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SPECIAL ISSUE:
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON
CELTIC AND SCANDINAVIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Editorial Note

For several years the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh has hosted an annual colloquium on 'Thinking about Mythology in the 21st Century'. The event owes its origin to the enthusiasm of Dr Emily Lyle, whose aim from the beginning has been to bring together scholars interested in critically examining the mythologies of the Indo-European cultural world from different perspectives. In 2017 an initiative was taken to focus the scope of the colloquium on Celtic and Scandinavian mythology, and with the active input of the Department of Scandinavian Studies the first gathering with over thirty speakers was held in November.

This special issue of *Temenos* includes a selection of papers from that successful event, representing a range of theoretical and critical perspectives that are current in the study of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology today. The comparisons drawn between the two traditions by the individual authors elucidate both the thematic similarities in the materials under investigation and the broader methodological issues pertinent to the interpretation and analysis of data relating to pre-Christian belief systems.

In the opening article Jonathan Wooding considers the relationship between archaeology and myth especially from the perspective of Celtic-speaking cultures. With a number of case studies Wooding illustrates how the various appropriations of 'myth' in archaeological research have shaped perceptions of history and ethnic identity in both academic and public discourse. His critical examination adds nuance to the view that the study of myth and material culture represents two mutually exclusive forms of knowledge, and highlights several points of convergence where the two subjects can be brought into dialogue by moving beyond the problematic presuppositions of previous scholarship.

The relationship between myth and materiality is also addressed in the contribution by Sara Ann Knutson, who offers an innovative reading of Old Norse myths from the perspective of contemporary material culture studies. Knutson's theoretical approach draws on the recent 'material turn' in historical and literary disciplines, which has explored the 'social lives' of objects and their role in mediating and negotiating cultural interactions. She argues that in Old Norse mythology, too, particular physical objects can be viewed as having active agency that defines their special status. The themes of manufacture, ownership, exchange, and utility that feature in the depiction of these objects in the mythical narratives also provide an insight

into the lived reality of Iron Age peoples, reflecting the ways in which this 'mythical materiality' is rooted in the mundane world.

Jonas Wellendorf's article explores the medieval Christian authors' attitudes towards the pre-Christian past by offering an insightful comparative analysis of Oddr munkr's late-twelfth century *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* and the contemporary Middle Irish tale *Acallam na Senórach*. While the comparison reveals certain shared features in the two stories, it even more importantly underscores the different narrative strategies that the authors and compilers of these works have employed in reframing the pagan traditions. From this perspective his discussion accentuates the importance of reading the medieval literary sources as products of particular historical and cultural circumstances, in which the earlier traditions were continuously re-shaped by specific agendas of harmonising, demonising, or historicising the pagan past.

The thematic similarities between Scandinavian and Irish materials also serve as a starting point for Felix Lummer's contribution, which re-evaluates the question of the possible Irish origin of an Old Norse literary character Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum. Lummer presents an overview of the relevant literary and folklore sources to argue that many of the parallels that have been used to support this hypothesis are more tenuous than has previously been acknowledged. Since many of the central mythological motifs relating to the Guðmundr narrative complex are ubiquitous in Scandinavian folklore and in folk tales more broadly, he suggests that their occurrence in the sagas can be explained without positing a direct borrowing or influence between Irish and Norse traditions.

John Shaw brings the approach of Indo-European comparative mythology to bear on two divine figures, the ruler of the Irish mythical race Tuatha Dé, the Dagda, and the Scandinavian god Thor. Shaw examines the shared qualities of these deities by relating their stories to the international tale type ATU1148B 'The Thunder Instrument', with particular emphasis on the role of both gods as defenders of the cosmic order against monstrous adversaries. With the help of the wider mythological framework Shaw proposes a sequence for the evolution and development of these traditions, tracing their origins to a celestial god whose traits and attributes are widely attested across the Indo-European cultural area.

The figure of Thor is also the focus of Emily Lyle, who similarly employs a comparative perspective in her analysis of Old Norse mythology. Lyle's interpretation of this body of material is based on a cosmological approach to the study of Indo-European myth, which she has developed in a number

of publications in recent decades. This schematic model views myths and cosmology as a system in which social organisation correlates with elements of space and time in a more complex manner than the Dumézilian functional theory assumed. Her analysis illustrates how such an approach can shed light on the cosmic ideas that may have been retained in the Old Norse stories, even if they are no longer discernible on the surface.

The concluding article by Adam Dahmer discusses the use of Germanic runic symbolism in the celebrations of modern Beltane festivals. His primary interest is to investigate how and why the runes have gained such a prominent position in the ritual and artistic setting of the festival, and whether, given the use of the same symbols in the ethnonationalistic iconography of the far right, their adoption by the Beltaners should be seen as socio-politically problematic. Dahmer's contribution raises a number of important questions relating to issues of cultural appropriation, historical accuracy, and ideological meaning-making that demonstrate why the study of mythology remains topical today.

I wish to thank all the authors for their contributions to this issue, and Dr Triin Laidoner and the editor-in-chief Måns Broo for their help in seeing it through to publication. I would also like to extend my personal thanks to all the anonymous reviewers of the individual articles, whose role in this process has been invaluable.

Alexandra Bergholm
Guest Editor

The Materiality of Myth: Divine Objects in Norse Mythology

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Abstract

The vivid presence of material objects in Scandinavian cosmology, as preserved in the Old Norse myths, carries underexplored traces of belief systems and the material experience of Iron Age Scandinavia (400–1000 CE). This paper proposes an archaeological reading of Norse mythology to help explain how ancient Scandinavians understood the presence and role of deities, magic, and the supernatural in everyday life. The Norse myths retain records of material objects that reinforced Scandinavian oral traditions and gave their stories power, memory, and influence. From Thor's hammer and Freyja's feathered cloak to Sigyn's bowl and Ran's net, such materials and the stories they colour are informed by everyday objects of Iron Age life – spun with the magic, belief, and narrative traditions that made them icons. The mythic objects promoted a belief system that expected and embraced the imperfections of objects, much like deities. These imperfections in the divine Norse objects and the ways in which the gods interact with their materials are part and parcel of the Scandinavian religious mentality and collective social reality. This work ultimately questions the relationship between materiality and myth, and seeks to nuance our current understandings of the ancient Scandinavian worldview based on the available textual evidence.

