Opening Perspectives on Folklore and Old Norse Mythology

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This volume is organized around an intersection of the slippery concepts of *folklore* and *mythology* in combination with *Old Norse*. The term *Old Norse* properly refers to a group of historical language forms characterizing a phase in the history of North Germanic, although where this is delineated on a chronology varies.[1] The term is metonymically applied to the cultures of speakers of the respective language forms. The transposed usage for culture (often simplified to *Norse*) is well-established and untethered from discussions of how the language phase should be defined and dated. It is instead a heuristic category for addressing Scandinavian-speaking cultures from roughly the cultural changes that are linked with the beginning of the Viking Age (usually dated ca. 800–1050), which has long been a nexus of research interest, through the majority of important medieval vernacular written sources with which researchers are concerned. Thus *Old Norse* usually covers everything from the eighth or ninth through at least the thirteenth, often the fourteenth, and sometimes the fifteenth century. The terms *folklore* and *mythology* are notoriously elusive. The words are so commonplace that they easily get taken for granted as meaning one thing or another, yet the concepts are difficult to pin down. Both as phenomena and in their definition as scientific concepts, folklore and mythology have been approached in different and sometimes incompatible ways throughout the history of scholarship and also in popular discussion. Approaches up through the present day have followed a variety of research interests, yet they normally build on previous scholarship and discussions that have spanned across disciplines. These factors make the possible ways of linking these concepts manifold, varying sometimes considerably by a scholar's research background, interests, and approach.

The chapters of the present book are united by current trajectories of interest in connecting mythology and folklore in the field of Old Norse studies. They also illustrate that these trajectories are not characterized by a

1 Accessibly illustrated in Schalin 2018: 38, Table 1; see also Wiegland 2002.

programmatic agenda for how either mythology or folklore should be defined in the field. The contributors have backgrounds in diverse disciplines and national scholarships, which shape their respective interests and concerns, how they conceive folklore and mythology, respectively, and how they relate the two. The present introduction is intended to help the reader get to grips with this diversity by generally introducing the concepts of folklore and mythology and ways they have been defined, with emphasis on how they have been related to one another, followed by a brief look at how they have been conceived and related across the history of Old Norse studies.

What Is Folklore?

The concept of folklore emerged in the era of National Romanticism, with its beginnings in the Enlightenment. In educated discussion, Classical Latin and Greek ideas tyrannized views on poetics and aesthetic standards until they were overthrown by Robert Lowth. Lowth (1753) argued that the Hebrew Bible was poetry – but poetry based on the principles of the Ancient Hebrew language and culture, which could not be recognized and appreciated if analyzed as though it were Greek or Latin. Moreover, since poetry was seen as a product of divine inspiration, Biblical poetry had to be considered the best poetry, because the Hebrews were the only ones who got religion right. Whatever we may think of Lowth's arguments today, they became a springboard for valorizing traditions of other cultures.

Johann Gottfried von Herder was considerably influenced by Lowth, even if he argued hotly against some features of Lowth's model of the origin of Hebrew poetry (Baildam 1999: 57–58). Herder theorized that language defines the way that we think and perceive the world and thus that there is a fundamental difference between the worldviews of different language groups and their respective cultures. Lowth's work provided a platform for considering a culture's traditions on their own terms, focusing on their aesthetics as reflecting the spiritual world and thinking of the respective people. Herder was also influenced by Giambattista Vico's pioneering developments toward a theory surrounding the history of mentalities (Hutton 1992; 1996: 539–540). According to Herder, the language and character of an ethnos (= nation) evolved in interaction with the people's surroundings, and thus their original, defining language and character was altered under external influence. In order to understand the real character of a people (*Volk*), it was therefore necessary to look back to its ancient history for evidence of its original state.

In search of the essence of a German national character, Herder found the German language at its purest in contemporary folk songs, a number of

which he had published, along with those of other peoples (see Herder 1846). He observed that both the language and the contents of the songs reflected circumstances of bygone eras from which they derived (Wilson 1973: 826–827; see also Liamin 2018). Herder's ideas and the discussions of which they were a part enabled a new type of cultural capital: traditions were documented and repackaged, reified into consumable texts, and commodified as objects that could be collectively owned as the heritage of a nation. These activities took place alongside and conjoined with more complex and sophisticated philological projects that both reconstructed and validated traditions of the past, exemplified by Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835). Representatives of modern, educated societies were making objects out of culture that was historically or socially "other", transforming it into something significant for their own contemporary audiences (Anttonen 2005).

The term *folklore* was coined by William Thoms in 1846 ("Folk-Lore"). He conceived folklore not only as an object of research but also as a "branch of Archaeological study" (1850: 223), hoping that some "James Grimm shall arise who shall do [the same as Jacob Grimm] for the Mythology of the British Islands" (1946 [1846]: 361; see also Emrich 1946; Roper 2008). During the nineteenth century, the "lore" of a "folk" referred first and foremost to European oral traditions that could be documented from, ideally, people whose ways of life had not been significantly impacted by literacy, urbanization, and industrialization. Folklore was widely seen as a type of cultural relic, something belonging to the past that could be documented in the present. This approach precipitated into Edward B. Tylor's "doctrine of survival in culture". Tylor theorized a "survival" from an anthropological perspective as a sort of anachronism in a society that has become dislocated from a more "primitive" cultural state to which it naturally belonged. The boundaries of what was or was not folklore varied. In the Nordic countries, folklore included ballads and other forms of oral poetry, and it was tightly linked to, or directly included, mythology. Conversely, in British scholarship, song traditions became studied separately from folklore as predominantly comprised of storytelling, customs, and sayings (Dorson 1961). British scholars also distinguished folklore from mythology, which would not qualify as a "survival" until it became divorced from religion (Gomme 1885). The definition of folklore as dislocated "survivals" equally excluded folklore from "primitive" societies, in which traditions would still be in their natural environment (Spence 1921: ch. 8). Some of these scholars were nevertheless driven by comparative methodologies to include traditions found in "primitive" cultures under the aegis of "folklore" even while upholding Thoms' characterization of

folklore as an archaeology of cultural artefacts (Lang 1884).[2] Defining folklore in terms of "survivals" was incompatible with the direction taken by the study of folklore in North America, where the research of Native American traditions was a priority (Newell 1888; Mason 1891). The exclusion of traditions found in contemporary "primitive" cultures was eventually rejected more widely as "ebenso wenig richtig wie nötig" ('just as little correct as necessary') (Krohn 1926: 25n.1; see also Jacobs 1892), yet folklore continued to be conceived as "other" from the perspective of modern societies. As modernization marched forward and the genres customarily identified as folklore disappeared or were "corrupted" through literacy, usage of the word *folklore* began to change, shifting from European traditions that *could be* documented to European traditions that *had been* documented and traditions that *could still be* documented elsewhere.

