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Asgard Revisited

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Asgard Revisited:

Old Norse Mythology and Icelandic National Culture 1820-1918

1. The dual nature of modern nationalism (glorifying the past and ancient traditions, while at the same time presenting the nation as modern and striving for a glorious future) has been likened to the two faces of the Roman god Janus: one facing towards the past, and the other one forwards, towards the future. In Iceland's national discourse, the cultural cultivation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature was determined by this dual nature. One might call it a division of tasks; whereas the more 'historical' Sagas of Icelanders (confined to a specified time and space, associated with the glorified Viking Age) were linked to Romantic historicism and the *backward*-looking face of nationalism, employment of the eddic narratives served a different purpose. The myths are more abstract, symbolic, unspecified, timeless and otherworldly than the sagas, and hence more readily applicable to convey ideological messages concerning the future of the nation. Due to the narrative flexibility of the genre, mythology is generally linked to the *forward*-looking face of nationalism.

2. The onset of a new movement in cultural history is usually accompanied by a temporary blindness for the beauty and merits of the preceding one. This explains why eddic themes are so suspiciously absent in the works of the first generation of Icelandic Romantics, notably the *Fjölismenn*; the myths were associated with the archaic *rímur*-tradition these poets sought to dispel in their renewal of Icelandic literature. Also, the very fact that the Norse myths were employed by other nations (notably Denmark and Germany) rendered them somewhat contaminated, and less 'Icelandic' than the Sagas of Icelanders. This relative absence of eddic themes is thus significant in itself, and equally revealing as the ideological employment of myth by later generations of Icelanders.

3. Nationalism is a modern phenomenon, and the transition from a pre-modern 'cultural identity' to actual national sentiments in the modern sense, occurred in the early nineteenth century, in the wake of Rasmus Rask's grim prediction that the Icelandic language would die out within the next three centuries. The awareness of a language and national culture 'under threat' gave rise to a collective sense of urgency: a salvage paradigm, which engendered the kind of cultural activism that would prove fundamental in the development of Icelandic nationalism as a programmatic and political movement.

4. Mythologies are more than simply static collections of old narratives. Mythology is a rhetorical device, a dynamic way of 'saying things'; a *modus operandi* rather than a set of stories. As a symbolic language, mythology can perform any of the following five rhetorical functions in modern discourses: primordialisation, indigenisation, universalisation, association, and differentiation.

5. Myths never occur in an ideological vacuum, and that which we generally refer to as 'reception' constitutes an essential element of the mythological praxis itself. The division between *original* myth (that is: medieval interpretations) and its later, *unoriginal* reception is a

misleading one. A more integrated approach to the matter is needed, in which both medieval and modern receptions constitute different manifestations of the same mode of rhetorical functionalisation. Snorri Sturluson's use of the myths as cultural capital is very similar to Finnur Magnússon's ideological mobilisation of the same material, some six hundred years later.

6. Referring to the Icelandic elves as the 'unwashed children of Eve' is highly offensive to this large (and very hygienic) majority of Iceland's population, and should be discarded as a piece of foul, human-colonial propaganda, intended to degrade the island's autochthonous hidden people.

7. Romantic nationalists had a predilection for female deities, rather than their male counterparts. Icelandic poets celebrated Iðunn, Freyja, Gefjun and (by extension) Hulda and the Lady of the Mountain as symbols of the nation, embodying the 'feminine' characteristics of national regeneration, peace, reconciliation, and even Scandinavian integration. This apparent deviation from the 'original' myths can be explained from the perspective of national philosophy; in the gendered concept of the nation, these goddesses represented the backward-looking face of Janus, and the link between the past and the present. They embodied peace and harmony, and served therefore as a civilised alternative to the male gods and their belligerent, even destructive characteristics. To a certain extent, these goddesses provided the modern nationalist with a 'light version' of Norse culture: one that resonated more easily with the moderate and peaceful ideals of modernity.

8. As a modern worldview, nationalism absorbs, recycles, and cannibalises on elements from pre-existing worldviews (religions and mythologies, both living and extinct) in a secular fashion.

9. Among historians of nationalism, there is a strong tendency to generalise, and to present one's own theoretical approach to national identity as universally applicable. Overstating the universal validity of any theory may however distort and oversimplify the national case studies conducted to strengthen the argument, and even invite selective insensitivity to very specific (cultural and geographical) local circumstances. Although general trends can certainly be identified, processes of identity formation differ from one cultural context to the next, and unfold along different lines in 'peripheral' and in 'central' areas, in large and in small communities. One size does not fit all, and one should take care not to 'copy paste' popular concepts and buzzwords from one study to the other, before critically assessing the applicability of these concepts in the case study in question.

10. The perpetual resignification and rejuvenation of ancient myths is the true apple of Iðunn, that keeps the gods forever young.