Keywords: materiality, mythological objects, Roland Barthes, religion, Iron Age Scandinavia, Norse mythology, pre-Christian belief

For this paper I am interested in how a study of the Norse myths that focuses on the material objects mentioned in these texts might nuance our understandings of Scandinavian belief during the Iron Age (400–1000 CE). Scandinavian cosmology, beliefs, and religious attitudes remain both an intriguing and elusive topic for specialists of Old Norse language and culture. To the ancient Scandinavian mind the spatial and temporal realms of the gods and supernatural entities and those of humans often coexisted and overlapped. Largely over the last decade scholars have explored how ancient Scandinavians would have understood the presence and role of deities, magic, and the supernatural in daily life (see e.g. DuBois 1999;

Sanmark 2002; Steinsland 2005; Dobat 2006; Price 2007; Andrén 2014). The Norse myths in particular offer opportunities for an insight into the Scandinavians' interaction with their mythology in everyday life, such as their engagement with mortuary performance and ritual (Price 2010), the slaughter practices for cattle in Scandinavian dairy economies – possibly with reference to the mythical cow Auðhumla whose milk sustains the giant Ymir (Dubois 2012), the participation of the warring berserkers and *úlfheðnar* in the cult of Odin (Schjødt 2011), and the eating of horsemeat in dedication to the gods (Þorgilsson and Benediktsson 1968, ch. 7; McKinnell et al. 2004, 54–56; O'Donoghue 2007, 62).

The Norse myths are 'sacred tales' (Kirk 1984, 57) that can shed light on the religious beliefs and embedded mentalities of the ancient Scandinavians. Scholarship has often applied a palimpsest metaphor to critique the surviving textual sources of these Scandinavian myths, namely because many of these texts were authored by later medieval Christian writers centuries after the period they claim to depict. Within this framework scholars perceive the agenda and aesthetics of the Christian writers as a problem and argue that only after scraping away the thirteenth-century Christian layer can we pursue the true 'essence' of Iron Age pagan belief (cf. DuBois 1999, 174). Indeed, it is productive to properly distinguish the mythological tales from the media – iconographic, textual, material, or oral – through which they are preserved. However, the literary corpus containing Scandinavian mythological information reveals a much more complicated and diverse array of texts than the palimpsest metaphor suggests, requiring different evaluations and considerations from the historian: (1) The early non-Norse texts (including Tacitus, Ibn Fadlan, and Adam of Bremen) feature foreign authors who were contemporaries of the pagan Scandinavians but, as outsiders, were probably prone to misunderstanding pagan belief or to be misinformed. (2) A small number of runic inscriptions also offer contemporary sources for Iron Age pagan belief and were written by the Scandinavians themselves, making them ideal sources from a source-critical perspective. However, their (sometimes fragmented) content is often difficult to interpret with any certainty, and in cases where the inscriptions also involve images they require multidisciplinary interpretations. (3) Early skaldic poetry attributed to pre-Christian Scandinavian poets similarly provides contemporary source material, with the caveat that certain passages or stanzas may have been subject to later medieval emendations and redactions (Whaley 2009–2017). (4) Eddic poetry contains obvious mythological material, but the dating and origin of most Eddic poems remain uncertain. (5) The texts of the thirteenth-

century Icelander Snorri Sturluson, *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*, remain a valuable source for much of our knowledge of Norse mythology. These texts, authored by a single expert with his own motivations and biases, are coloured by Snorri's Christian outlook, and he mischaracterises Scandinavian pagan belief as a single coherent religion, whereas Iron Age belief was more likely a diverse aggregation of regional and local religious practices, beliefs, and traditions (cf. Sanmark 2002).

This brief survey of textual sources containing mythological content or information thus reminds us that these sources cannot be evaluated with a one-size-fits-all methodology or theoretical approach. Rather, they must be weighed against their individual historical contexts, authorship, and intended purposes. Frustrated by these complications outlined above, scholars until recently have rejected the textual material as a valid source for Scandinavian pagan belief, because from a source-critical perspective the source material should be contemporaneous with the time and society it claims to represent. However, given the constraints and complexities of the Scandinavian and foreign texts, scholars can benefit from *Annales* methodologies and interpretations of the *longue durée*, including structures of religious belief and mentalities, which require different analytical tools, pose different questions, and, most importantly, suggest alternative and innovative uses of the sources (cf. Braudel 1966; Hedeager 2011).

Historians of religion, of course, contend with persistent and very slow-changing structures of worldviews over a timespan of several centuries. For the purpose of investigating Scandinavian systems of belief, the Old Norse myths, compiled a few centuries after the Iron Age as a synthesis of diverse oral traditions, still contain the deep mentalities and structures of the older Scandinavian culture. Margaret Clunies Ross (1998, 12–13) has termed these long-lasting mentalities 'mythic schemas', arguing that even after their conversion to Christianity the medieval Icelanders retained their pre-Christian beliefs as a frame of reference by which to understand and represent human life and behaviour. Such 'mythic schemas' are similarly preserved in the mythological material, reflecting the transmission of Nordic poetic traditions over many generations. The textual corpus of Norse mythology therefore presents certain records of past oral performances (Gunnell 1995, 182–85; Mitchell 2001; Gunnell 2011, 17).