Significant changes in conceptions of folklore only advanced with the reflexive considerations carried by Postmodernism. The presumption of folklore as "other" was entangled with ideologies of modernity. Literacy, scientific epistemologies, and institutionally administrated knowledge or practices were treated as emblematic of modernity, which made their opposites – orality, non-scientific thinking, and socially-mediated knowledge and practices – emblematic of otherness, characterizing the "folk" and "primitive" societies. Although the contrast may seem natural and intuitive with a basis in empirical reality, ideologies of modernity polarized these differences. Features emblematic of modernity such as literacy or scientific rationale were made invisible among the "folk", while orality and non-scientific thinking were correspondingly invisible in modern milieux.[3] Questioning the assumptions behind these polarized contrasts led to recognizing folklore as something also found in contemporary modern cultures, which demanded a fundamental rethinking of the concept.[4] At roughly the same time, changing technologies made audio and then video recording practical. These facilitated the documentation of performances in real time and in wide-ranging situations rather than in often interruptive processes of dictation for manual transcription. They alleviated

2 On the intimate and evolving relationship between the study of folklore and colonialism, see Naithani 2010.

3 On ideologies of difference, see Gal & Irvine 2019.

4 Alan Dundes' article "Who Are the Folk?" (1980 [1977]) – where the answer to the eponymous question is "We are!" – is sometimes treated as iconic of this change. However, the same view is found already as the concept of folklore was taking shape in North American scholarship most of a century earlier (Mason 1891). The North American perspective enabled theorizing that folklore will commonly spread from more advanced to less advanced societies rather than the reverse, imagining modern societies as the apex of the dissemination of folklore rather than outside of it (Newell 1895).

researchers' need to focus on the verbal text to ensure that it was accurately recorded, and the new types of data made it much more feasible to analyze and compare non-linguistic features of performance. The changing technologies were thus instrumental in the advance to consider folklore as more than text to be captured on a page (Katajamäki & Lukin 2013; see also Fine 1984). These developments combined with the shift of interest to what has been called the performance-oriented turn, bringing into focus folklore as practice by individuals as agents in situations and with intentions rather than simply being passive mediators of traditions (e.g. Abrahams 1968; Ben Amos & Goldstein 1975; Bauman 1984 [1975]). The impacts on ideas about folklore as an object of research were transformative (Frog 2013), evolving especially across the last decades of the twentieth century.

Conceptions of folklore continue to vary, but they can be viewed in relation to three basic criteria, beginning with:

1. *Folklore is a category of knowledge or competence.*

Earlier approaches to folklore focused on the "lore" as knowledge, both as "beliefs" and as knowledge of repeatable arrangements of signs – "things" made of language (songs, proverbs), mediated through language (stories) or enacted (rituals) – of which different examples could be compared as variations of "the same thing". More variable traditions were often also acknowledged as folklore, but they tended to remain peripheral because traditions were viewed through the recorded products and such traditions did not yield material conducive to text-centered comparisons. The performance-oriented turn extended knowledge of "things" to incorporate competence in a broader traditional system, such as in a form of oral poetry or a system of rite techniques. Broadening the view was conjoined with a shift in attention from texts as products to competencies and processes, bringing the systems of verbal art or practices into focus.

Well into the twentieth century, the "lore" of folklore was defined negatively in relation to modern knowledge, which is at the root of a second criterion:

2. *Folklore is transmitted through social networks without institutional* administration.

Folklore was initially characterized as uneducated and oral in contrast to modern education and literacy. Today, oral, written, and electronic media are recognized as channels of communication. Folklore is no longer conceived as distinguished by channel but rather by a process of communication that allows for negotiation or contestation rather than being unilaterally imposed

and regulated either by an external administration or by a textual form conceded as a non-negotiable authority.

As a rule of thumb, *folklore is characterized by variation*, which has been included in many more recent definitions (e.g. Honko 2013 [1991]: 33–37). However, variation *per se* does not define something as folklore; it is as an outcome of social transmission. The types and degrees of variation are linked to the medium, such as oral, written, or electronic. For instance, variation in skaldic *dróttkvætt* verse as a mode of communication will be different than in third-person *fornyrðislag* narrative poetry, dialogic *ljóðaháttr* poetry, or prose. Any of these may be affected again by whether it is "performed" with its conventional voicing and rhythm, dictated, manually rendered through writing, and so on. However, the human factor is also significant: social conventions customarily lead to avoiding or minimizing variation for some things while remaining indifferent to variation in others, and particular individuals may subscribe to these conventions or engage with them in idiosyncratic ways.[5]

When defining the concept, the first two criteria are often linked to the etymology of the term as a compound of *folk* and *lore*, although such connections should be considered as using etymology as a thinking tool or as a rhetorical instrument, insofar as etymology does not define the concept as it operates today. Alone, the two criteria above encompass a spectrum of culture transmitted outside of institutionalized learning, including everything from our first language to using toilet paper. Any distinct practice or knowledge about the world ("belief") qualified by these two criteria can be called a *tradition*, which is sometimes treated as synonymous with folklore. More commonly, however, folklore is qualified by one or two additional criteria:

