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Folklore and Old Norse Mythology

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Published as volume 323 in the series Folklore Fellows' Communications by the Kalevala Society, Helsinki, in 2021; 696 pages (ISBN 978-952-9534-02-9).

This book responds to the rising boom of interest in folklore and folklore research in the study of Old Norse mythology. The twenty-two authors of this volume reveal the dynamism of this lively dialogue, which is characterized by a diversity of perspectives linking to different fields and national scholarships.

The chapters open with a general overview of how the concepts of 'folklore' and 'mythology' have been understood and related across the history of Old Norse studies. This is followed by a group of chapters that discuss and present different approaches and types of source materials, with methodological and theoretical concerns. The interest in folklore is bound up with interests in practice and lived religion, which are brought into focus in a series of chapters relating to magic and ritual. Attention then turns to images that link to mythology and different mythic agents in studies that explore a variety of usage in meaning-making in different forms of cultural expression. The next group of studies spotlights motifs, with perspectives on synchronic usage across genres and different media, cross-cultural exchange and long-term continuities. The volume culminates in discussions of complex stories, variously behind medieval sources and relationships between accounts found in medieval sources and those recorded from more recent traditions.

The book's first section, *Approaches*, is constituted of five chapters. John Lindow opens the section with perspectives on the development of research in "Folklore, Folkloristics, and an 'Old Norse Mythology Method'?". Jens Peter Schjødt then engages currently debated topics in "Pre-Christian Religions of the North as Folklore, with Special Reference to the Notion of

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Edited by
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‘Pantheon’”. Sophie Bønding has a strong theoretical emphasis in “Conceptualising Continuity in the Christianisation: Towards a Discursive Approach”. Olof Sundqvist illustrates the potential of interdisciplinary approaches 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”. The section is closed by Frog’s outline of a framework for addressing several current issues in “Mythic Discourse Analysis”.

The second section, *Magic and Ritual*, is formed by four chapters. In “*Seiðr* and (Sámi) Shamanism: Definitions, Sources, and Identities”, Kendra Willson considers how *seiðr* and its construction in comparative research has been shaped by scholars’ contemporary trends and concerns. Stephen A. Mitchell then offers “Notes on *historiolas*, Referentiality, and Time in Nordic Magical Traditions”, raising valuable issues related to mythological narratives and their connections to charm texts. Bengt af Klintberg then brings into focus a particular Swedish charm and its potential for continuities from a pre-Christian milieu in “The Dead Mother: An Exceptional Nordic Binding Charm”. Clive Tolley completes the section with an extensive and thorough study “Heimdallr’s Charm: The Lost *Heimdallargaldr* and Symbolism and Allusion in the Myths of Heimdallr”, which first explores the image of the god Heimdallr and then turns to the relationship of the mysterious source to charm traditions.

The third section, *Mythic Images and Agents*, also consists of four chapters. In “Divine Gear? – ‘Odinic’ Disguise and Its Narrative Contexts in Medieval Icelandic Literature”, Joonas Ahola explores the role of images in meaning-making, and how connections of images with the mythological sphere can shape the significance of the same images in other contexts. Leszek Gardela then turns attention to artefacts in the archaeological record in “Women and Axes in the North: Diversity and Meaning in Viking Age Mortuary Practices”, where he argues for axes as ritual objects in these contexts based on a wide range of comparative evidence. In “Wise Men and Half Trolls”, Rudolf Simek and Valerie Broustin turn discussion to

supernatural agents, bringing into focus the often overlooked position of trolls in the genealogies of significant Icelandic families. Tommy Kuusela brings the section to a close with a return to the history of scholarship in “The Giants and the Critics: A Brief History of Old Norse ‘Gigantology’”, exploring how views on giants in mythology and folklore have been shaped by scholars’ contemporary discussions.

The fourth section, *Motifs and Narratives*, is again comprised of four chapters. In “Mythological Motifs and Other Narrative Elements of *Vǫlsunga* saga in Icelandic Folk- and Fairytales”, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir explores long-term continuities and transformations of motifs in oral tradition. In “Gotland Picture Stones and Narration”, Laila Kitzler Áhfeldt then presents an approach to carvers’ use of templates in depicting stories, in which she uniquely applies Oral-Formulaic Theory. Kirsi Kanerva follows questions of composition with variation of a topic as it is addressed in different genres in “Genre Matters? – Female Suicide in Mythic, Mytho-Heroic, and Historical Contexts”. Karen Bek-Pedersen closes the section with a discussion of “Bolli Þorleiksson’s Celtic Horses”, with an approach to cross-cultural comparison more concerned with meanings than reconstructing earlier forms or origins.

The final section, *Stories*, is formed by another group of four chapters. Else Mundal opens discussion by raising issues about the value of different types of sources, connecting back to issues of genre, in “Old Norse Myths, Heroic Legends, and Folklore: Sources for Old Norse Religion on the Move”. The problem of distinguishing tradition behind medieval written sources is then taken on by Joseph Hopkins in “Phantoms of the *Edda*: Observations Regarding Eddic Items of Unknown Provenance in the *Prose Edda*”. Eldar Heide illustrates the potential for narrative traditions to endure in the long term and to provide insights into obscure sources in the past in “Magical Fishing in *Historia Norvegie*: Incomprehensible without Late Folklore”. The section and the book are then brought to a close by Terry Gunnell with Tom Muir in “George Marwick’s Account of ‘The Muckle Tree or Igasill’: Folklore or Literature?”, examining a case of potential

long-term continuity that might also reflect an oral tradition that emerged around an early written source.

Individually, the chapters variously offer reflexive and historical research criticism, new research frameworks, illustrative studies and exploratory investigations. Collectively, they illustrate the rapidly evolving multidisciplinary discussion at the intersections of folklore and Old

Norse mythology, where the transformative impacts were recently described as a paradigm shift. They open new paths for scholarly discussion with the potential to inspire future research.

The book will soon become available at: <https://tiedekirja.fi>.

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