

# From Theme to Book and Back Again

*Joonas Ahola and Frog*

Across especially the past decade, research on Old Norse mythology has exhibited a boom of interest in both folklore collected under the aegis of Romanticism and the perspectives and insights of current folklore research. As seen from the chapters introduced here, the theme of *Folklore and Old Norse Mythology* is broadly conceived in this book. It can be practically viewed in terms of three broad domains that overlap and intersect:

- Exploring genetic relations
- Developing analogical insights
- Approaching Old Norse mythology *as* folklore

Of course, the classic domain of interest is in historical relations between Old Norse mythology and later folklore. Research on Old Norse mythology emerged with a broad inclusion of evidence of more recent traditions. Across especially the second half of the twentieth century, however, changes in paradigms, theories, and source-critical standards made earlier work incorporating relatively recent traditions look more intuitive than analytical and led to reimagining such comparisons as impossibly problematic. Today, comparisons are being cautiously reopened, building on current knowledge and new methodologies, pioneering into a long-neglected area. The exploration for potential long-term continuities can seem like an uncharted wilderness until, abandoned, crumbled, and overgrown, a structure built by Jacob Grimm or Axel Olrik emerges through the trees: others have indeed tread here before. Analogical comparisons, in their turn, can operate as a type of chart that may help to navigate the landscape and make sense of its contours through connections that are no longer readily apparent, perhaps offering insights into their rationale. The most recent domain of interest is rooted in changing understandings of folklore in the field, which transform the landscape formed by static texts and the objects and places unearthed by archaeology into windows onto a living world of performance, praxis, and competing discourses. The present book invites you to explore these landscapes, guided by authors with a wide range of perspectives rooted in different disciplines and research backgrounds. Each chapter leads down a different path, with particular concerns and points of focus. Some follow well-worn trails to shed light on how and

why they formed in the landscape and bring familiar points of reference into a new light; others take on more rugged terrain that is less well known or work through dense growth, cutting a new path to share a scenic overlook. Whereas most of us begin with difficulty seeing the forest for the trees, we hope that the wide-ranging explorations gathered here will leave you with a perspective on the forest, equipped for further investigations.

The present volume is a response to a general move in Old Norse mythology research to advance beyond the philology of textual sources and archaeology of material culture to oral traditions, performance practices, and ways of understanding and engaging with the world behind them. This move has by no means been abrupt. Comparative considerations have always been present, if often implicit, but a crucial factor was a paradigm shift in approaches to folklore that reached a watershed in European and North American research especially in the 1970s. This turn involved a fundamental reconceptualization of tradition from emphasis on abstracted and ideal texts or traditions' formal elements with continuity in inter-generational transmission (analogous to Saussure's *langue*) to focus on tradition as lived and interactive practice or situated performance, with concern for variation (analogous to Saussure's *parole*). This turn in folklore research belonged to a much broader paradigm shift that also gave rise to "new philology", which made later manuscripts interesting as things people did with written texts in particular situations rather than only as source evidence for reconstructing the earliest form of a written work. The many changes that took place during this period led to challenging much earlier comparative research while shifts from diachronic to synchronic interests augmented the formation of a gap between Old Norse studies and research on later folklore. Nevertheless, many corpora collected from the nineteenth century onwards are vast, and these were complemented by fieldwork being done in cultures around the world. This research offered perspectives on how traditions operate and vary in societies that were gradually taken up by individual Old Norse scholars as frames of reference to consider, for example, what might be happening behind the one or two variants of an eddic poem. The tendency to view oral and ritual traditions as static and transmitted with a text stability comparable to scribal copies was slow to give way. Today, however, attention has largely moved to orality and performance behind sources for Scandinavian mythology or religion and the processes that led such knowledge and verbal art to be materialized as written texts, and also to practices as traditions that have left material outcomes in the archaeological record. Iron Age and medieval sources are increasingly recognized as not the traditions *per se*, but as representing and reflecting what people knew and did in society, thus providing fragmented glimpses into the respective traditions.