3. *Folklore is distinguished by the role of imagination or aesthetics.*

Aesthetics and/or imagination distinguish poetry from language, storytelling from a shopping list, and knowledge of how to deal with forest spirits from how to ride a horse. This third criterion narrows the range of things encompassed, but it includes, for example, folk music, traditional cuisine, and costume alongside oral poetry, taboos, and stories of the creation of the world. Such breadth is how folklore is commonly understood in North American

5 Anna-Leena Siikala describes differences in how individual performers engage with a tradition as a *tradition orientation* (1990: ch. 5, on legend traditions; in oral poetry, see also Harvilahti 1992: 95–96). She also observes that performers may align with social patterns of engagement with tradition that impact on variation as *performer habitus* or *singer habitus* (2002b). Linda Dégh describes individual performers who deviate markedly from such conventions as *form breakers* (1995: 44–45).

research today, and it is a view that has spread quite widely. This type of definition will often treat folklore and tradition as synonymous.

The conception of folklore that developed in the Nordic and Baltic countries and more broadly through the Folklore Fellows' international network is more narrowly concerned with traditions linked to verbal art, narrative, rituals, and beliefs, a view that remains no less widespread.[6] Pinning this down as a clear and concise criterion has challenged scholars for a century (cf. Krohn 1926: 16–25), but may be described as:

4. *Folklore is constituted of signs that communicate meaning or model the world.*

This criterion is straightforward for traditions of oral poetry, which is made up of linguistic signs. In stories and so-called belief traditions, images and motifs are signs communicated through language or through discourse more generally, whether they are imagined as belonging exclusively to a narrated world or to the past, or the image or motif is a model for imagining something in the contemporary world, like what lightning is and why it strikes. Understood in this way, taboos, for instance, are based on avoiding the actualization of a motif as experience, such as being struck by lightning, while rituals are based on actualizing corresponding signs with predicted outcomes. This criterion distinguishes folklore from traditions of music, costume, cuisine, and so on, which was a significant concern in the early twentieth century, when disciplines were being defined in relation to one another. This is not to deny that different categories of tradition may have complex networks of relations or, for example, that some forms of oral poetry are fully integrated with music by singing and/or accompaniment. The fourth criterion simply offers a means of categorically distinguishing folklore from folk music, handicrafts, and so on.

What is Mythology?

Although the words *myth* and *mythology* are commonly traced back to Classical Greek *muthos* ('(untrue) story') and *muthologia* ('storytelling, a telling of a story, legendary lore; (untrue) story'), the concepts they refer to are modern. The Latinized form and usage of Greek *mythos* were taken up during

6 How folklore is defined today is further complicated in national scholarships by the fact that it was common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to take up the concept of folklore that was circulating internationally but identify it with a vernacular term that might mean something quite different with interpreted literally, like Swedish *folkliv* (literally 'folk life') or Finnish *kansanrunous* (literally 'folk poetry'). The concept could later be redefined through the literal meaning of the term or become instead identified with a vernacular word with a broader meaning translating as 'tradition'.

the Enlightenment and employed as tools for talking about stories linked to non-Christian religions. Lowth's success in shaking Biblical Hebrew free from Classical models was facilitated by the religious authority of the biblical texts. Greek and Roman mythology had been assimilated into learned Christian discussion more or less from the outset, leaving their connotations of paganism in the shadow of valorized literature, while Christian exegesis drew heavily on the tools of interpretation that Classical authors provided (Harran 2018). "Paganism" remained a stigma on the pre-Christian past of other European languages. By the Enlightenment, however, that past had already become remote. Lowth paved the way to reconceptualize poetic language, stories, and symbolic worlds of different traditions on their own *aesthetic and ideological* terms, divorcing them from controversial religious beliefs. Much as Snorri Sturluson had proposed over five centuries earlier, if modern readers did not believe in pagan gods or fantastic accounts of the origin of the world, the threat of these traditions to Christian faith was diffused and they could be appreciated as beautiful and compelling – providing a reservoir of symbols and stories on which modern nations could reflect as manifestations of the voice of a people. As Herder put it:

> Ueberhaupt kann man nicht zu viel thun, um das blos Fabelhafte in der Mythologie zu zerstören; unter solchem Schein, als Aberglaube, Lüge, Vorurtheil hergebetet, ist sie unerträglich. Aber als Poesie, als Kunst, als Nationaldenkart, als Phänomenon des Menschlichen Geistes, in ihren Gründen und Folgen studirt: da ist sie groß, göttlich, lehrend!
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> Herder 1878 [1769]: 380

> Altogether one cannot do too much to destroy what is merely fabulous in mythology; in such light, prattled as superstition, lies, prejudice, it is intolerable. But as poetry, as art, as a nation's mode of thought, as a phenomenon of the human spirit: there it is great, divine, instructive!

From the outset, the terms *myth* and *mythology* were encoded with an epistemological evaluation as "false knowledge", contrasted variously with Christian and scientific knowledge. *Myth* remained strongly linked to stories through the nineteenth century. By the eighteenth century, *mythologia* was predominantly used in Latin for "a collection of *mythoi*" as a written work. With the new usage of *myth*, *mythology* became a collective term for the respective stories of a particular ethnos (= nation). In the nineteenth century, *mythology* was extended from including stories proper to encompass all supernatural agents and forces, the cosmology, cosmogony, and eschatology

that were linked to an ethnic religion (e.g. Grimm J. 1835; Castrén 1853).[7] Mythology was tightly bound up with other concepts with which it linked, overlapped, or contrasted, such as: *ritual*, usually describing any recurrent procedure that people do with particular aims in connection with a religion; *superstition*, referring to a false belief often not connected with religion or only seen as a "survival" of mythology that had become divorced from religion; *magic*, viewed as something people do to affect the world and evaluated as religiously other from the perspective of the Church and/or epistemologically other from the perspective of modern science. The term *myth* remained linked to stories, gradually developing a discussion around the distinctions and relations of myths, legends, and *Märchen* or fairytales.

