faith, and that is transmitted to the reader.<sup>2</sup> I imagined I could crawl into the mindset of the author and tried to determine his religious beliefs, which on closer inspection proved to be what has been called *guðtrú* [lit.: believe in God] in Icelandic, the foreign term for which is Deism. This religious current was very dominant among intellectuals in Denmark in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century [...]. Deism is something of a Christian version of pagan polytheism...

By equating the runologist's presumed Deistic convictions with pre-Christian polytheism, Finnur is spiritually appropriated for the Neopagan cause, and presented as 'one of ours': a true Icelandic Ásatrúarmenn *avant* – or maybe rather *après?* – *la lettre*. His profound understanding of ancient mythology, so 'true' that ensuing generations saw no need to revise it, sprang from a world-view that was essentially the same as the one which had brought forth the eddic poems centuries earlier. This seems to suggest that Finnur's knowledge – or rather *wisdom* – was not of an external nature, but originated from within, making his *magnum opus* a work of spiritual revelation rather than merely a scholarly treatise. This interpretation of Finnur and his work can be seen as the age-old 'noble heathen' trope *in reverse*; just like noble characters from pre-Christian times could be praised for their Christian characteristics (see Chapter 8.1.1), so Finnur could be lauded for his heathen qualities, even if he would have considered himself a Christian. In this new discourse, the history of Icelandic mythography and philology, as explored in the previous chapters, has itself become a tool for *primordialisation* (function 1), incorporated in the new mythology of Ásatrú.

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, p.5; "Inngangsorðin hér á eftir túlka first og fremst skoðanir þess sem þau ritar, enda er hann ekki sjálfsagður málsvari heiðinna manna almennt. Viðhorf hans ættu þó að eiga heima innan þess víða ramma lífsviðhorfs, sem vor síður setur okkur sem til hans viljum teljast. Við höfum enga trúarjátninga en þeim mun rýmra frelsi til eigin túlkunar."

<sup>2</sup> Jörmundur Ingi Hansen, "Formáli þýðanda", in Finnur Magnússon, *Eddufræði og uppruni þeirra* (Reykjavík 2002) pp. i-vii, i: "Eddufræðin, hið mikla og stórmerka verk Finns Magnússonar sem birtist hér í fyrsta skipti í íslenskri þýðingu var í raun upphafið að heilli vísindagrein, rannsóknum á íslenskri og fornorrænni heiðni. [...] Það sem hefur komið þýðanda mest á óvart við það snúna verk sem þessi þýðing er í raun, er það að nýjustu bækur um efnid innihalda nær engar nýjar upplýsingar. [...] Nýrri bækur virðast vera þurr upptalning staðreynda miðað við Eddufræðin. Með öðrum orðum, bók Finns er skrifuð af manni sem sjálfur er ekki aðeins trúaður heldur einnig leitandi í trú sinni og þetta smitast yfir á lesandann. Ég þóttist geta séðinn í hugarheim höfundar og reyndi að gera mér grein fyrir trúarskoðunum hans sem reyndust við nánari skoðun vera það sem hefur verið kallað guðstrú á íslensku, útlanda orðið er deismi. Þessi trúarstefna var mjög ríkjandi meðal menntamanna í Danmörku í byrjun 19 aldar [...]. Deisminn er nokkurs konar Kristin útgáfa af hinni heiðnu algyðistrú..."

The rise of Neopaganism worldwide has – especially in the Anglo-Saxon world – led to a whole new, more devotional approach to the study of the Eddas. In this endeavour, the philological traditions of the Romantic age are often interpreted as precursors to modern heathenism. An American collective known as *The Norroena Society* is dedicated to presenting modern heathens with a complete body of sacred texts, neatly systematised and purged of Christian influences. The group named itself after the enigmatic *Norroena Society*, allegedly founded by the American diplomat and scholar Rasmus Anderson (1846-1936), and published *The Ásatrú Edda. Sacred Lore of the North* in 2009. This work probably represents the most ambitious attempt to systematise the chaotic jungle of poems, stories and fragments through which the ‘Lore of the North’ has been handed down through the ages, and presents the reader with a cohesive, monolithic and chronological narrative. In order to achieve this, the compilers erased everything that sounded too Christian, changed names and altered storylines. They also supplemented their narrative with other ‘Germanic sources’ from the European mainland, such as the ancient Merseburger incantations, but also with fragments from the Frisian *Oera Linda* book: a grotesque forgery from the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Although this kind of very creative handling of source material is unforgivable in an academic context, these devout rewritings of the Edda form an interesting genre for scholars of modern religion in their own right.<sup>2</sup>

In Iceland, this trend to canonise the eddic corpus is rather unpopular; generally, Icelandic Ásatrúarmenn seem to prefer the plurality and incoherent nature of the original sources. In recent years, the Ásatrúarfélag has witnessed a steady growth in its membership, and even realised its own pagan burial site in the main cemetery of Reykjavík. Currently, the construction of northern Europe’s ‘first pagan temple in a thousand years’ is in full progress on the slopes of Öskjuhlíð, a forested hill not far from downtown Reykjavík. The modern building was designed by Magnús Jensson, and represents a complex symbolic representation of many aspects of eddic cosmology.<sup>3</sup> The temple is expected to open its doors to Ásatrúarmenn – and everyone else interested in the organisation and Old Norse mythology – in 2018. This will however not prevent the Ásatrúarmenn from worshipping outside as well: Ásatrú is a nature religion, and Icelandic nature in particular, animated with stories and magico-mystical references to elves and gods, forms the Neopagan’s central ‘faithscape’.<sup>4</sup> According to the poet Þórarinn Eldjárn, Icelandic landscape, the ‘natural habitat of the gods’, functions simultaneously as the Mecca, Jerusalem, and the Hollywood of Norse paganism.<sup>5</sup>

### ***10.5 The Impact of Tourism***

Arguably the most drastic development in Icelandic society since the Second World War is the advent of mass tourism, and the emergence of a flourishing tourist industry. In recent years, this booming sector has developed into one of the mainstays of Iceland’s national economy, and the annual number of foreign visitors to the island crossed the one-million-mark for the first time in 2015. This radical development is a very interesting one in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Norroena Society, *The Ásatrú Edda. Sacred Lore of the North* (New York – Bloomington 2009). A similar attempt to render the eddic narratives more compact and coherent for modern pagans is Wayland Skallagrímsson’s *New Edda* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent assessment of Neopagan approaches to the Old Norse sources, see Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival. Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the temple’s design, visit the architect’s website: [http://magnus.jensson.is/?page\\_id=141](http://magnus.jensson.is/?page_id=141) (last accessed: 8 March 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Compare Edensor (2002) p.52.

<sup>5</sup> Eldjárn (2009), p.189.

context of this research, since it forces the Icelanders to determine their own identity *vis-à-vis* an invasion of ‘others’. In previous chapters, we have seen how Icelandic national identity was formed through a long process of contact and contrastation, in which the ‘significant other’ constituted a convenient non-self against which a collective self-image could be juxtaposed and formulated. In the past, this significant other was usually encountered abroad, notably in Denmark, where the Romantic idea of the Icelandic nation first occurred. But with the arrival of mass tourism to Iceland, the islanders now find themselves surrounded by significant others on their own turf, and in need of new ways of self-fashioning in the face of the foreigner.<sup>1</sup> This process can be observed in the large corpus of tourist literature, intended for a foreign audience, in which many of the classical topoi of Romantic nationalism are recycled and amplified. A good example of this is the English translation of Jónas Kristjánsson’s popular introduction to Old Norse Icelandic literature, in which the reader is acquainted with the island’s literary heritage:

But if there is a slight disadvantage in the fact that the book was written *for Icelanders*, there ought to be a decided advantage in the fact that it was written *by an Icelander*, for none but Icelanders can fully participate in this unique national literature. Only we speak this ancient language and only we have the setting of the sagas in our daily view. Thus it ought to be of benefit to foreigners to be led through this landscape by an Icelandic guide.<sup>2</sup>

This passage may come across as intimidating, and forcefully re-affirms Iceland’s age-old and exclusive claim to the cultural capital of the Eddas and sagas, from which all non-Icelanders are automatically excluded. The theme of Icelandic exclusivism in literary matters, proclaimed in different tonalities by scholars from Snorri Sturluson to Finnur Magnússon, Benedikt Gröndal, Björn M. Ólsen and Sigurður Nordal, resonates in this imposing introduction. Like his predecessors, Jónas clearly demarcates the terrain of Iceland’s cultural capital along ethnic lines.

In order to emphasise the image of Iceland as a pristine nation of ancient Viking traditions, many of the invented traditions treated in the previous chapters are presented as authentic and truly ancient in publications for tourists. On posters in Iceland’s national airport, an old farmer in traditional woollen sweater claims to have ‘an ancient name’ – Baldur –, seemingly unaware of the fact that there were no Baldurs in Iceland before the 1870s (see Chapter 9.1.2). Þorrablót is generally presented as an ancient Viking festival (see Chapter 7.1.3), and contemporary Ásatrú is explained as an uninterrupted continuation of the pre-Christian faith, which was never quite eradicated in Iceland. The impression of historical continuity is more appealing to tourists – those heirs of Romanticism, always on the hunt for *authentic* experiences – than a complicated lecture on invented traditions. Furthermore, the supposedly widespread belief in elves and the ‘hidden people’ in Iceland turned out to be quite a curiosity to foreign visitors, and thus something to be exploited as exotic and ‘typically Icelandic’ in the tourist industry.<sup>3</sup> The cultivation of this stereotype – or even caricature – can be interpreted as a conscious attempt to place oneself out of the so-called modern – rational – world, in order to distinguish oneself from the others (see function number five, as identified in Chapter 1.1) create an alternative, magico-mystical blueprint of Icelandic identity based on *belief* rather than concrete knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This anti-Enlightenment

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<sup>1</sup> On the influence of the tourist industry on contemporary Icelandic identity, see Gísli Sigurðsson, “Icelandic national identity: from romanticism to tourism”, in Pertti J. Anttonen (ed.), *Making Europe in Nordic contexts* (Turku 1996) pp. 41-75.

<sup>2</sup> Kristjánsson (2007), translated by Peter Foote, p.7. Italics original.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of elves in Iceland’s contemporary self-image, see Hafstein (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Compare Latour (1993).

stance, characteristic of much of Romantic literature (see Chapter 1.3), has become such an important element in Iceland's self-representation, that an Icelander who explicitly denies the existence of elves could almost be labelled 'not a true Icelander'.

In this perpetual process of self-exoticisation, fuelled by the tourist industry, Icelanders do not merely recycle the traditional themes of Romantic nationalism; the modern tourist enters the island with a set of pre-conceived, vague notions of 'northernness', motivated by Tolkien's fantastic Middle-earth series or popular TV-shows like *Vikings* (History Channel, since 2013) and *Game of Thrones* (HBO, since 2011). This last series was partly filmed in Iceland, rendering the island an instant place of pilgrimage to fans from around the world. This development adds yet another layer of fictional *lieux de mémoire* to the already existing ones of Romantic poetry and the Íslendingasögur, and offers contemporary readers an alternative mode of experiencing the palimpsest of Iceland's mythical landscape.<sup>1</sup> Foreign conceptions of Icelandic history and culture are often influenced by Hollywood and popular culture, and the Icelandic tourist industry anticipates in this respect by importing and internalising the gaze of the outsider.<sup>2</sup>

It goes almost without saying that Old Norse mythology plays a pivotal part in the self-exoticisation – and mystification – of the exciting travel destination Iceland claims to be. For this purpose, the assumed link between Icelandic landscape and eddic myth, employed as a philological argument in favour of the corpus's Icelandicness by Benedikt Gröndal and Björn M. Ólsen (see Chapters 6.3 and 7.1.3), is now solidified in popular renditions of the myths for foreign visitors. A good example of this is Patrick Desgraupes's *Island und die Snorra Edda*, in which spectacular photographs capturing the great variety of Iceland's natural beauty are coupled with appropriate passages from Snorri's *Prose Edda* in five different languages.<sup>3</sup> This way, the foreign reader can learn about the myths and experience Iceland's 'sublime' nature simultaneously. The landscapes seem to be expressing, or re-enacting the entire mythological narrative, from the creation of the world to its demise and rebirth after Ragnarök, and the gods and their divine qualities appear to be embodied by the glaciers, the rocks, the volcanoes and the geothermal pools. This presumption is reflected in the mythical descriptions of Iceland in travelogues and expedition accounts, such as 'Land of Thor' or 'Odins Reich'.<sup>4</sup> Little booklets containing the 'wisdom of the Vikings' – *Hávamál* – in a wide range of Western and Asian languages are for sale in bookshops and tourist centres throughout the country, offering the visitors a change to take a swift dive into the Viking world-view while appreciating the epic surroundings.

The idea of Iceland as a mythical, liminal, or ethereal space is even most clearly expressed in Walter Hansen's travel book *Asgard. Entdeckungsfahrt in die germanische Götterwelt* from 1985.<sup>5</sup> Hansen (b.1934), in his youth inspired by the books of Wilhelm Wägner (see Chapter 7.2.2), took his theories to their extremes and travelled to Iceland to determine the geographical locations of Ásgarður (Mount Herðubreið), the Völva's grave (Landmannahellir), the spring Hvergelmir, the origins of Yggdrasil (Mount Katla) and many other eddic worlds and places, using the descriptions provided by the Eddas as his map. He entertains the idea that every aspect of the eddic stories was in fact inspired by actual

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<sup>1</sup> Halink (2014).

<sup>2</sup> As an example of this, I could mention the fact that – just like one can undertake a Middle-earth tour through New Zealand to visit the locations where the popular *Lord of the Rings* movies were shot – one can now book *Game of Thrones* excursions from Reykjavík.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Desgraupes, *Island und die Snorra Edda*, or: *Islande. Le Sublime – l'Imaginaire; Iceland. The Sublime – The Imaginary; Island. Die Erhabenheit – die Einbildung; Island. Det fullkomne – det uvirkelige* (Reykjavík 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Browne (1867), and Katja Lechthaler and Thomas Linkel, *Island. Geschichten und Bilder aus Odins Reich* (Eichstätt 1995) respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Bergisch Gladbach 1985.

locations, and that the Old Norse poets created a mythology in which the map of Iceland is accurately reflected on the mythological plane. Although Hansen's very spatial approach to the myths is very far from universally accepted, the relationship between eddic poetry and Icelandic landscape, shaped by 'fire and ice', has become more or less commonplace in popular literature. In the introduction to her popular *Song of the Vikings. Snorri and the Making of the Norse Myths*, the American author and Iceland enthusiast Nancy Marie Brown emphasises this link as follows:

So Snorri explains the creation of the world in the beginning of his *Edda*. Partly he is quoting an older poem, "Song of the Sibyl", whose author he does not name. Partly he is making it up – especially the bit about the world forming in a kind of volcanic eruption and then freezing to ice. If this myth were truly ancient, there would be no volcano. Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, the Scandinavian homelands, are not volcanic. Only Iceland – discovered in 870, when Norse paganism was already on the wane – is geologically active. In medieval times Iceland's volcanoes ten or a dozen times a century, often burning through thick glaciers. Nothing is as characteristic of Iceland's landscape as the clash between fire and ice.<sup>1</sup>

Just like Hansen, Brown situates the origin of much of what we now know as eddic mythology in the imagination of this one poet, confronted by a landscape yearning for mythological cultivation. And since we know only the author of the *Prose Edda* by name, the person of Snorri Sturluson forms the most important historical link between the realm of myth and the Icelandic space. Sometimes, Ásgarður – as presented to us by the 'pseudo-heathen' Snorri – becomes almost tangible for visitors to Reykholt: the skald's homestead and birthplace of his epic writings. During a German expedition to Iceland, organised by the SS in 1936, one of the participants – writer, esotericist and *Obersturmführer* Otto Rahn (1904-1939) – was at first not very impressed by the desolate and empty dwelling place of Snorri. It was only during a hike in the vicinity, in the brightness of the midnight sun, that Rahn suddenly 'grasped' the significance of this place:

Es ging ein Singen durch diese Nacht der Sommersonnenwende auf Island. Sollte es nicht Sphärenmusik gewesen sein, die Baldrs Tod und Wiederkehr ankundet? Ehe dieser tote Gott auf dem Dornholz von den Flammen verzehrt wurde, flüsterte Allvater Odhin ihm das Wort der höchsten Weisheit ins Ohr. Dieses Wort könnte Luzifer gelautet haben. Auch Lohengrin oder Helias.<sup>2</sup>

In an instant, Reykholt had become sacred ground, and Rahn picked up a stone to take with him, so he could later place it next to other stones from Delphi and the Cathar stronghold of Montségur in his own personal monument to pagan, pre-Christian Europe.<sup>3</sup> In the tourist industry of our own day, the same primordial sentiments are still being cultivated. On a website for visitors to West-Iceland for instance, Reykholt's link with the world of myth is highlighted in order to attract tourists: who would not like to visit "the home of The Prose Edda, the *bible* of Norse Mythology"?<sup>4</sup>

But mythological spaces can also be created in places where there seems to be no direct historical incentive to do so. Although the emptiness of the Icelandic countryside is exactly what attracts many tourists to the island, the lack of historical manmade structures –

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<sup>1</sup> Brown (2012) p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Rahn, *Luzifers Hofgesind. Eine Reise zu den guten Geistern Europas* (Dresden 2006) p.239. On the motif of Óðinn's secret words, whispered into the ear of his dead son Baldr, see Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*.

<sup>3</sup> On Otto Rahn and the National Socialist interpretation of Iceland's heritage, see Halink (2010).

<sup>4</sup> On the website of *Visit West Iceland: Official Travel Guide to West Iceland*: <http://www.west.is/en/west-iceland-regions/sagaland> (last accessed: 8 March 2016). (Italics added.)



especially in the sparsely populated areas of the northeast – has moved some local residents to fill the void with modern, but very archaic-looking constructions. In 1996, locals from the surroundings of Raufarhöfn – some 130 kilometres from Húsavík – began construction of their *Heimskautsgerðið*, or ‘Arctic Henge’, which functions, similar “to its ancient predecessor, Stonehenge”, like a “huge sundial, aiming to capture the sun’s rays, cast shadows in precise locations and capture the light between aligned gateways” (see fig. 28).<sup>1</sup> The imposing – but still unfinished – construction out of basaltic columns is supposed to reflect the world-view of *Völuspá*, with “72 stones, each one representing a different dwarf name. There are also four gates corresponding to the four seasons, and a range of other symbols to explore. Along with the outer circle, the final henge will be a massive 52 metres in diameter.”<sup>2</sup> The monument in the making is presented as a sanctuary, a place of worship for the island’s new pagan community. But its primary purpose appears to be to attract visitors to this part of the island, and to fill the historical-cultural vacuum in this region. Mythology is placeless, and can therefore serve to supplement historical monuments where there is a lack thereof, creating an *instant* tourist attraction.

