

- gamle Danske og Norske Historie* (1757) or *Om de nordiske folks ældste oprindelse* (1770), that Jan Ragnar Hagland examines in 'The Reception of Old Norse Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century Norway', in *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. Andrew Wawn, Enfield Lock 1994.
- 4 'At däremot många af de Nordiska Skaldeqwäden blifwit flyttade til Island, och där äro förwarade, då de förkommit i sit rätta fädernes land', Lagerbring 1769, p. 481.
- 5 Lagerbring 1769, pp. 57, 428, 449.
- 6 Jonas Nordin, *Ett fattigt men fritt folk. Nationell och politisk självbild i Sverige från sen stormaktstid till slutet av frihetstiden*, Eslöv 2000; *Nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige*, eds. Åsa Karlsson and Bo Lindberg, Uppsala 2002; Patrick Hall, *The Social Construction of Nationalism: Sweden as an Example*, Lund 1998.
- 7 See Mattias Legné, *Fäderneslandets rätta beskrivning*, Helsingfors 2004, or Johanna Widenberg, *Fäderneslandets antikviteter. Etnoterritoriella historiebruk och integrationssträvanden i den svenska statsmaktens antikvariska verksamhet ca 1600–1720*, Stockholm 2006.
- 8 Lagerbring 1769, p. 204.
- 9 See the dissertation *Dissertatio de unionne Calmariensi*, presented by the student Aaron Törngren, 1745.
- 10 Perhaps this is a typically Swedish dilemma, since Swedes in particular have been confronted with the issue of being both nationalistic and Nordic, as Steinar Imsen puts it in 'Grenser i Nord', in *Grenser og grannelag i Nordens historie*, ed. Steinar Imsen, Oslo 2005, p. 17.

# Taming the Barbarian

## Literary Representations of Northern Antiquity, 1750–1850

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Around 1600, scholars outside Iceland became aware of the rich resources on Nordic history that were preserved in old manuscripts on this remote island. As early as the seventeenth century, scholars in Denmark and Sweden began extensive studies of the content of the manuscripts. The poems and sagas also attracted attention elsewhere in Europe, as the Nordic scholars of that time generally presented their findings in Latin, even translating examples of the Old Norse writings into that language. But it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that serious consideration of the writings as literature commenced outside Iceland, when the pioneers of pre-Romanticism in European culture discovered this heritage, and began to translate the writings and to rework them in new literary works. In due course, this creative reception of Old Norse literature became focussed in Scandinavia, culminating in

the Romantic era. Old Norse writings also continued to be a major source of study for historians.

The premises of these two approaches to the reformulation of Old Norse literature, the scholarly and the literary, are of course quite different. Poets and writers are obviously not bound to be faithful to the sources in the same way as scholars: the former are, above all, free to fill in the gaps. On the other hand, for the first century or so, the literary reformulation was significantly constrained by the aesthetic and ethical discourse. The picture of Northern Antiquity presented by poets and writers generally reflected a compromise between the sources themselves and the taste of their own time. These compromises undoubtedly influenced the image of the Nordic world, both at home and abroad, during an important period of development of national identity in Europe. Only a few issues can be discussed within the bounds of this brief paper.

At first European writers were impressed especially by the primitive and the terrifying in Old Norse literature. Two books by Swiss historian Paul-Henri Mallet, published in French in Copenhagen, blazed the trail, and had a major influence on the way that the Old Norse heritage was initially received by the educated European public. Not only did Mallet's writings become very popular in the original French, they were also translated into many other languages. The first, *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, où l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs & des usages des anciens Danois* (1755), was an overview of Old Norse culture and customs, based upon research by leading scholars. The latter book, *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756), is a short anthology of Old Norse literature. Like most of those who translated such selections of the literature into major languages during the eighteenth century, Mallet had little knowledge of Old Norse. Many of them did not understand any modern Nordic language, either. The vast majority of the translations were made from the Latin. Mallet and his successors focussed mainly on the mythology recorded in the Prose Edda, along with about ten eddic and skaldic poems.<sup>1</sup> As it happened, a disproportionately large amount of the poetry that had been translated into Latin by Nordic scholars was concerned with themes of death, often in the context of terrifying events and/or the supernatural. *Krákumál* became the best known of all Old Norse poems; it was long reputed to have been composed by Ragnar Loðbrók himself moments before his death in the snake-pit of his enemy King Ella. The stoicism expressed in the poem was greatly admired; the speaker's attitude is no less than defiant at the end of the poem, when he maintains that he will 'die laughing'. Most of the other works that formed the canon of Old Norse poetry in the eighteenth century were similar in nature. Six are drawn from Thomas Bartholin's book on the ancient