In the twentieth century, discussions of myth rapidly diversified, as did the ways it was conceived and defined. Alongside use of *myth* to refer to stories in non-Christian religions, it became widely used for any socially circulating false belief about the world or things in it. The term often remained loosely defined and interpreted through whichever way it was used in a particular discussion. Some interpretive frameworks were nevertheless directly bound up to theories of what mythology is and how it emerges. Discussions developed across a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, modern literature studies, and so on, in addition to discussions in philology, religious studies, anthropology, and folklore studies. The diversification in ways of conceiving and defining myth and mythology was nurtured by two key factors. First, the overlap of interests in many of the disciplinary discussions was limited, reducing the dialogue between them. Second, research on mythology was never sufficiently distinguished to receive institutionally recognized status as a discipline. Rather than taking shape as a unified field, mythology was something considered to exist in the world that was addressed in a variety of different research.

Although Friedrich Max Müller's approach is early in the development of these discussions, it is illustrative of how theories penetrate into definitions. The eras of the Enlightenment and Romanticism were distinguished by theories of cultural development. Recognizing that cultures of the past might differ considerably in their thinking from cultures of the present required

7 This broader concept is closer to how authors like Snorri Sturluson link stories about gods to beliefs, rituals, and religion, but tend to do so within a wider general category of information about gods, cosmology, cosmogony, and eschatology. The differences are that the modern concept identifies mythology as an abstract category that can be found in any ethnic culture and that religious tensions are absent. Consequently, modern discussions developed approaches to mythology on principles of analogy of what was discussed as mythology in different cultures, whereas medieval authors presumably began from discourses on paganism linked to the particular culture.

postulating some type of framework for interpreting the thinking of cultures which were being reconstructed behind puzzling written sources and ambiguous archaeological finds. Philosophers such as David Hume (1757: 10) had argued that religion's ultimate origins are rooted in the combination of fear and curiosity as early human beings sought to understand the world and their situation in it. Müller synthesized ideas of primitive thinking with comparative linguistics, producing a theory about the origin of mythology through what he famously described as a "disease of language" (Müller 1873: 56n).[8] There are numerous examples of theonyms being identical to common nouns, making a relationship between the god and the phenomenon transparent, while others start off as identical and become distinguished over time, like *Þórr*, which etymologically means 'thunder', although the common noun used for the phenomenon changed in Scandinavian languages. Müller extended this model to descriptions of events and plots in a mythology, postulating that primitive people used language to describe phenomena in the world, but that these connections became obscured by inevitable processes of change affecting language. His approach led, for example, to interpreting Greek descriptions of the relationship between Apollo and Daphne as originally accounting for how the day overcomes twilight every morning (Müller 1856: 92–93; Konaris 2016: 119–123). In Müller's theory, the identification of something as a myth implicitly presumed the process of its origin, which needed only to be reconstructed through the aid of etymology. Theories about mythology and the definitions of *myth* and *mythology* are never independent, even if certain central features remain fairly stable, interpreted in relation to different points of focus.

In spite of differences in emphasis, two key criteria around which myth is conceived have generally remained central up through the present. One, grounded in the etymology of the term, is that a myth is a type of story, while the other characterizes myth as a model of knowing for understanding the world, interpreting experience, or as a model of behaviour and action. Definition as a type of story was long dominant, yet what qualifies a story as a myth has varied considerably. It could be a current relationship to "belief", the story's explanation of something in nature (Tylor 1871) or reflection of "primitive science" (e.g. Gomme 1906), a historical relationship to religion or ritual (Smith 1889; see also Segal 2017), its relationship to human psychology (Jung 1998 [1945]; see also Segal 2013), the aesthetic principles on which it operates (Frye 1957), and so on and so forth. The criterion of story has often

8 On Müller's theory, see also Musolff 2016; for criticism of the theory, see e.g. Yelle 2013: 33–70.

been combined with the criterion of myth providing some sort of model for knowing and understanding. However, emphasis on the relationship between mythology and a "reality lived" (Malinowski 1948 [1926]: 100) could also de-emphasize or discard the criterion of story, stretching it to include any of the broader range of things that might be included in a mythology.

With Postmodernism's reflexive turn and exploration of multiple perspectives, the idea that myths are only found in non-modern cultures was challenged, which also led to further diversification in definitions. The influential work of Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) in particular both offered new ways of looking at myths as abstract signs like images, motifs, and story-patterns corresponding to units of folklore, but he also used *mythology* for a whole abstract system of ideas more commonly called an *ideology* (see e.g. Coupe 1997: 156–158). Nevertheless, this turn has doubled the view of mythology in modern Western cultures. On the one hand, *myth* is commonly used for both stories about gods like Þórr and Óðinn identified with religions that are culturally or historically "other". On the other hand, it is used for contemporary models of "reality lived" within modern Western cultures, although the epistemological stance has endured that something called a *myth* is somehow a "false understanding" (although see e.g. Lotman & Uspenskii 1976). This double vision of mythology entails a tension that things called myths as stories in other cultures are most often events that only happen once, like Þórr fishing up Miðgarðsormr or Óðinn seducing Rindr with *seiðr*, whereas the majority of secular things called myths as "reality lived" in modern Western cultures have countless manifestations, like a battle between good and evil or an event type like a superfood healing a life-threatening illness. This apparent incongruity has had the consequence that discussions of the two have normally remained disconnected, although reflexive consideration of mythologies in contemporary culture have nevertheless gradually affected discussions of mythology more generally.

The incongruity between the mythologies of cultures of each type is more apparent than real, owing to a difference in the things most prominently labelled "myths" in each context and the scope of what is included in "mythology". In discussions of Old Norse mythology, for example, myth has predominantly been used for *particular* stories. Recurrent paradigms like Þórr affecting the weather and Óðinn shaping heroes' fates are considered part of the mythology without being called "myths", as are land spirits and narrative patterns associated with them. Where the models of the world are centrally linked to human agents, other terms like *belief* or *magic* get used rather than discussing *berserkir* and *vǫlur* as parts of "the mythology". In modern secular mythologies, particular stories more commonly receive labels like *theory*,

whether it is the creation story of the Big Bang or a conspiracy surrounding the re-election of Donald Trump, while discussions of mythology more often focus on event paradigms as models for understanding how the world works. However, approaches to mythology at this broader scope can encompass the full spectrum as mythology in spite of differences in how terms are conventionally used in the multitude of discussions.