Mythological names are also still employed to embed new geological features, constantly appearing in a geologically active land such as Iceland, firmly into the national narrative, determined by Eddas and sagas. When in 1963 a new volcanic island began to take shape off the coast of the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*), the violent spectacle of fire and ash reminded the onlookers of Ragnarök, and the island was named *Surtsey* (‘Surtr’s Island’), after the terrifying fire giant *Surtr* (‘the Black One’) from the Eddas. After the 2010 eruption of the infamous – and apparently unpronounceable – Eyjafjallajökull volcano, the Icelandic Toponymical Committee was quick to christen two brand new hillocks which had occurred on the – still smouldering – site of the eruption Móði and Magni, after the sons of Þórr.<sup>3</sup>

As this – very selective – overview of eddic themes in contemporary Icelandic culture serves to demonstrate, the main tenets of Romantic mythography never faded, and spilled over into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where they only acquired new shapes in the contexts of popular culture, Neopaganism, and mass tourism. When the Icelandic male football team took part in the UEFA European Championship – for the first time in its history – in 2016, the mythological identity templates were re-activated, albeit mostly in an ironic and playful fashion. In a comment on a post about the game against Austria, posted on the Facebook site of Iceland’s most popular magazine in English, *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, someone expressed the hope that, later that evening, “the mighty hammer of Thor will crack dainty Austrian heads. And hopefully the feet of sigurdsson [Gylfi Sigurðsson] will score many and Edda-worthy goals.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, the message itself has little to do with the actual contents of the Eddas, but the ‘mighty hammer of Thor’, as well as the term Edda itself – in this case positively associated with epic, superhuman achievement – serve as markers of Icelandic identity vis-à-vis those ‘dainty Austrians’, even if posted by a non-Icelander. The antagonistic narrative template of *noble* gods versus *evil* giants, politically activated by Grundtvig and Gísli Brynjúlfsson (Chapters 3.2.3 and 6.2), acquired new significance in the context of the jovial and amicable expressions of national identity associated with international tournaments. The gods are still very much alive, and their transformation in

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<sup>1</sup> “The Arctic Henge”, on the website of *Visit Húsavík: Official Travel Guide to Húsavík*: <http://www.visithusavik.com/attractions/the-arctic-henge/> (last accessed: 20 March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> These are very apt names, considering their close proximity to the mountain ridge of Þórsmörk (‘Þórr’s Forest’).

<sup>4</sup> Thom Langley, in reaction to a post on the *Reykjavík Grapevine* Facebook site (<https://www.facebook.com/ReykjavikGrapevine/>), posted on 22 June 2016 (last accessed: 22 June 2016).

contemporary culture is an as yet still largely unexplored and fascinating field of research, which requires more scholarly attention.



## Concluding Remarks: New Beginnings

In the present study I have attempted to map and elucidate the multiple functions of mythology in Iceland's national discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its very essence, it is an exploration of the different ways in which significance is attributed to mythology from an ideological perspective. The period of roughly one-hundred years – which transpired between Finnur Magnússon's first mythological publications and the establishment of the Kingdom of Iceland in 1918 – witnessed the formation of a distinguished *national* culture in Iceland, inspired by Romantic concepts of history, nature and the nation, which engendered an entirely *new* paradigm in the study and cultivation of both sagas and Eddas. The main body of this study consists of a – more or less – chronologically structured set of analyses, each with its own thematic emphasis, in which one specific discursive functionalisation of the Old Norse myths is scrutinised. There is no limit to the polyphonic reception history of the Eddas, even within the relatively manageable and clearly demarcated – or so I believed – corpus of Icelandic sources. Within this polyphony of the wildly divergent fashions of myth-recycling, I decided to focus on the *national* strain of cultivation, in order to reach a more profound understanding of mythology as an instrument in the construction of collective – national – identities. Throughout my research, I have applied the concept of *mythopoesis* – referring to the continuous, creative and dynamic production of new mythologies from older material – to all my sources in order to establish in what respect they constituted an original break *from*, or addition *to* previous mythographical traditions.

Armed with this central concept, I have studied my sources in relation to the core problem addressed by this study, namely the seemingly paradoxical entanglement of *modernity* and (Romantic) *historicism* in the nature of modern nationalism. In the course of this work I have frequently referred to this supposed Janus-face of national ideologies, and to the interesting ways in which an infatuation with blurry pasts was reconciled with the forward-looking, futuristic outlook have been reconciled in national discourses. In order to do so, I have on occasion allowed myself short excursions to branches of Icelandic national culture other than the strictly mythographical one, only to return to the subject with a clearer understanding of the dynamics and motivations underlying my source material. This has allowed me to formulate a set of conclusions relating to the special function of mythology – as opposed to, say, historiography – in the context of this schizophrenic marriage of historicism and modernity. Myths are generally considered traditional and national, but simultaneously retain a certain measure of indeterminacy and ethereality, which renders them more flexible, and suitable for re-interpretation and ideological appropriation than most other narrative genres. And it is the deliberate vagueness and *timeless* quality of myth that the paradox of distant past and glorious future is resolved, facilitating the co-existence of seemingly mutually exclusive ideals within the framework of nationalism. I will also argue that the ideological functionalisation of mythology was not a merely discovery of the Romantics, or a characteristic of pre-Christian cultures: mythologies, ancient and new ones, have *always* been at work in human society, and every reworking of ancient themes forms a new chapter in the perpetual cultural process of mythopoesis. In order to fully comprehend the role of mythology in the process of identity formation, past and present, the results of the present study will have to be analysed not only with the toolkit of the cultural historian, but also with that of the anthropologist and the semiotician.

In my selection of source material, I have deliberately ignored the traditional fault lines between literature, academic writings, the visual arts, 'popular culture', politics,

everyday life, the public sphere, and other categories of cultural life in which traces of ‘eddic identity’ could be discerned. This integrated approach has certainly led to a more comprehensive and complete image of ‘pragmatic mythography’ in Icelandic culture than any previous study, mostly singling out one of these fields of cultural production. Only by maintaining a high level of interdisciplinarity can we attain insight into the full scope of the intellectual ‘quotation culture’ – or template of reference – founded on Old Norse mythology<sup>1</sup>, as it unfolded in the evolving *mentalité* of this demarcated section of history.<sup>2</sup> Due to the wide variety of sources used in this study, I have applied an amalgam of divergent methodologies in order to do full justice to the information contained in each source individually. In approaching these sources, I have always kept the distinction between the two main strands of cultivation – myth as cultural capital, and myth as symbolic language – clearly before my eyes. Even though these two types of cultivation operate on different levels, they are certainly not unrelated; I have demonstrated that the national mythological language of type two only evolved a result of the first strand, which ensured the cultural and national prestige of employing these myths. Furthermore, there is a lively interaction between these two types of cultivation; the first one is strengthened by the second one, and vice versa. In the writings of philologists like Finnur Magnússon and Björn M. Ólsen, establishing the cultural capital of the myths and calling upon artists to apply them as a symbolic language went hand in hand. When analysing sources in which myth is employed as a symbolic language, I used the five interrelated functions of mythology – primordialisation, indigenisation, universalisation, association and differentiation – as formulated in the introduction, to reveal more precisely the cultural dynamics at work in these sources. This approach has allowed me to discern the following great lines in the story of Icelandic mythology and national culture.



In Chapter Two, I discussed the nature and origin of Iceland’s ‘pagan heritage’, as well as the problem of distinguishing between ‘authentic’ mythology on the one hand, and its later reception on the other. I have briefly outlined the possible political and cultural motives for Snorri Sturluson’s occupation with the myths, and the way in which they may have influenced his creative presentation of the material. The beginnings of the Eddas’ ‘international career’ in Early Modernity, unfolding from the scholarly endeavours of Scandinavian Humanists, already forms an indication of the myths’ (proto-)national potentials, not only in Iceland. In the turbulent age of the Protestant Reformation, eddic themes were appropriated by both sides of the religious divide: The Catholic Icelander Jón lærði fashioned his experience of the decline of his Mother Church in apocalyptic terms, mirroring the language of *Völuspá*, whereas Swedish scholars of the seventeenth century sought to cultivate Old Norse-Icelandic sources in order to glorify and exaggerate the ancient, ‘Gothic’ grandeur of their Protestant nation. Translated fragments of Nordic mythology and the sagas first entered the European scene in the apologetic historiographies of Arngrímur Jónsson, whose writings were motivated first and foremost by a patriotic urge to correct the myriad misunderstandings about his island, which circulated in Europe. But Old Norse culture would not become *bon ton* until the 1750s, when Paul Henri Mallet’s French expositions on ‘Danish antiquity’ became international best-sellers, widely read in salons and learned circles. In the meantime, Copenhagen had developed into the political, cultural, and intellectual heart of Scandinavia, where a dynamic process of cultural transfer took shape and

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<sup>1</sup> Grever (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Green (2008) pp.1-10.

the physical presence of the ancient manuscripts – presented to the king by Icelandic ‘manuscript hunters’ – attracted scholars and enthusiasts from beyond the Nordic world. In this vibrant cosmopolitan atmosphere, Icelandic students first encountered foreign conceptions of ‘their’ Old Norse culture, and were motivated to formulate their own Icelandic views, inspired by new Romantic notions of nation and nature. It is in the intellectual climate of Copenhagen in the early nineteenth century, that the beginnings of a *Romantic* Icelandic self-image – although not the beginnings of Icelandic identity itself – should be situated. In the light of Jacob Grimm’s ‘new mythology’, as well as the general intellectual revolution which marked the transition from Early Modernity to Modernity – Reinhart Koselleck’s *Sattelzeit* – and the creation of an urban public sphere, or *Öffentlichkeit* (Jürgen Habermas), the representation of the eddic myths was transformed.

I have analysed this development in Chapter Three, and demonstrated how the myths evolved as they were continuously adjusted to the cultural and ideological climate of the age. A good example of this evolution is to be found in the visual representation of the *Æsir*, from the Neoclassical works of sculptors like Hermann Ernst Freund in the early part of the nineteenth century – which basically represent *classical* gods with a new, Nordic nomenclature – to the development of a more self-confidently Nordic symbolic language in the works of the Norwegian Peter Nicolai Arbo and, much later, the mystical sculptures of Einar Jónsson. This evolutionary process, spun out over the full extent of what Eric Hobsbawm has coined the ‘long nineteenth century’, is one of myriad cultural expressions of a growing national self-awareness in Scandinavia, which initially manifested itself in a need to *emancipate* its Nordic antiquity through stylistic association with classical antiquity, and eventually also developed into a more antagonistic stance vis-à-vis the south – Grundtvig’s ‘Rome’ – in which the Nordic pantheon was presented as quintessentially *different* from – and superior to – the gods of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>1</sup> By replacing the Olympians with the *Æsir*, Scandinavian intellectuals of the nineteenth century successfully re-operationalised the mythological language of the Eddas, and created a new *classical* discourse, a national ‘quotation culture’, or – in Jan Assman’s interpretation of the term ‘classical’ –, a model for very divergent modes of writing and cultural expression.

A key-element in the development of Icelandic nationalism – which should not be confused with a distinctive *cultural identity*, which, in the case of Iceland, can be traced back to pre-modern times – is the introduction of a sense of urgency, provoked primarily by the pessimistic forecasts of the Icelandophile Rasmus Rask. The linguistic activism and cultural societies which quite suddenly sprung up after Rask’s prediction that the Icelandic language would be supplanted entirely by Danish in the next couple of centuries, can best be understood as a form of ‘moral panic’, defined by Stanley Cohen as the existential fear of losing one’s ‘recently found’ national character and language. This moral panic would have a profound effect on the way in which Icelanders fashioned their island community as a nation, and on their efforts to purify and safeguard their linguistic and cultural heritage in dictionaries, saga editions, and folktale collections.<sup>2</sup> To Icelandic intellectuals, this was their nation’s ‘to be or not to be’, which did not only reverberate in language politics and philology, but also in the adjacent study of mythology.

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<sup>1</sup> It is of great importance not to oversimplify this general development: The synchronism of Grímur Thomsen’s theory of Nordic supremacy, and Benedikt Gröndal’s classical refashionings of eddic myths, clearly demonstrates that the onset of Grundtvigian Romanticism in Iceland did not automatically entail the uprooting of older, classical visions of Old Norse mythology.

<sup>2</sup> In order to demonstrate that this sense of urgency constitutes the defining difference between modern Icelandic nationalism and earlier forms of Icelandic identity, I have referred to Jørgen Jørgensen’s failed *coup d’état* of 1809, which did not generate general popular support due to the absence of nationalism a cultural and political agenda.

It may come as no surprise that my first protagonist, Finnur Magnússon, was a close associate of Rask, with whom he shared an ambivalent relationship with the Grimm brothers and their German appropriation of Scandinavian culture. In order to establish the eddic poems as national heritage and the ultimate benchmark of Nordic culture, Finnur had to wage an intellectual war on multiple fronts, confronting the theory of euhemerism and the anti-eddists' disregard for Nordic culture at the same time. In this endeavour, he was greatly inspired by the artistic and spiritual emancipation of 'the North' caused by the Ossian poems and the Ossian vogue they provoked; Finnur authored a defence of the poems' authenticity, and associated the sublime genius of the Celtic bard to that of the eddic poems. In his mythological writings, he sought to emancipate this heritage by connecting it to the fashionable Indo-European discourse of modern philology – stylising it as a beautiful branch in the 'Eurasian myth-tree'–, as well as to the latest theories in the natural sciences. And, alongside this emancipation, he encouraged modern artists and writers to look for inspiration in these stanzas, so that the cultural prestige of the myths could contribute to the contemporary 're-awakening' of the Scandinavian nations. In my chapter on this influential but now largely neglected runologist, I have also demonstrated that this two-fold program of emancipation and cultural cultivation of the myths is, to a large extent, similar to that of Snorri Sturluson, who compiled his *Prose Edda* in order to safeguard the 'cultural capital' of Icelandic skalds – and of course his own – in the face of his cultural opponents. Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' is an essential one, whether one seeks to understand the motivation behind Snorri's *Edda* of the thirteenth, or Finnur's *Eddalæren* of the nineteenth century. But, although this may indicate an anthropological parallelism of considerable interest, it does by no means justify a primordialist reading of Iceland's past: the occurrence of Romantic nationalism as a cultural and political program is decidedly a nineteenth-century phenomenon.

Finnur's call for national rejuvenation, directed to all Scandinavians in his *Eddalæren* and to his Icelandic compatriots separately in the journal *Íslensk sagnablöð*, struck a chord. By linking Freyja and her mysterious husband Óðr with motifs and characters from Hellas and exotic India, Adam Oehlenschläger – who attended his classes – expressed Finnur's Indo-European 'upgrade' of the Eddas in poetry, and adjusted the myths – for instance by replacing Freyja's cats with tigers – accordingly. This development did not occur in a Danish vacuum, and bears the hallmarks of Herder's seminal, programmatic philosophy of *Volksgeist* and *national* mythology. Together with Fichte's passionate defence of the nation as the most natural unit of societal organisation, these ideas entered the Scandinavian scene through the popular lectures and publications of cultural brokers like Henrik Steffens. Young Icelandic students who participated in this intellectual climate were inspired both indirectly – through the poetry of Oehlenschläger – and directly by Finnur's mythological revolution, firmly rooted in these imported and internalised ideas.

The poets and intellectuals generally conceived as the first generation of Icelandic Romantics were in close contact with Finnur, and operationalised much of his cultural program in spite of his reputation among young Icelanders for being 'too Danish'. The transition from philology and cultural program to the actual production of national literature has been analysed in Chapter Four, which contains a set of interesting observations about the role of mythology in early Icelandic Romanticism. Bjarni Thorarensen, who had celebrated his compatriot Finnur – the great decipherer of Runamo – in verse as *Mímir* Magnússon, wrote several poems in which Freyja, the embodiment of love, figures prominently. The link between Freyja and Bacchus, which he cultivates in a drinking song, is indebted to Oehlenschläger, and the same goes for his *Sigrúnarljóð*, in which themes reminiscent of Novalis's darker brand of Romanticism are employed. But despite this indebtedness to Danish Romanticism, Bjarni was one of the very first to accentuate the *otherness* of Iceland,

by contrasting his native land to its significant other, Denmark. In this, the poet's views differed significantly from those of Finnur, who was also a proud Icelander but considered his island a part of a Nordic unity with Denmark. I have discussed how fashionable theories on climatic determinism, and an emphasised and highly normative north-south antithesis – personified by Bacchus (the negative south) and Freyja (the fair maiden of the north) – coloured his perception of Denmark and its 'boring' landscape. Bjarni's Fjallkonan, who – like Freyja – signifies the authentic and sublime character of the North/Iceland, is identified with the very landscape element – mountains – which constitute the greatest contrast with Denmark. In this contrastive process, a Romantic image of Iceland, characterised by a sublime and animated mythscape, occurs. Bjarni's oeuvre marks the disentanglement of that which, according to Finnur and the older generation of Icelandic patriots, had been such a natural unity, namely Iceland and the Danish realm. However, this was first and foremost a cultural statement, without immediate political repercussions: it was not until much later that Icelanders began to contemplate the possibility of full independence from Denmark. Cultural nationalism has the potential of inspiring political activism and an independence movement, and once that has occurred, the political agenda largely determines the cultivation of national culture. But one thing does not *necessarily* lead to the next, and not all cultural nationalisms evolve into political movements. It is this teleological fallacy, rampant in the study of the development of national movements, that can easily be debunked when the Icelandic case study is compared to that of 'uncompleted' national projects, like Friesland in the Netherlands, or Brittany in France.

I have established in Chapter Four that, although prominent poets like Jónas Hallgrímsson *did* adopt Finnur's ideal of national rejuvenation through the cultivation of Old Norse culture, they largely discarded his plea for a national mythology. The most plausible explanation for the relative absence of eddic themes in early Romantic poetry – which sets Iceland apart from the other Nordic nations – is the *Sonderweg* of Iceland's pagan heritage since the Middle Ages, which is markedly different from that of the rest of northern Europe. In the popular poetry and rímur compositions, eddic themes had remained part of Iceland's poetic tradition, from the late Middle Ages until well into the nineteenth century. But it was exactly this 'uninspired' tradition of 'unoriginal' versification, characterised by formulaic expressions and strict metrical patterns, which was so fiercely attacked by Jónas, as a symbol for everything that was backward and stood between the nation and the recovery of its former greatness. The term 'eddic' had at that time already come to signify unintelligibility and obscurantism in certain contexts, and it may well be that the Eddas' association with the rímur caused the 'temporal blindness' (Johan Huizinga) for the 'beauty' of the myths, which may explain their relative absence in early Icelandic Romanticism. Also, the Danish cultivation of Norse myths probably encouraged the Fjölismenn to focus on the more exclusively Icelandic sagas instead, which also reflects their commitment to the historicist, or the backward-gazing element of nationalism. In this case, ignoring the myths is in itself a way to contrast oneself vis-à-vis the significant other, even if the Romantic format in which this is done is directly taken from that very same significant other. At this stage, leaving out the myths thus serves the same ideological purpose as the cultivation of those some myths would serve later on in the nineteenth century.

However, this theory should not blind us for the more *implicit* cultivation of eddic themes, which can be detected in Jónas's oeuvre upon closer inspection. Jónas's experience of nature was, to a large extent, of a pantheistic character, and hence tied into the deeply mystical Romantic concept of the *Sublime*. In my interpretation of several of Jónas's writings, I have demonstrated how, in nature, the universal and the national converged, and profound knowledge could be revealed by animated landscapes, according to Jónas. Romantic though this may seem, the national poet was also a scientist, and to a large degree a



child of the Enlightenment, which is clearly demonstrated in his admiration for Eggert Ólafsson: an enlightened author of the eighteenth century and one of the first Icelanders to glorify Icelandic nature in verse. But Jónas's approach to scientific matters also shows clear signs of Romantic idealism, and even employs mythological language at times. Like Finnur Magnússon, he argued in his scientific articles that the Old Norse myths were in fact metaphorised natural philosophy, and monuments to the intellectual strength of the ancient Scandinavians. This side of Jónas's oeuvre is often overlooked, leading to an *underestimation* of eddic influence in his writings.<sup>1</sup> A more balanced approach will lead to the conclusion that Jónas's position vis-à-vis the myths was consonant with Finnur's Romantic ideal of leading science back to the 'ocean of poetry' through mythology (Schelling), despite the lack of eddic themes in his poetry. Mythological narrative could be seen as a way to romanticise the scientific heritage of the Enlightenment, and the example of Jónas serves as a fascinating case study for scholars struggling with the ambivalent and often over-polarised relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism. The transition from one cultural era to the next is usually not marked by clear fissures of any kind, but rather by gradual transformation and original adaptation. In this specific case, mythology played a moderate but nevertheless crucial role in the transitional character of Jónas's writings.