Danes' supposed fearlessness in the face of death: *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis libri tres* (Copenhagen 1689). Of the Old Norse poems that became familiar to educated eighteenth-century Europeans, few are today regarded as being of much literary value.

Typical attitudes are seen in the introduction by English translator Thomas Percy to his book *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry. Translated from the Islandic Language*, published in London in 1763.<sup>2</sup> While Percy implies by the subtitle that the translations were made direct from the original Old Icelandic, in fact he knew little of the language.<sup>3</sup> His knowledge of Old Norse literature was largely restricted to what had been translated into Latin. He was clearly unaware of how one-sided that selection of poems was: 'From the following specimens it will be found, that the poetry of the Scalds chiefly displays itself in images of terror.'<sup>4</sup> Percy had no intention, of course, of putting his readers off by this emphasis on terror; he is alluding to the contemporary discourse of the sublime. Some years earlier, Edmund Burke had written in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) that the terrible is one of the major sources of the sublime.<sup>5</sup> Percy is not only impressed by the terrifying in the poems, but also the primitive; he believes that the poems reveal 'the workings of the human mind in its almost original state of nature.'<sup>6</sup> The comment is not intended to be patronising; it should be viewed in the context of Rousseau's recent writings on the possibility that something valuable may have been lost early in the process of civilisation.

Percy's renowned fellow-countryman, the poet Thomas Gray, set out at about the same time to rework two Old Norse poems in English: *Darðarljóð* as 'The Fatal Sisters' and *Baldurs draumar* as 'The Descent of Odin'. In Gray's version the fearsome ambiance of the poems is magnified by his vivid descriptions. But the external presentation, the form and register, are consistent with the aesthetic conventions of the age.

A body of poems attributed to an ancient Celt, Ossian, were catapulted into prominence at just the same time. They were first published in 1760–63. Some scholars made little distinction between Old Norse and Old Celtic culture. Among them was Mallet, as witness the title of his literary anthology, above. Due to this conflation of the Nordic and Celtic, the popularity of Ossian's verse proved beneficial for Old Norse poetry. But where Celts and Norsemen come face to face in the Ossianic verses, it is quite clear that the cultures are different. This was emphasised by Scottish academic Hugh Blair in a paper often published with editions of the poetry. Comparing *Krákumál* with Ossian, he concludes: 'When we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desert, into a fertile and cultivated country.'<sup>7</sup> The ancient world of Ossian was not as uncouth as that depicted in Old Norse poetry. It was more palatable to the eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century reader; not surprisingly, for there is little doubt that the publisher of the poems, James Macpherson, was in truth the author of a large proportion of the works, in addition to adapting extant fragments to modern taste. Since even distinguished scholars confused the Old Norse world and the Old Celtic, it is understandable that many poets and writers did not appreciate the distinction. And even those who knew better must have been tempted to adjust their Old Norse material to the poetic world of Ossian, for instance by an admixture of sensibility, in order to win over their readership.

The most important translator of Old Norse verse into German in the eighteenth century was undoubtedly Johann Gottfried Herder, who included some examples in his anthology of folk songs, *Volkslieder* (1778–79). At the end of the century he published an important paper in the form of a dialogue, ‘Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung’ (1796), in which he urged German poets to make use of Norse mythology rather than Greek, as some were indeed already doing. His main argument is that Norse mythology is closer to German language and culture. Herder believes that this could lead to renewal in German literature. The ‘apple of rejuvenation’ in the paper’s title refers not only to this possibility, but also to Herder’s view that Norse mythology requires considerable ‘cleaning up’ in order to be of use. He felt that the more barbaric elements must be eliminated, and that it was natural to continue to uphold the aesthetic rules of the Ancient Greeks. This quest to embellish and civilise Northern Antiquity became the predominant approach in the reworking of Old Norse literature in the following decades.