In recent decades, changes have been occurring in the criterion of myths as false from the perspective of a particular epistemology. Conceiving myth as *necessarily* false knowledge is built on the premise that the user possesses true knowledge, yet even scientific truth may be revealed as myth in the light of new knowledge, while something called a myth might be revealed as scientifically true through empirical testing. This question might seem tangential for research on Old Norse mythology, yet approaching source materials through the assumption that Þórr's battle with Hrungnir is comparable to a fairytale or fantasy novel disparages its potential for mythic significance in the ninth-century milieu where Þjóðólfr *ór Hvini* composed the skaldic poem *Haustlǫng*, as well as the potential that the thirteenth-century rendering in *Snorra Edda* may be responding to such significance. Rather than defining myth as opposed to one epistemology's truth, it can be approached in terms of *emotional investment* by one or more groups in society (Doty 2000: 55–58). Viewing it in terms of emotional investment has the advantage of avoiding questions of subjective "belief" or inconsistencies between claims of belief that may appear alongside religious backsliding in a time of stress or crisis.

The long-enduring criterion of myth as a "story" has also been challenged as problematic. This development was anticipated by discussions of legends, where scholars struggled with the tension between the inherited definition of legend as a genre of narrative and the paradox that "[a] legend is a story or narrative that may not be a story or narrative at all" (Georges 1971: 18; see also Laudun 2021). William G. Doty observes that defining myth as narrative seems to be a polarized point of differentiation from images of modernity (cf. Gal & Irvine 2019): myth becomes imagined through contrast with scientific thinking's objective, non-linear, arithmetical equations, foregrounding its characterization through humanistic storytelling, creative imagination, and aesthetic or emotional dimensions (Doty 2000: 49). The presumption that a myth is a story has shaped thinking about evidence of Old Norse mythology. For example, insults in *Lokasenna* or *Hárbarðsljóð* and references such as Kormákr Ǫgmundarson's phrase *seið Yggr til Rindar* ('Óðinn performed *seiðr* to (get to) Rindr') (KormǪ *Sigdr* 3^{III}.4)[9] or Bragi

9 Skaldic poems are cited according to sigla in the Skaldic Database.

Boddason's kenning *þjófr Þrúðar* ('thief of [Þórr's daughter] Þrúðr') for Hrungnir (Bragi Rdr 1^{III}.3–4) tend to get identified as "myths", yet this identification requires either postulating some sort of immanent story behind the references or stretching the criterion of story to include such references.

Conceiving myth to be a type of story reduces it to a linear plot, with an implicit presumption that it is false knowledge. Referring to, for example, Baldr's death as a "story" carries evaluative connotations that it was not a real event. Such connotations are why some people might get offended if told that Jesus's death is a story, whereas actual events are considered to have had objective reality. History is constituted of multitudes of events that transpired both simultaneously and on a chronology. Narration of history selects and organizes events according to an interpretation that may equally inform how they are presented, but any one narration does not exclude the possibility of others that may link some of the same events to others and interpret them in different or even conflicting ways. When mythology is reconceived in terms of knowledge and understandings of the world, its past and future, discussing its events as "stories" becomes reductive, collapsing potentially complex networks of relations. Baldr's death, for example, is at the intersection of one cycle of events concerning Frigg and Loki and another concerning Óðinn, Hǫðr, and Rindr, as well as being a mooring point for diverse events elsewhere in the mythology (Frog, this volume). These events do not reduce to a linear plot nor do all accounts seem to link them in the same linear plot. Issues of this type have led to shifting emphasis in conceptualizing mythology from narrative to knowledge.

The Concepts of Folklore and Mythology in Old Norse Studies

Research on Viking-Age and medieval Scandinavia did not initially make clear distinctions between mythology and folklore. Across the nineteenth century, research became dominated by the philological approach exemplified by Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835, second edition 1844). Grimm conceived of mythology exclusively in terms of ethnolinguistic heritage and later folklore as the remnants of that heritage that had become disconnected from the earlier belief traditions. The idea was similar to Tylor's doctrine of survivals (1871), which became a foundation for British folklore research (e.g. Lang 1884; Gomme 1885). Both approaches viewed folklore as leftovers of mythology and religious ritual that remained following cultural changes. Both also conceived it as ethnolinguistic heritage, excluding the possibility of exchange between groups. The central difference was that philology-centered

approaches like that of Grimm presumed that the commensurate folklore was genetically related; Tylor's theory of survivals was built on a comparative anthropological view of cultures as universally subject to development in successive stages (e.g. Comte 2009 [1830–1842]). Approaches to folklore based on the latter considered independent genesis of the same folklore (i.e. multigenesis) as equally probable to genetically-related heritage.[10] Across the middle of the nineteenth century, mythology and folklore became seen as separate categories: medieval sources provided authentic representations of mythology, of which later sources were derivative.