In Chapter Five, the national movement – instigated by the cultural and political activism of the Fjölnismenn, Jón Sigurðsson, Bjarni Thorarensen and Rasmus Rask – entered a new phase, which matches Hroch's description of the *second* stage in his model of the development of national movements. If we take Joep Leerssen's set of corrective reservations concerning Hroch's theories in mind, the model actually serves as a very practical tool when it comes to deepening our understanding of what was going on in Iceland at this time. Just like in the second stage of this model, Icelandic intellectuals now began to solidify their national ideals in the form of popular publications, national institutions, costumes, societies, and public works and celebrations. Instrumental in this development was the cultural all-rounder Sigurður málari, who may well be characterised as the single most versatile and active protagonist of this study. In his view – and in that of his intellectual allies – Reykjavík was to become not only the political, but also the cultural heart of the nation. This urban twist, which resulted in grand designs for a national theatre, a national museum, and an ideological map of monuments and statues, seemed only natural after the Alþingi was re-established in Reykjavík – rather than on Þingvellir – and brought the national movement 'home' to Iceland, rather than Denmark. In my analysis of Sigurður's writings and drawings, I have demonstrated how eddic themes were implicitly employed in the design of the female national costume, and in the 'archaeologically correct' – but still rather Hellenic – presentation of the Nordic past in sketches and *tableaux vivants*. This development occurred in tandem with the folkloristic turn in cultural nationalism, or the move "from past to peasant" (Leerssen), which was introduced to Iceland by a student of Jacob Grimm and a proponent of Iceland's national movement, Konrad Maurer. In Maurer's perception – which was largely adopted by Icelandic folktale collectors like Jón Árnason – heathen practices and wisdom had survived in the traditions and stories of the common folk in the fjords and in the fields. This link between mythology and rural traditions had already been established by Finnur Magnússon, but had been largely discarded by the following generation of Romantics, to whom rural culture was mainly associated with the rímur tradition. The folkloristic turn created a sense of continuity between the heathen past and the rural communities of the present, and rendered old folktales and other elements of 'authentic' origin appropriate material for *high*-cultural expressions, like theatrical plays and artworks. This creative

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the correction of this image should not lead to overcompensation, as in the case of Svava Jakobsdóttir, who re-interpreted all his writings in the light of the Eddas.

interaction between urban culture and rural narratives established myths and legends as national heritage, and forged a link between eddic mythology and Icelandic nature that would inspire subsequent generations of Romantic poets. Most of the mythological works treated up to this point are to be placed in the first phase of Hroch's three-phase model, and many of them were shaped in a very different ideological framework than that of the nation. The full nationalisation of discourses on Old Norse literature, and a strong emphasis on the Icelandicness of the material, does not occur until later in the nineteenth century.

If the early Romantics had suffered from what Huizinga referred to as 'temporary blindness' (see Chapter 4.2) regarding the Eddas, that blindness surely appears to have been lifted by the poets and authors of the 1840s and the second half of the nineteenth century. In the discourse analyses of chapter six, performed on the works of three prominent Romantics, the multiple functionalisations of eddic myth for ideological purposes have been dissected and explained in their cultural and political contexts. An obvious conclusion which should be drawn from this chapter, is that the term *Eddantities*, which I introduced in the conceptional framework of this study, should indeed always be applied in the *plural* when discussing Icelandic cultivations of the Eddas; the three protagonists of this chapter have turned to mythology, that rhetorical toolbox, in order to convey their divergent, conflicting and overlapping views on Iceland's political and cultural identity in a poetic and even sublime fashion. In order to make his point on the Hungarian Revolution – and, implicitly, on the Byronian's wish for an Icelandic Revolution – for an Icelandic audience, all Gísli Brynjúlfsson had to do was to equate the Russians with the giants of the east, and Attila the Hun, personification of the Hungarian nation, with the great giant-slaying god Þórr. By fashioning his political manifesto in these mythological images, Gísli endowed his poems with an extra, superrational layer of rhetorical force, virtually immune to the rational arguments that could be raised against his views. By their very nature, myths 'convey rightness' (Cohen), and every argument embedded in such rightness-conveying – and creating! – narrative will seem more natural and correct to the 'closed cultural group' (Huizinga) susceptible to the ideological repercussions of this instrumentalisation. I have referred to Wertsch's theory of 'narrative templates' in order to demonstrate how the discursive mode of mythology, or the mythological template, renders to message of the author self-explanatory and evident, due to the self-structuring nature and obvious dichotomy of good and evil which characterise this genre. The application of a mythological template thus exempts the author from having to support his views with more objective arguments.

Along the same lines, Grímur Thomsen sought to reinforce his Pan-Scandinavian views in the symbolic language of the eddic poems, which he conceived as the "Quran of the Scandinavians". As Adam Oehlenschläger had done previously, Grímur linked the demise of Nordic greatness to the downfall of the old religion, which reached a dramatic climax in his rendition of the death of the Norwegian jarl Hákon. Grímur's Nordic ideal was scorned by some of his Icelandic contemporaries, who did not believe that they could be reconciled with Icelandic nationalism. But – as so often when discussing national identity – things were more complicated than that, and a closer inspection of Grímur's essays and poems leads to believe that Iceland did play an exclusive and essential role in the political universe of Grímur. Most of all because the ancient language, history and mythology of the Nordic world – which he saw as a blueprint for future Scandinavian integration – had been preserved and cultivated here. Confronted with Hegel's negative views on the Eddas, he considered it his duty to debunk them on Hegelian grounds, and to emancipate what he considered the North's greatest contribution to world literature. By emphasising that the strong and independent Nordic *Volksgeist* had been shaped by the 'Ásatrú' of old, Grímur presented the old faith as a creative force in history, to which all modern Scandinavians owe their special, national character. This hypothesis – which leaves the superfluous question of the chicken or the egg,

world-view or national character unanswered – would become an influential one, especially in the writings of Icelandic historians, who would come to interpret their nation’s ‘Golden Age’ in deterministic terms, as a creation of the independent, pre-Christian world-view of the Saga Age.

Benedikt Gröndal forms a particularly interesting case study in the context of this research, and – although his difficult character may have contributed to the fact that he did not always receive credit for his ideas – it could be argued that his Romantic and nationalistic stance in the debate on eddic poetry formed the ideological foundation of the most influential philological views of the twentieth century. Benedikt inherited his father’s passion for classical culture, and turned against those who – in the antagonistic spirit of Grundtvig – sought to entirely replace classical mythology with its eddic equivalent. In his poetry, he attempted to *indigenise* classical culture, for instance by bringing together Óðr (Freyja’s husband) and Apollo, or by celebrating the classical virtue of irony in his humoristic depictions of the Æsir. In his poetry, the classicist created what I have called a ‘new Asgard’, which served as an ideological blueprint for Icelandic culture: rooted in Old Norse traditions and literature, but enriched and softened by the warm and humanistic qualities of the south – symbolised by Apollo and the flower of the south, which Óðr brings home to Freyja. The ‘South’ was not antagonised by Benedikt, as it was in the theories of Grundtvig, Bjarni Thorarensen, and Grímur Thomsen, but rather seen as a source of rejuvenation, which could hold the key to Iceland’s transformation into a *modern* nation. In this context, mythology is applied as the great synchroniser, neutralising to a certain extent the paradox of nationalism’s Janus-face, torn between conservative historicism and progressive modernism. Simultaneously, Benedikt aggressively sought to reclaim the Eddas for Iceland, deeming theories like those of Finnur Jónsson – who believed the poems originated primarily in Norway – too ridiculous to even engage with. In his line of argumentation, inspired by a mission to establish the poems as Iceland’s national heritage and cultural capital, the verses were – as literary products – of purely Icelandic origin, and the creation of Icelandic genius. Benedikt may not have been the first one to use Icelandic landscape, shaped by fire and ice, as a philological argument in this context.<sup>1</sup> But he did initiate a tradition of naturalisation and appropriation, which would be followed by later philologists. As a rule, scholars who were most favourable towards Iceland’s national movement, would tend to propose a relatively *late* date of origin of the poems in Iceland, so as to debunk any Scandinavian or even Germanic claims to the material. And as the development of Iceland’s national culture progressed towards Hroch’s third phase of development in the twentieth century, this view – which emphasised Iceland’s uniqueness and special literary status – would come to prevail over the others.

The field of Icelandic historiography – which evolved into a separate branch of scholarship at a relatively late stage, and remained closely linked to the paradigms of philology – is also included in my analysis of ‘Eddantities’ in the academia, and appears to have incorporated the concept of *Ásatrú* as a *creative force* in Icelandic history. As in the poetry of Bjarni Thorarensen and Grímur Thomsen, the nature of the Old Norse religion – as reflected in the surviving mythology – was presented by historians as an integral element of Nordic national character, determined by a harsh climate and hard living conditions. A particularly creative take on this subject is presented in the writings of Jón J. Aðils, to whom the neglected Irish element in Icelandic culture was of paramount importance. His reading of Icelandic history, and especially of Iceland’s Golden Age, received political patronage from the Alþingi and became established as the hegemonic interpretation through popular lectures

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<sup>1</sup> Finnur Magnússon already looked to landscape and natural phenomena to explain the myths, but not in order to establish an Icelandic monopoly on them.

and widely available publications. Jón Aðils argued that the unique national character of Iceland – vis-à-vis the character of other Nordic nations – could only be explained when conceived as a symbiosis of Celtic and Nordic elements, and the same could be said for the island’s unique literary heritage. He saw in Ireland’s smooth transition to Christianity – so smooth actually, that pagan druids were easily turned into Christian priests – a precursor of Iceland’s conversion, which – as in Ireland – hardly affected the unique and *national* brand of spirituality, embedded in heathenism and Christianity alike. This particular take on the old faith – sympathetic, but without turning anti-Christian – and his emphasis on continuity, I have linked to Jón’s Theosophical ideas, and his conviction that ‘the truth’ could not be limited to one religion alone. I have also demonstrated that his belief in ethnic amalgamation as a stimulus for national and spiritual originality is reflected in his other writings, as for instance his article on Leo Tolstoy. Jón’s version of Icelandic history – and Ásatrú’s role in it – became fixed in the minds of most twentieth century Icelanders, who grew up with the handbooks of Jónas frá Hriflu and other national educators. With the large-scale institutionalisation of these nationalistic views in the twentieth century, Icelandic national culture can be said to have entered the third and final phase of Hroch’s model, characterised by ‘national education’ and the general absorption of national ideals.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the versatile antiquarian-poet of the nineteenth century made way for the professionalised and ‘objective’ scholar on the one hand, and the unacademic, bohemian poet on the other. As the link between philological scholarship and the composition of (national) poetry began to dissolve in Europe, a new, more academic discourse of appropriation appeared in Icelandic Edda-scholarship. This transition is closely tied into the transformation of the nation’s institutional infrastructure, which climaxed in the establishment of the University of Iceland in 1911. In chapter seven, the philological debate on the origin of, and the ownership over the eddic poems has been analysed in the context of these developments. By tracing the lines of argumentation applied by the principal Icelandic opponents in this debate, Björn M. Ólsen and Finnur Jónsson, I have mapped the academic cultivation of the nationalistic and Romantic tropes as discussed in the previous chapters. From this analysis, it becomes clear that national character, or the level of connectedness to the fatherland, could now be employed as an epistemological category and an accusation directed towards one’s opponent; obviously, Finnur Jónsson could not possibly come to the right conclusion concerning the origin of the poems, since he hardly knew his own fatherland and was not Icelandic enough (according to Björn M. Ólsen). The entanglement of national identity and ‘proper’ scholarship, which facilitated an aggressive Icelandic monopolisation of the field of Old Norse studies, was fuelled by a growing political self-confidence – the island acquired home rule in 1904 – and can be observed, in one guise or another, in the writings of Icelandic scholars up to the present day. By debunking foreign claims on Old Norse-Icelandic texts, these academics ‘salvaged’ their nation’s age-old cultural capital, and perfectly illustrate Foucault’s theory that texts are, or can be, first and foremost ‘objects of appropriation’ and ‘forms of property’. The national appropriation of these texts occurred in two interrelated fashions, namely *academically* – by establishing Iceland as the place of origin and hence the legitimate owner of the poems – and *creatively*. Even though the creative cultivation of this cultural capital was growing increasingly more detached from the academic scene, Björn M. Ólsen’s poetic contribution to the invention and institutionalisation of the new ‘national festival’ of Þorrablót, presents us with a fine example of how scholarly zeal and the invention of traditions – so essential to the development of Romantic nationalism in Europe – could go hand in hand, contributing to the popularisation of ancient myths – in this case: Þórr’s drinking contest – on a large scale. More importantly, Björn conceived himself as an *inspirator*, calling upon Icelandic artists to turn to *Sólarljóð* – and Old Norse-Icelandic literature in general – to inspire the creation of *national* art. In this

respect, the role of the philologist as a middleman – bridging the gap between the recovery of national heritage and the production of new national culture by others – had changed remarkably little since the early nineteenth century, when Finnur Magnússon had spiced up his academic oeuvre with similar calls for national rejuvenation.

In Chapter Eight, I have focused on the artistic oeuvre of Einar Jónsson, and linked his interpretation of eddic mythemes to the national discourse of his age and the esoteric assumptions of contemporary Theosophy. Both Einar and the other protagonist of this chapter, the Theosophist Sigurður Kristófer Pétursson, took the metaphysical approach to the myths further than anyone ever before and applied their symbolic language to de-exoticise and indigenise foreign, exotic concepts like karma and reincarnation. The assimilative stance of Theosophy even motivated Sigurður to name his Icelandic translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* the ‘Hávamál of India’. Einar’s application of mythological motifs was highly psychological and even mystical, and did not always resonate with the mainstream current ‘banal’ national culture, as illustrated by the public debate about his controversial statue of Ingólfr Arnarson. The Nietzschean ideals underlying his conception of Iceland’s *landnám* – and the role of the Æsir therein – were conceived as shocking and incorrect by proud Icelanders, who saw in the founder of Reykjavík a noble proto-Christian, loyal to the demands of his god Þórr. Here we see a clash between two types of Edda-reception, namely the conventional *superficial* – which restricted itself to the application of the symbolic, metaphorical language of the Eddas as a *national* quotation culture – and the *metaphysical* one, which achieved full expression of Einar’s more private works. This last type would never obtain the overhand in Icelandic national culture, although the advent of Ásatrú as a living religion since the 1970s has fortified its presence in society. Post-secular Icelandic Neopaganism is in many ways indebted to the Romantic (secular) cultivation of Old Norse mythology, and maybe interpreted as a successful attempt to ‘uncook the egg’ of modern secularism.

Modern urban culture was not introduced in Iceland until the twentieth century, when Reykjavík rapidly evolved into a centre of industrial activity. In chapter nine, the far-reaching implications of Iceland’s transformation into a modern nation have been scrutinised. The creation of new, urban mythscapes and the cultivation of eddic terms in the public sphere went hand in hand with the invented tradition of eddic given names, and rendered the myths a banal element in everyday city life. With the unparalleled infusion of eddic themes – of the superficial type, representing a national symbolic language – in public life, the nationalisation of the Eddas, which had begun in the writings of Finnur Magnússon, reached its climax. The gods and goddesses now served as emblems of national progress and prosperity, and naming one’s enterprise, ship, house or periodical after one of them almost seemed self-evident. Even to Icelanders who had never read any of the eddic verses themselves, the myths were omnipresent, as “the ambient background noise of the contemporary nation” – to borrow Joep Leerssen’s description of banal nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Not only did they represent the symbolic language of choice for city planners and company founders, they were also employed to fashion a national approach to new worlds, and the struggle of being surrounded by ‘others’. When Icelandic migrants looked for a better life in Canada, they identified the harsh life they left behind with the apocalyptic vocabulary of the Ragnarök narrative, and expressed their hope for a new beginning in the name of their first settlement, Gimli. They constructed for themselves a New Iceland *beyond* Ragnarök, rooted in the same Old Norse past as the old Iceland, but simultaneously facing a glorious new ‘Golden Age’. The instrumentalisation of this material in the New World could be seen as a secular equivalent of the biblical post-apocalyptic sentiments of Christian settlers, and was never considered at odds with the

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<sup>1</sup> Leerssen (2014) p.30.

generally Lutheran world-view of the new *landnámsmenn*. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Ten, this national cultivation of the myths did not cease after 1918, and the prolonged echoes of Romantic nationalism still show no sign of fading out.



The Romantic cultivation of Nordic myth started out as a *Nordic* enterprise, in which the national divisions between Norway, Denmark and Iceland were not yet as relevant as they would later become. The philological endeavours of Finnur Magnússon and his like-minded contemporaries contributed to the ideal of a Nordic *counter-Hellas*, or a ‘Hellas of the North’<sup>1</sup>, which served as a device to emancipate the North through imitation of the blueprint of classical mythology. This ideal represented a North of the spirit, in which there was little space for regional differentiations or national rivalries concerning the ownership of Old Norse-Icelandic literature; the *Poetic Edda* was as unambiguously a national treasure of the Icelanders as it represented the ‘oldest monument’ of the ‘Danish tongue’. The myths occupied a special position in this Nordic discourse, since they represented both universal, ‘classical’ ideals, and national authenticity at the same time. This is what rendered them the perfect tools for indigenising classical ideals, as Benedikt Gröndal demonstrated in his ‘new’ mythology. In this respect, the cultivation of eddic themes can be interpreted as both complementary *to*, and the counterpart *of* the cultivation of the Icelandic sagas; each genre plays its own specific role in the twofold nature of literary historicism. Whereas the sagas appear to have been instrumentalised primarily – but not exclusively – to emphasise the very unique and heroic nature of the Icelandic or the Nordic nation(s) (*centrifugal* cultivation), the Eddas were more suitable for demonstrating Icelandic and Nordic greatness *in relation to* other prestigious systems of mythology and world-views (*centripetal* cultivation).<sup>2</sup> When applying the very appropriate metaphor of the two faces of Janus to dissect modern nationalism, one could associate the sagas with the medievalism and antiquarianism of the backward-looking face, whereas mythology – due to its timeless, abstract character, and its association with other cultures – represents the masculine forward-looking face of modernism.<sup>3</sup> That is why, paradoxically, the *avant-garde* journal *Verðandi*, which took a stance *against* Romantic historicism, could still name itself after the *eddic* personification of everything that is coming into being. The position of the myths in Iceland’s national discourse may have been more problematic than that of the family sagas, due to their association with the *rímur* tradition, their appropriation by other nations, and because their Icelandicness was less unequivocal, more contestable than that of the sagas. However, their undetermined nature and ideological flexibility rendered them indispensable in the larger construction of Iceland’s national discourse.

The national cultivation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature forms a revealing case study, which sheds light on the process of nation-building in small and peripheral communities in Europe. The awareness of some sort of historical *Sonderweg*, which sets the community in question apart from the central ‘mainstream’ of European culture, is a recurring theme in many peripheral national discourses. It facilitates a dissociation from all the negative elements associated with the European Middle Ages – feudalism, centralised

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<sup>1</sup> Ísleifsson (2007).

<sup>2</sup> This rather general observation does not negate the fact that the Eddas have also been applied to emphasise the contrast between north and south (see e.g. Grímur Thomsen), and that the saga heroes have been likened to the protagonists of Homer’s epics.