The chapters of the present volume reflect the breadth of these changes through the diversity of their approaches and handling of the issues at hand. The contributions gathered here are linked to one another in countless ways, such as by subject matter, approach, or groupings according to the three broad domains mentioned above. They are arranged in five sections, preceded by an introductory chapter, which opens the concepts of folklore and mythology and the many ways these have been understood through the history of Old Norse research. The opening section then presents different *Approaches* to the relationship between folklore and Old Norse mythology and folklore research in the study of Old Norse mythology. Although it remains common to presume that myths are stories, central interests of current mythology research are in variation, practice, and lived religion, with the result that perhaps the greater part of attention goes to elements of mythology less complex than complete plots. The following four sections present a variety of case studies that are therefore organized on the arc of this trajectory of interests. This begins at the level of practice with *Magic and Ritual*, followed by *Mythic Images and Agents*, and then *Motifs and Narration*, advancing gradually to the level of plots in the concluding section on *Stories*.

## Approaches

Five chapters introduce and discuss general approaches to the connections between mythology and folklore in Scandinavian Iron Age and medieval sources. They explore research history, source criticism, analytical methodology, and conceptualizations in relevant disciplines. These contributions address questions surrounding the common conception of myths as narrative expressions of religious ideas and as folklore. They explore methodological questions surrounding the transmission and variation of mythology and associated worldviews, as well as hybridization and syncretism. Even though local and individual expressions found in the sources are often discussed within a larger, collective cultural or religious framework, these chapters remind us that each source is also a unique expression no less than is any particular folklore performance.

John Lindow opens the section with an exploration of the history of the study of mythology alongside the emergence and development of methodology in folkloristics. In “Folklore, Folkloristics, and an ‘Old Norse Mythology Method’?”, he provides a detailed picture of the “folkloristic method” that took shape in the Nordic countries, also known as the Historical-Geographic or “Finnish” Method. Lindow brings into sharp focus the problems that were later seen as emblematic of such comparative approaches as well as their

evolution in Old Norse mythology research. He advances to consider whether the adaptations of these approaches gave rise to an “Old Norse mythology method” across the beginning of the twentieth century, and discusses how such comparativism was superseded by the rise of structuralism and the turn to performance.

In “Pre-Christian Religions of the North as Folklore, with Special Reference to the Notion of ‘Pantheon’”, Jens Peter Schjødt advances an approach that juxtaposes the research of mythology and folklore in concrete terms. Schjødt relates phenomena in folklore and mythology and the scientific concepts associated with them to create a framework for approaching variation. He uses this framework to confront the currently debated topic of whether or not Old Norse religion entailed a “pantheon” or had a fragmented structure in which worshippers would rely on only a single god for more or less all of their needs. Schjødt’s chapter may be seen as representative of a current need for an encompassing methodology that abandons the ostensible separateness of mythology, religion, and folklore.

Sophie Bønding leads discussion into the theme of religious change, continuity, and discontinuity in “Conceptualising Continuity in the Christianisation: Towards a Discursive Approach”. Her chapter offers an accessible introduction into a discourse-based approach to religion and how mythology operates in religious encounters. As an illustrative case study, she scrutinizes the Viking Age Christianization process with focus on linguistic discourses, examining its reflection in the source material. The approach and its comparative dimensions offer a firm empirical foundation and reveals that both the Christian and non-Christian religions and religiosity manifest different forms of syncretism in contemporary linguistic expressions. By bringing religious discourse into focus in this way, Bønding reveals that the assimilation of Christianity was not simply something that happened to people as a result of externally propelled conversion; instead, it was an activity of the subjects themselves across a long period.

The adaptation of methods, theories, and perspectives from folklore studies for research on Old Norse mythology is contextualized by Olof Sundqvist within a broader interdisciplinary turn in the field. In “A ‘Turn to Interdisciplinary Methods’ in the Study of Old Norse Mythology and Religion: With a Case Study on the Distribution of the Cult of Freyr”, Sundqvist explores indications of a cult of the god Freyr in Viking Age central Sweden that have surfaced in connection with different disciplines. In so doing, he underscores that the study of a religion without written religious texts necessarily requires a multidisciplinary approach. He shows that the development

of interdisciplinary approaches enables the posing of new questions that lead to new insights and deeper understandings.