The categories changed at the end of the nineteenth century. Borrowings of folklore across linguistic groups had been acknowledged earlier (e.g. Grundtvig 1853–1976; Grimm W. 1856 [1850]: 411), but diffusion was only brought into focus as a phenomenon by Theodor Benfey (1859), who argued that most European folktales originated from the literature of India. This diffusion theory gradually evolved a heated debate in research on folktales in Europe,[11] yet mythology's status as inseparable from ethnolinguistic heritage remained largely unchallenged.[12] This debate was thus not engaged in research on Old Norse mythology, where the question of diffusion was introduced from elsewhere. Edwin Jessen (1871) argued that the eddic poems were literary creations produced in Iceland, and this was followed by Sophus Bugge's (1879: 45–46) argument that poems in the *ljóðaháttr* meter are composed after syncope, which at the time meant they could not be older than the Viking Age (see also Harris 1985: 93; Fidjestøl 1999: 96–96). These arguments did not focus on mythology *per se*, but they challenged the long-standing assumptions that the eddic poems represent an ancient collective heritage – poems that include the most revered sources for Scandinavian mythology. Anton

10 See e.g. Lang's heated response to Newell's diffusion argument in Newell 1892.

11 Diffusion was contrary to both the philology-based approaches of the Grimms and Tylorian approaches to folklore as "survivals" (see e.g. von Hahn 1863: 2–4; Jacobs 1892). The approach to folklore in North America did not emerge from National-Romantic ethnolinguistic heritage-construction projects or as viewing traditions through a lens of a cultural development theory; the intensive work with Native American as well as Black American cultures rather than only traditions carried by European immigrants made cross-cultural exchange a salient phenomenon of interest (e.g. Newell 1895; Boas 1896).

12 In his *magnum opus* on kalevalaic epic and mythology, Julius Krohn (1883) explored cases of potential cross-cultural exchange of mythology, but this aspect of his work had little international impact. A factor here may be that his comparative methodology moved into the background in the Swedish translation (1891). Whereas the Finnish work is organized through the comparative studies and the chapter structure foregrounds his methodology, he decided to integrate the material from these parts into the chapters on epic subjects (Krohn K. 1891c: [ii]). As a result, it simply looks like a book about the *Kalevala* from the table of contents, rather than having, for example, a nearly 70-page chapter devoted to comparisons with Germanic traditions (1883: 230–298).

Christian Bang (1879) then published his explosive argument that *Vǫluspá* is a Norse poet's imitation of Greek sibylline (i.e. Christian) texts. The questions being raised about the origin and historical spread of the poems led Bugge to aggressively challenge their ancientness and that of the mythology, which had long been taken for granted. Finding parallels in Christian, Classical, or Celtic traditions, he argued that the Scandinavian oral traditions or learned authors had borrowed these much nearer the time of the sources (1881–1889; 1899). His work resonated with the trends of modernism and was well received, pioneering a source-critical turn in scholarship (Fidjestøl 1999: 101). These new views restructured the situation surrounding sources in a way that somewhat levelled the difference between medieval sources and later folklore: each presented different issues as evidence for mythology at a time when the temporal distance was not considered as a significant factor in the way it tends to be today (e.g. Olrik 1892–1894; see also Lindow, this volume).

This new comparativism subsequently extended to identifying impacts of Old Norse traditions on Finnic and Sámi. Finnic and Sámi traditions thus became viewed as potential sources for Old Norse mythology, supporting interpretations or filling in gaps in the earlier evidence (e.g. Olrik 1906). Connecting Old Norse research to discussions of these later materials had reciprocal impacts on the concept of folklore, which was considered to include post-medieval traditions of mythology and religion (i.e. of Finnic and Sámi cultures). Viewing folklore as inclusive of mythology was bolstered by the rise of comparative research in Finland, which developed around living traditions of kalevalaic poetry and contemporary traditions of kindred peoples in the Russian Empire (e.g. Castrén 1853; Borenius 1873; Krohn J. 1883; see also Ahola & Lukin 2019). In 1907, Kaarle Krohn and Axel Olrik, along with a young Carl von Sydow, established the Folklore Fellows as an international network, which would include members such as Eugen Mogk, Jan de Vries, and Kurt Ranke. The Folklore Fellows emerged with an interest in reverse-engineering the cross-cultural spread of folklore, which included theorizing the properties of folklore and its variation (i.e. "laws" of folklore). Through the Folklore Fellows, a comparative methodological paradigm became established that could be uniformly applied to both medieval and later evidence and became foundational in research across the first half of the twentieth century (Krohn K. 1926; see also Frog 2013). This approach fused with Old Norse philological research. The impact was sufficiently formative that John Lindow (this volume) considers whether it evolved an "Old Norse Mythology Method".

The paradigm built on the massive comparative work of Julius Krohn (1883). His approach was set apart from contemporary folklore research by

working from an evolutionary model, which conferred value on the documented forms of a tradition.[13] This perspective on folklore was a foundation of Kaarle Krohn's, who, from an early stage, developed an agenda of establishing folklore studies as an independent discipline – i.e. as a science. At the time, this meant having distinct methods for objectively analyzing its particular research object and, as a science, uncovering "laws" that governed that research object. Early in his career, Kaarle Krohn criticized other scholars' treatment of later folklore as derivative of something else, like mythology, as characteristic of the Grimms' approach, or as Tylorian "survivals". Whereas his contemporaries proposed theories ("laws") bound up with such models of the origin of folklore or its diffusion, he proposed theories ("laws") for how the recorded traditions were internally structured and varied (1891: 64). As was customary for the era, a central parameter of folklore was that it was "echt volkstümlich" ('truly of the folk') (Krohn K. 1926: 23–25), an assessment of authenticity as unadulterated by modernity or knowledge based on literacy. His orientation to establishing folklore studies as a scientific discipline not only steered him to develop and explicate a folklore-specific methodology, but also to build it with a procedural emphasis, with a focus exclusively on formal units of tradition, reconstructing the history of motifs, episodes, and plots, rather than their meanings or significance, which could be seen as more interpretive than "scientific" in its systematicity. The formal emphasis aligned with the changing trends in Scandinavian philology, but also contrasted with speculations about "nature-myths" in approaches like Müller's, or in British researchers' use of analogical comparisons to reconstruct the significance of folklore "survivals". The formal emphasis collapsed the distinction between mythology and derivative forms of tradition, and the approach established a view of orally-transmitted mythology as folklore.