<sup>3</sup> This ideological division between history and mythology is not exclusively Icelandic; also in Finland, a “newly acquired national mythology” (the *Kalevala*) was conceived not “as medievalism but as a powerful expression of the emergent modern nation”; Battarbee (2007) p.95.

monarchies, autocracy – and gave rise to grotesque attempts to fashion one’s own nation as unspoiled, or as the primordial ‘cradle’ of everything – mainly parliamentary democracy and individual liberty – that could be juxtaposed to these vices of the European heartland.<sup>1</sup> The urge to transform the authentic periphery into a new, *national* heartland resonated with the fashionable primitivism of the age, and its rebellion against the dominant but in the end artificial *civilisation* of Europe’s centre. In this very dynamic process of self-fashioning through contrastation, my protagonists’ position vis-à-vis dominant European – or Scandinavian – culture is no less ambivalent than that of Eastern-European intellectuals vis-à-vis ‘the West’; in both cases, one can discern a ‘twofold stance’, in which “on the one hand, they claimed that certain unique aspects differentiated their nation’s past from that of ‘Western’ nations. On the other, those unique aspects were discerned in similar or even identical qualities to those that ‘Western’ historians reserved for their own nations.”<sup>2</sup> An example of this in the case of Iceland is the imitation of tropes from the mythological poetry of Grundtvig and Oehlenschläger, with the aim of Icelandicising the ‘new mythology’ of European Romanticism. Paradoxically, this led to a situation in which the “arguments and strategies (...) employed for the enrichment of national culture were often taken from the precise culture whose impact they sought to undermine.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to this observation, it is important to note that Iceland’s ‘significant others’ – most notably Denmark and Norway – were themselves inclined to look upon Iceland as a more authentic or unspoiled version of their former selves. The conception of Iceland as ‘Antiquity’s Isle’ (Oehlenschläger’s *Oldtidens Øe*), or as a repository or ‘deep freezer’ in which Nordic culture has been preserved, did not have to be invented, only internalised and instrumentalised by Icelandic nationalists. Nordic authenticity, as embodied by the pre-Christian gods of the North, had been depicted by Scandinavian artists and poets as leaving mainland Scandinavia westwards, towards the ‘land of sunset’ (Einar Jónsson), and it took very little imagination to conclude from this ‘westward move of authenticity’, away from Christian Europe, that Iceland was the heir to everything true and noble about the primordial North. In the case of Iceland, the concept of a national *Sonderweg* was not so much the result of the island’s own national ambitions, but rather of other nations’ longings for a direct link with their own native pasts.

The ambivalence in this reciprocal association with foreign ideas and concepts becomes most evident when the Icelandic character of Old Norse culture was at stake. Foreign appropriation of Icelandic heritage, and the consequent reactions of Icelandic intellectuals, have been a recurrent theme in the present study, and gave cause to the most passionate expressions of cultural nationalism. Within the framework of Romantic nationalism, derived primarily from Danish and German discourses, it was a matter of vital importance to warrant the Icelandic nature – and ownership – of the Eddas and sagas. This may explain why cultural discourses and ideologies in which the Icelandic dimension of Old Norse – or ‘Germanic’ – culture was systematically played down or ignored never acquired the same level of popularity in Iceland as they did elsewhere. So, although implicit signs of ‘Wagnerisation’ – that is, the national cultivation of Old Norse mythology inspired by the Wagnerian paradigm<sup>4</sup> – are certainly discernible in Icelandic culture, Wagner did not acquire a great following here, and his use – or appropriation – of eddic themes left most Icelanders utterly unimpressed.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Nazism never gained a strong foothold in Iceland, despite its glorification of everything Nordic and Old Norse.

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<sup>1</sup> On Icelandic and Czech claims to being the cradle of democracy, see Matthíasdóttir (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Baár (2010) p.291.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Baár is writing here about historians in East-Central Europe, not about Iceland.

<sup>4</sup> Leerssen (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the very underdeveloped cultural infrastructure of the island did not further the cause of Wagnerism either. See Chapter 7.1.1.

The creative reinterpretation of Norse mythology in the context of Nordic and Icelandic identity formation is clearly reflected in the themes and deities which were most frequently selected for cultivation. In some cases, a nearly unknown god like Óðr is placed centre stage, merely because of his obscurity and hence the possibility of introducing through him a new ideological dimension to the eddic narrative (Benedikt Gröndal). The national functionalisation of the Æsir is also clearly exemplified by the frequent occurrence of deities personifying natural elements, especially the ocean; the names of the sea deities Rán and Ægir occur so frequently in (Neo-)Romantic poetry, that they seem to function as mere synonyms for ocean, rather than signifiers of eddic characters.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in the context of the present study, I find it rather enlightening that the deities representing the one thing that physically *separates* Iceland from the rest of the world – and thus defines the nation’s insularity – could surpass even Óðinn and Þórr, the very protagonists of the Eddas, in national significance.<sup>2</sup> Apart from gods connected to the ocean, the more creative protagonists of this study appear to have had a predilection for female deities, rather than their male counterparts. Icelandic poets followed the examples set by Danish, German, Frisian and other European Romantics, by cultivating Iðunn, Freyja, Gefjun – from whom the invented national ‘deities’, Hulda and the Lady of the Mountain, were derived – as symbols of the nation, embodying the ‘feminine’ characteristics of national regeneration, peace, reconciliation, and sometimes even Scandinavian integration. This apparent deviation from the ‘original’ myths can be explained from the perspective of national philosophy; in the gendered concept of the nation, these goddesses represent the backward-glancing face of Janus, and the link between the past and the present. They embody peace and harmony, and serve therefore as a civilised alternative to the male Æsir and their belligerent, even destructive characteristics. To a certain extent, these goddesses provided the modern nationalist with a ‘light version’ of Norse culture: one which resonated more easily with the moderate and peaceful ideals of modernity. The ideological cultivation of Baldur, as well as Benedikt Gröndal’s Óðr, can be said to have fulfilled a very similar moderating function in Iceland’s mythological discourse.



The general observations summarised in the above attest to this fluidity, the agility and adaptability of myth. These characterisations do not only apply to the ‘original mythologies’ of antiquity, but equally to their modern equivalents and continuations, which together make up the ‘new mythologies’ of this study’s protagonists. In the previous chapters I have demonstrated that mythology’s rhetorical and unifying function in society has remained the same throughout the ages; like Snorri Sturluson before him, Finnur Magnússon cultivated the myths in order to salvage his nation’s cultural capital abroad, and to strengthen the sense of a distinct Nordic cultural identity. In their mission to emancipate Icelandic culture through association with universal narratives, they applied a very similar discursive pattern. And, just like Snorri served his own ideological agenda by presenting the myths in a specific fashion – and possibly even introducing entirely new elements like the cow Auðumbla –, Benedikt Gröndal created a whole new Ásgarðr to suit his modern demands for an educated and

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, it is significant that the streets named after these two gods (*Ægisíða*, *Ægisgata* and *Ránargata*) are not situated in Reykjavík’s ‘neighborhood of the gods’, but near to the ocean. The development of these names into synonyms probably occurred under the influence of the poetic language of the *rímur*.

<sup>2</sup> In modern times, Ægir has been promoted informally to what could be considered a secular ‘trinity of national gods’, after the Icelandic Coast Guard (*Landhelgisgæsla Íslands*) named their vessels Óðinn, Þórr and Ægir. These ships became ‘national heroes’ in their own right, when they protected the island against foreign (British) ‘aggression’ during the so-called Cod Wars (1958-1976).



cultivated nation. The role of the mythographer never consists of mere registration of pre-existing narratives, and – to quote Bruce Lincoln – all involvement with mythology as a “privileged type of narrative” is ideological per definition.<sup>1</sup> The protagonists of the present study – be they poets, scholars, politicians, artists, or all of the above – have all in their own way contributed to the construction of a distinctly modern and national interpretation of Norse mythology, and can therefore be considered myth-makers – like Snorri – in their own right. In this respect, especially the scholars – philologists, antiquarians and historians – play an interesting double role, in that they combine their claim of academic objectivity with the creative impulse of Romantic historicism. Finnur Magnússon’s patriotic poetry, Grímur Thomsen’s Hákon Jarl, and Björn M. Ólsen’s ‘invented tradition’ of the Þorrablót are all indicative of this creative outburst, at the intersection of scholarship and national culture.

The emphasis that I place on the historical continuity of Icelandic mythology may strike some as paradoxical, given the fact that this research deals primarily with ‘new mythologies’ and ‘re-invented Asgards’ in a modern context. However, it is not the *contents* of the myths or the message they were intended to convey which have remained stable throughout the ages. Quite the contrary: it is exactly their *role* as conveyers of – continuously changing – rightness, and hence their perpetual transformation which constitutes the historical continuity. Re-interpretation and re-writing make up – and have *always* made up – the very essence of what mythology is all about; as soon as a certain narrative becomes immune to re-interpretations, it loses its relevance and eventually withers away. According to Ann Rigney, every monument has to be “invested with new meaning” on a continual basis, to prevent cultural amnesia from setting in.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, mythological narratives are only sustainable – and hence truly mythological – as long as they are cultivated and bear relevance to a certain culture group. It has to be stressed that the modern, ideological appropriations of the myths are thus by no means different in nature than the ‘original’ myths themselves; myths never occur in an ideological vacuum, and that which we generally refer to as ‘reception’ or ‘re-interpretation’ constitutes an essential element of the mythological praxis itself. I would argue – with Hans Blumenberg – that the division between original myth and its (*unoriginal*) reception is a distortive and misleading one, and propose a more integrated approach to the matter, in which both ‘authentic’ and reception are multiple layers of rhetorical functionalisation. The rather passive term ‘reception’ also fails to capture the ideological agency and creative nature of modern mythography, which entails the creation of entirely new mythologies from the fragmentary remains of their historical predecessors; a transformative process driven by Anthony Smith’s *mythomoteur*. Rather than the static term mythology, which I have problematised in the introduction, the term *mythopoesis* should be applied to cover the full scope of this dynamic interaction between old texts and new creations. The stories of the Edda and Marvel’s superhero Thor are both part of the same movement, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which has never been entirely interrupted. The distinction between pre-Christian – or Neopagan – ‘religious’ mythology, and ‘secular’ mythology without any spiritual value, is irrelevant in this respect; the *social* dynamics of mythological narrative remain very similar. By examining these long lines of continuity in the employment of myth, I hope to have contributed to redressing the historian’s anxiety concerning *longue durée* developments, as diagnosed by Fernand Braudel (Chapter 1.1). And since myth is always first and foremost a rhetorical device, or a tool for conveying rightness, the protagonists of this study can be considered more authentically ‘mythological’ in their treatment of the material than those academic mythologists who claim to be objective and ideologically neutral in their reconstruction of the ‘authentic’ myths. Myth is interactive by

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Rigney (2008) p.345.

nature, dynamic, and as a way of saying things and a narrative template, it influences and modifies the message it is supposed to convey.

By providing the reader with a broad and interdisciplinary overview of the various ways in which the Eddas have been cultivated in Iceland, I have attempted to instil in him or her a full appreciation of the pluriformity and employability of myth in ideological discourses. If I succeeded in conveying some of my initial astonishment over the inexhaustible rhetorical agility of this narrative genre, I have achieved what I set out to achieve. Just like the Germanic chieftain Arminius, one of Germany's national heroes, could be presented as an anti-Catholic proto-Protestant by German church-reformers, and subsequently as an anti-French protector of the German nation solely on the basis of his military victory over the Romans<sup>1</sup>, so the gods and goddesses wear many different masks, depending on the ideological climate of the age. Traditional topoi are recycled and re-arranged, contemporary issues are addressed, but the mythological template – which can be every bit as antagonistic as the Arminius template – remains the same; Ragnarök can be the end of paganism (Adam Oehlenschläger, Grímur Thomsen), the advent of Lutheranism (Jón lærði) or the atrocities of poverty and famine, and the maleficent giants can be equated alternately with Russian troops (Gísli Brynjúlfsson) and the merciless forces of nature. Myth is a particularly useful type of narrative in this respect, since it is in no way bound to the limitations of history and space. This discursive agility makes mythology first and foremost a *modus operandi* – preceding its actual contents –, a way of saying things (Barthes), rather than merely a static corpus of interrelated narratives. In the course of this study, I have highlighted the most relevant functions of mythology in modern discourses. These can be boiled down to the following: the indigenisation of foreign concepts, mystification – e.g. of 'national' landscapes –, primordialisation, and rhetorical persuasion ('conveying rightness'), both of an antagonistic (centrifugal) and a reconciliatory (centripetal) nature. From a more general perspective, these functions are all constituents of the larger process of in- and exclusion, the engine of collective identity formation. In this process, collective selves are continuously being negotiated. By adorning one's statement with references from the ethnic symbolic language of myth, obscure to anyone unfamiliar with the corpus, one clearly restricts the right to participate in this mythological game (Johan Huizinga) to those who actually understand the rules and the riddles, and who can solve the kennings. A key aspect of mythology is that it is shared, cherished and employed by an identity group, which derives its sense of distinction from other identity groups in part from the others' inability to partake in this internal discourse. This strengthens the group spirit, even if its members, participants in the myth game, disagree fiercely among themselves; the fact that they draw from the same arsenal of rhetorical weaponry in their discussions creates a sense of unity which transcends internal differences of opinion. This social functionalisation of myths is of all ages, and does not usually fall into decline after the narratives' loss of religious relevance.<sup>2</sup>

In my assessment of Icelandic mythography, I have employed Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to demonstrate how the idea of ownership – especially in the light of foreign appropriations of Old Norse-Icelandic culture – and national prestige were closely linked in the national discourse. Eddic myth as cultural capital is a recurrent theme, which links the writings of Snorri Sturluson to the scholarship of Finnur Magnússon, the national antagonism of Benedikt Gröndal, and to the 'Icelandic school' of Björn M. Ólsen and Sigurður Nordal. But the function of mythology is not confined to this capital-aspect; in order to grasp the full

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<sup>1</sup> In this national discourse, both the Catholic Church and French imperialism were conceived as latter-day manifestations of that same oppressive Roman spirit. For this reason, Arminius's colossal statue in Detmold (*Hermannsdenkmal*, completed in 1875) points its sword not to Rome, but to the 'new Romans' in France. See Klaus Kösters, *Mythos Arminius. Die Varusschlacht und ihre Folgen* (Münster 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Huizinga (1958) pp.137-8.

extent of mythology's cultural functionalisation, Itamar Even-Zohar's distinction between culture as 'goods' and culture as 'tools'. On the basic level, a 'national mythology' is fashioned as national heritage, or national property, just like physical monuments and historical objects. Since a community takes pride in the collective possession of these reified 'goods'<sup>1</sup>, reactions to foreign appropriation can be fierce. The concept of culture – and mythology – 'as tools' is less tangible and more dynamic; it entails the ideological cultivation of the corpus as a "set of operating tools for the organisation of life, on both the collective and individual levels"<sup>2</sup>, in order to enhance a collective sense of national character, for instance. From the wide range of subjects covered in the present study, it becomes evident that this mobilisation of mythological tools can be ever so subtle, and may occur in all sections of society. Like an 'invisible religion' (Thomas Luckmann), its manifestations are omnipresent, even if the community in question may not constantly be aware of this. Luckmann defined invisible religion as "objectivated systems of meaning that refer, on the one hand, to the world of everyday life and point, on the other hand, to the world that is experienced as transcending everyday life."<sup>3</sup> As a symbolic universe, or a shared system of signification, mythology can sublimate the personal experiences of individuals and integrate them into the collective experience of the community, thus enabling the individual to fully 'belong' to society.<sup>4</sup> In other words: the 'Ragnarök within'<sup>5</sup> coincides to a large extent with the 'Ragnarök without', synchronises the inner world of the individual with the shared life of the community – through their shared symbolic language –, and consequently enhances the individual's participation in society and the cultivation of a group spirit. Once they are nationalised, an ancient mythology becomes a secular 'sacred cosmos' (Luckmann), re-invigorated and re-signified through its application in the modern world, and through invented traditions such as the Þorrablót festival.



The year of my birth, 1983, saw the publication of some of the most paradigmatic studies on nationalism ever published; not only Gellner's seminal *Nations and Nationalism*, but also Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Hobsbawm's and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* revolutionised the field of nationalism studies that very year. Perhaps, the fact that I saw the light of day in the same year as these ground-breaking studies was bound to have some effect on my later development as a historian. In the following section of the conclusion, I will explore how my findings concerning the social functions of mythology – that "soluble fish in national waters"<sup>6</sup> – and mythopoesis can contribute to the study of nationalism in general, and of nationalism's ambivalent relationship with the past in particular.

Throughout the course of this research, I have frequently referred to the Janus-face model of analysing modern nationalism; it reveals the two-sidedness of national ideologies, gravitating between the binary oppositions of the feminine and the masculine, antiquity and

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<sup>1</sup> Applying Even-Zohar's deviation to Old Norse mythology, 'mythology as goods' can be subdivided into 'mythology as immaterial goods' – the corpus of mythological literature, the nation's cultural capital –, and as 'material goods', namely the medieval manuscripts themselves, which fulfil the role of, physical relics in the secular religion of cultural nationalism. Their solemn enshrinement in the semi-sacral space of the (national) museum resonates with this functionalisation.

<sup>2</sup> Even-Zohar (2005) p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Luckmann (1967) p.43.

<sup>4</sup> Assmann (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Chase (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Leerssen (2016). See also the introduction to the present study.

the future, tradition and modernity. The paradoxical nature of nationalism can only be overcome through the cultivation of narratives, in which these two faces of Janus are successfully integrated and merged into one single face, which appeases both the modernist and the traditionalist camp. Due to its pragmatic qualities as summarised in the above, mythology has proved itself a particularly suitable tool when it comes to bridging this gap, and solving the paradox. It is the genre's narrative flexibility, its otherworldliness and detachment from any particular time and space that renders it the ultimate discursive template for integrating the past, the present and the future of the nation. For this reason, it was considered the most pristine and primordial expression of the national spirit by adherents of Romanticism's 'new mythology' throughout Europe. I have demonstrated this point at multiple occasions throughout this study, but nowhere can one find it more clearly exemplified than in Benedikt Gröndal's poem *Brísingamen*, in which the poet expresses his ideals for Iceland's future in the primordial and sublime language of Old Norse myth. His Ásgarður is timeless: it constitutes a strong link with the nation's Golden Age but not merely a thing of the past. A national space capable of modernisation, ideological 'updates' and progress, without gambling away the nation's ancient traditions. When Even-Zohar's distinction between 'culture as goods' and 'culture as tools' is added to the equation, one can conclude that the first – more static – category applies to the traditionalists: Janus's backward-looking face. A strong fixation on the 'golden age', dovetailed with the veneration of its literary relics – the nation's cultural capital – formed the ideological backbone of for instance the Fjölnismenn, who envisioned a resurrected nation on the plains of ancient Þingvellir. The other category however, signifying culture as tools, is more concerned with the application of national heritage in the here and now, and its ideological signification in the present. For this purpose, mythology is more suitable than other genres due to its abstract character, which the sagas only possess to a lesser extent. One runs the risk of oversimplifying and over-juxtaposing the two faces of nationalism, which are in fact a great multitude of faces, all fading in to each other on a sliding scale. In many respects, the Fjölnismenn were very modern and progressive in their attitude towards the nation. Also, the functionalisation of mythology as a tool could on occasion serve very conservative purposes, as revealed in Jón lærði's anti-Reformation poetry. Nevertheless, the corpus I have examined in the present study seems to support the hypothesis that mythology was more frequently applied as a tool for modernisation and ideological progress – for instance by importing and indigenising foreign concepts – than for conservatism and regression.

According to Anne-Marie Thiesse, "nothing is more international than the construction of national identities."<sup>1</sup> My research constitutes, in its entirety, one exhaustive affirmation of this hypothesis. No nation is ever really an island, even if it meets the geographical criteria; the oft-cited contention that islands are places apart where 'Europe is absent'<sup>2</sup> is rooted in a romantic misconception.<sup>3</sup> Just like all other national projects of the nineteenth century, Iceland was embedded in a vast Pan-European network of correspondences between scholars, philosophers, writers and artists, facilitating the 'viral' dispersion (Leerssen) of Romantic nationalism even to the most peripheral corners of the continent. Since Iceland was a remote and small rural society with only a very limited intellectual infrastructure for most of the period under investigation, the direct influence of foreign cultural activists was considerably stronger here than in the larger nations of Europe; I have indicated that the linguistic activism of 'Iceland friend' Rasmus Rask marked the transition from an ethnic sense of self-awareness to actual cultural nationalism in the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Thiesse (1999) p.1., quoted in Baár (2010) p.304.