The final chapter of this section lays out a methodological approach to “Mythic Discourse Analysis”. Frog argues that it is possible to compare and combine different types of sources through the semiotic connections they share in spite of representing diverse forms of expression. This approach involves breaking down sources into the socially recognizable elements of mythology as discreet “mythic signs”, distinguished according to formal types, and that are combined and transposed in “equations” that produce different sorts of meanings. This approach aims to offer solutions to some of the questions and concerns that come forward in several other chapters.

Through their range and variety, these five chapters reflect the vitality and dynamism of ways of linking folklore and Old Norse mythology in different disciplines. Individually, some of these chapters are programmatic in their presentation and advocacy of a particular approach, yet the approaches themselves remain largely independent and complementary. Reading them as in dialogue with one another rather than as isolated works makes the chapters reciprocally informative. Despite not developing from any single definition of folklore or mythology, they illustrate the current interest in unified approaches to Old Norse mythology or religion that integrate folklore.

## **Magic and Ritual**

A relationship between mythology and rituals is salient in many instances, and each may help to understand the other within a given cultural environment. Of course, it has long been recognized that not all rituals are connected to mythological narratives, nor are all such narratives connected to rituals. Nevertheless, mythology and ritual were being conceived as representing the theoretical and practical sides of a non-Christian religion (or “superstition”) as early as in the eighteenth century. Although ritual may concern dimensions of cult, its most common manifestations in a society fall under the aegis of what is commonly called magic, as a prescriptive procedure or flexible framework of rite techniques used to affect change in the world, whether for healing, harm, or to achieve some other aim. Such practices very often involve a verbal dimension of performance, such as a static verbal charm or potentially variable, situation-dependent incantation. These verbal components of ritual practices often engage with supernatural agents and forces of the mythology and many refer to mythic events in so-called *w* – i.e. short narratives of mythic content associated with charms’ magical efficacy. The

four chapters of this section turn to the areas of practice that connect with mythology.

Researchers' interests and ideologies can easily shape their findings and interpretations. Kendra Willson returns discussion to the history of scholarship to consider the discussion and interpretations of the Old Norse practice called *seiðr* in this light. In "*Seiðr* and (Sámi) Shamanism: Definitions, Sources, and Identities", she surveys the views and arguments on the relationship between *seiðr* and "shamanism", usually as associated with the Sámi. These discussions have long concerned questions of the practices being borrowed from one culture into another through comparisons of references and descriptions in Old Norse with much later evidence of shamanic traditions. Willson reveals that these discussions have conformed to general scholarly trends concerning the exchange of cultural influences. She argues that the ambiguity of the sources, on the one hand, and of the scholarly concepts of both "*seiðr*" and "shamanism", on the other, have enabled the continuous production of alternative interpretations that will probably not reach an enduring consensus in the near future.

Stephen A. Mitchell carries discussion from ritual practice to *historiolas* as a salient intersection between performed magic and mythology. In "Notes on *historiolas*, Referentiality, and Time in Nordic Magical Traditions", he scrutinizes Scandinavian texts from the Viking Age to the nineteenth century that have formal connections to this type of narrative constituent. Mitchell raises interesting theoretical issues concerning the role of mythology in a society where it no longer belongs to the dominant religion. He shows that mythology and associated beliefs are able to survive under these circumstances as adaptations to forms of religion-related activity that maintain their relevance, even when people do not necessarily have a clear picture of what the mythic elements refer to.

Bengt af Klintberg brings forward a particular case in "The Dead Mother: An Exceptional Nordic Binding Charm", which presents an image of nine sons who carry their dead mother. The case study leads the reader through the world in which the charm's variants were documented and its applications at that time. He observes that this image seems to have been no more clear to the people who used the charms than it is to a present-day reader, and he explores its potential associations. af Klintberg argues that the image embedded in the *historiola* likely has connections to certain elements in Scandinavian mythology. This chapter is a valuable illustration of the challenges presented by verbal charms as source material, as well as their interest for the potential perspectives that they may offer.