In Old Norse studies, treating medieval and later evidence within a common methodological framework was an integrated part of methodological development in mythology research (Lindow, this volume). However, it did not break down the longstanding tendency to keep Old Norse culture or its sources distinct from what was called folklore. In combination with the

13 This difference is rooted in Julius Krohn's focus on kalevalaic epic and its relation to Elias Lönnrot's epic *Kalevala*. His research brought into focus Friedrich August Wolf's (1795) theory that Homeric epics developed through the combination of simpler poems from different regions into increasingly complex forms, of which the resulting epics of Homer were the apex of development. Rather than transmission being seen as a process of degradation and corruption from an earlier ideal form or a tradition simply being preserved as culture changed around it, transmission was viewed as a process of evolution. The *Kalevala* could be viewed as a climax of development that required the unifying vision of a single poet – Lönnrot – rather than something artificial or secondary to the "authentic" traditions.

source-critical concerns surrounding medieval texts, the term folklore developed a heuristic value in Old Norse research for referring to evidence from non-learned culture in post-medieval environments.

Across the nineteenth century, mythology also took shape as a category in Old Norse research. The process centered on texts and their categorization, to which the Codex Regius manuscript collection of eddic poems (GKS 2365 4to) and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* were central. The result was the establishment of fairly stable conventions for what mythology did and did not include, and these conventions were maintained through the twentieth century with almost no critical discussion. The category of mythology took shape centrally through philological approaches and tied to medieval texts. Later evidence of both written sources and folklore remained supplementary, with the exception of written texts believed to be copies of medieval exemplars. Mythology was constituted centrally of cosmogony, cosmology, and eschatology, along with gods and the stories about them that are removed from worlds of human beings; poems and sagas concerning events and locations of the human sphere were differentiated as heroic even if they involved gods. Nevertheless, *Grímnismál* is consistently classed as mythological because of its place in that collection, although the events concern gods involving themselves in the lives of human heroes.[14] If *Grímnismál* had only been preserved in a hypothetical **Geirrøðar saga ok Agnars*, like Óðinn's riddling contest with Heiðrekr (*Heiðreks saga* R9/H10–11/U14–15), it would more likely be considered a heroic poem, regardless of the content of Óðinn's speech.[15] Similarly, the events surrounding Loki's killing of Otr concern gods and begins with the motif of three gods wandering in the world, which associates it with cosmogonic time, and it seems that they encounter giants (*Reginsmál*; *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 14; *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 39). If the capture and liberation of the gods had been all that was preserved, the narrative would no doubt be classed as mythological, but it is treated as belonging to the heroic sphere because the events are presented as establishing conditions for the slaying of Fáfnir by Sigurðr – i.e. concerned with the fate of a hero rather than of cosmological scope.

14 Eddic poems are cited according to the edition of Neckel & Kuhn 1963.

15 Similarly, *Hynduljóð* gets classed as mythological because it both concerns the goddess Freyja in an altercation with a giantess and also because it contains an extended passage of poetry identified as *Vǫluspá in skamma* through a quotation in Snorri's *Edda*. However, Freyja is aiding a human Ottarr, also present in the action; if the poem were preserved in a saga about Ottarr, it would most likely be considered heroic, with an interpolation from a mythological poem.

The distinction between mythological and heroic is centrally an extension from the organization of poems in the Codex Regius, where the division seems simply to reflect two earlier collections of poems that were brought together in a single manuscript (Vésteinn Ólason 2019: 235–242). The concentration of stories about gods but not human heroes in *Gylfaginning* of Snorri's *Edda* might seem to resonate with the division, yet this is likely only a consequence of the narrative frame and its emphasis on events of cosmological scope as the "Æsir" seek to convince Gylfi that they are gods rather than humans. Evidence outside of the central medieval source texts have been treated as supplementary or complementary, such as the contents of *Ynglinga saga*, Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, *Sǫrla þáttr*, or *Þorsteins saga bœjarmagins*. Later folklore seems to have remained marginal to these discussions because it either appeared directly linked to mythology found in the medieval sources, and therefore derivative and irrelevant if a more original version was available (cf. Bugge & Moe 1897), or its relation to the earlier mythology was unclear and its fairytale-like quality made its authenticity dubious (e.g. *Lokka táttur*).

The concept of folklore and its relevance for Old Norse mythology research changed radically in the decades following World War II. These decades saw a general disenchantment with folklore attributable to several factors, including its connection to nationalist ideologies, a growing, critical reflexivity in research, and a shift of attention from reconstructing ideal pasts to agency and complexity in synchronic situations and the sources as products of those situations. Although the comparative methodology propagated by the Folklore Fellows had developed richly around understanding and analyzing variation, Kaarle Krohn asserted it as having a prescriptive aim of reconstructing the *Urform* ('original form') of traditions. This aim became iconic of the whole methodology, which collapsed as synchronic variation became a topic of interest and concern. In Old Norse research, rising source-critical standards and the temporal distance between the living non-Christian religion and later sources became viewed as an issue. *Grógaldr* and *Fjölsvinnsmál* were omitted from editions of eddic poetry because they might derive from after the fourteenth or fifteenth century (Kuhn 1961: 268). Earlier uses of more recent folklore became sharply criticized, and its value for reconstructing the remote past was discredited. Within this frame of reasoning, the pragmatic temporal distinction between medieval sources and folklore as later evidence reified the contrast between mythology and folklore, but, rather than seeing the latter as derivative of the former, folklore was simply devalued and dismissed, pushing it to the peripheries of Old Norse studies.

Around 1990, a cross-disciplinary turn to meaning-making in situated contexts began, along with moves toward interdisciplinarity. This turn produced a new approach to mythology through *mythic discourse* – or mythology as it is used, communicated and manipulated by people in society (e.g. Urban 1991; Siikala 1992; see also Schjødt 2013; Frog 2015). Old Norse research underwent a "social turn" around 1970, situating mythology and religion in relation to societies (Clunies Ross 2018: 584–589). In the 1990s, the rise of interest in meanings explored how mythology works and is used in society (e.g. Clunies Ross 1994–1998; McKinnell 1994; Lindow 1995), and there was a corresponding rise in interest in cultural exchange with Finnic and Sámi mythology and ritual (e.g. Tolley 1993; Zachrisson et al. 1997; DuBois 1999). People and practices come into the spotlight, adapting Oral-Formulaic Theory as a tool for examining meanings behind variation in eddic poetry as oral poetry (e.g. Quinn 1990; Gísli Sigurðsson 1990; 1998), and performance is brought into focus (esp. Gunnell 1995).