Heinrich Heine maintained in his evaluation of the Romantic school in Germany that it consisted solely of the reawakening of medieval literature.<sup>8</sup> This may be an exaggeration, but the creative reception of such works of medieval art and literature, which contrasted starkly with Graeco–Roman classicism, was at least a major aspect of German Romanticism. Both Heine and the pioneers of the Romantic school saw it as a key factor that these medieval works were moulded by the spirit of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> For Danish and Swedish Romantics who wished to make use of Old Norse literature in a similar fashion, the principal sources were the Eddas and the legendary sagas, which were seen as reflecting pagan pre-Christian values. Perhaps due in part to German literary influence, the pagan Old Norse world as interpreted by Scandinavian poets often bears a marked resemblance to the Christian Middle Ages.

Adam Oehlenschläger had already written an essay on the question of whether Norse mythology could be useful in new poetry before he became acquainted with German Romanticism through Henrik Steffens. In his essay, written for a competition held at the University of Copenhagen in 1800,

Oehlenschläger put his arguments for modern poets to use this mythology. He saw the major advantage of Norse mythology as the freedom it confers, due to having been used very little in poetry hitherto. Oehlenschläger also mentions other sources on ancient Norse history. He sees the limited amount of reliable information in the sources as making the ancient Norse world particularly attractive for poets, as it gives them more scope for creativity: 'Vi interessere os for at faae mere at vide om disse Tider, end der staaer i vor Magt, og Indbildningskraften, som altid er rede, skaber os med Fornøielse en nye Verden.'<sup>10</sup> The imagination need not be restricted by anything, in his view – 'uden Smagen'.<sup>11</sup> While Oehlenschläger placed less emphasis on the imagination in his later career, his free approach to the old sources did not change.

After his initial enthusiasm, Oehlenschläger turned away from pure Romanticism, preferring to seek inspiration in the German neoclassical poets Goethe and Schiller. Subsequently his taste largely reflected classical aesthetics, even where his subject matter was Nordic. This reorientation towards classicism is clearly seen in his play *Baldur hin Gode* (1807), which is in the form of a Greek tragedy. This of course imbues the Norse mythological content with a classical ambiance. Yet this only works because Oehlenschläger from the very beginning had viewed the material from a classical perspective. 'Ikke Lyst, til at skrive en græsk Tragoedie, har bragt mig til at vælge Baldur', writes Oehlenschläger in a discussion of the play, 'men Baldur, som først be-seiede mig, har tvunget mig til at skrive en græsk Tragoedie.'<sup>12</sup> And he gives a classical touch to most of the important characters in all his later works set in the ancient Norse world. Ida Falbe-Hansen writes in her essay on his use of Old Norse subject-matter: 'Øhlenschlæger bruger jævnlig et ganske eget lille Kunstgreb for at kaste Kunstens Skønhedsglans over sine nordiske Skikkelser: han gør dem til græsk-romerske Statuer.'<sup>13</sup>

Late in his career, Oehlenschläger used the *Sagas of Icelanders* as the basis for a couple of plays. While the *Sagas of Icelanders* were at that time generally regarded as broadly historically true, he allows himself the same licence as in his prior reworkings of Old Norse literature, both with respect to plot and to details of social reality. In *Kiartan og Gudrun* (1848) the main protagonist is not slain by the sword of his sworn brother, as in *Laxdæla saga*, but is accidentally killed by an arrow from his mistress' bow: Gudrun was aiming for a supposed rival for Kiartan's affections. In order to elevate Iceland to a slightly higher plane of civilisation than the sagas imply, Oehlenschläger resorts, for example, in one scene to showing Kiartan's father unwrapping an Ancient Greek statue which he has just been sent from abroad.