The oral transmission of Norse mythology prior to its textual composition constitutes just one layer through which information about ancient Scandinavian beliefs is remembered, negotiated, and transmitted across centuries. The Norse myths similarly retain records of materials in the past

that reinforced Scandinavian oral traditions and gave the stories power, memory, and influence: Thor's hammer; Freyja's feathered cloak; Odin's spear; Loki's magic shoes.¹ These materials and the stories they colour are informed by everyday objects of Iron Age life, spun with magic, belief, religion, and narrative tradition that ultimately make them icons. After all, 'pots and poetry' were created and used by the same societies and thus belong to the same cultural context of ancient Scandinavia (Morris 2000, 27; Hedeager 2011, 3).

An archaeological reading of the Norse myths would therefore complement the interdisciplinary work required for exposing the 'mythic schemas' of the Norse world. It is my departure to claim that the vivid presence of *materials* in the Norse cosmology, preserved in literary form, carry hitherto underexplored representations of collective belief systems and the material experience of pagan Scandinavia. After an overview of material perspectives on mythology I will present a material reading of Norse mythology and will show how mythic objects promote a belief system that not only relies on materials but fully expects them to be imperfect tools. Indeed, the imperfections evident in divine objects and the ways in which the gods interact with materials are part and parcel of the Norse religious mentality as well as collective social reality.

The material turn in mythology studies

Over the last few decades scholarship has witnessed a 'material turn' in the literary and historical disciplines. The correlation between mythology and its impact on ritual have long been discussed in case-specific anthropological studies (cf. Rivière 1969), but more general theoretical discourse on the topic remains rather limited. Nevertheless, many of the theoretical treatments of the objects central to mythology studies have been anticipated by anthropology and materiality studies. This paper will not attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of the development of perspectives in these fields but will instead briefly explore some areas in which these approaches are especially relevant for mythologists.

Scholarly interest in materiality and materials largely stems from a body of sociological work on the consumption of objects and consumerist culture. Such scholarship dates at least to the writings of Karl Marx, who understood objects as 'commodities', generated within a system of capitalist

1 I have chosen to anglicise Old Norse spellings of proper names unless otherwise noted for greater ease of access for both Old Norse specialists and a more general audience.

social relations (Marx 1988 [1844]). Marx's nineteenth-century contemporaries at academic institutions and museums similarly saw objects as direct representations of knowledge. They believed that such knowledge plainly resided in the objects themselves, and the mere collection and organisation of objects could therefore display the sum of the world's knowledge, a phenomenon known as 'object-based epistemology' (Conn 2000). After the late nineteenth century, anthropologists, archaeologists, and museum practitioners began to direct their attention away from typologically oriented studies of objects and instead pursued questions concerning the nature of the *relations* between people and objects as the source of cultural knowledge.

To theorise the relationship between people and objects, especially in the context of myth, scholars looked to the role of language. The mid-twentieth-century semioticians Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, applied language as a metaphor for culture and extended the analogy to cultural objects. They argued that a structuralist approach could decode objects in much the same process as if they were a language of signs and symbols (Lévi-Strauss 1978; Barthes 1957). This perspective rejected the Marxist view of objects as obscure representations of consumerism in favour of objects' symbolic value. Barthes, to whom I will return later, applied the structuralist approach directly to myth in his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957), emphasising the mythic meanings of objects and their ability to propagate certain mythologies within mass consumerist culture.

Structuralism was met with criticism for its limitations in distinguishing just two aspects of material objects, namely their 'double lives' as both functions and signs (Baudrillard 1998), and the reduction of social relations between humans and objects to the exchange of objects as signs and commodities (Dant 1999, 28–29). The subsequent poststructuralist movement paid more attention to the ability of objects, within their specific cultural and historical contexts, to reinforce cultural values and social attitudes. Bourdieu's early study of taste (1984) examined the role of objects as markers of aesthetic and cultural value. He claimed that aesthetic choice played a significant role in reproducing social inequality, for taste was thoroughly engrained and socially learned. For mythology and religious studies this perspective suggests that social hierarchies play a role in the negotiation and display of belief, particularly as objects themselves inform and reinforce multiple layers of aesthetic choice, belief, and status in a society.

Contemporary approaches to the study of materials have led to a debate about agency. Foucauldian notions of power have generated discussion of the role of objects in discourses and networks of power, as well as how

objects can influence human action. Such work has contributed to the development of actor-network theory (ANT), which claims that objects define and mediate the cultural networks of humans and materials in which they are situated. Objects in turn influence network interactions, affording them purpose and meaning within a system of social relations (Law 2009). Materiality studies continues to refine discussion on the nature of objects within networks of humans and other objects, as well as their social meaning in everyday life. These perspectives rely on the conviction that objects indeed *matter* in theorising culture (Woodward 2007, 28) and that understanding the 'social lives' of objects is key to its study (Kopytoff 1986). Recent trends such as Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory' in literary studies and Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter' have promoted the interdisciplinary study of human-material relations, with added emphasis on avoiding the human-subject, material-object dichotomy (Brown 2001; Brown 2003; Bennett 2010; cf. Miller 2005).

Exactly how we can recover cultural information from objects (Miller 1987; Riggins 1994), and how objects reinforce and negotiate the societies that depend on these materials (Hodder 2012, 16) still generates much debate. For the present purpose it is worth noting that if belief systems are bound with these interconnected cultural networks consisting of humans and objects, we may assume that myth, religion, and thought are similarly influenced by the social nature and influence of objects in these networks. Mythic and conceptual schemas, as discussed earlier, organise human knowledge because they structure human comprehension, interpretation, and the representation of experience (Clunies Ross 1998). Furthermore, material objects figure prominently in a society's embedded schemas, generated and negotiated over generations.

Objects, mass culture, and mythic structure

The theoretical underpinnings of material culture studies find relevance in work on materials in mythology and belief. Materials, as the previous section has shown, can offer key insights into individual human actors through an examination of the relations between objects and humans. But what about the relations between objects and *gods*? I will now explore mythological narratives and the literary 'divine objects' that reflect not only the cultural context of their creators and owners, but their connection with and reinforcement of sacred practice and belief.