With the new millennium, the trend of considering medieval "folklore" begins to penetrate into Old Norse research (e.g. Lindahl et al. 2000) and tradition-based variation behind Old Norse sources becomes a topic of interest (e.g. Gísli Sigurðsson 2004 [2002]; Mitchell 2003). New ways of thinking about cult and ritual take shape (e.g. Gunnell 2001; Nordberg 2004; Schjødt 2008), along with increasingly synthetic interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. Sundqvist 2002 [2000]; Price 2002; see also Schjødt 2007; Sundqvist, this volume). The boom of interest in *seiðr* (e.g. Heide 2006; Dillmann 2006) and ritual specialists (e.g. McKinnell 2003; 2005; Price 2010) seems connected to the shift of attention to performance and practice, and it connects to a rise of cross-cultural comparative studies (e.g. Bertell 2003; Tolley 2009; Frog 2010; see also Willson, this volume). The different trends gradually converged and coalesced, leading to a rapid rise in interest both in later folklore and in the applicability of folklore research to Old Norse materials, especially with the establishment of the Retrospective Methods Network in 2009 and associated networks beginning from 2011 (e.g. Heide 2009; *RMN Newsletter* 2010–present; Mitchell 2011; Sävborg & Bek-Pedersen 2014; 2018; Bertell et al. 2019; Frog et al. 2019; Sävborg 2021). The developments across this period have been driving toward a broad reconceptualization that distinguishes the mythology and practices of Old Norse cultures from their individual sources and that views these *as* forms of folklore, a process that can be observed unfolding in the present. Indeed, as John Lindow (2017) recently observed, we seem to be in the midst of a paradigm shift.

A Four-Stage Model

Both folklore and mythology are etic categories constructed by researchers and/or the discourses in which they – and we – participate. The ways of thinking about mythology and folklore in Old Norse studies and how these may be related have changed considerably over time, but they can be loosely classed according to four stages, even if in practice these overlap and blur because the changing trends manifest through the work of individual scholars. In each stage, the understandings of the categories and their relationships reflect implicit or explicit theories about them.

In the first stage, folklore and mythology gradually became distinguished according to the Grimms' paradigm of folklore as derivative of mythology and ritual. The Grimms presumed that folklore was bound, like mythology, to ethnolinguistic heritage. Folklore was not theorized further as a phenomenon itself, which limited its significance in mythology research to its genetic relation to a mythology of the past. The view that the medieval sources represented authentic mythology ultimately marginalized folklore in discussions of Old Norse mythology because folklore remained secondary to, and derivative of, mythology, for which there was better evidence. The assumption that mythology is an ethnolinguistic heritage was later contested with an alternative model of diffusion. The diffusion model generated source-critical concerns about the medieval sources and challenged their value as authentic representations of an ancient heritage of mythology. Folklore, however, continued to be viewed as derivative.

The second stage was set in motion by the Folklore Fellows. They propagated a methodology concerned with the formal elements of tradition, for which a distinction between mythology as authentic and folklore as derivative was considered invalid and misleading. Oral traditions of mythology were also viewed as folklore, which meant that theoretical models ("laws") for the features and variation of folklore also governed the respective mythologies. The emphasis of the methodology remained on identifying and explicating genetic relations between examples of traditions, yet theories developed on the basis of different traditions could also be applied by analogy to Old Norse mythology. The evolving perspectives on folklore recognized forms of variation, but focused on continuities with a text-centered emphasis analogous to manuscript studies. Nevertheless, the discourse in Old Norse studies ultimately maintained prior use of the term *folklore* as a convenient way to refer only to later traditions and any evidence that they provided.

The third stage took shape during the post-War decades, linked to changing views of source-criticism and new perspectives on variation and

historical change. The comparative methodology that had been propagated and evolved in connection with the Folklore Fellows was abandoned and much of the associated research became considered problematic. Genetic relations remained the type of comparison in focus, but became considered unviable. The practical use of the word *folklore* for later evidence became contrasted with earlier evidence for the mythology, and bound up with evaluative assessments of earlier studies that were seen as problematic. These changes also dissolved the Folklore Fellows' lens for viewing the earlier oral traditions also as folklore. Thus, in this stage, folklore was neither considered viable as source material nor even as an analogical frame of reference for considering the mythology, to which approaches remained extremely text-centered, easily conflating particular texts with tradition.

The fourth stage carries through the present. The developments since the 1990s have brought practices into focus, a rise in comparativism, and increased interdisciplinarity, linking Old Norse research to different disciplines and approaches. Ultimately, these developments have led to understanding the mythology and practices with which it is linked as traditions in predominantly oral milieux. There has been a reopening of questions about how later traditions may be related to Old Norse mythology and associated practices. Today, these are viewed mainly in terms of continuities on their own terms rather than as derivative fragments of what had been before. More generally, theoretical understandings of folklore and how it works and varies in society are applied to Old Norse traditions, recognized as distinct from individual sources in which they are reflected. Analogical comparisons with later, more richly-documented traditions are increasingly used in order to develop perspectives on the Old Norse traditions. Terminology in the field has maintained momentum, so that many scholars continue to use the term *folklore* as referring to post-medieval traditions, in which case relating folklore and Old Norse mythology is understood as involving a diachronic comparison between genetically or analogically related materials or traditions. Other scholars have advanced more fully to addressing the Old Norse traditions *as* folklore. It is yet to be seen which of these uses of the term will become dominant with the shifting trends in research.

Contributions to the present volume are representative of the current trends of this fourth stage, whether they focus on genetic relations between traditions past and present, make analogical comparisons between present and past traditions, or approach Old Norse traditions as folklore, allowing it to be considered through theoretical and methodological frameworks developed for the study of folklore.

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