The section is brought to a close by Clive Tolley's extensive study of "Heimdallr's Charm: The Lost *Heimdallargaldr* and Symbolism and Allusion in the Myths of Heimdallr". This case study situates the two brief references to an otherwise unknown poem called the charm or incantation (*galdr*) of Heimdallr at the nexus of a wide-ranging study. Little is known of Heimdallr, who is referred to as the son of nine mothers in the preserved lines of the poem. Tolley constructs an image of Heimdallr through the close reading of a number of sources, also connecting back to the *historiola* addressed in af Klintberg's chapter. By comparing his observations with later Scandinavian and Finnic oral traditions, he builds up a more nuanced understanding of the scant medieval sources that builds into a general perspective on the Old Norse charm tradition, from its Germanic roots to its manifestations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Together, these chapters highlight that mythology becomes bound up with practices and areas of social life. They illustrate how elements of mythology can maintain relevance and survive in connection with such practices, even when their significance becomes obscure. Although the studies bring out some potential pitfalls of comparativism and how the interests and ideologies of scholars may impact on interpretations, they also elucidate the potential of gaining insights into the practices behind the scattered and limited evidence of particular traditions.

## Mythic Images and Agents

The elucidation of the god Heimdallr at the conclusion of the preceding section anticipates the turn to the images of different types of mythic agents, highlighting that their significance is not limited to their appearance in stories about gods and their adventures in mythic time. Such agents hold a central position in Scandinavian mythology. Those that are subject to veneration become emblematic of religion, yet the variety of such agents extends far beyond these, including those that interact with gods in cosmological time, others encountered by heroes in the ancient past, and also those encountered by the settlers of Iceland, Christian missionaries, and so on. The characteristics and qualities imagined for these agents are constructed through the narratives and motifs with which they are associated, and then may carry over into additional contexts. They may also be metonymically identified through their particular features or objects associated with them. Metonymic identification allows both particular agents or types of agent to be used referentially in a number of ways, such as recognizing someone as a troll or simply as "trollishness" through the character's description, identifying a character as

“Þórr-like” through motifs linked to the god, or Þórr’s hammer being sufficiently emblematic that it was used as a popular amulet in the Viking Age. Mythic images and their usage are central to mythology and religion, and it is often at this level of images that the dynamics of mythology in both society and discourse can be most vibrant. The four chapters in this section explore images of different types of mythic agents from a number of angles, from their background in the Iron Age through their evolution across subsequent centuries, including consideration of the sort of work they do in medieval literature.

Joonas Ahola opens discussion by exploring networks of associations and meanings constructed through the patterns of use of what might seem a rather mundane and commonplace image. In “Divine Gear? ‘Odinic’ Disguise and Its Narrative Contexts in Medieval Icelandic Literature”, he surveys different instances in which a cloak appears as a particularly mentioned accessory in the corpus of medieval Icelandic literature. Ahola’s discussion illustrates how a single attribute may be connected in narration both to a character’s appearance and to their activities, which enables the attribute to carry connotative meanings through the associative connections between different narrative characters and their actions. The cloak is a type of gear associated in the mythology with Óðinn, and Ahola shows how an attribute emblematic of a certain agent or type of situation in the mythology may referentially alter the significance of that attribute in different narrative genres.

Leszek Gardela advances discussion on how mythic images are linked to characterizations, connecting back to the topic of ritual practices in an investigation of certain gear and its contexts in the archaeological record. In “Women and Axes in the North: Diversity and Meaning in Viking Age Mortuary Practices”, he scrutinizes burial finds of females supplied with axes, discussed through comparison with Old Icelandic sources and later folklore. Gardela’s source material is diverse and spread across centuries, building a compelling, multifaceted argument that the axes as burial finds in female graves refer to their ritual use. This chapter is an excellent illustration of how interdisciplinary study of diverse sources may shed light on ritual practices and underlying religious conceptions, in this case connected to a single type of object.