The archaeological and anthropological disciplines have long established the study of materials as a crucial point of entry into understanding

cultures and ideologies, not least religion (cf. DeMarrais et al. 2004). This gap in interdisciplinary approaches to religion, however, has hindered understandings of belief systems, especially in historical contexts where the source material, as is the case for ancient Scandinavia, is already quite limited. It has been established that 'material culture is active', that objects can act and influence humans, and that the exchange of objects themselves promotes the construction of social relationships (Hodder 1994, 395). The study of objects is therefore not merely informative but also vital to any study of the mythic structures that mediate and influence human behaviour. The relationship between myth and materiality in ancient Scandinavia has been highlighted in Hedeager's book *Iron Age Myth and Materiality* (2011), in which she argues for the interdisciplinary interpretation of textual and material culture as two modes of expression that in the case of Old Norse culture represent two different temporalities, but nevertheless reproduce much the same cosmological structures in action (Hedeager 2011, 1). In addition to text, materials provide another layer with which audiences have interacted throughout the transmission of the mythic tales.

Roland Barthes was one of the most prominent theorists to discuss the connection between materiality and mythology. His book *Mythologies* exposed the mythic meanings inherent in the material culture of consumer societies. Barthes understood myth as a semiological system consisting of pure matter and its social usage. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's position that humans use objects to construct and assign meanings, Barthes argued that commodities, even those with seemingly little personal or cultural value, were loaded with symbolic essence. More specifically, objects contained information about the prevalent ideological myths of the bourgeois culture that created and exchanged them, and were therefore fundamental for an insight into these bourgeois 'mythologies'. In other words materials allow us to uncover the 'language' inherent in the ideological system of capitalism. For instance, toys are common objects that contain encoded myths and ideologies of the modern adult world that are imparted to children, who will later replicate these beliefs and ways of engaging with the world (Barthes 1957, 71). Objects, therefore, act as containers of the mythologies of mass culture.

Barthes' thesis establishes the mythic meanings latent in objects, which has clear implications for mythology studies: material objects are essential to theorising the very nature of myth and ideological structures. The role of materials is supposedly immaterial, provided that myth, according to Barthes, 'economizes intelligence, it understands reality more cheaply:

“mythology” does not hesitate to apply to aesthetic realities which it deems, on the other hand, to partake of an immaterial essence’ (Barthes 1957, 268). Through use of structuralist tools the mythologist can identify how materials conceal the exploitation involved in their production under the guise of mythologies. Myth consequentially rejects all complexity and dialectics, and instead fashions a world without contradictions to establish ‘a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves’ (Barthes 1957, 143). Barthes’ assertion challenged his contemporary Claude Lévi-Strauss’s argument that myth’s purpose was rather to reconcile contradictory ideas (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 443; cf. Segal 2017, 22). Even more provocatively, Barthes insists that certain objects are capable of transcending human complexities and imperfections. He takes the Citroën DS as his example, suggesting that the car is ‘almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic Cathedrals’, a divine-like object that presents itself as a great creation of its time and with a striking absence of human input (1957, 88). For Barthes, the immaculate Citroën marks an important deviation from other industrial objects that betray their human-influenced creation. As Barthes concludes of his automobile mythology, ‘the object is the supernatural’s best messenger: there is easily a perfection and an absence of origin [...] [A]s for the material itself, there is no question that it promotes a taste for lightness in a magical sense’ (Barthes 1957, 170).

I would like to further probe Barthes’ claims here regarding the perfection of material objects and the mythologies that propagate this illusion, and to question whether any object – physical or literary – is truly capable of embodying such perfection. It is also the intention of this paper to complicate Barthes’ argument by reflecting on the ways in which the representation of objects in literature and mythology is just as much entangled in mythical structures and narratives as physical materials – indeed, the physical cultural object and its literary counterpart are inevitably related. Barthes’ theory would suggest that objects depicted in texts are also intentionally made to be refined and perfected, and are origin-less renditions of their crude physical manifestations. This idea of the flawless literary object is taken up in structuralist approaches that explore the ways in which the material properties of objects operate in their surroundings as signs (Manning and Meneley 2008, 286). The literary object can only *resemble* or *represent* a physical one, and the subjectivity of language enables textual representations of material things to signify abstract meanings as the ‘perfect’ version of the object. This assumption foregrounds the function of objects in cosmological narratives and requires further examination. To do this, I will apply Barthes’ theory

to mythical objects present in Norse mythology. Christopher Abram (2011, 80) has suggested that the Norse myths are 'just stories', not unmediated expressions of religious belief. By applying a material focus to the Norse mythological corpus, I intend to nuance this interpretation. Mythical objects, like their divine creators and owners, are deeply rooted in the minds and daily experience of the ancient Scandinavians. While the myths are certainly not unmediated sources of belief, they are not simply stories that lack the complexities of the ancient belief system. We may still find fundamental truth in the myth-making process that unfolded within the framework of centuries-old traditions in a situated cultural context (Price 2012, 14). The materials and objects of the Norse gods we will encounter demonstrate the depth and extent of the Scandinavian worldview underpinning the mythic narratives.

Material objects in Norse myths

Norse studies have considered material objects predominantly in the context of gift giving in Iron Age and medieval Scandinavian societies (Miller 1986; Sheehan 2013). Mauss's (1954 [1923]) classic sociological study of gift exchange argued that the exchange of objects in ancient societies built social relationships through reciprocity and the maintenance of social capital. *Hávamál* (stanza 42) famously reinforces the importance of reciprocity in ancient Scandinavia, dictating that 'with his friend a man should be friends and give gift for gift' (*Vin sínum / skal maðr vinr vera / ok gjalda gjöf við gjöf*). Less commonly, others have examined particular objects in the mythological corpus, such as *Mjölnir*, Thor's hammer (Lindow 1994), and the mythic significance of the whetstone, which highlighted the social meanings of objects underlying their utilitarian functions (Mitchell 1985). In a few exceptional studies scholars approach such mythic materials not as objects per se but as linguistic techniques that colour the narratives. Early Old Norse scholar Rasmus Björn Anderson noted the metaphorical language that prevails throughout the Old Norse texts. The Norse poet, he observed, identified objects not by their name but through the construction of complex metaphors, borrowed from mythological figures:

Thus he would call the sky the skull of the giant Ymer; the rainbow he called the bridge of the gods; gold was the tears of Freya; poetry, the present or drink of Odin. The earth was called indifferently the wife of Odin, the flesh of Ymer, the daughter of night, the vessel that floats on the ages, or the founda-

tion of the air; herbs and plants were called the hair or the fleece of the earth. A battle was called a bath of blood, the hail of Odin (Anderson 1875, 123).