<sup>2</sup> As expressed in W.H. Auden's poem 'Journey to Iceland' (1936), in Auden and MacNeice (1967). However, Auden did not adhere to this Romantic belief himself, and actually criticised Ireland's isolationism of the 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> A misconception Kirsten Hastrup is accused of having integrated in her studies of the 'Icelandic world'.

sense – sparked by a sense of urgency –, and that Konrad Maurer introduced the Grimmian paradigm of collecting folktales to Iceland while simultaneously backing Jón Sigurðsson's political agenda. Even if the 'raw material' of a national discourse – e.g. medieval literature: the heritage that is being cultivated – could be classified as 'truly Icelandic', the mode and techniques of cultivation – in this case: Romantic historicism – most certainly were not. This distinction between 'national' heritage on the one hand, and the mode of its cultivation on the other, is overlooked by historians who cling to an internalistic approach to nationalism, seeing the nation as the cradle of its own national movement – whereas the opposite is actually the case: nations spring from national movements. The international dimension of Iceland's national movement is also exemplified by the ambiguous relationship with the 'significant other', Denmark. Copenhagen, the urban junction of new ideas and philosophies between Scandinavia and the rest of the continent, is the undisputed birthplace of modern Icelandic nationalism. It was here that Icelandic students first encountered the basic tenets of Fichte's national philosophy, and Herder's concept of the *Volksgeist*. In accordance with Homi Bhabha's theories, the fledgling national movement gravitated between imitation and rejection of the Romantic models provided by Danish poets like Oehlenschläger and Grundtvig. This ambivalence is clearly present in the *oeuvre* of Bjarni Thorarensen, who followed Oehlenschläger in his national cultivation of Old Norse themes, but vehemently rejected his Danish take on the material.

In the introduction to this study, I have gone to considerable lengths to introduce theories and methodologies developed *not* only by historians, but also by anthropologists, literary scholars, sociologists and semioticians. By applying this theoretical framework to my primary sources, I have sought to approach the material from a new angle, and to provide the reader with a more thorough appreciation of the versatility and multi-layeredness of nationalism and collective identity formation. The analyses of different discourses on Old Norse mythology have demonstrated that Björn M. Ólsen's concept of Icelandic national identity, or that of Benedikt Gröndal, was very different from that of Finnur Magnússon or Grímur Thomsen. These ideological distinctions come to light, either implicitly or explicitly, in my protagonists' varying conceptions of the Norse myths and their relevance to the modern nation. Their tendency to mobilise this heritage in order to carve out a collective self – be it Iceland, or a more inclusive *Norden* –, sharply demarcated from 'the others', constitutes a common denominator. In this context, the eddic narratives have been refashioned in order to "open new worlds and make new orders of action"<sup>1</sup> (Ricœur), and to establish new charters for – cultural and political – action (Malinowski). The 'symbolic construction of community' (Cohen), and identity in general, is highly contrastive externally, and cohesive internally. And the narrative templates (Wertsch) of mythology have been employed extensively to focus the lens in this respect, both to accentuate and to downplay the contrasts, on both ends of the ideological spectrum.

Identifying these general patterns in modern national mythography and mythopoesis, enables us to confront the core issue of historical continuity versus historical discontinuity, which still lies at the very heart of nationalism studies. The very fact that this study's chronology commences in the 1820s, with the mythological studies of Finnur Magnússon, indicates in itself that this period marked the beginning of something 'new', and consequently also the decline of something old. It was the time when, in the words of Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "the echoes of Fichte's and Hegel's writings reached the Icelandic student community in Copenhagen."<sup>2</sup> The view of nationalism supported by this research is therefore certainly of a *modernist* nature, since Romantic historicism and the 'sense of urgency' – or

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<sup>1</sup> Scharlemann (1985) p.273.

<sup>2</sup> Hálfðanarson (2000a).

‘moral panic’ (Cohen), cultivated by the linguistic activism of Rask – gave rise to an entirely new way of converting ancient culture into cultural capital, and of identifying with one’s nation. Similarly, Finnur Magnússon’s subversion of the age-old theory of euhemerism marked the beginning of the ‘new mythology’ in the North, and of the Romantic nationalisation of eddic narratives. However, even though these phenomena – Romantic historicism and cultural nationalism – are rightfully identified as modern and unprecedented, they do have much more in common with pre- and early modern modes of mythopoetic community-making than many a modernist would be willing to admit; on a meta level, the mechanism behind Snorri’s exploitation of his island’s cultural capital, and Finnur Magnússon’s attempt to emancipate Nordic culture – see the diagram in Chapter 3.4 –, are remarkably similar. Although these two Icelanders thought very differently about their subject matter – Snorri popularised and Finnur rejected euhemerism –, and although they faced very different ‘external threats’ to their capital – new genres of court poetry and the anti-Eddists, respectively –, the discursive parameters at work have changed remarkably little over the centuries. The modern national discourse, in which all of my protagonists took part in one way or another, should be considered the latest in a long succession of modes in which communities have cultivated and safeguarded their cultural heritage. It is, in other words, the same emancipation and even superiority discourse as before, performed in a new and fashionable key. This observation certainly does not downplay the immense significance of the intellectual and cultural revolution of the early nineteenth century; all the sources clearly indicate that it was in this ideological climate that cultural and political nationalism could first occur. But this should not lead to selective blindness when looking at the older sources, or to fear of recognising comparable rhetorical qualities in earlier mythological works and creations.<sup>1</sup> Applying methodologies developed by anthropologists and semioticians can lift the analysis of the historical source material to a new meta level, from where it may be easier to overcome the great fissure that divides the field of nationalism studies into two camps: that of the modernists and that of their critics, respectively.

On the basis of the present study, I can now formulate two points of discussion regarding the modernist interpretation of nationalism, as developed in the last decades from the theories of Ernest Gellner, Benedikt Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, among others. First of all, I would suggest a reconsideration of the general vocabulary of the modernist discourse, which is saturated with terms like ‘invented’, ‘forged’<sup>2</sup> and ‘imagined’. I have made use of these terms myself throughout this study, and many of the phenomena analysed here – like ‘invented traditions’ – are best fathomed by them. But taken together, these hallmark concepts of nationalism studies emphasise the *artificiality* of the modern nation, while displaying a structural underestimation – or disregard – of the intersubjective *reality* of national identities. Identifying the nation as a modern construction marks the first step towards its deconstruction, in the very normative approach of modern scholars. This critical stance is understandable, especially when it concerns an explosive political force like nationalism. However, it also distorts our objective understanding of the subject at hand, namely the function and formation of collective identities in society. The cultural activities typically associated with modern nationalism – such as the compilation of a national canon,

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<sup>1</sup> This blindness can – just like Jónas Hallgrímsson’s lack of interest in eddic themes – be explained by Johan Huizinga’s adage, that the introduction of something new – like modernism – is always accompanied by a ‘temporary blindness’ for the merits of the old (see Chapter 4.2). This mechanism leads to a distorted image of previous schools of thought, and exaggerates the differences between old and new. See also Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge – Malden 2008) p.5.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘to forge’ is not necessarily related to the negative concept of ‘forgery’, or ‘artificiality’. It may also refer to the ‘forging’ of something new from older ingredients, just like a sword is forged in fire.

or ‘purifying’ the national language – are modern ways of ‘negotiating authentic selves’<sup>1</sup>, but that does not mean that the function fulfilled by these processes – narrating collective identities – is *itself* a modern invention. In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated how eddic themes have contributed to the construction of a new, Romantic image of the Icelandic nation. But I have also demonstrated how the myths have been instrumentalised in previous centuries, long before the advent of Romantic nationalism, to perform very similar functions in Icelandic society. Rather than stressing the inventedness of modern nations, it would be interesting to pursue a more functionalistic approach to the topic, linking the Romantic cultivation of cultural heritage to similar processes before and after the long nineteenth century. This proposed approach does not deny the constructedness of modern nations, and constitutes a nuanced interpretation of the modernist discourse rather than a critique thereof.

My second point of discussion concerns the omnipresent urge to generalise among scholars of nationalism, on both sides of the divide. In order to invest one’s argument with sufficient intellectual weight to actually matter in the international debate on nationalism, it has to be as general and universally applicable as possible. Although every scholar has his or her own region of expertise, strictly confining oneself to this one region would amount to self-imposed insignificance on the more abstract plane where new theoretical approaches are developed.<sup>2</sup> The urge to include as many case studies and exemplary regions from all over Europe – or even the world – in one’s substantiation of a new theory has, in some cases, taken on the form of competitive enumeration. This is in and of itself not a bad thing; nationalism is such an international phenomenon, that only comparative methodologies – concentrating on the ‘interlocking’ of nationalisms, rather than internalistic explanations – can bring us any further. However, overstating the universal validity of a certain theory of the origin and spread of nationalism may distort and oversimplify the examples in question, and even invite selective insensitivity to very specific – cultural or geographical – local circumstances. “One of the important lessons of historical anthropology is”, according to Kirsten Hastrup, “that modes of producing ‘history’ differ from one context to the next. Beyond the obvious differences in environment, economy, and social organisation, the making of history is also in part determined by local ways of thinking about history.”<sup>3</sup> This observation does not only apply to the production of history, but also to the production of collective identities; does (national) identity formation unfold along the same lines in ‘peripheral’ and in ‘central’ areas? In large and in small communities? On islands and in the geographical heart of a continent?<sup>4</sup> Concentrating on these issues will further increase our understanding of the great divergence in forms and shapes of national identity, indispensable to the scholar who wants to know how the ‘viral spread’ of nationalism affected any particular community, and how it interacted with its preceding paradigms of collective identity.

My study of the Icelandic case reveals significant similarities with European peripheries on the other side of the continent. The protagonists of this research shared many of the ‘common preoccupations’ of their age with scholars, poets, artists and politicians in nations like Poland, Hungary and Romania. In the conclusion to her comparative study on historians and nationalism in East-Central Europe, Monika Baár identifies antiquity, unity, continuity and uniqueness as the four prevalent topoi in the writings of the five nineteenth-

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<sup>1</sup> Jones (2010) pp.182-3.

<sup>2</sup> A good example is of course Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, in which the author substantiates his theory on modern print capitalism with examples from Asia, Europe and America.

<sup>3</sup> Hastrup (1992) p.102.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on important works regarding the differences between centre and periphery, I refer to the introduction.

century scholars she has studied.<sup>1</sup> These central themes were woven into a general template which, in all cases, consisted of “three major phases: the ancient period, informed by liberty from time immemorial; the medieval epoch, often associated with the loss of liberty; and a subsequent period typified by the struggle for the restoration of liberty. This basic plot was then further embellished, depending on individual circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> The heightened relevance of these tropes to marginalised communities, in search of a (pre-)historical *raison d’être* and a justification for political sovereignty in the face of a dominating ‘other’, becomes evident when the development of Icelandic national culture is compared to its counterparts in Eastern Europe. Similarly, Miroslav Hroch’s model for analysing the development of national movements – based on the study of Eastern-European case studies – has proven not only relevant, but also useful when applied to Iceland, as long as the reservations formulated by Joep Leerssen – and explained in the introduction – are kept in mind. This of course does not prove the universality of Hroch’s model, but it does lead our attention to interesting similarities concerning the emergence of national identities in peripheral areas, where the cultivation of ancient culture and literary historicism played a more significant role than in the more established nations of the European centre, with their relatively well-defined borders and political institutions.<sup>3</sup> The dispersion of Romantic nationalism in Europe can never be fully captured by a one-size-fits-all theory, as this study of Iceland’s national culture clearly demonstrates.

On a small isolated island, the demarcations that communities on the mainland have to negotiate for themselves – through historiography, politics, poetry, and cultural and linguistic activism – seem almost ‘God-given’, uncontested and natural, provided by steep sea cliffs and a vast ocean. This creates a certain historical stability in the semantics of a term like ‘Icelander’; a stability that terms like ‘Dutchman’, ‘Bulgarian’ or ‘German’ – which function more like conceptual palimpsests than anything else – lack entirely. Due to their geographical isolation, Icelanders developed a strong sense of ethnic alterity before most other peoples in Europe, rooted to a large extent in their linguistic self-awareness. Icelandic was designated the ‘Latin of the North’ by Arngrímur Jónsson around 1600, and linguistic purism has been a vital characteristic of Icelandic identity ever since. These conditions – together with the fact that Icelandic society was homogeneous to the point, that all its members could (supposedly) trace their bloodlines back to the same Viking Age ancestors, and that an elaborate medieval corpus of ‘national epics’ did not have to be invented or forged when Romanticism kicked in – set Iceland’s national culture apart from that of for instance Bulgaria or Belgium, where a national identity had to be constructed virtually from scratch. I have demonstrated that my protagonists were very much children of their time, inspired by the same cultural currents and philosophies that integrated all of Europe into one network of interlocking nationalisms. But the point of departure was different for Icelanders; a unifying Icelandic identity did not have to be written into existence, and medieval epics or national mythologies did not have to be composed. Only *rewritten*: adjusted to the tastes of the modern nationalist. The Icelandic nation resulting from this modern cultivation of ancient literature is a Romantic invention, just like the Scottish kilt. But the constituents of this modern invention have deep historical roots, and have been embedded in Icelandic culture for centuries. Even when all of these Icelandic abnormalities are taken into consideration, the tiny nation of Iceland still qualifies as an imagined community; the islanders do not know all their fellow islanders personally, and the concept of the Icelandic nation remains a faceless abstraction, represented by a flag and a national anthem. But in comparison to the large-scale

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<sup>1</sup> Baár (2010) p.295.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparative study of the veneration of ‘cultural saints’ in Slovenia and Iceland, see Dović and Helgason (2017).



nations of the world, and their historical development to nationhood, I would argue that the Icelandic community is considerably less invented and imagined than most other national communities.



Contrary to what it may appear at first glance, the topic of the present study is by no means confined to a set of dusty scripts in a small and isolated, if exotic country. Iceland's medieval Eddas have in the course of the centuries been appropriated and instrumentalised by Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Poles, British, Americans, and even Japanese. They have been labelled 'Nordic', 'Scandinavian' or 'Germanic' – depending on the ideological context – rather than Icelandic. From this perspective, debates on Old Norse-Icelandic culture have shaped not only Icelandic, but also other Nordic and European discourses on cultural identity. The social relevance of this type of research becomes clear if we extend the lines of this study to the present, and realise that the entanglement of (creative) philology and ideology is by no means confined of the past. As 'functional fictions'<sup>1</sup>, mythologies will retain their function of rhetorical device beyond rational argumentation, and remain – like history itself – an inexhaustible "reservoir of political arguments"; a 'stock' which is "continuously renewed".<sup>2</sup> As long as there will be people who can relate to the symbolic language of a mythological narrative, it may serve as a continuation of politics – or rhetoric – by sublime means. And as long as that is the case, people will continue to relate to this particular symbolic language, or this particular 'way of saying things' (Barthes).<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lincoln's provocative assertion that all involvement with Indo-European mythology is per definition ideological may be somewhat exorbitant, and even insulting to scholars who have spent their entire career painstakingly deconstructing the avowedly ideological theories of previous, less objective generations. But even contemporary scholars do not formulate their theories in a vacuum, and it would be interesting to chart the influence of post-1945 – such as European integration and internationalism – on modern studies and editions of Old Norse literature.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, these modern approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic literature have yielded a treasure trove of new insights, but so did the studies of prominent nationalists – or Pan-Scandinavists – like the ones discussed in this study in their time. It is not enough to criticise and debunk the ideological biases of previous generations in their cultivation of national heritage; it is the task of the historian and the philologist to remain watchful and aware of similar developments in our own day and age, no matter how innocent or subtle these new biases may seem in comparison to their rejected predecessors. To quote Donald Kelley, scholars are "always claiming to be unprecedentedly critical – but critical rejection is a rhetorical topos as well as a rational claim. They are forever pretending to overcome myth, but at the same time adept at devising alternative myths."<sup>5</sup> Rather than 'pretending to overcome myth', it should

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor-Roper (2008) p.xix.

<sup>2</sup> Kalela (2012) p.147.

<sup>3</sup> On the ideological cultivation of Old Norse myths in modern times, see for instance Helgason (2017) pp.13-32 – on the role of Thor in American comics of the 1940s, where he is presented as an American hero smashing Nazis with his hammer –, Arnold (2011), and – more specifically on the Eddas in right-wing extremism – Rudgley (2006).

<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, embedding Old Norse-Icelandic culture in the wider scope of European literary culture has become an academic and – since international grants are hardly ever awarded to proposals lacking this international perspective – a financial necessity. See for instance Jørgensen (ed., 2009). Another interesting topic for further research would be the post-2008 financial crisis instrumentalisation of Old Norse myths, or the influence of Iceland's strong anti-EU sentiments on philology.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Kelley, "Ancient Verses on New Ideas: Legal Tradition and the French Historical School", in *History and Theory* 26:3 (1987) pp.319-38, 337-8. See also Baár (2010) p.290.

be our task to analyse the rhetorical functionalisation and signification of the narratives we are so eager to debunk and deconstruct. Rather than following the normative approach, we should analyse the phenomenon of modern mythopoesis as a constituent of the ‘social construction’ – as theorised by Foucault and Ian Hacking – of collective identities, which deserves our critical attention rather than our biased disapproval. This field of research requires a large degree of self-reflexivity on the part of the scholars involved, not only in respect to the humanities at large – and their role in the construction and deconstruction of historical narratives –, but also on the more personal level; is my research truly contributing to our understanding of social constructions, or am I merely ‘devising alternative myths’?

The present study is intended to provide its readers not only with a deeper understanding of the state of affairs in Iceland; I have attempted to present a detailed case study of national cultivation of a mythological corpus, not as an isolated or insular peculiarity, but embedded in an intricate network of interlocking nationalisms. Similar studies into the modern ideological dynamics of mythology have been conducted in other countries<sup>1</sup>, but further research – especially from an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective – is called for, in order to reach more conceptual conclusions regarding the functions of instrumentalised mythology in general, both in the past and in the present. In a national discourse infused with mythology, the “sequence of historical events is over-written by mythical structures, which causes the linear passing of time to be eliminated.”<sup>2</sup> Mythology overrules actual causality and chronology, and supplants traditional linear narratives with cyclical ones, in which lost golden ages will eventually always be restored – just like a new world arises from the devastation of Ragnarök. The mythological template seems to automatically imply a primordial promise of return to a blessed state of existence, in an endless cycle of decline and rebirth. And by embracing this genre in their poetry, art and essays, national idealists could become shareholders in this sublime promise and further their cause by specifying the parameters and linking gods and goddesses to their specific cultural and political ideals. They could emancipate their marginalised communities through the ancient myths, which supplied them with the narrative means to localise the universal and to universalise the local.<sup>3</sup>

Myth is per definition interactive, playful and dynamic, and the cyclicity inherent to its narrative structure, eternally hinting at new beginnings, renders them central to the human story. Mythology will continue to appeal, because it forms an inexhaustible symbolic arsenal for every idea imaginable. Anyone who has acquired full awareness of the social functions of mythology, will vehemently endorse Joep Leerssen’s recent statement that mythology constitutes “a challenging and a promising topic for the study of intellectual and cultural dynamics.”<sup>4</sup> Even in modern Christian and Post-Christian societies, it remains a pivotal tool for the construction of communities, and an instrument of in- and exclusion. The dynamic process of re-signification demonstrates how, as a modern world-view, nationalism absorbs, recycles, and cannibalises on elements from pre-existing world-views – religions and mythologies, both living and extinct – in a secular fashion. The aim of this study has been to deepen our understanding of this recycling function of nationalism, and to reveal the subtle shapes it can take in modern mythographies. I have endeavoured to do full justice to this semiological functionality of myth, and to enhance our understanding of the “important if limited part”<sup>5</sup> the Eddas are believed to have played in Icelandic national culture. I have

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of these works, I refer to the introduction and to the elaborate bibliography of this study. Kęcis (2012), Ægidius (1985), Bödl (2000) and Harding (1995) deserve special mention here.

<sup>2</sup> Balázs (2012) p.59.

