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The Perception of Thunder Gods in Scandinavian and Northern Baltic Cultural Milieus: Idiosyncrasies, Changes and Possible Parallels

Victor Hugo Sampaio Alves, Federal University of Paraíba

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Supervisor: Johnni Langer (Federal University of Paraíba).*

This dissertation project proposes to examine the perceptions regarding Thunder gods in Scandinavian and Northern Baltic belief systems and mythologies. The theoretical inspirations for such an endeavor were the recent works of Declan Taggart (2017; 2018), which competently questioned the Norse god Þórr's connection with thunder. This compelled me to start searching for other areas of regency concerning this god, such as his role as protector of gods and men, giant-slayer, maintainer of cosmic order, helper of fertility and even as responsible for creative and cosmogonic acts (Lindow 1996: 17–19; Langer 2018: 226–239). Other turning points were Frog's studies, which offered a broad and in-depth look at a type of folk narrative indexed as ATU 1148B, demonstrating how the Germanic and Scandinavian traditions of this kind differed considerably from those circulating in Finnic, Baltic and Sámic traditions of the same type (Frog 2011: 89–91; 2014: 141–143), and Clive Tolley's extensive comparative investigation pointed out some interesting traits present in Þórr's relation with waters and the cosmic pillar (Tolley 2009: 283–287).

Þórr's lack of a connection with thunder, along with the fact that he was somehow related to protection, superhuman strength, community welfare and cosmic balance, made me ponder whether these features were the

result of a hybridization of his Germanic inheritance with certain characteristics of thunder gods present in mythological and belief systems of the Finno-Ugric peoples. If so, such transformations could have been introduced by the Finns, Estonians and Sámis through their contact with Scandinavians. My intention is to map the presence of thunder gods in these Finno-Ugric religions/mythologies while inquiring about the meanings, values, characterizations and areas of regency which were attributed to these gods by believers inside the vernacular religions. Once this has been done, I will investigate the mythology surrounding the Norse god Þórr for similar perceptions regarding the thunder god that could have emerged as a result of Finno-Ugric influence.

The an additional aim of the project is to indicate and elucidate how Scandinavian mythology, religion and culture received influences and borrowed from Finno-Ugric peoples in an attempt to invert previous ethnocentric studies that frequently assumed the similarities between these different religions to be loans and influences imported from the allegedly superior Scandinavian religion (Rydving 1990). Therefore, the basic aim is to compare how thunder gods were perceived in each of the respective cultural milieus, demonstrating the parallels between them as well as showing what seems to be

peculiar to each system. If changes and evolution in the perception of the thunder god within a religious system are observed, these will also be indicated.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The first step of the research is to map the presence of thunder gods inside each mythology (Scandinavian, Finnic, Sámic), attempting to understand how they were perceived and how they have operated within their traditions as symbols and models for understanding the world. In other words, it is a scrutinizing procedure to look for internal balance, steadiness and incoherence in the symbolic representation of these gods. The second step constitutes the main objective of the research, dedicated to putting these different traditions in a broad comparative perspective. Steps one and two correspond, respectively, to what Schjødt named ‘first’ and ‘fourth’ levels of comparison (Schjødt 2017a: 72). Since these different mythologies and systems of belief belong to peoples who have established cultural and historical contacts and exchanges, my proposal consists in what is called a genetic comparison (Schjødt 2017b: 2).