Scholars have long since analysed the poetics of Old Norse texts, especially skaldic poetry, for their linguistic complexities, and the mythic corpus is certainly no exception. However, Anderson's reduction of the mythic materials to simply 'metaphorical language' obscures an otherwise apparent Scandinavian interest in the materials themselves. The Scandinavians chose objects specifically to describe their world as they experienced it. An examination of these objects thereby offers an important opening into the worldview of Iron Age Scandinavia.

I will thus explore material objects as the Norse mythological texts present them, while remaining conscious of the considerations and limitations that each textual source presents. Structures such as buildings or even landscapes, which are sometimes treated in anthropological discussions, are not considered in the scope of this study but remain a fruitful area for future research. This work does not claim to present a universal reading of Norse mythic material culture; rather, it recognises the diversity of Scandinavian religious belief. It is worth underscoring that certain objects would have found varying degrees of resonance across regional and local Scandinavian societies at different points in space and time. In contrast, this work relies on a synthesis of cultural and religious traditions surrounding materials across nearly a millennium. I will examine how material objects are created, move, and exchange owners in the mythic narratives and thus reflect the ever-changing worldview of the Iron Age Scandinavians who negotiated and transmitted these stories.

A discussion of materiality in Norse mythology could not find a more fitting introduction than the infamous trickster deity, Loki, who procures the treasured gifts of the gods in connection with replacing the golden hair of the goddess Sif. The sons of the dwarf Ivaldi fashion six items for the Aesir in a contest for the recognition of the most precious object: Sif's golden headpiece; Odin's spear *Gungrnir* and his ring *Draupnir*; Thor's hammer *Mjölhnir*; and Frey's boar Gullinborsti and ship *Skidbladnir*. Loki presents the objects to the gods and explains their virtues:

The spear would never stop its thrust; and the hair would grow to the flesh as soon as it came upon Sif's head, and *Skíðblaðnir* would have a favoring breeze as soon as the sail was raised, in whatever direction it might go, but could be folded together, like a cloth and be kept in one's pouch if that was

desired. Then Brokkr brought forward his precious things. He gave to Odin the ring and said that every ninth night eight rings of the same weight would drop from it...Then he gave Thor the hammer, and said that Thor might strike as hard as he desired, whatever might be before him, and the hammer would not fail; and if he threw it at anything, it would never miss, and never fly so far as not to return to his hand (*Skáldskaparmál* I, 42, lines 20–34).

Geirrinn nam aldri staðar í lagi, en haddrinn var holdgróinn þegar er hann kom á höfuð Sif, en Skíðbládnir hafði byr þegar er segl kom á lopt, hvert er fara skyldi, en mátti vefja saman sem dúk ok hafa í pung sér ef þat vildi. Þá bar fram Brokkr sína gripi. Hann gaf Óðni hringinn ok sagði at ina niundu hverja nótt mundi drjúpa af honum átta hringar jafnhöfgir sem hann...Þá gaf hann Þór hamarrinn ok sagði at hann mundi mega ljósta svá stórt sem hann vildi, hvat sem fyrir væri, ok eigi mundi hamarrinn bila, ok ef hann vyrpi honum til þá mundi hann aldri missa, ok aldri fljúgja svá langt at eigi mundi hann sækja heim hönd.

The *Skáldskaparmál* passage identifies four material objects (*Gungnir*, *Draupnir*, *Mjölñir*, and *Skíðbládnir*) and provides a provenance of their creation in both space and time. The text attests to the magical qualities of each material, from the spear and hammer that never fail to miss their target to the replicating ring and the grand ship, constructed with such skill of the dwarfs that it can fold up into a cloth (*Gylfaginning* 36, lines 15–22). However, most of the material objects with which the Norse gods interact find no such explanation of their creation or origin anywhere in the myths. *Sórla þáttr* refers to a euphemised version of Freyja, whose necklace, named Necklace of the Brisings in other texts, was made by the dwarfs Dvalinn, Alfrik, Berling, and Grer (Nordal 1944–45). The necklace's provenance remains the only known exception to the plethora of mythic objects lacking any textual reference to their origin. Based on the surviving texts, most materials simply already exist in mythic time. *Gylfaginning* describes the Gjallarhorn, for instance, as an instrument belonging to the god Heimdall, though it also maintains some associations with Mimir. Heimdall drinks from Mimir's well with Gjallarhorn and, as the owner of the object, will one day blow Gjallarhorn to signal Ragnarok, the end of the world (*Gylfaginning* 50, lines 22–24). Despite the object's importance at a pivotal moment in the Norse cosmological cycle, the texts remain silent on Gjallarhorn's origin. This observation anticipates Barthes' theory on objects and suggests that the Norse myths mediate mainly timeless materials that strive to retain their mythical, decidedly inhuman-like, qualities. Interestingly, while Gjallarhorn does not occupy any definitive

time until Ragnarok, the instrument maintains special spatial connotations. In *Völuspá* stanza 46 the narrator describes the time of Ragnarok, when the god Heimdall loudly blows the old Gjallarhorn (*miotuðr kyndiz / att ino gamla Giallarhorni; / hátt blæss Heimdallr, horn er á lopti*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 11). John Lindow (2001, 143–44) similarly suggests that the Gjallarhorn, like the Gjallarbru, may be associated with the river Gjoll, which flowed from the Hvergelmir, like Mimir's well, a spring near the centre of the cosmos. The Gjallarhorn's spatial association with the mythic landscape, indeed the heart of the Norse universe, imparts a palpable infinite and sacred quality that situates the object outside the ebb and flow and time, and therefore distinct from the temporal materials of humankind. Unsurprisingly, the Norse myths appear to characterise most objects handled by the gods in a similar manner. Further analysis of the movement, function, and characteristics of mythic objects (see Table 1 in appendix) sheds new light on their role in the Norse cosmological narratives.