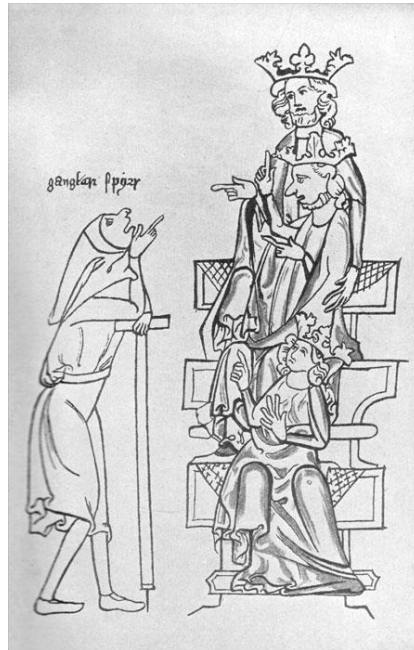
<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.60.

<sup>4</sup> Leerssen (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Egilsson (2008) p.119.

demonstrated what this part consisted of, how it differed from that of the Icelandic sagas, and how it helped to transform the youngest country of Europe – both in geological and in historical terms – into the primordial dwelling place of the Nordic gods, who already appear to have animated its mountains and glaciers eons before the first Viking ever set foot on its black shores. And they will remain a part of the country for as long as there will be people here to refer to them, because – in the inimitable words of Friedrich Schiller – “Was sich nie und nirgends hat begeben, Das allein veraltet nie.” The perpetual resignification and rejuvenation of the old myths are the true apple of Iðunn, that keeps the gods forever young.

## Images



**Fig. 1:** Medieval illuminations depicting scenes from heathen mythology are extremely rare in Icelandic manuscripts. Here, Gylfi is portrayed questioning Óðinn in the guise of High, Just-as-High, and Third, as described in Gylfaginning (of the Prose Edda). From: Codex Upsaliensis, p.50 (ca. 1300-1325).



**Fig. 2:** Óðinn with his two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, detail from an Icelandic paper manuscript of the Prose Edda (SÁM 66), written by Jakob Sigurðsson (ca. 1765-1766). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



**Fig. 3:** The dedication in the first volume of Finnur Magnússon's Danish translation of the Poetic Edda (1821), to the Danish king and the Danish people.



**Fig. 4:** Euhemerism imagined: Yngvi-Freyr builds the Uppsala temple. By Hugo Hamilton, in his *Teckningar ur Skandinaviens Äldre Historia* (Stockholm 1830). Source: Wikipedia Commons.



**Fig. 5:** *Finnur Magnússon's influential visualisation of Yggdrasil, included in the endpapers of volume three of his Eddalæren og dens Oprindelse (1825).*



**Fig. 6:** *The Lady of the Mountain (Fjallkonan), personification of the Icelandic nation, as envisioned by Eiríkr Magnússon. Frontispiece to the English translation of Jón Árnason's Icelandic Legends (London 1866).*



**Fig. 7:** *W.G. Collingwood's Romantic watercolor impression of Iceland's medieval Assembly (Alþingi) at Þingvellir (ca. 1897). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.*



**Fig. 8:** *Hermann Ernst Freund's very classical impression of the supreme god of the Æsir in bronze; Odin (1828), at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

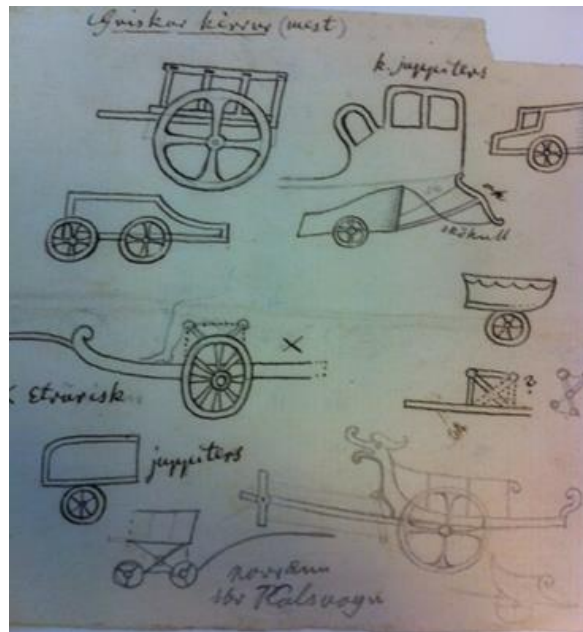


**Fig. 9:** *Hermann Ernst Freund's best-known work, the Ragnarök frieze (Ragnarökfrisen) was completed after his death in 1840, and was destroyed by fire in 1884. This scene, in which the Norns – winged women depicted in classical dress and posture (middle) – are interviewed by Mimir and Baldr (right), was only the beginning of an ambitious attempt to capture the whole of Old Norse mythology in a never-ending chain of neoclassical sculpture. Photograph from 1833, retrieved from [www.germanicmythology.com](http://www.germanicmythology.com) (last accessed: 10 April 2017).*





**Fig. 10:** The saga hero Grettir Ásmundarson as envisioned by Sigurður málari; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-LÍ-190.



**Fig. 11:** From these sketches by Sigurður málari it becomes clear that the artist relied heavily on the study of classical (Greek, Etruscan) chariots for the design of an Old Norse prototype; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-6.



**Fig. 12:** Design by Sigurður málari for one of his unrealised tableaux vivants, showing Sigyn holding a bowl between the dripping venom of the snake and her husband's (Loki's) face; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-1.



**Fig. 13:** Sigurður málari's classical impression of Óðinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir, with his name in runes; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-6.



**Fig. 14:** *Sigurður málarí: Þórr with his hammer on a chariot; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-6.*



**Fig. 15:** *Sigurður málarí: Þórr, front view; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-6.*



**Fig. 16:** *Sigurður málari*: A lady in national costume, standing next to a rune stone surrounded by symbols of the Icelandic nation. The first Icelandic depiction of Fjallkonan? Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-3.



**Fig. 17:** *Sigurður málari*'s impression of a Valkyrie; Archive of the National Museum of Iceland, artefact number A-SG09-3.



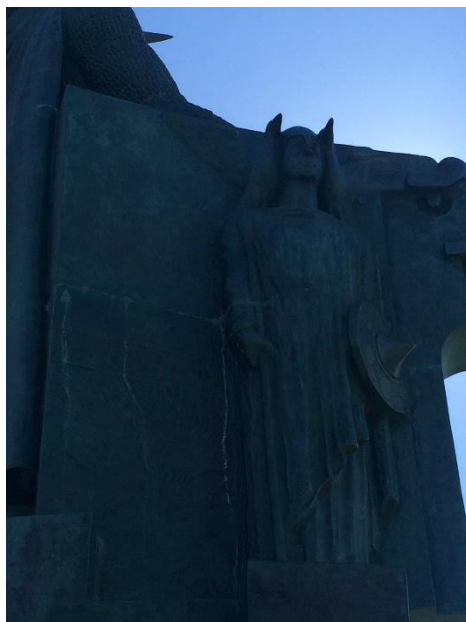
**Fig. 18:** *Asgårdsreien* by the Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo (1872), the paradigmatic depiction of the ‘wild hunt’ (Nasjonalgalleriet in Oslo). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



**Fig. 19:** Depictions of the obscure god Óðr are hard to come by. On this illustration by the German artist Carl Emil Doepler ‘the Elder’, he is leaving his wife Freyja again for yet another journey. Source: Wilhelm Wägner, *Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden* (Leipzig and Berlin 1882) p.221.



**Fig. 20:** *Einar Jónsson, Húm (Twilight) from 1907. Courtesy of the Einar Jónsson Museum, Reykjavík.*



**Fig. 21:** *Close-up of Óðinn and the two ravens on his shoulders; detail on the high seat pillar which is part of Einar Jónsson's statue of Ingólfr Arnarson. Picture taken by the author.*



**Fig. 22:** A photograph of Einar Jónsson's now destroyed relief 'Flight of the gods to Iceland's mountains' from 1907. Courtesy of the Einar Jónsson Museum.



**Fig. 23:** Kristus i Dødsriget (*Christ in the Realm of the Dead*), by the Danish Symbolist Joakim Skovgaard (1891-4); Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



**Fig. 24:** *Einar Jónsson, Skuld (1927). Courtesy of the Einar Jónsson Museum, Reykjavík.*



**Fig. 25:** *Einar Jónsson, Fæðing Psyche (The Birth of Psyche) from 1918. Courtesy of the Einar Jónsson Museum, Reykjavík.*





**Fig. 26:** *Einar Jónsson, Þór og Elli (Þór and Elli), completed in 1940. Sculpture garden of the Einar Jónsson Museum in Reykjavík. Picture taken by the author.*



**Fig. 27:** *Gimli, the luxurious residence of the engineer and major Knud Zimsen, on Lækjargata-street in Reykjavík (1906). Picture taken by the author.*



**Fig. 28:** *The impact of tourism; the unfinished Arctic Henge in northern Iceland, started in 1996, is inspired by the cosmology of Völuspá. Source: the Arctic Henge Facebook site (last accessed: 11 April 2017).*

# Bibliography

**Note on the Bibliography:** *In order to prevent confusion, all the works in this bibliography are alphabetically ordered on the basis of the authors' last name, which is in the case of most Icelanders not a family name but a patronymic. I am aware of the fact that this method of organisation is not in line with the Icelandic custom of alphabetising on the basis of the authors' first or given name, but since this study is intended for an international readership, and for the sake of uniformity and clarity, I have made the decision to maintain the conventional principle of organisation on last name basis.*

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## *Terug naar Asgaard: Samenvatting in het Nederlands*

IJslanders zien zichzelf graag als een volk van boeken en verhalen, een echt ‘literatuurvolk’ (*bókmenntaþjóð*) dat, ondanks zijn uiterst bescheiden omvang, de literaire tradities van grotere landen met gemak naar de kroon steekt. Hun dunbevolkte vulkanische eiland, dat in grote isolatie tegen de poolcirkel aanschurkt, is pas in de Vikingtijd (vanaf de tweede helft van de negende eeuw na Christus) permanent bewoond geraakt, en kan bogen op een bijzonder rijk literair erfgoed in de volkstaal dat terugreikt tot de twaalfde eeuw. De fameuze saga’s van de IJslanders (*Íslendingasögur*) vormen de literaire neerslag van de lotgevallen, de bloedvetes, de rooftochten en de liefdesgeschiedenissen van de eerste generaties IJslanders in de saga-tijd (930-1030). Twee andere middeleeuwse werken, te weten de *Poëtische Edda* (een verzameling anonieme mythologische verzen, samengesteld in de late dertiende eeuw) en de *Proza Edda* (een handboek voor dichters in de Oudnoordse traditie uit de vroege dertiende eeuw, van de hand van Snorri Sturluson), vormen samengenomen onze voornaamste bron van kennis over het wereldbeeld en de mythologie van het voorchristelijke Scandinavië, ook als deze werken meer dan tweehonderd jaar na de kerstening van IJsland geschreven zijn en de exacte datering van eddische gedichten een controversieel onderwerp blijft.

In andere overgeleverde manuscripten staat ondermeer de vroegste geschiedenis van de eilandgemeenschap opgetekend, alsmede de turbulente ontwikkelingen van de dertiende eeuw die er uiteindelijk toe leidden dat IJsland onderdeel werd van het Noorse (1262) en uiteindelijk het Deense Koninkrijk, waar het eiland tot 1944 deel van zou blijven uitmaken. Dat de eilanders in de negentiende en vroege twintigste eeuw, ten tijde van hun (vreedzame) onafhankelijkheidsstrijd dit indrukwekkende erfgoed hebben ingezet om hun politieke eisen kracht bij te zetten, gold onder IJslandse historici lange tijd als zo vanzelfsprekend dat er relatief weinig onderzoek werd verricht op dit gebied (aldus de historicus Gunnar Karlsson). Hoewel er in de laatste decennia weldegelijk een indrukwekkend corpus aan secundaire literatuur is ontstaan over dit onderwerp, heeft niemand zich tot dusver nog gewaagd aan een integrale, structurele analyse van de IJslandse cultivering van de Oudnoordse mythen (als vastgelegd in de Edda’s) in relatie tot de constructie van een modern nationaal zelfbewustzijn.

In dit proefschrift staat de link tussen mythologie en nationale identiteitsvorming centraal. Daarbij versta ik onder mythologie veel meer dan een ethnisch afgebakende verhalenkluster over helden, goden en godinnen; volgens de Franse semioticus Roland Barthes vormen mythologische narratieven een *manier* om dingen te zeggen, een *modus operandi* waarin een complex systeem van tekens en symbolen wordt verheven tot het niveau van mythe. Mythologie kan als geen ander genre op beeldende wijze ideeën over goed en kwaad, over aanvaardbaar en onaanvaardbaar gedrag uitdragen en in het collectieve bewustzijn van de gemeenschap verankeren. Het onderscheid tussen goed (de goden, orde) en kwaad (reuzen, chaos) is hier klip en klaar, en daarom vormen mythologische motieven bijzonder effectief rhetorisch gereedschap; wie zijn argumenten in het narratieve sjabloon van een mythe weet te gieten (waarin de tegenstander gelijk wordt gesteld aan een tegenstrever van de goddelijke orde) heeft al snel het gelijk aan zijn zijde, zelfs als zijn of haar argumenten inhoudelijk geen hout snijden. Een mythologie is geen statische eenheid van onveranderlijke originele vertellingen, maar een dynamisch geheel, opgetrokken uit narratieve bouwsteentjes (*mythemen*) die naar hartelust aangepast en steeds opnieuw gerangschikt kunnen worden, om zo de oude motieven continu van actuele betekenis en van accuut belang te voorzien. Dit dynamische en creatieve proces van continue herinterpretatie wordt *mythopoesis* genoemd, en ligt ten grondslag aan het ontstaan van nieuwe

mythologische vertogen op basis van de oude vertrouwde mythen. Naast deze retorische functie heeft mythologie ook een belangrijke gemeenschapsversterkende en -bevorderende werking, omdat alleen de 'insiders' die het complexe systeem van tekens en symbolen volledig doorgronden deel kunnen nemen aan een specifiek mythologisch vertoog. Deze vertogen vormen dus een instrument van collectieve in- en uitsluiting, en in die hoedanigheid heeft dit genre, na de komst van het christendom in gesecculariseerde vorm, weinig aan belang ingeboet. De mythen vormen (ook in de moderne tijd) onderdeel van het 'cultureel kapitaal' (Pierre Bourdieu) van een gemeenschap, en kunnen als zodanig worden gebruikt om de status van de gemeenschap, zowel intern als naar buiten toe, te versterken.

De negentiende eeuw staat te boek als het tijdvak van het romantisch nationalisme, waarin de volkeren van Europa op zoek gingen naar de (pre)historische oorsprong van hun nationale eigenheid, de bakermat van hun 'volksgeest'. Filologen, dichters, politici en historici herontdekten (of fabriceerden) de oudste bronnen van hun vaderlandse geschiedenis, en smeedden deze om tot een heroïsch, teleologisch nationaal vertoog. In de uitgebreide secundaire literatuur over het verschijnsel nationalisme wordt soms naar de twee-hoofdige Romeinse god Janus verwezen, als treffende verbeelding van de tweeslachtigheid die aan het nationale denken ten grondslag ligt; zijn ene gezicht kijkt achteruit, naar een glorieus verleden, terwijl het andere juist vooruitblijkt, naar een toekomst waarin een nieuwe nationale bloeitijd gloort. Deze twee kanten van de medaille zijn dus onlosmakelijk met elkaar verbonden; alleen door een culturele herbezinning op het nationale verleden kan de grootsheid van weleer hersteld en wellicht zelfs overtroffen worden in de toekomst. Folklore, middeleeuwse literatuur, taal en volksvertellingen werden in het kielzog van de Napoleontische oorlogen gemobiliseerd om nationale identiteiten te articuleren, en om het contrast ten opzichte van de 'de anderen' te accentueren. Ook mythologie, of het inheemse wereldbeeld van vóór de implementatie van het christendom, werd in dit kader (door ondermeer Johann Gottfried Herder en Jacob Grimm) opgewaarderd van spirituele dwaling of gemythologiseerde geschiedschrijving (*euhemerisme*) tot een zuivere manifestatievorm van de volksgeest. Dit ideeëngoed verspreidde zich razendsnel in het Europa van de vroege negentiende eeuw, door een internationaal netwerk van in elkaar grijpende nationale bewegingen die elkaar continu over en weer beïnvloedden. In navolging van Jacob Grimms *Deutsche Mythologie* werden overal in Europa (vaak op erg creatieve wijze) nationale mythologieën 'gereconstrueerd' en op romantische wijze gecultiveerd in dichtkunst, theater en de beeldende kunsten. Deze culturele productie ontvouwde zich in een nieuwe publieke sfeer (Jürgen Habermas' *Öffentlichkeit*) die sinds de zeventiende eeuw steeds intellectueler was geworden, en die met de introductie van nieuwe media (bijvoorbeeld kranten en tijdschriften) het podium vormde voor de opkomst van nationale bewegingen.

Maar hoe verhoudt dit alles zich nou tot het ontstaan van een IJslandse nationale identiteit in de loop van de negentiende en vroege twintigste eeuw? In de chronologisch gerangschikte hoofdstukken van dit boek wordt de rol van de Oudnoordse mythologie in de nationale cultuur van de IJslanders per cultureel deelgebied (literatuur, beeldende kunsten, academische wereld, openbare ruimte, etc.) uitgebreid in kaart gebracht en geanalyseerd. Ik richt me hierbij op de bijna honderd jaar tussen het ontstaan van een specifiek IJslands Edda-vertoog vanaf circa 1820, en de politieke onafhankelijkheid (in personele unie met de koning van Denemarken) van 1918. Deze lange periode heb ik onderverdeeld in drie chronologische tijdvakken (1820-1845, 1845-1880, 1880-1918) die grofweg overeenkomen met de drie opeenvolgende fasen in de ontwikkeling van nationale bewegingen als geformuleerd door Miroslav Hroch (te weten: 1. Het ontstaan van een romantisch natiebeeld binnen een kleine groep intellectuelen; 2. Institutionalisering van dit beeld d.m.v. instellingen, onderwijs en media; 3. Nationalisme als een breedgedragen massabeweging). Dit model wordt in deze

studie op kritische wijze toegepast, en toegesneden op de specifieke ontwikkeling van IJslands nationale cultuur.

In tegenstelling tot veel andere volkeren hoefden de IJslanders geen moeite te doen een nationale mythologie te reconstrueren op basis van schaars bronnenmateriaal; de Edda's spraken immers voor zich. Hoe is de IJslandse omgang met dit mythologische erfgoed in verband te brengen met het ontstaan van een politieke en culturele identiteit? Hoe werden ideeën over de IJslandse identiteit uitgedragen door de cultivering van mythologische beelden? En hoe werden deze praktijken (op directe of indirecte wijze) beïnvloed en gevormd door externe factoren en buitenlands gedachtegoed? Naast de beantwoording van deze onderzoeksvragen wordt er in deze studie een vergelijking getrokken tussen de ideologische interpretatie van mythologische motieven enerzijds, en de cultivering van de *Íslendingasögur* anderzijds, om vast te stellen of deze twee middeleeuwse genres al dan niet een vergelijkbare rol hebben gespeeld in de constructie van een IJslandse identiteit. Welke mythemen en mythologische figuren komen het meest voor in het onderzochte bronnenmateriaal, en hoe verhoudt deze prominente aanwezigheid zich tot hun rol in de middeleeuwse bronnen? Hoe werden zij gemodificeerd of herschreven om een actuele ideologische boodschap over te brengen? Om recht te doen aan de veelzijdigheid van het bronnenmateriaal en de vele uiteenlopende manieren waarop mythologie hierin wordt ingezet, wordt er in dit onderzoek onderscheid gemaakt tussen vijf verschillende retorische functies van mythologie, te weten: primordialisering, ver-inheemsing (of indigenisatie), universalisering, associatie, and differentiatie. Wat hieronder precies verstaan wordt zal in het onderstaande aan de hand van voorbeelden verduidelijkt worden.