The connection between mythic images and identities are approached from a different perspective by Rudolf Simek and Valerie Broustin. In Old Norse research, descent from gods has been discussed extensively for royal genealogies and in contexts of euhemerism. In “Wise Men and Half Trolls”, Simek and Broustin show that Icelandic sagas connect many Icelandic families prominent in the time of saga writing to ancestors that are genealogically



linked to trolls. They discuss why trolls – quite counter-intuitively from the perspective of modern research – seem to have provided a noble ancestry in a way similar to euhemerized gods. Their chapter introduces the important topic of genealogical lore with a reassessment of common presumptions about medieval attitudes towards trolls and giants as mythic beings.

The discussion of counter-intuitive roles of trolls leads to the section's final chapter, which turns to giants in the history of scholarship, and how scholars have constructed and reconstructed images of giants in relation to their contemporary contexts. In "The Giants and the Critics: A Brief History of Old Norse 'Gigantology'", Tommy Kuusela provides an extensive survey on the different scholarly approaches to the central counter-role to the gods in the mythology. He discusses the evolution of discussion surrounding both the agents called *jötnar* in medieval Icelandic sources and giants in later traditions. Linking across these categories leads to highlighting the problems connected to terms for different types of agents and how to translate them, as well as how different types of agents become interpreted through researchers' categories. Kuusela's survey returns to the issues raised by Willson regarding how researchers' views have been shaped by contemporary thought and debates, and then reciprocally impact the images of the mythology that they construct and propagate.

These four chapters begin from how objects seen as attributes are socially constructed as emblematic of certain identities, whether of a particular god or of a ritual practitioner. Beginning with meaning-making in the narrative world of sagas and followed by meaning-making in burials of living communities, they advance to the symbolic capital conferred by descent from mythic agents. Challenging researchers' assumptions about the evaluation of such agents opens into an exploration of how the meaningfulness of these agents is subject to ongoing construction and negotiation by scholars, impacted by the worlds in which they live and work. Together, progression through this series of case studies offers a multifaceted view of how mythic images and agents operated in the mythology, life, literature, and later folklore of Scandinavia up through scholarship in the present day.

## Motifs and Narration

*Motif* (or *motive*) is a term that moved into the spotlight in folklore studies in the first half of the twentieth century through the emergence of indexing projects that produced infrastructures for comparative research. The concept goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the analysis of folktale plots broke these down into a chain of elements in sequence, which might also be

used across different tales. These elements were eventually indexed in their own right. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir opens this section with a discussion of various ways the term *motif* has been defined and used, highlighting that it was initially heuristic rather than analytical. Nevertheless, approaching traditional narratives as constituted of motifs that might vary or be found across different stories is fundamental to current thinking in research.

In “Mythological Motifs and Other Narrative Elements of *Völsunga saga* in Icelandic Folk and Fairytales”, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir explores how, like images, mythic motifs exhibit dynamic and varied use as well as a *longue durée* of use. This exploration begins from the medieval *fornaldarsögur*, the class of sagas that narrate the mytho-heroic milieu, where Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir reveals the interconnections of these sagas with both mythology and folktales. She then traces motifs from an influential saga through their manifestations in later folklore, illustrating the interplay of continuity and evolution of mythic motifs across centuries.

Mythological and mytho-heroic narratives are preserved in iconographic representations as well as written works. In her pioneering “Gotland Picture Stones and Narration”, Laila Kitzler Åhlfeldt examined units of narration as they appear on Gotlandic picture stones. She applies Oral-Formulaic Theory to the study of these compositions, which employ a carving technique utilizing templates for both repeating the same pictorial motifs and also for the production of distinct images by, for example, adding attributes to a male or female figure. The article raises intriguing questions concerning the interpretation of different media and makes a new kind of contribution to the study of picture stones as pictorial narration.