In the Old Norse myths materials achieve mobility either through formalised gift exchange or from the illicit breaking of the bond between owner and object in relation to theft. The only exceptions to this rule appear to be Freyja's cloak and necklace, objects that temporarily move from owner to an alternative user when the goddess lends them to Loki and Thor respectively. The nature of gift exchange in the myths is illustrated, for instance, by Frey's sword. The story of Frey's wooing of the giantess Gerdr survives in a number of attestations in the texts. Frey dispatches his servant Skirnir to pursue her and in exchange for this errand bequeaths his magic sword to the boy (*Gylfaginning* 31, lines 21–22). In *Skirnismál* stanza 9 Frey explains to Skirnir that the sword magically fights on its own 'if wise be he who wields it' (*ef sá er horscr, er hefir*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 71). *Völuspá* stanza 52, meanwhile, is more interested in the repercussions of this object exchange, warning that 'Surt comes from the south with branches-ruin, / the slaughter-gods' sun glances from his sword' (*Surtr ferr sunnan með sviga lævi, scínn af sverði sól valtíva*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 12). The subject of 'sword' in this passage remains notably ambiguous, and could also translate as 'from the sword of the gods'. Sigurður Nordal (1923) interpreted this passage as an indication that Surtr slays Frey with the same sword he once exchanged for Gerdr. In either case the trade of the magic sword leaves Frey weaponless at Ragnarok, as is also implied in *Lokasenna* stanza 42, and the myths unequivocally consider its transfer of owners a tragic exchange. Frey's sword thus exemplifies the importance the Scandinavians placed on the status of ownership in their mythology.

Freyja's magical necklace of the Brisings provides further insight into the significance of material ownership. It is unclear who the 'Brisings' were, but *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* unambiguously associate the ownership of the men and the necklace bearing their name with Freyja. In *Þrymskviða* stanza 13 the necklace assumes Freyja's very emotions: the object jerks when Freyja is angered at the prospect of travelling to Jötunheim. The necklace is clearly associated with Freyja's ownership, for Thor borrows the necklace to assume Freyja's disguise (*Þrymskviða*, stanza 19). Loki's theft of the necklace is therefore starkly noted in *Skáldskaparmál*, where he is introduced as the 'thief of the giants, of the goat, of the Brisínga men' (*þjófr jötna, hafrs ok Brisingamens*) (Faulkes 1998, 20, lines 3–4), as well as in stanza 9 of the early skaldic poem *Haustlög* by Thjóðólf of Hvin, which refers to Loki as the 'hoop-thief of Brising's people', an apparent reference to his theft of the necklace (Lindow 2001, 89). Owners of objects are often explicitly noted in the myths. The narrators are therefore highly attentive to the strict disregard for ownership, as is evidenced by the identification of Loki as a thief.

The exchange of objects between owners as a formal transaction frequently occurs in the Norse myths and perhaps exposes a thread of Iron Age Scandinavian attitudes towards objects. After all, the myths mention only three objects in which the user is *never* the object's owner: Freyja's cloak; Frey's sword; and Draupnir (see Table 1). The rarity of an owner not explicitly using his or her own object cannot be overlooked and indicates the close association of an object with its owner and vice versa. The naming of objects further accentuates this claim. Objects are seldom referred to by their standard, generalised name. Instead, they bear distinct personal names of their own – Draupnir, Odrerir, Rati, and Skidbladnir, to cite a few. Scholars have examined the poetic discourse surrounding weapons in Norse culture, devoting most attention to the names of swords (Drachmann 1967), but much less research has attended more broadly to the ancient Scandinavian practice of naming objects. Yet in Norse cosmology a hammer is rarely just a hammer or a ring just a ring. Even Odin's auger, the tool he uses to drill for Suttung into the deepest mountain to claim the mead of poetry features its own name, Rati. The evidence suggests that Scandinavians recognised and attributed enough great meaning to objects in cosmic and mundane realities to warrant the act of supplying personal names.²

2 Objects did not need always to be associated with mythology to be given names. For example, certain weapons in the saga literature bore personal names, such as Fótþítr in the *Laxdæla saga* and the spear Grásíða in the *Gísla saga*.

In examining how mythical objects mediate belief structures, it is noteworthy that nearly all objects in the Norse myths contain magical properties. At the same time the objects of the gods are not perfect, ethereal renditions of their manmade counterparts. As previously discussed, *Skáldskaparmál* details the presentation of the six treasures of the gods. However, more interestingly and far less commented on is the scene that immediately follows. In a wager that risked Loki's head the dwarfs win and attempt to capture him. The text indicates that Loki was by this point already far away, for he had shoes with which he ran through air and over water (*þá var hann víðs fjarri. Loki átti skúa er hann rann á lopt ok lög*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 43, lines 2–3). For all the popular attention paid to Odin's spear and Thor's hammer, Loki too wields his own magical object – if less iconically. Freyja similarly features her own object of transport. *Gylfaginning* introduces Freyja as the most renowned of the goddesses, who travels in a chariot driven by two cats (*En er hon ferr, þá ekr hon köttum tveim ok sitr í reið*) (*Gylfaginning* 25, lines 1–2). However, both *Skáldskaparmál* and *Þrymskviða* mention another of Freyja's possessions: a feathered cloak. *Þrymskviða* recounts the theft of Thor's hammer by the giant Thrym, in which Thor requests Freyja's feathered cloak (*fjaðrhams ljá*) to retrieve the weapon in Jotunheim, realm of the giants. Freyja responds, 'I would give it to you even if it were made of gold, / I'd lend it to you even if it were made of silver' (*Þó mynda ec gefa þér, þótt ór gulli væri, / oc þó selia, at væri ór silfri*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, stanza 4, 111). Loki wears the feather cloak and flies from Asgard to Jotunheim and back. In showcasing Freyja's generosity, the myths expose the extraordinary value of the cloak in comparison to gold and silver. *Skáldskaparmál* contributes further detail to the object's description, claiming that the cloak consists specifically of hawk feathers. In this myth Loki borrows the same item from Freyja when Idunn is kidnapped. Threatened by the Aesir, Loki intends to retrieve Idunn in Jotunheim on the condition that 'Freyja [will] lend him the hawk's plumage, which she owned' (*En er hann varð hræddr þá kvazk hann mundu sækja eptir Iðunn í Jötunheima ef Freyja vill ljá honum valshams er hon á*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 2, lines 10–12). Loki finds Idunn, and they fly back to Asgard pursued by the giant Thjazi, who owns an eagle's plumage (*arnarhaminn*), similar to Freyja's possession (*Skáldskaparmál* 2, line 15).