In het tijdsgewricht dat in dit boek onder de loep genomen wordt was de IJslandse bevolking erg klein (in de negentiende eeuw lag het totale inwoneraantal gemiddeld rond de zestigduizend), en over het algemeen erg arm bovendien. Van een stedelijke cultuur was nog helemaal geen sprake. Omdat IJsland tot 1911 geen eigen universiteit had, trokken IJslanders met grotere ambities naar Kopenhagen, het cosmopolitische hart van Noord-Europa, om daar te studeren. Hier kwamen de studenten voor het eerst in aanraking met nieuwe ideeën en culturele stromingen uit andere delen van Europa, waaronder het nationale gedachtegoed van denkers als Fichte, Schelling en Hegel. Bovendien namen ze hier ook voor het eerst kennis van de romantische receptie van hun *eigen* culturele erfgoed, bijvoorbeeld in de nationaal-historische dichtkunst van de Deen Adam Oehlenschläger, die zich in zijn poëzie en toneelwerken sterk liet beïnvloeden door Oudnoordse geschiedenis en mythologie zoals overgeleverd in de IJslandse bronnen. Deze bronnen waren rond 1600 voor het eerst (in Latijnse vertaling) onder de aandacht gekomen van Europese humanisten, en in het tijdvak volgend op de protestantse reformatie hebben zowel Zweden als Denemarken (de twee Scandinavische grootmachten) pogingen ondernomen om aan de hand van dit materiaal hun superioriteit ten opzichte van de ander met historische argumenten te staven. Er was het Deense hof veel aan gelegen deze waardevolle literatuurschatten naar Kopenhagen te halen, en in de loop van de zeventiende en achttiende werden grote hoeveelheden materiaal door IJslandse manuscriptenjagers (waaronder Árne Magnússon, grondlegger van de Arnamagnæaanse Collectie) verzameld en naar Denemarken verscheept.

Rond het midden van de achttiende eeuw groeide de Europese fascinatie voor de cultuur van het oude Scandinavië onder invloed van Paul Henri Mallet's invloedrijke *Introduction à l'histoire du Danemarch*, en de razend populaire, 'oeroude' (maar later als vervalsingen ontmaskerde) gedichten toegeschreven aan de Schotse bard Ossian. Vooral deze laatste publicatie was van groot belang voor de romantische beeldvorming omtrent Noord-Europa, en kan gezien worden als het startschot van de emancipatie van de Keltische en Scandinavische beschavingen; Ossian werd gezien als de Homerus van het Noorden, en zijn werk gold als het onomstotelijke bewijs voor de gewaagde these dat de cultuur van het

noorden in niets onderdeel aan de hegemonische ‘klassieke’ culturen van Rome en Griekenland. De ‘Noordse renaissance’ kreeg ondermeer vorm in de poëzie van Duitse dichters die in Kopenhagen resideerden (zoals Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock en Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg), en in de eerste decennia van de negentiende eeuw ook in het werk van Deense romantici, waaronder Adam Oehlenschläger. De eerste generatie IJslandse romantici liet zich in Denemarken sterk beïnvloeden door het historicisme van Oehlenschläger, maar begon tegelijkertijd met het construeren van een exclusief IJslandse identiteit die zich scherp aftekende tegen de Deense ‘ander’; het ruwe, bergachtige landschap van IJsland werd door de dichter Bjarni Thorarensen bijvoorbeeld geprezen en afgezet tegen de saaie platheid van Denemarken.

De eerste protagonist van dit onderzoek is de IJslandse filoloog, archeoloog en runoloog Finnur Magnússon, die tevens de functie van geheimraad vervulde aan het Deense hof. Finnur gold in de eerste decennia van de negentiende eeuw als een ongeëvenaarde autoriteit op het gebied van Oudnoordse cultuur en mythologie, en werd daarom door geleerden uit heel Europa (waaronder de gebroeders Grimm) aangeschreven. Hij verzorgde edities (zowel in het Deens als het Latijn) van de *Poëtische Edda*, en publiceerde tussen 1824 en 1826 zijn vierdelige hoofdwerk over de Oudnoordse mythologie, *Eddalæren og dens oprindelse* (‘De leer van de Edda en haar oorsprong’). Het beeld dat Finnur in dit werk schetst van het heidense wereldbeeld staat in schril contrast tot de over het algemeen vrij negatieve mythe-interpretatie van de Verlichting; de zogenaamde ‘anti-Eddisten’ zagen de mythen als infantiele fabeltjes (zeker in vergelijking met de schone mythologie van de Grieken en Romeinen), en deden ze af als ontspoorde, gemythologiseerde pogingen tot geschiedschrijving, of door de wetenschap ontzenuwde pogingen om natuurverschijnselen te verklaren.

Finnur ging dit negatieve vertoog te lijf, en hanteerde daarbij een comparatieve methode; door aan te tonen dat de Noordse mythologie deel uitmaakte van de grote Indo-Europese ‘mythenboom’, waartoe ook de gerenomeerde mythologische systemen der Grieken en Indiërs gerekend konden worden, kon de Oudnoordse ‘tak’ worden voorgesteld als *gelijkwaardig* aan alle andere takken. De idee van een organische vertakking van Indo-Europese mythologieën ontleende Finnur aan de Indo-Europese taalwetenschap, die op dat moment nog in haar kinderschoenen stond maar steeds meer in zwang raakte. Daarnaast interpreteerde Finnur de mythen als ‘natuurlijke filosofie’ (of natuurwetenschap), die in veel opzichten niet onderdeel aan de empirische wetenschap van de moderne tijd; de goden, walkuren en andere mythische figuren en motieven golden volgens Finnur als verwijzingen naar bepaalde planeten en astronomische verschijnselen, en de vertellingen waarin ze verwerkt waren fungeerden dus als een soort geraffineerde orale almanak, waar de inwoners van Scandinavië zelfs na de overgang tot het christendom nog goed mee uit de voeten konden. Bovendien leken de voorouders vaak beter geïnformeerd dan de huidige generatie; modieuze nieuwe opvattingen (zoals het *neptunisme*: de theorie dat alle gesteenten op Aarde van oceanische oorsprong zijn) zag hij bijvoorbeeld reeds verbeeld in de symboliek van de Edda’s. Deze nieuwe vorm van mythe-interpretatie sloot aan bij de romantische herwaardering voor dit verguisde materiaal, en droeg bij aan wat Friedrich von Schelling als de terugkeer van de wetenschap naar de “ocean van de poëzie” (door mythologie) aangeduid had.

Net zoals zijn middeleeuwse voorganger Snorri Sturluson droeg Finnur door zijn werk bij aan de rehabilitatie en emancipatie van zijn eigen culturele erfgoed; beide mythologen koppelden het materiaal aan nieuwe, modieuze vertogen (in het geval van Snorri: Troje en de Bijbel, in het geval van Finnur: Indo-Germanistiek en natuurwetenschap) om de mythen van actuele betekenis te voorzien, en zo dus hun eigen culturele kapitaal (de bron van hun eigen faam en aanzien in het buitenland), en dat van de IJslanders in het algemeen, in

bescherming te nemen tegen critici (in Snorri's tijd: de voorvechters van vertaalde hoofse literatuur, in Finnurs geval: de anti-Eddisten). In beide gevallen is er sprake van een soort culturele reddingsoperatie, en een aansporing aan het adres van Scandinavische kunstenaars om zich in hun werk toch vooral te bezinnen op hun eigen voorouderlijke erfdeel. Daarbij zag Finnur de Edda's nadrukkelijk als een uitdrukking van *Noordse* nationale identiteit, en dus niet als specifiek IJslands. Maar samen met zijn collega, de Deense linguïst Rasmus Rask (die als een van de grondleggers van de Indo-Europese taalkunde geldt), stond hij weldegelijk aan de wieg van IJslands nationale beweging. Een geprononceerde culturele identiteit bestond al veel langer op IJsland, in ieder geval sinds de twaalfde eeuw. Maar een cultuur-politieke ideologie, gericht op het behoud en de cultivering van de eigen taal en cultuur, kreeg pas vorm in het kielzog van Rasks alarmerende diagnose dat het IJslands verdrongen werd door het Deens, en over enkele eeuwen geheel verdwenen zou zijn. Om dit te voorkomen *moest* er actie ondernomen worden. Rask richtte daartoe in 1816 zelf het invloedrijke 'IJslandse literatuurgenootschap' (*Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*) op, en bracht zijn pleidooi voor een literaire renaissance onder de aandacht in verschillende publicaties. Finnur geldt als een van de eerste IJslanders die zich (onder invloed van het werk van ondermeer Ossian en Walter Scott) tot het romantische denken bekeerden, en publiceerde in het orgaan van voornoemd literatuurgenootschap een hartekreet gericht aan alle IJslanders, dat als een soort blauwdruk en programma voor de IJslandse romantiek zou gaan fungeren. Zijn boodschap was simpel: zoals wij eens waren, moeten we in de toekomst weer worden. De vergane glorie van een gouden tijdperk (de hoogtijdagen van de Oudnoords-IJslandse cultuur) moesten als inspiratie en meetlat voor de toekomst dienen, en zo een nationale wedergeboorte bewerkstelligen.

Finnurs hartekreet bleef niet onbeantwoord, en heeft het romantische geschiedsbeeld van de samenstellers van het invloedrijke literaire tijdschrift *Fjölnir* (1835-1847), dat traditioneel als het beginpunt van het IJslandse nationalisme wordt gezien, mede bepaald. Dit schrijverscollectief, bestaande uit vier jonge intellectuelen bekend onder de noemer *Fjölnismenn* ('mannen van Fjölnir'), zette zich af tegen de culturele conventies van hun tijd en probeerde een literaire ommezwaai te provoceren door middel van taalvernieuwing en de introductie van werk van buitenlandse voorbeelden (in vertaling), waaronder Heinrich Heine. Veruit het beroemdste lid van dit collectief was Jónas Hallgrímsson, die na zijn vroegtijdige overlijden uit zou groeien tot IJslands dichter des vaderlands. Jónas' poëzie, waarin vooral de oude saga-helden en de bijeenkomsten van het (in 930 opgerichte) IJslandse parlement in Þingvellir verheerlijkt worden (om het contrast met een troosteloos heden te benadrukken), vormt het meest tot de verbeelding sprekende antwoord op Finnurs oproep. Wat opvalt is echter de afwezigheid van mythologische motieven in Jónas' werk; alleen onderwerpen ontleend aan de geschiedschrijving en de saga's lijken in zijn ogen in aanmerking te komen voor nationalistische cultivering.

Vanwaar deze frapante afwezigheid? Hiervoor zijn twee verklaringen aan te dragen. Enerzijds is de mythologische traditie van de Edda's op IJsland nooit helemaal uitgestorven, en werden er nog in Jónas' tijd (en ver daarna) epische gedichten gecomponeerd in de uitermate populaire (maar door poëtische conventies en gemeenplaatsen gekenmerkte) *rímur*-traditie. In dit genre werden de oude goden en helden uit de Edda's nog steeds ten tonele gevoerd, en werd de eeuwenoude kennis van het mythologische materiaal in stand gehouden. Maar de *Fjölnismenn* verachtten deze traditionele vorm van 'rijmelarij', en zagen hierin het tegendeel van alles waar zij voor stonden (originaliteit en taalkundige en poëtische vernieuwing). Jónas opende de aanval op een van 's lands meest geliefde *rímur*-dichters in een vernietigende bespreking van diens werk, en verhief daarmee de afkeer van dit genre tot een kenmerk van goede smaak. Hoewel de Oudnoordse versvormen die we in de Edda's tegenkomen weliswaar nieuw leven werd ingeblazen, werden de goden en godinnen zelf voornamelijk genegeerd, waarschijnlijk vanwege hun associatie met de gehate *rímur*. Johan



Huizinga signaleerde reeds in zijn *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* dat iedere culturele vernieuwing noodzakelijkerwijs gepaard gaat met een ‘tijdelijke blindheid’ voor de schoonheid van het voorgaande, en deze initiële, relatieve afwezigheid van mythologie kan in dit kader begrepen worden.

Anderzijds zochten de mannen van Fjölfnir zich af te zetten tegen de receptie van ‘hun’ erfgoed in het buitenland, voornamelijk in Denemarken (deze jongere generatie vond Finnur Magnússon bijvoorbeeld ‘te Deens’ in diens politieke toewijding). Dat is een interessant gegeven, vooral omdat de eerste generatie IJslandse romantici sterk werd beïnvloed door de Deense romantiek, en dan vooral door Oehlenschläger. Jónas’ beroemde gedicht *Ísland* (‘IJsland’) uit 1835 is duidelijk geënt op Oehlenschläger’s lofdicht *Island* (eveneens ‘IJsland’) uit 1805, maar alle goden die door de Deen werden aangehaald om het ‘eiland van het verleden’ te bezingen werden door Jónas min of meer vervangen door historische IJslanders en saga-helden. Wellicht heeft dus het feit dat de goden zowel door dichters en geleerden in het buitenland (ongehinderd door een ‘beschamende’ traditie zoals de *rímur*) alsook door *rímur*-dichters op IJsland zelf toegeëigend en gecontamineerd zijn, ertoe geleid dat de *Íslendingasögur* een veel gepastere bron van nationale inspiratie vormden. Dat wil echter niet zeggen dat de goden helemaal afgedaan hadden voor Jónas; in een van zijn gedichten roept hij ze zelfs direct aan om zich te wreken op de *rímur*-dichters die hun namen en de naam van de IJslanders door het slijk haalden, en in zijn wetenschappelijke werk (hij was tevens natuurwetenschapper) haalt Jónas het Edda-gedicht *Völuspá* (‘de profetie van de zieneres’) aan als bewijs voor het grote wetenschappelijke inzicht van de voorouders.

Rond het midden van de negentiende eeuw ging het culturele nationalisme uit het begin van de eeuw een nieuwe fase in, die in grote lijnen overeenkomt met het tweede stadium van Hrochs verklarende model; de romantische idealen werden geconsolideerd in de vorm van populaire publicaties, nationale instituties en instellingen, nationale klederdracht (en andere ‘invented traditions’), verenigingen, publieke werken en festivals. Ook in dit proces heeft de Oudnoordse mythologie een rol gespeeld. Een centrale figuur in deze ontwikkeling was de culturele duizendpoot Sigurður Guðmundsson *málari* (‘de schilder’), wellicht de meest veelzijdige persoon in dit onderzoek. In zijn optiek (en in die van zijn intellectuele en artistieke bondgenoten) moest niet Kopenhagen, maar Reykjavík naast het *politieke* (het IJslandse parlement was hier in 1845 opnieuw opgericht) ook het *culturele* hart van de IJslandse natie worden. Om dit doel te bereiken moest het kleine stadje uitgedost worden met alle monumentale instituties die een hoofdstad kenmerken, waaronder een nationaal museum, een nationaal theater, en standbeelden van belangrijke nationale helden. Sigurður was zelf actief betrokken bij de ontwikkeling van al deze toekomstvisies, en liet zich hierbij sterk inspireren door het middeleeuwse erfgoed. In mijn analyse van zijn geschriften en tekeningen heb ik aangetoond hoe eddische motieven impliciet ingezet werden in Sigurðurs ontwerp voor vrouwelijke klederdracht (waarbij hij zich de IJslandse vrouw als een soort strijdvaardige walkure voorstelde), en in zijn ‘archeologisch correcte’ voorstellingen van het Oudnoordse verleden in zijn schetsen en *tableaux vivants*. De invloed van de Hellenistische stijl (die de artistieke verbeelding van de Oudnoordse goden kenmerkte in de vroege negentiende eeuw) valt in dit werk nog duidelijk te bespeuren.

Deze culturele ontwikkelingen voltrokken zich in tandem met wat Joep Leerssen de beweging van “past to peasant” (van verleden naar boer) genoemd heeft; de ware volksgeest lag niet meer alleen beslagen in een verheerlijkt verleden, maar evengoed in de folklore en volksgebruiken van het platteland. Een Duitse volgeling van Jacob Grimm (en tevens IJslandsvriend) Konrad Maurer nam dit gedachtegoed met zich mee naar IJsland, waar hij een grote verzameling mondeling overgeleverde volksverhalen aanlegde. In zijn optiek (overgenomen door IJslandse verhalenverzamelaars zoals Jón Árnarson) lagen in dit erfgoed de overblijfselen van oude heidense gebruiken en wijsheid beslagen, die als een soort

‘levende Edda’ naast de middeleeuwse bronnen stonden. Deze continuïteit tussen pre-christelijke cultuur en hedendaagse folklore was ook al geopperd door Finnur Magnússon, maar kreeg pas echt een ideologische lading rond het midden van de eeuw (Maurer was een voorstander van IJslands nationale beweging onder leiding van zijn vriend Jón Sigurðsson). Hiermee werd het traditionele onderscheid tussen ‘hoge’ (stedelijke) en ‘lage’ (rurale) cultuur tenietgedaan, en werden motieven uit de IJslandse folklore geschikte thema’s voor toneelstukken en kunst met een nationalistische boodschap.

Als de eerste generatie IJslandse romantici nog aan een ‘tijdelijke blindheid’ had geleden wat de Oudnoordse mythologie betreft, dan was deze blindheid grotendeels opgetrokken in de jaren veertig en in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw. In hun vreedzame campagne voor onafhankelijkheid van Denemarken was IJslandse nationalisten er veel aan gelegen om de buitenlandse toe-eigening van ‘hun erfgoed’ tegen te gaan, en het specifiek IJslandse karakter van de middeleeuwse literatuur te benadrukken. Alleen op die manier kon de wereld inzien dat IJsland een ‘cultuurnatie’ was en als zodanig, ondanks het kleine aantal inwoners, tot grootse prestaties in staat was en dus prima op eigen benen kon staan. De dichter Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal vond het volkomen onzinnig dat andere volkeren de *Poëtische Edda* als hun eigen Noordse/Germaanse erfgoed claimden, terwijl het toch zo evident was dat de mythen op IJsland ontstaan waren. Om deze bewering te staven haalde Benedikt de Oudnoordse scheppingsmythe aan, waarin het universum ontstaat door het samenkomen van een noordelijke ijswereld en het zuidelijke rijk van de vuurreuzen. Alleen een geest die bekend was met de geologie van IJsland, waar het samenspel van gletsjers en vulkanen het landschap vormt, kon een dergelijke mythe voortgebracht hebben. Met andere woorden: de mythologische vertellingen van de Edda’s waren pas *vrij laat* in de middeleeuwen, of in ieder geval *na* de kolonisatie van IJsland ontstaan, en dus niet het resultaat van een eeuwenoude mondelinge traditie waar andere Scandinavische en Germaanse volkeren aanspraak op konden maken. De Edda’s waren naar zijn mening onmiskenbaar het *exclusieve* culturele kapitaal van de IJslanders.

Benedikt was een groot liefhebber van de klassieke culturen van het zuiden, en zag dus niets in een grootscheepse vervanging van alle verwijzingen naar Griekse en Romeinse mythologie ten gunste van hun eddische equivalenten (zoals de Deense priester en filosoof N.F.S. Grundtvig propageerde in Denemarken). In zijn poëzie streefde Benedikt ernaar om de klassieke cultuur te importeren en te ver-IJslandsen (of te ‘ver-inheemsen’; een voorbeeld van de tweede functie van mythologie), bijvoorbeeld door de god Óðr (de mysterieuze echtgenoot van de godin Freyja) en Apollo samen te brengen, en zo een soort ‘nieuw Asgaard’ te scheppen dat dienst kon doen als een ideologische blauwdruk voor het IJsland van de toekomst: geworteld in de Oudnoordse cultuur, maar verrijkt en getemperd door de warme en humanistische kwaliteiten van het zuiden, gesymboliseerd door Apollo’s ‘bloem van het zuiden’ die Óðr als geschenk meebrengt voor zijn vrouw. De voorliefde die romantische nationalist (zowel op IJsland als daarbuiten) aan de dag legden voor *godinnen* (in plaats van hun ‘stoerdere’ mannelijke mede-Asgaardianen) is overigens opvallend, en lijkt te duiden op een behoefte om het Oudnoordse erfgoed van een vreedzamer, getemperd imago te voorzien, geschikt voor een eigentijdse beschaafde samenleving. Vooral Freyja, godin van de liefde, en Iðunn (Iduna), allegorie van eeuwig leven, vernieuwing en regeneratie, groeiden uit tot populaire emblemen van verschillende nationale bewegingen. Zij staan voor het *vrouwelijke* aspect van het moderne nationalisme: tradities en geborgenheid in een verheerlijkt verleden, ofwel het achteruitkijkende gezicht van Janus.