Mythology is approached in a broad sense as a system of signs and structures that are emotionally invested models for interpreting experience of both the seen and unseen worlds, with which people, then, interact (Frog 2015; 2018). Such a conception enables us to discuss these interactions as mythic discourses, allowing mythic narratives to be seen not only as stylistically representative of their respective genres, but as cultural discourses of which meaning can be analyzed on the levels of text, performance and oral tradition: it provides us with the tools to give an approximate answer of how mythic tradition operates and works as a means of constructing the community and the individual’s ego, as well as a mode of interpreting feelings and experiences (Siikala 2012: 34–35). Within mythic discourses are mental images, through which mythological phenomena are perceived by ‘seeing’ them instead of comprehending them logically or through abstract concepts. The act of interpretation creates in our minds mental images that could never be seen in reality; images that acquire meaning by referring to

phenomena from the mythic world. These images, of course, do not rise out of nothing but belong to a specific culture that will offer people a large – although limited – number of such shared images that may be engaged unconsciously (Siikala 2002: 47–49). Bearing this in mind, it is possible that the perception of thunder gods in Scandinavian and Northern Baltic areas could be fairly diverse and varied, although such variation would have been limited.

It is therefore impossible to separate the thunder gods present in these mythological systems from the contemporaneous mentality of their societies. This mentality is a set of cognitive, experiential, action-governing models for perceiving and analyzing the world; these models create and organize the perceptible expressions of a culture, and thus mentality becomes fixed and is transmitted along with these representations (Siikala 2002: 28). That being said, my objective is precisely to identify the roles of thunder gods in regard to these models of perception. These theoretical premises are the main foundations of my research.

Schjødt’s (2013) notion of ‘semantic center’ will be utilized as a tool in order to effectually identify and clarify the functions, characteristics, values, regencies and portrayals each of these thunder gods receive (and in turn, give) within their mythological systems.

Research Materials

The sources on Þórr are numerous. This is especially true if we consider mythological narratives in which, despite not being a protagonist, he is still somehow mentioned. His presence will be sought in materials such as The Prose Edda (with focus on *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*); in Eddic Poems (*Völuspá*, *Grimnismál*, *Skirnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Hymiskviða*, *Lokasenna* and *Brymskviða*); in some of the *Íslendingasögur* (*Eyrbyggja saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, *Njáls saga*) and *Fornaldarsögur* (*Gautreks saga*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*); and finally in skaldic poems such as *Þórsdrápa*, *Ragnarsdrápa*, *Húsdrápa* and *Haustlög*. The thunder gods from Finno-Ugric mythologies

we intend to analyze (Finnish, Sáami, and Estonian) will be pursued mainly in the folklore corpus encompassing oral traditions, poems, laments, short tales, incantations and the like (Kuusi, Bosley & Branch 1977; Honko et al. 1994; Jauhainen 1998; Virtanen & DuBois 2000; Kurrik 2013; Koskimies & Itkonen 2019). In the case of Saami traditions, other works will be taken into account, as for example Johannes Schefferus' *Laponia* (1674) and Lars Levi Laestadius' *Fragments of Lappish Mythology* (2002).

The primary sources to be analyzed indeed constitute a considerably long list. However, since the object of interest is well defined and fairly specific, it must be taken into account that the manifestation of thunder gods in many of these textual materials is brief, if not, in some cases, superficial. Also, the fact that these sources differ greatly from each other both chronologically as well as in their nature (epic poetry, oral prose folklore, incantations, prose sagas, fieldwork reports, bibliographic studies) will be kept at sight. Unfortunately, this is an arbitrary fact imposed by the nature of the sources themselves if one intends to study these different cultures from a comparative perspective. Nevertheless, the social, historical and cultural context in which each of these sources was written or collected will be made explicit and taken into consideration at all times. If we are to comprehend the perception of thunder gods and their role in contemporary thinking-models, it is not possible to separate such perceptions from the cultural milieu where they circulated and with which they established a network of dialogic relations.

This is an endeavor to bring Finno-Ugric studies to Brazil, where the field is practically nonexistent. Besides my master's thesis, which discussed some of the sources on Ukko, Hovregaellies and Þórr (Sampaio Alves 2019), nothing related to Finno-Ugric studies has been developed here. I hope this PhD research will not only bring relevant conclusions regarding thunder gods in the area, but that it will also turn the attention of a Portuguese audience to this thematic field of study.

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