In both textual attestations of Freyja's cloak the object is loaned to Loki and affords him the ability to journey between the realms of the gods and the giants. We do not hear of a myth in which Freyja uses the cloak for her own purposes: the object always features in connection with Loki when the necessity arises for him to travel to Jotunheim. Assuming that Loki's shoes

are not an invention of Snorri, it seems possible that Loki's shoes, with their ability to traverse air and water, nevertheless have their limitations. Whenever the need arises for Loki to travel between realms, Freyja's cloak appears the obvious choice of transport, perhaps suggesting that the magic shoes are somehow unsuitable for long journeys between realms. Contrary to Barthes' appraisal that objects seek to promote a 'blissful clarity', no such simplicity exists in the Norse material. Loki's association with Freyja's cloak suggests that, at least in this case, the texts do not display much interest in the relationship between the object and its owner. For it is Loki whom the myths associate with the flying cloak.³ This reading thus reveals the contradictions and complicated reality of the Norse mythic traditions that respect ownership of objects but in some cases operate on a more fluid definition of ownership.

Skidbladnir, the cloth that unfolds into Frey's magic ship, offers additional insight into the limitations of the mythic objects. *Grímnismál* introduces Skidbladnir as the best of ships for shining Frey (*scipa bezt, scírom Freyr*) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, stanza 43, 66). The ship is also praised as one of the 'best of things' in *Grímnismál*, stanza 44: 'The ash Yggdrasil, it is the best of trees / and Skíðblaðnir, of ships' (*Askr Yggdrasils hann es æztr víða, / enn Skíðblaðnir skipa*). Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning*, in which Gangleri inquires how Skidbladnir is considered the best of ships. Hár replies that 'Skíðbladnir is the best of ships and made with the greatest skill, but Naglfar is the largest ship' (*Skíðblaðnir er beztr skipanna ok með mestum hagleik gerr, en Naglfari er mest skip*) (Faulkes 1998, 36). The passage qualifies Skidbladnir as an object that is not the largest of its kind but nevertheless possesses unique characteristics, namely the skill of the dwarfs in its manufacture, that all the Aesir may be aboard and when it is not at sea, it is made of so many pieces with such skill that it can magically fold into a cloth. Beyond the greatest of all ships, the gods deem *Mjöllnir* the best of all objects created by the sons of Ivaldi (*hamarrinn var beztr af öllum gripum*) (*Skáldskaparmál* 42, lines 36–37). It is striking that even the most treasured and iconic of the gods' things, Thor's hammer, is also the most clearly flawed. While the lightning maker will never miss its target when thrown, the dwarf Eitri makes the hammer shaft too short, so that it may only be held with one hand. Although Thor's

3 In *Gylfaginning* Snorri refers to Loki alternatively as 'Lopt', a masculine form of the feminine term for 'sky'. Lindow (2001, 220) has suggested that this alternative personal name refers to Loki's use of Freyja's flying cloak. The name may also similarly acknowledge Loki's shoes as one of his chosen means of travel and more generally highlight his apparent connection with the act of flying.

hammer is associated with a weapon for giant slaying, the giant Skrymir manages to magically redirect the object's blows (Faulkes 1998: 38). *Meg-ingjörd*, Thor's belt,⁴ with its magical ability to double his strength, fails to save him at Ragnarok, where he is ultimately killed by the midgard serpent's poison (Simek 1984, 272).

The myths impart a clear message to their audiences: even the most powerful of magical objects, wielded by the greatest of the Norse deities, have their limitations. Anderson (1875, 374) blamed the imperfections of the gods' objects on Loki, suggesting that the trickster was responsible for the defect in Thor's hammer and 'makes the best things defective'. Scholarship has since revisited the narrative of Loki as an evil figure as one in which Loki operates as a mediator, presenting problems and then using his cunning to solve them. Indeed, the myths provide little indication that Loki tampers with the production of the gods' treasures or has any reason to do so. More persuasively, objects in the Norse worldview appear necessarily flawed because nearly everything in the Norse cosmos is – including humans and the gods themselves. Here too, an application of Barthes disintegrates against the Norse myths. Rather than seeking to obscure the defects in their production, the myths embrace the imperfections of objects. And at the same time the gods in the myths hardly appear troubled by these flawed, suspiciously human-like materials but treat them as an inherent and complex part of their reality.

Concluding remarks

My research shows that objects hold an appreciable influence within the Norse mythological narratives. The myths suggest that the Scandinavians understood objects as active agents in their own right, evidenced in their assignment of personal names to designate their divine status. This examination has revealed some of the ways in which the objects maintain social lives in the mythology and do indeed matter in the divine networks between other materials, gods, and supernatural beings. Taken as a whole, the Norse myths more often rupture Barthes' theories on the relationship between materiality and myth than they find common parallels. Mythic objects seem to signify abstract 'mythologies'; they operate as materials in their own right and they embrace, rather than obscure, the defects of their creators. Barthes' understanding may operate for a twentieth century

4 For iconographic evidence for Thor's hammer and his struggles with the midgard serpent, especially in Anglo-Norse sculpture, see Kopar 2012.

consumer culture but seems less readily applicable to Norse mythology, revealing opportunities for further analysis and unpacking of Scandinavian Iron Age oral culture and traditions.