Benedikts nationalistische interpretaties van de Oudnoordse literatuur werd echter niet door alle IJslanders gedeeld. De dichter Grímur Thomsen was trots op zijn IJslandse komaf, maar was tevens aanhanger van het pan-Scandinavisme: een stroming die de culturele en politieke eenwording van alle Scandinavische landen nastreefde. Volgens Grímur hadden de

IJslanders geen alleenrecht op de Edda's, waarin de god Heimdallr wordt neergezet als de stamvader van *alle* Scandinavische volkeren. Lang voordat de mythen op IJsland werden vastgelegd hadden ze volgend Grímur in mondelinge vorm alle volkeren van Noord-Europa verenigd in één grote geloofs- en cultuurgemeenschap. Hij verwees naar de *Poëtische Edda* als de 'Koran van de Scandinaviërs' en zag in deze Oudnoordse eenheid een blauwdruk voor de toekomst. Grímur was een aanhanger van de dialectische geschiedfilosofie van Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, maar worstelde met diens negatieve opvattingen over de Edda's. In zijn essays over Oudnoordse cultuur en literatuur presenteerde Grímur de mythen als Scandinavië's grote bijdrage aan de wereldliteratuur, en benadrukte hij de rol die het oude heidendom (*Ásatrú*, of 'Asengeloof': een negentiende-eeuws neologisme) gespeeld heeft in het ontstaan van een sterke, onafhankelijk en heroïsche Noordse volksgeest. Het eddische wereldbeeld was volgens hem dus een *creatieve kracht* in de geschiedenis van het noorden, waaraan alle eigentijdse Scandinaviërs hun nationale karakter te danken hadden; een hypothese (mede beïnvloed door het modieuze klimatologische determinisme van Montesquieu) die later het geschiedsbeeld van de IJslanders zou beïnvloeden.

Dezelfde verhaalstof werd ook ingezet door dichters die de onafhankelijkheidsbeweging een nieuwe impuls wilden geven. Zo was Gísli Brynjúlfsson bijzonder geïnteresseerd in alle politieke omwentelingen die Europa doormaakte in de negentiende eeuw, en bovenal in de Hongaarse Revolutie van 1848-9. Gísli geloofde dat de brave IJslanders behoefte hadden aan een soortgelijke revolutionaire bevlogenheid, en schreef daarom een reeks gedichten waarin hij de opstand der Hongaren beschreef aan de hand van de mythologische beeldspraak uit de Edda's. De Oudnoordse dondergod Þórr was volgens Gísli gebaseerd op de historische figuur Attila de Hun, en daarom in wezen een personificatie van het Hongaarse volk. In het gedicht worden de kwaadaardige Russen voorgesteld als de reuzen die Þórr de reuzendoder op zijn vele reizen bevecht met zijn bovennatuurlijke hamer Mjólnir. In Gísli's uitroep "Omhoog met Mjólnir" is dit instrument symbool geworden van de revolutie, en van de overwinning van het goede op het kwade. In mijn analyse van dit vertoog verwijs ik naar James Wertschs theorie van 'narratieve sjablonen' (narrative templates) om aan te tonen hoe het rhetorische gebruik van mythologische motieven en sjablonen (gekenmerkt door een scherpe tegenstelling tussen goed en kwaad) de boodschap van de auteur versterkt en bijna vanzelfsprekend juist maakt, verheven boven de gebruikelijke eisen van rationele argumentatie. Door de Hongaarse Revolutie in Oudnoordse termen te beschrijven heeft Gísli geprobeerd de verwantschap tussen beide volkeren te benadrukken, en zo de revolutie te importeren. Daarmee vormen zijn 'Hongaarse gedichten' een goed voorbeeld van de vierde, verbindende functie van mythologie, namelijk 'associatie'. Hoewel er van een IJslandse revolutie geen sprake is geweest, wordt wel beweerd dat deze opruiende gedichten hebben bijgedragen aan de populariteit van de nationale beweging en haar leider, Jón Sigurðsson.

Rond de eeuwwisseling, en in de eerste decennia van de twintigste eeuw bereikte IJslands nationale cultuur het derde stadium van Hrochs verklarende model, waarin het nationale denken grote massa's kon mobiliseren en verwijzingen naar de nationale identiteit alomtegenwoordig werden in de publieke ruimte. In dit tijdsgewricht behaalde de nationale beweging enige successen ('Home Rule' in 1904, en uiteindelijk in 1918 onafhankelijkheid), en het zelfverzekerde triomfalisme dat hiermee gepaard ging kleurde de interpretatie *van*, en de omgang *met* de Oudnoordse literatuur. IJslands unieke positie als bakermat van de saga's en Edda's werd (in navolging van Benedikt Gröndal) in het academische vertoog steeds sterker benadrukt, ondermeer door de filoloog Björn M. Ólsen: een van de grondleggers en de eerste rector van de Universiteit van IJsland (opgericht in 1911). Rond 1900 maakte het veelzijdige, Boheemse dichter/geleerde-type van de negentiende eeuw plaats voor de professionele, 'objectieve' academicus, en werd de toon van de IJslandse toe-eigening van de

Edda's wetenschappelijker. In dit kader heb ik het verhitte debat over de historische oorsprong van (en in het verlengde daarvan de nationale *zeggenschap* over) de eddische gedichten geanalyseerd, en de argumenten van de twee grootste tegenstanders in dit debat (Björn M. Ólsen en Finnur Jónsson) uitgebreid tegen het licht gehouden. Finnur was van mening dat het overgrote merendeel van de verzen van de Edda niet op IJsland ontstaan was, en dat de IJslanders ze alleen opgetekend hadden, enkele eeuwen nadat hun voorouders ze met zich mee brachten naar het eiland. Deze visie kwam overeen met die van de zogenaamde 'Noorse school', die de continentaal-Scandinavische oorsprong van het materiaal benadrukte en zo het culturele kapitaal dat erin beslagen lag kon opeisen voor Noorwegen.

Het debat tussen de twee heren spon zich uit over een reeks tijdschriftpublicaties, waarin de toon steeds verder verhardde. Uiteindelijk beschuldigde Björn zijn tegenstander ervan niet 'IJslands genoeg' te zijn om de ware betekenis en oorsprong van de verzen te kunnen doorgronden; hij had het eiland reeds op jonge leeftijd verlaten, en had dus geen weet van het landschap en van de volkscultuur. Volgens Björn vormde het nationale karakter (en de mate van verbondenheid aan het vaderland) dus een epistemologische factor, en een geldig argument in een discussie over middeleeuwse literatuur. Zijn nationale monopolisering van de Oudnoordse mythen werd aangewakkerd door het politieke klimaat van de vroege twintigste eeuw, en vormde het fundament van wat uit zou groeien tot de 'IJslandse school', die de IJslandse benadering van de Oudnoordse literatuur gedurende de hele twintigste eeuw zou bepalen. Michel Foucault noemde teksten op de eerste plaats 'objecten van toe-eigening', of 'vormen van eigendom', en dit filologische vertoog over de Edda's lijkt een goede illustratie van deze these. Maar Björns nationalisering van de mythen reikte veel verder dan de academische wereld; hij gaf zelf vorm aan het winterfestival *þorrablót*: een 'invented tradition' die hij in verband bracht met de god Þórr, en zodoende kon presenteren als een *oeroude* traditie (een goed voorbeeld dus van de eerste functie van mythologie: 'primordialisering'). Ook spoorde Björn IJslandse kunstenaars aan om inspiratie te putten uit de grote beeldenrijkdom van de eddische mythologie (net als Finnur Magnússon bijna een eeuw eerder), om zo 'nationale kunst' te scheppen. Maar in tegenstelling tot Finnur Magnússon bedoelde hij met die term *IJslandse* kunst, niet Scandinavische kunst.

Een andere academische discipline die in de vroege twintigste eeuw tot bloei kwam was de geschiedkunde, en ook hierin werd het heidense verleden door een nationalistische lens bekeken. Grímur Thomsens concept van *Ásatrú* als een 'creatieve kracht' in de Scandinavische geschiedenis vinden we ook terug in de populaire geschiedschrijving van deze periode, waarin het pre-christelijke heidendom niet langer als louter 'spirituele duisternis' werd afgedaan. De Oudnoordse godenwereld vormde een integraal onderdeel van het IJslandse volkskarakter, gevormd door een onvergeeflijk klimaat en ruwe levensomstandigheden. De meest invloedrijke en originele IJslandse historicus in deze periode was Jón J. Aðils, die in zijn publieke lezingen (gefinancierd door het IJslandse parlement) en populaire publicaties een nationaal narratief uitdroeg waarin (politieke) onafhankelijkheid en culturele bloei aan elkaar gekoppeld werden. Het gouden tijdperk van de IJslandse 'natie' was in zijn ogen de periode tussen de oprichting van het parlement (930) en de onderwerping aan Noorwegen (1262); de periode waarin het land *vrij* was en het unieke IJslandse volkskarakter vorm kreeg. Deze ideologische lezing van het verleden werd in de daaropvolgende decennia gecanoniseerd en ingeklonken in schoolboeken en tal van populaire publicaties. Volgens Jón lag het onderscheid tussen IJsland en de andere Noordse naties in de grote Ierse invloed op het eiland (vooral in de vorm van Keltische slaven die de Vikingen met zich meebrachten), en kon uit het samenvloeien van deze twee culturen het unieke karakter van IJslands middeleeuwse literatuur verklaard worden. Ook in religieus opzicht zag Jón een sterke overeenkomst tussen IJsland en Ierland; net zoals de kerstening van de Ieren een soepele en natuurlijke transitie was geweest (waarin druïden zonder problemen de rol van

priester op zich namen), was ook de bekering van IJsland (enkele eeuwen later) een probleemloos proces geweest, waarin de authentieke, *nationale* spiritualiteit van het volk (die zich zowel in heidense als in christelijke vormen liet uitdrukken) niet verloren was gegaan.

In deze originele interpretatie van het heidendom werden Jóns nationalistische geschiedsbeeld en diens persoonlijke spirituele overtuigingen onlosmakelijk met elkaar vervlochten; als aanhanger van de nieuwe spirituele stroming der theosofie (die zich in 1912 ook op IJsland vestigde) was hij ervan overtuigd dat ‘de absolute waarheid’ zich niet in één religie liet vangen, en dus zowel in heidendom als christendom uitgedrukt kon worden. Jón was niet de enige IJslander die zich door dit nieuwe gedachtegoed liet inspireren; IJslands beroemdste beeldhouwer van de twintigste eeuw, Einar Jónsson, die in zijn persoonlijke werken brak met het klassieke naturalisme, ontwikkelde een eigen symbolische beeldtaal waarin mystieke concepten een centrale rol speelden. Hierin verbond hij elementen uit de Edda’s en IJslandse volksoverleveringen aan het nationale vertoog van zijn tijd, en aan esoterische concepten uit het christendom en de Oosterse filosofie. Zijn cultivering van mythologische motieven was uiterst psychologisch en mystiek, en resoneerde niet altijd met de algemene opvattingen van de conservatieve IJslandse samenleving. Deze tegenstelling kwam ondermeer naar voren in het publieke debat omtrent Einars controversiële standbeeld van Ingólfur Arnarson, de ‘eerste IJslander’ en grondlegger van Reykjavík. De Nietzscheaanse, heidense idealen die Einar met deze pionier (en met de kolonisatie van IJsland) in verband bracht werden als schokkend en onjuist ervaren door het culturele establishment, dat Ingólfur liever voorstelde als een vrome ‘proto-christen’ die in zijn lovenswaardige loyaliteit aan Þórr christelijke kwaliteiten aan de dag legde. Kortom: een heiden waar de protestantse IJslander zich mee kon identificeren. Net zoals de theosoof Sigurður Kristófer, die het Asengeloof van de voorouders vanuit theosofisch perspectief probeerde te verklaren, gebruikte Einar de bekende mythen om exotische, onbekende concepten, zoals karma en reïncarnatie, te introduceren bij het IJslandse publiek. Deze neiging naar culturele assimilatie bewoog Sigurður er zelfs toe zijn IJslandse vertaling van de *Bhagavad Gita* aan de man te brengen als de ‘*Hávamál* (‘het lied van de Hoge’: een eddisch gedicht) van India’. Middels deze strategie wist hij zowel exotisch materiaal te ver-IJslandsen als nationaal erfgoed te ‘universaliseren’ (de derde functie van mythologie).

Deze metafysische receptie van de mythen is echter nooit de norm geworden, en verschilde sterk van de meer oppervlakkige cultivering van mythologische motieven (als een soort nationaal referentiekader van symbolen en metaforen) in de moderne IJslandse cultuur. De goden en godinnen werden nu grootschalig ingezet als emblemen van nationale vooruitgang en welvaart, en het vernoemen van bedrijven en ondernemingen, van schepen, straten, gebouwen en tijdschriften naar toepasselijke godheden werd bijna vanzelfsprekend en cliché in de vroege twintigste eeuw. Zelfs voor IJslanders die nog nooit een vers uit de *Poëtische Edda* gelezen hadden waren de mythen verweven met de textuur van de openbare ruimte waarin zij dagelijks bewogen. Ze waren alomtegenwoordig, als “het omringende achtergrondgeluid van de eigentijdse natie” (om Joep Leerssens beschrijving van ‘banaal nationalisme’ aan te halen). Deze openbare cultivering van de Edda’s had met levensbeschouwelijke overwegingen niets van doen, en hing samen met de razendsnelle ontwikkeling van een stedelijke cultuur in Reykjavík, dat zich ontpopte als ’s lands industriële en economische hart. Het ontstond een stedelijke publieke ruimte, genationaliseerd door heidense straatnamen (er ontstond zelfs een heuse ‘godenwijk’, waarin verhaallijnen uit de Edda’s weerspiegeld werden in het stratenplan) en heidense logo’s (bijvoorbeeld Þórshamer Mjöltnir) ging hand in hand met de opkomst van eddische voornamen (zoals Óðin en Baldur) die voorheen, ook in de pre-christelijke tijd, nooit als zodanig in gebruik waren geweest. Deze ontwikkelingen zijn niet uniek voor IJsland, en kregen veelal vorm in navolging van soortgelijke ontwikkelingen in de andere Scandinavische landen.

Deze vormen van publieke cultivering maakten van de goden en godinnen een *banaal* onderdeel van het alledaagse leven in de stad, en vormen het sluitstuk van een ontwikkeling die een eeuw eerder begon met Finnur Magnússons oproep aan alle IJslanders om zich te bezinnen op hun Oudnoordse erfgoed. Als symbolen van 'IJslandsheid' (*Icelandicness*) vervulden de mythen ook een belangrijke functie in de directe confrontatie met 'de ander', bijvoorbeeld binnen de gemeenschap van IJslandse kolonisten die neerstreek in een gebied nabij het Manitobameer in Canada, dat bekend werd onder de naam 'Nieuw IJsland'. De immigranten stelden het harde IJslandse bestaan dat ze achter zich lieten gelijk aan de apocalyptische 'Godenschemering' (*Ragnarök*) van de Oudnoordse mythologie, en drukten hun hoop op een betere toekomst en een nieuw begin uit in de naam van hun eerste nederzetting: *Gimli*, de schitterende zaal van de geliefde god Baldr, symbool van regeneratie en van een nieuwe wereld na de ondergang van de oude. De Canadese IJslanders schiepen voor zichzelf een nieuw IJsland voorbij de verschrikkingen van *Ragnarök*: net zozeer geworteld in het Oudnoordse verleden maar tegelijkertijd gericht op een nieuw gouden tijdperk. Dit gebruik van mythologische thema's in de Nieuwe Wereld kan gezien worden als een *seculiere* tegenhanger van de Bijbelse post-apocalyptische sentimenten van kolonisten uit andere delen van Europa, en werd door de IJslandse kolonisten nooit ervaren als in strijd met hun Lutherse overtuigingen. In de meeste gevallen dienden toespelingen op dit heidense erfgoed geen ander doel dan het versterken van het IJslandse saamhorigheidsgevoel in den vreemde, en de afgrenzing van het eigene ten overstaan van alle 'anderen' waardoor de IJslanders hier omringd werden ('differentiatie': de vijfde functie van mythologie).

In de epiloog van dit boek heb ik aangetoond dat de nationale cultivering van de Oudnoordse mythen allerm minst een afgesloten hoofdstuk vormt, en dat de lange nasleep van het romantische (en banale) nationalisme nog lang niet ten einde is. De veelzijdigheid, narratieve dynamiek en symbolische zeggingskracht van de mythen maakt het genre te allen tijde retorisch inzetbaar en altijd actueel, in welke historische context dan ook. In dat opzicht verschilt de moderne functionalisering van de mythen ook niet fundamenteel van hun maatschappelijke functionalisering in voorgaande eeuwen, waardoor het gebruikelijke onderscheid tussen de 'oorspronkelijke mythen' (de middeleeuwse bronnen) en hun latere 'receptiegeschiedenis' onhoudbaar wordt. *Oorspronkelijke* mythen zijn er nooit geweest, en alle versies die overgeleverd zijn (middeleeuws of modern) maken deel uit van hetzelfde mythologische spel, waarin een groot arsenaal aan mythen continú in nieuwe constellaties wordt gepresenteerd en zodoende toegespitst op actuele thema's en kwesties.

In dit onderzoek heb ik deze veelzijdigheid zo systematisch mogelijk in kaart gebracht door vijf verschillende retorische functies van mythologie te formuleren, en deze uitgebreid te analyseren in de context van IJslands nationale cultuur. Ik heb aangetoond dat mythologie een bijzondere rol speelt in de grootschalige, nationalistische herinterpretatie van de Oudnoordse cultuur, omdat de verhalen over goden en godinnen zich afspelen *buiten* de tijd, in een mythische tijd voorbij de tijd, en in een wereld voorbij onze fysieke realiteit. Omdat de mythen losgezongen zijn van plaats en tijd hebben ze een totaal ander karakter dan de andere Oudnoordse genres, vooral de *Íslendingasögur*, en om die reden vervullen de mythen en de saga's twee fundamenteel verschillende functies in IJslands nationale vertoog. Om terug te keren naar de metafoer van de god Janus met zijn twee gezichten; de historisch geïnspireerde narratieven (saga's) werden vooral gemobiliseerd door nationalisten om het verleden te verheerlijken en vergane glorie in herinnering te brengen (het achteruitkijkende gezicht), terwijl de mythen in hun tijdloosheid juist een brug konden slaan naar de toekomst, naar een nieuw begin (het vooruitkijkende gezicht): een brug tussen het gouden tijdperk van weleer en een nieuw gouden tijdperk dat nog in het verschiet ligt. In het cyclische wereldbeeld van de mythen (gouden oertijd – verval – ondergang – wedergeboorte) ligt altijd een belofte besloten voor de toekomst, waar politieke facties en ideologieën van uiteenlopende plumeau elk op

hun eigen manier mee aan de haal zijn gegaan. Om die reden worden de mythen onophoudelijk aangepast, herverteld en gerecycled; een voortdurend proces dat we als de *ware* appel van Iðunn kunnen duiden, die de goden eeuwig jong houdt.