*Frithiofs saga* (1825) clearly indicates that Esaias Tegnér had a background in both Greek and theology. In his notes on the work from 1839, 'Anmärkningar

såsom inledning till Frithiofs saga', Tegnér writes that he sought to create 'en poetisk bild af det gamla nordiska hjältelivvet.'<sup>14</sup> He goes on:

I sagan förekommer mycket storartadt och heroiskt, som gäller för alla tider, och derföre både kunde och borde bibehållas; men derjemte ett och annat rätt, vildsint, barbariskt, som antingen borde heldt och hållet afsöndras, eller åtminstone mildras. Till en viss grad blef derföre nödvändigt at<sup>15</sup>

Tegnér in fact adds more to *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* than he omits. Above all he brings to it a subjective or psychological dimension, and links the events together in a more logical manner than in the saga. As the work progresses, the plot becomes increasingly Greek in character. Frithiof exhibits hubris towards the gods, for which he then suffers mental anguish. This has no parallels in the legendary saga of Friðþjófur, or in other Old Norse sagas as far as I know. A temple priest who bears a strong resemblance to a Christian priest teaches Frithiof the way to be at peace with both gods and men: he must give up his desire for revenge and learn to forgive. The temple priest's philosophy, as expressed in his speech at the end of the work, has little basis in sources on the Norse pagan world, but is all the more reminiscent of the Christian view of life.

### Att tämja barbaren:

#### litterära representationer av fornnorden 1750–1850

Europeiska författare och poeter upptäckte den nordiska forntiden, och därmed betydelsen av det fornnordiska kulturarvet, först i mitten av 1700-talet. Utanför Island hade den fornnordiska litteraturen förut till stor del varit förbehållen forskare. Tidiga pionjärer inom förromantiken i den europeiska kulturen översatte dessa skrifter som litteratur och började omarbeta dem i nya litterära verk. I sinom tid blev detta kreativa mottagande av fornnordisk litteratur koncentrerat till Skandinavien, och kom att kulminera under romantiken. Under lång tid reglerades den litterära omformningen av detta material i betydande grad av en estetisk och etisk diskurs. Den bild av det forntida Norden som presenterades av poeter och författare reflekterade i allmänhet en kompromiss mellan källorna själva och smaken i deras egen samtid. Otivvelaktigt influerade dessa kompromisser bilden av den nordiska världen, både hemma och utomlands, under en betydelsefull period av nationell identitetsutveckling i Europa.

Keywords: Old Norse literature, reception history, images of the North, national identity

## Notes

- 1 Most of these poems are discussed in Anne Heinrichs, "Der Kanon altnordischer Poesie im 18. Jhd.", in *The Audience of the Sagas. The Eighth International Saga Conference I*, Gothenburg 1991, pp. 201–221.
- 2 Percy completed the book in 1761, but it was not published for two years.
- 3 Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 26–27.
- 4 *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, p. A6.
- 5 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford 1998, p. 36.
- 6 *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, p. A8.
- 7 Hugh Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal", in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill, Edinburgh 1996, p. 349.
- 8 Heinrich Heine, *Die Romantische Schule. Heines Werke in fünf Bänden IV*, Berlin 1967, p. 189.
- 9 See, for example, Gerhard Schulz, *Romantik. Geschichte und Begriff*, 2nd ed. Munich 2002, pp. 15–16.
- 10 Adam Oehlenschläger, *Æstetiske Skrifter 1800–1812*, Copenhagen 1980, p. 15.
- 11 Oehlenschläger, p. 16.
- 12 Oehlenschläger, p. 34.
- 13 Ida Falbe-Hansen, *Øhlenschlägers nordiske Digtning og andre Afhandlinger*, Copenhagen 1921, p. 107.
- 14 Esaias Tegnér, *Samlade skrifter VI*, Stockholm (undated), p. 229.
- 15 Tegnér, pp. 229–230.

# Ideas of an Island in the North

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Iceland as part of the North, especially the far North, has a long history, but there are a number of other dominant discourses about Iceland. It is the aim here to demonstrate how images of Iceland have been constructed at a variety of times and places, and to offer some suggestions as to why they are as diverse as they seem to be, drawing on examples from literature on Iceland from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

One of the most important discourses about Iceland stems from it being an island, and therefore part of a wider 'island discourse'. From Antiquity, descriptions of islands have tended to be similar, even when the islands were far from each other and different in many respects. The American scholar, John Kirtland Wright, stated that, 'islands were convenient topographic units