To provide a final lesson on mythic materiality in Norse culture, I would like to examine *Gleipnir*, the chains of the monster Fenrir-wolf with which the gods bound the monster. According to *Gylfaginning*, after Fenrir broke out of two previous fetters, Odin sent Skirnir

Down into the world of the dark-elves to some dwarfs and had that fetter made, which is called Gleipnir. It was made of six things: the sound (of the footsteps) of the cat, the beard of the woman, the roots of the mountain, the sinews of the bear, the breath of the fish, and the spittle of a bird [...] The fetter was smooth and soft as silk ribbon.

Ofan í Svartálfaheim til dverga nokkura ok lét gera fjötur þann er Gleipnir heitir. Hann var gjörr af sex hlutum: af dyn kattarins ok af skeggi konunnar ok af rótum bjargsins ok af sinum bjarnarins ok af anda fisksins ok af fogls hráka...Fjöturrinn varð sléttir ok blautr sem silkiræma (Faulkes 1998, 28).

The chains of Gleipnir are made with materials of the impossible: the silent steps of a cat; a woman who grows a beard; a mountain that contains roots; the breath of a fish. Gleipnir ultimately originates from truly divine, ethereal materiality. Made with materials inconceivable to humankind, Gleipnir paradoxically exemplifies that the Norse world is inherently a material one. *Naglfar*, the ship at the end of the world, is constructed from the toenails and fingernails of the dead. Kvasir's blood provided the mead of poetry, the liquid of Odrerir. Mythic landscapes, too, find connections to objects. The end of Utgardaloki's drinking horn stretches into the deepest part of the sea. Sigyn's bowl catches the poison before it drips onto Loki – when it fills to the brim, Loki's convulsions cause earthquakes. And those who drown at sea are gathered into Ran's net. Both humans and landscapes are material. Even the ingredients for Gleipnir, the immaterial, contain their own materiality. The myths suggest that the Scandinavians understood their world in this way, with a fundamentally material outlook, and one therefore rooted in the mundane world.

I have examined the ways in which the Norse myths reveal the mentalities and lived experiences of the ancient Scandinavians. A material focus reminds us that mythology is more than the mere literary representation of the gods (cf. O'Donoghue 2007, 67). Myths function socially, and the Scandinavians

recreated and reinforced their mythic traditions, all the while reconceiving earthly objects as mythic materials: hammers, rings, spears, and so forth are transformed into mythic objects via magic and divine interaction. The creation of objects throughout Iron Age Scandinavia provided tangible links to the intangible oral retellings of the stories and generated cognitive associations for the Scandinavians between their physical objects found in everyday life and the mythic objects that resided in the traditions of the Norse imagination. This relationship has often been explored in the archaeological record. Thor's hammer amulets are the most obvious talismans with specific accoutrements of the gods (Lindow 2001, 288–90), but studies have similarly investigated parallels, for example, between Skidbladnir and solar mythology ritual (Simek 1977) and material representations of Freyja's necklace (Arrhenius 1962). The archaeological record provides no evidence for a cult of Loki in ancient Scandinavia, yet his role in the mythology as it currently survives is clear. Perhaps the relative obscurity of Loki and physical representations of his magical shoes are heightened by the marked lack of religious practice centred on Loki in Iron Age Scandinavia.

The reconstruction of a reality of the past always includes some sort of reductionism in an attempt to isolate certain structures for study (Schjødt 2012, 270). In doing so, I have attempted to recognise the diversity of belief in Iron Age Scandinavia by exploring examples of ways in which the Scandinavians might have approached and thought about objects, rather than providing an exhaustive treatment of objects found in the myths. The mythologist Karl Luckert defined religion as 'man's response to so-conceived greater-than-human configurations of reality' (as cited in DuBois 1999, 30–31). The Scandinavians mapped mythic objects onto the profane world of daily experience and vice versa, creating a dynamic process of religious change and negotiation. The ancient Scandinavian reality included configurations of mythic space that, at least in the presentation of materials, looked more like profane, human spaces than we may have previously believed.

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Appendix. Table 1. Mythic objects in Norse mythology

Object	Provenance	Owner	Users	Mode of Exchange	Magical	Object Type
Loki's shoes	?	Loki	Loki	----	X	Transport
Freyja's cloak	?	Freyja	Loki	Loan	----	Transport
Skiðblaðnir	Dwarfs	Frey/ Odin	?	----	X	Transport
Mjölnir	Dwarfs	Thor	Thor	----	X	Weapon
Gungnir	Dwarfs	Odin	Odin	----	X	Weapon
Frey's sword	?	Frey	Skírnir	Gift	X	Weapon
Draupnir	Dwarfs	Odin/ Baldr	Baldr/ Skírnir	Gift/ ? *	X	Ornament
Necklace of the Brísings	Dwarfs	Freyja	Freyja/ Thor/ Loki	Gift/ Loan/ Theft	X	Ornament
Megingjörð	?	Thor	Thor	----	X	Ornament/ Weapon
Oðrerir	?	Kvasir (?)	Fjalar & Galar/ Odin	Theft (?)	X	Tool
Gjallarhorn	?	Heimdall	Mímir/ Heimdall	----	----	Tool
Rati	?	Odin	Odin	----	X	Tool

* *Skirnismál* stanza 21 mentions that Skírnir offers Gerd a ring that was burned with Odin's son, an apparent reference to Draupnir. It is unclear between the stories in which Draupnir is mentioned how Skírnir acquires the ring. See Lindow 2001, 97f.

