



Review Article

“Vituð ér enn—eða hvat?” Do you want to know, or what? Understanding medieval Scandinavian relationships with the divine

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CAROLYNE LARRINGTON. 2023. *The Norse myths that shape the way we think*. London: Thames & Hudson; 978-0-500-25234-5 hardback £20.

LESZEK GARDEŁA, SOPHIE BØNDING & PETER PENTZ (ed.). 2023. *The Norse sorceress: mind and materiality in the Viking world*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-953-7 hardback £60.

The peoples who inhabited the worlds discussed in these two books, either in reality or within our imaginations, are at once slippery and certain. We may believe we have a grip on what the Norse/Viking worlds were about, only to have new evidence or a new approach to existing data challenge our views. These two books, *The Norse myths that shape the way we think* and *The Norse sorceress: mind and materiality in the Viking world*, explore the ways in which medieval northerners understood and interacted with the sublime, the divine, the non-human within their worlds and, in turn, how these interactions shape our own imaginations.

As part of a Thames & Hudson popular series of books concerning mythology, *The Norse myths* by Carolyne Larrington is designed for a wide audience, presumably the titular “we” who these myths have influenced, predominantly western Europeans and North Americans, many with ties to Scandinavia. *The Norse myths* meditates on mediations, introducing Old Norse texts and material sources, and how these medieval myths have been (re)created and reinterpreted in the modern and post-modern eras. Anyone who has read an Old Norse saga will recognise the style of this book, meandering between the timelines of past and present, interweaving themes, like the branches of a tree, or threads of fate. To avoid confusion between gods, giants and heroes, Larrington’s other popular book *The Norse myths: a guide to the gods and heroes* (2017), and Heather O’Donoghue’s *From Asgard to Valhalla: the remarkable history of the Norse myths* (2024) are both useful references to have to hand to decipher these interwoven narratives.

Beginning at *Ginnungagap*, and concluding with *ragna rök*, 10 chapters cover mythscapes of Yggdrasil, Valhöll and Vínland the Good, and the gods and heroes within. Larrington is playful in the analyses of various mythical figures who are both divine and weird, but with very human characteristics. The science fiction writer Douglas Adams’s “dishevelled, drunken Einherjar ... vanish unobtrusively” because those valiant and honoured warriors are as much part of the London nightscape as they are separate from it (p.64).

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Contemplations of the divine and the mundane run throughout the book, asking us to consider “what kind of heroism ... will prevail in the modern world?” (p.78).

The way we think that shapes Norse myths could also be an appropriate title for the last chapter of this book, concerning *Vínland the Good*. The translation and interpretation of sagas that tell of a magical land to the west have influenced the way in which Europeans considered settlement in North America, underpinning colonial narratives of discovery and negatively influencing perceptions of Indigenous peoples to this day. These standard archaeological and saga narratives of exploration and discovery are challenged within current research. A decolonial perspective was missed in this chapter. *Vínland* and other Norse myths have also inspired numerous anime and manga such as *Vinland saga* (Yukimura 2005). A discussion of Japanese perceptions of Norse myths would have presented a fuller discussion of how ‘we’ are all shaped by these myths.

Larrington dismisses runic magic as “pure invention” (p.92), but this may disregard potential arcane uses of runic finds such as the Ribe skull fragment which is interpreted as an example of healing magic (Stocklund 1996, 2004). Other inscriptions, such as numerous Greenlandic finds, for instance, invoke a host of divine and supernatural beings including Mary, Guð (God), Rafael, Gabriel, Mikjáll (Imer 2017). Reference to these inscriptions helps explain how Sophie Bønding conceptualises magic in the second book under review: “magic is not an entity discernible from religion, but rather a form of ritualised behaviour and related beliefs, which constitute an element of religion” (p.4).

Beliefs and practices as witnessed through myths, runic invocations, amulets: all of these are human interventions towards understanding non-human or superhuman elements. The *vǫlva* or sorceress speaks her vision of *ragnarǫk* in the Old Norse eddaic poem *Vǫluspá* before she sinks away or down into the ground (*nú mon hon sökkvask*). The editors of *The Norse sorceress: mind and materiality in the Viking world* also seek answers from objects called out of the ground, not by the gods in this case but mostly by metal-detectorists. The Danefæ treasure trove scheme resulted in 30 336 objects being brought into the collection of the Danish National Museum. This collection was explored under the auspices of the *Tanken bag tingene* (“Thoughts behind things”) project and the resulting 36 studies of religious belief and the *vǫlur*, the sorceresses who used or inspired the things, are collected in this comprehensive and beautifully presented volume, which is a welcome addition to the library of studies concerning practitioners of magic in the past 20 years.

The book is divided into five themed sections. The first four studies introduce the function of divination and how the mind links to the myths and mythscapes as analysed by Larrington. The second section considers what, where and how activities occurred in ritual landscapes. The third section considers the role of animals as mediators between the divine and the mundane. The fourth section allows us to examine the ritual specialist, who they may be and how they rise from the earth through objects and from texts. The final section studies the equipment and tools required for the *vǫlur* to do their work and enable their assigned roles within society.

Bønding focuses on the agentive role of *vǫlur*, acting as connectors and sensemakers. *Vǫlur* are treated as agents to create new insights and new ways of doing in relation to people, animals and landscapes, with objects and ideas, the nonhuman or more-than-human

elements, as insightfully discussed by Sara Ann Knutson. One of these elements is gender, which Eirinn Jefford Franks considers in terms of intersectional performance of identity.

Larrington describes the mythical hall of the warrior dead, Valhöll and the mythscape surrounding the World Tree, Yggdrasil, situating the reader within the Norse metaphysical environment (pp.27–78). John Ljungkvist and Ben Raffield consider how Gamla Uppsala has ‘filtered into antiquarian and archaeological research’, despite any archaeological evidence for the temple that Adam of Bremen describes.