In “Genre Matters? Female Suicide in Mythic, Mytho-Heroic, and Historical Contexts”, Kirsi Kanerva approaches the depictions of female suicides and death from grief in three different genres and the meaning-producing dialogues between them as well as other material in the corpus. Her central cases are the death of Baldr’s wife Nanna from grief, the suicide of Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* and eddic poetry, and the grief of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*. Kanerva explores how the genre affects the expression of attitudes towards suicide, highlighting the impact of a genre on what is represented. Her analysis situates the different representations in relation to social values in the environment of readers and audiences as well as the contexts in which they are narrated, offering a nuanced perspective on variation across these discourses.

Discussion of *Laxdæla saga* continues in the final chapter of this section. In “Bolli Þorleiksson’s Celtic Horses”, Karen Bek-Pedersen turns to the classic concern of comparative folklore in cross-cultural comparison. She

examines connections between horses as mythic agents in Icelandic and Irish medieval sources and their roles in narration. In the past, comparative studies often sought to unravel the relationships between traditions and their direction of spread as an end unto itself. Bek-Pedersen uses the identification of historical influence as a tool for gaining a more nuanced understanding of meanings. She shows that the referential connection to Irish tradition reveals a greater depth to character development in the Icelandic saga, which juxtaposes Irish heroes with an Icelandic historical character, further illustrating how the referential engagement of mythology may alter significance.

These four chapters highlight the position of motifs in the transmission and variation of mythology. Like images, motifs become instruments of meaning-making, whether they shape the context into which they are drawn, are subordinated to that context and its priorities, or some combination thereof. Within the history of comparative research, the distinction of motifs is particularly important, because problems of many early comparative studies were linked to the presumption that mythology was constituted of plots as wholes that were simply transplanted from cosmological to heroic or fairytale contexts or from one culture into another. The chapters gathered in this section emphasize that stories are constituted of pieces that people can take up, recombine, and use in new ways, adapting and altering them to the needs and interests of the new genre or context of use.

## Stories

Stories are popularly imagined as at the core of a mythology, frequently conceived in terms of static and ideal plots. As the previous section highlights, current research has become deeply aware that the reality of traditions proves far messier. Of course, complex narratives can circulate widely and survive through centuries of oral transmission, not to mention their potential movements between oral discourse, the aural discourse of public reading, and private reading as well. Nevertheless, when narratives are transmitted from one cultural context to another, from one era to another, and from one narrative genre to another, the whole frame of reference is altered and necessarily leads to transformations of the subject matter – if not formally, then minimally by the meanings given to the narrative in reception. The four chapters in this final section explore mythological narratives as discourse in different genres of expression, as well as their transformations and adaptations across time.

Else Mundal begins discussion by taking up issues of genre and highlighting the different types of primary evidence for Scandinavian non-Christian religion in “Old Norse Myths, Heroic legends, and Folklore”. She

assesses the value of different categories of sources from the Middle Ages to more recent times, bringing this classic question into connection with the current view that religious conceptions varied not only over time but also areally. As a consequence, a source-critical approach to the dispersed and dissimilar sources is all the more crucial. Mundal's overview draws together numerous threads from preceding chapters, weaving these together with a view toward future directions of research.

Among the most vexing questions in Old Norse mythology concerns the potentially lost stories behind references, quotations, and summaries or allusions, as in the case of lines from a charm about Heimdalr discussed by Tolley. Joseph S. Hopkins takes up this topic in "Phantoms of the *Edda*: Observations Regarding Eddic Items of Unknown Provenance in the *Prose Edda*". He reviews passages of eddic poetry quoted in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* where a poem or other source is possible in the background but no text has survived. Hopkins argues that the quotations have not simply been composed for the sake of *Edda*'s narration, a view supported by parallels between Snorri's *Edda* and Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, although those parallels lead into the question of whether the common information is rooted in an oral tradition or might reflect an early circulating written source.

The search for continuities from stories in medieval sources into folklore recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth century is often seen as emblematic of interest in later folklore, especially where the later folklore can fill gaps in understandings of the early material. Eldar Heide takes on the challenge of such a study in "Magical Fishing in *Historia Norwegie*: Incomprehensible without Late Folklore". Such comparative studies have a history of controversy, and Heide is careful to establish his methodological footing. Through comparative evidence provided by later ethnographic descriptions and nineteenth-century folklore of Norway and Iceland, he illuminates an obscure statement in the medieval *Historia Norwegie* connected to fishing by the Sámi, demonstrating a background of the description in legend traditions that must have a continuity of many centuries.

Of course, many cases of possible long-term continuities are much more problematic to assess, resulting in open questions that beg further research. The book is brought to a close by just such a riddlesome case presented by Terry Gunnell with Tom Muir. In "George Marwick's Account of 'The Muckle Tree or Igasill': Folklore or Literature?", they offer a source-critical examination of a purportedly oral tradition documented in the Orkney Islands at the turn of the twentieth century. The story "The Muckle Tree" bears remarkable similarities to Scandinavian mythology in both plot and the names it includes, yet it also deviates from what is known from medieval sources in striking

ways. Gunnell and Muir raise the possibility that this account is rooted in the circulation of an early translation Scandinavian mythology that may have been available in the Orkney Islands, in which case the written work would seem to have entered into oral lore. However, many traditions found in the Orkney Islands seem to have roots in the Middle Ages or earlier, supporting the possibility of a locally developed variant of the death of the god Baldr with long-term continuity.

The chapters of this final section return to questions that were central to discussions of folklore and Old Norse mythology a century ago, both in their explorations of potential continuities from ancient times into post-medieval folklore and also in opening relationships of accounts in medieval sources to one another and to broader traditions. The present authors, however, approach these questions with current theories and understandings of how traditions operate as well as awareness of the methodological caveats that undermined the sustainability of many interpretations in earlier scholarship. Although the questions were being asked more than a century ago and such investigations were subsequently marginalized in research, these chapters reveal their value, relevance, and interest today, showing that they can be addressed in methodologically sound ways.

## Full Circle

The five sections of this book form a cycle. Although the chapters are independent and focus on different cases, the cycle of the sections loosely follows that of a contemporary monographic study. The introduction outlines the topic, the first section discusses theories and methodology, the second situates the object of research interest in society, simpler units of the tradition are then brought into focus, building up to those that are more complex. This organization in itself reflects significant differences from research in the first half of the twentieth century, when comparative use of post-medieval folklore was popular. First, methods and theory are not only foregrounded, but also plural and dynamic, rather than exclusive, rigid, and mechanically implemented. Second, society and practices are in focus rather than treating mythology as something to be approached as an ideal object independent of them. Third, attention is on forms of variation and meaning production rather than on a unified and reified vision of which all sources are fragmentary and imperfect reflections. Rather than leading to conclusions *per se*, the progression through this book's sections invites the reader to reflect on questions of larger scope that were the focus of the opening section on theory and methods – questions that have become central points of concern in the field.

This book is more than the sum of its chapters: it points to a watershed in how scholars engage with folklore research and post-medieval folklore, which itself reflects a breakdown in the tendency in Old Norse Studies to view “folklore” as something exclusive to post-medieval cultures. Using post-medieval folklore and perspectives gained from it in research on Old Norse mythology and religion is, in a sense, a return to what researchers were doing a century ago, yet, it is also done with the benefit of a century of development in theories, methods, and knowledge of methodological caveats. In several respects, this constitutes a reopening of scholarship to possibilities that were an integrated part of research as it took shape across the nineteenth century, returning to it with the insights and understanding that have accumulated while folklore and folklore research were kept at a distance. The diverse contributions brought together in these pages shed new light on questions in each of the three central domains of interest in folklore and Old Norse mythology mentioned above, while the discussions they unfold bridge across these domains and the various disciplines that engage them. Taken individually, each chapter offers new insights, perspectives, and potentially also new tools that will be of value to future research. When considered together, they illuminate a rising trend in research on Old Norse mythology and perhaps also – at least to some extent – its course for the future. Through reading this volume from different perspectives, the dialogues between the chapters gathered here, with the many works that they engage beyond the covers of this book, offer a foundation for advancing these discussions in new and unforeseen directions.