Marianne Hem Eriksen describes the hall not merely as an empty place where rituals occur, but more as a non-human entity “conceptualised as a body” which has multigenerational rituals performed on its behalf from its birth to its death (p.82). Lars Grundvad examines burial rituals at elite hall sites. Hem Eriksen reminds us that entry to the rituals within the hall would not only have been limited to the elite, but also their subordinates, subalterns or enslaved persons. Karen Bek-Pedersen takes up that challenge to discuss routine and domestic ritual spaces such as *dyngjur*, outhouses generally described for textile work. This *dyngja* will be immediately recognisable as the scene of *Darraðarljóð*, Dörruðr’s vision of Valkyries weaving the fates of men before the Battle of Clontarf (Larrington, pp.65–7). Weaving, spinning and all textile work are activities imbued with ritual symbolism. Matthias Egeler analyses the saga environment, how the land and water have ritual meaning and purpose and how non-human elements, such as the fire giant Surtr, were used to make sense of the volcanic Icelandic landscape. How and why people moved through various landscapes for ritual purposes is discussed by Luke John Murphy and Simon Nygaard, exploring differences between circular and linear processions. Ritualised deaths are discussed by Matthias Simon Toplak and Marianne Moen. Considering the afterlife of Viking-Age graves, Alison Klevnäs reminds us that these ritual specialists are ancestors of modern populations. I found Klevnäs’s chapter quite poignant in the context of how culture and cultural landscapes are routinely interfered with or destroyed: “violence was a necessary part of the transferral of objects to new owners” (p.179). This weaponisation of cultural and ritual landscapes by adversaries is a strategy that continues in present-day conflict.

Anyone with cursory knowledge of Viking-Age culture is aware of the importance of animals within it. Sigmund Oehrl discusses the relationship between birds and the divine, as mediators between human and non-human, particularly noticeable in the graves of ritual specialists. Similarly, Harriet Evans Tang and Keith Ruiter discuss the importance of horses within ritual, as agents and objects of ritual. Aleks Pluskowski discusses canids, wolves and dogs, and their connections with death. Following Anne Stine Ingstad’s interpretations of the animal imagery within the Oseberg tapestries, Luciano Pezzoli proposes there are “two aesthetic and narrative systems” on the wagon which allow one to read “the ornamental language of other artefacts in the collection” (p.251).

Whether by design or chance, a magic number of nine contributions discuss ritual specialists. Jeanette Varberg approaches the question of gender identity and ritual specialisation, a fitting follow-on from Jefford Franks’s contribution. Sofie Laurine Albris discusses the surprising amount of onomastic evidence of pre-Christian women’s personal names with potential sacral elements. Three chapters analyse aspects of the *vǫlva* buried in Fyrkat 4, Denmark. Else Roesdahl puts this most iconic grave of a ritual practitioner into context—possibly the *vǫlva* of King Haraldr *blátǫnn* himself? Peter Pentz provides a comprehensive catalogue of

grave goods (well photographed by Gardeła), and Ulla Mannering and Charlotte Rimstad discuss the textiles, finest clothing and wrapping made with gold and silver thread, luxurious furs and leathers and brightly dyed fabrics.

There is ample evidence for the expected kit of ritual practitioners as well as the bizarre manner of their burials. Neil Price provides an overview of the four ritual specialists and staff bearers at Birka, Sweden, that have been excavated to date and which have provided the foundation for considerations of ritual practitioners in this century. Taking an intersectional approach, Julie Westlye, Leszek Gardeła and Klaudia Karpínska revisit the *völva* from Gutdalen, Norway, postulating that the staff, and possibly other ritual items found within the burial, could have been viewed as a “material extension of the self” (p.371). Ole Thirup Kastholm and Jens Ulriksen revisit two complex Danish graves from Roskilde Fjord, Gerdrup B and Trekroner-Grydehøj A505, two “extraordinary burials even in a Viking world where burial customs were diverse to say the least” (p.396).

The discrete updates on specific types of finds are very welcome. Gardeła updates the corpus of staffs. Matthew Delvaux focuses on the various necklaces found within graves of suspected *völur*. The significance of snake amulets found on these necklaces provides an interesting link to Pezzoli’s study on animal imagery on the Oseberg wagon. Mads Dengsø Jessen reviews miniature chairs, Peter Vang Petersen surveys wheel-shaped pendants, Gardeła contributes a study of miniature weaponry, including shields, swords, helmets, spears and axes, and Vlasatý considers miniature weathervanes as markers of a particular seafaring group within the Baltic and Old Rus. Terry Gunnell’s chapter spans nearly 10 thousand years of evidence regarding the use of masks in shamanistic ritual from Germany nine thousand years ago to sixteenth-century Iceland. This reader is more comfortable with the more discrete and specific studies than the broader contributions. Indeed, with such an expansive volume, an index would have been helpful to link across the contributions and for ease of reference to the archaeology.

The Norse sorceress is the most comprehensive published volume on ritual practitioners in pre-Christian Scandinavia, revisiting existing knowledge and narratives, providing useful catalogues of small finds and proposing new directions for future research. It is a must for those interested in the intersections between myth, belief, practice, human and non-humans. The artists and writers described by Larrington have even more inspiration for further mythic interpretations.

The knowledge of *The Norse sorceress* has indeed emerged from the earth. Equipped with this knowledge and supplied with lists of popular works inspired by *The Norse myths*, the reader is well armed to understand how Norse worlds are imagined, and to counter potential destructive consequences of that imagining in an increasingly insecure world.

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