Myth and Reality: the Contribution of Archaeology

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Paradoxical though it might initially seem, the serious study of myth must also be a study of reality. Myth is not merely fiction and fantasy, the absolute antithesis of concrete fact. The understanding that myth is a type of allegory, a metaphorical narrative in which conceived general truths are represented by individual characters and episodes, has been either handed down or reinvented in adequately reflexive contexts in every age since classical antiquity. It is reasonable to assume that both the truth that is expressed in mythic form, and the way it is portrayed, will represent topics that were particularly significant in the myth’s native circumstances. Thus (for a relatively simple example) the mythical motif of Valhöll (Valhalla, the hall of the slain) and the eikherjar (Óðinn’s chosen warriors) ought to reflect circumstances in which the idea of an afterlife was an important one for at least some part of society, while warfare and the use of a hall as a social focus were significant features of the life of that group.

As myths are transmitted over time, through different historical and cultural circumstances from those in which they arose, they may gain increasing autonomy: they may take on a life of their own. Realities may then be influenced or governed by ideology inherited in the form of myth, so that life imitates art rather than the other way around. Even without any such determinative role, it would be wrong to assume that a myth is shorn of functional significance when it passes out of its original context. Its very survival could imply that it still has some role to play. On the strength of comparative literary analysis, it can in fact be argued that the allegorical mode characteristic of myth serves to maintain the mythographical tradition. Where the meaning and function of a tale remain essentially implicit, that tale is amenable to re-interpretation and thus adaptation to different circumstances. A corollary of this is that leading signifiers in such a tale – for instance its characters, settings and images – and particularly the relationships between them, are inherently more likely to be identifiable with
features in the immediate historical context, as this is perhaps the easiest way to make a meaningful connexion between the myth as tale and its external circumstances.

In medieval Scandinavian literature we encounter a wide range of kinds of myth. Without assuming any categorical position on how accurate a historical view they give, the historiographies of, for instance, ninth- to eleventh-century Iceland and Norwegian kingship in the same period can properly be described as historical myth. They serve to provide a historical explanation of crucial features of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic and Norwegian worlds from which the records derive, and to embody and reinforce attitudes to both the past and the present in those same contexts. The tales of Vinland and the exploration of the Atlantic likewise provide a body of geographical myth, locating and defining the bounds of the Scandinavian North Atlantic zone, ethnographically as well as spatially. Conventionally at the centre of the view of Old Norse mythology, however, are the cosmology and theology that derive from pre-Christian Scandinavia and which were intimately associated with the pre-Christian Scandinavian ‘pagan’ religion. These reside in myths whose roots must lie in prehistoric Scandinavia, and which will have been transmitted — undergoing substantial changes, one must assume — through the threshold ‘proto-historical’ phase of the Viking Period into the historical Middle Ages.

Archaeology — the study of the past as represented by its material remains — is the sole basis for writing prehistory, and thus the best source for locating the earliest detectable forms of these myths within a concrete culture-historical framework. Archaeology also makes its own special contribution to the study of historical periods. For early or otherwise remote historical contexts, there are, not surprisingly, likely to be substantial gaps in the documentary record that can be filled by archaeology. But irrespective of the quality and range of written evidence, archaeology can always broaden the range of cultural history by providing substantial insights into the material and technical circumstances of life. Archaeology is thus often better suited to yielding views of long-term continuities and processes of development in the past than are historical sources. It is hoped that the necessarily summary explorations that follow will nonetheless effectively make the case for how this perspective can yield significant insights into the functional and historical character of some central Norse mythological motifs.
Artefact and text

In the fullest recent general re-assessment of the relationship between material cultures and literacy in literate contexts, Anders Andrén has proposed that three basic types of discursive context, or artefact-text relationship, can be identified: ‘object-created’, ‘integrated’ and ‘text-created’ (1998, 150-3). These three categories in fact represent stages in a progressive, evolutionary model of the growth to dominance of literacy in Western culture. This pragmatic Eurocentricity is no particular cause for complaint; but it needs to be noted, along with the salient riders that these three categories should also be understood, not as three sharply distinct states, but rather as the two ends and middle of a continuum of text-artefact relationships. That continuum itself need not exist only along a diachronic dimension. There can be a range from text-centred to object-centred practices in any given context.

Andrén’s object-created relation is strongly linked to oral and consequently to early literate contexts. Andrén notes the ‘tremendous power of the word’ in such circumstances (compare the power of nið and lof in the skaldic and saga worlds), and a persistent characterization of poetry and songs as woven or crafted objects. There is also an emphatic and persistent reference to contemporary material culture in the literary and documentary sources in these circumstances, as indeed would seem to be corroborated by the very early skaldic shield- and house-lays. In the ‘integrated’ context, meanwhile, text and artefact ‘presuppose each other’s existence’. The best example Andrén gives of this is of inscriptions, which not only transform the character of the objects on which they are placed, but are themselves often monumentally and obtrusively material, depending for their function on their whole contextual situation within a large, physical world. He also assigns the phenomenon of texts substituting for material objects and physical actions to this category, for instance in legally binding rituals. Since, however, no example is given of reciprocal replacement of text by act or artefact, this would seem rather to reflect a threshold between the object- and the text-centred situations, not some sort of balanced integration between them.

The third relation, text-created, gets, and perhaps needs, least explanatory introduction as it is so very much the character of our modern world. It is the situation in which we refer to text-books and written sources for primary information and authority on practically every subject – to an ex-
treme that Andrén does not trouble to discuss recent literary and linguistic theorists’ attempts to declare the ‘textuality’ of (literally) everything (cf. Spiegel 1990). For examples of continuing archaeological relevance in this situation, which are indeed of considerable antiquity in some cases, Andrén has to turn to the relatively esoteric zone of artistic iconography, whereby material images embody narratives, along with their potentially deep ideological significance.

It should be clear from the critical comments in this synopsis of Andrén’s scheme that in my view the most revealing correlations between archaeology and literature can be found by looking at the first half of his continuum: from the object-centred, primarily oral, and in our historical case prehistoric contexts up to that watershed in the middle of the ‘integrated’ zone where the textual displaces the material. Let us start, then, with what should be an ideal example of that situation, by looking at a Danish rune-stone. First recorded found at the top of a bank near a bridge over the Århus River at Bering, Hørning parish, Hjelmslev district, Skanderborg county in Jutland is a stone raised by a man called Toki (Fig. 1). There is a Christian cross in an unusually prominent place at the end of this inscription, which can be dated with reasonable confidence to the eleventh century (Rafn 1856, 203-4; von Friesen 1933, 134-6; Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, no. 58; cf. also ibid. nos. 91 and 314). The inscription reads:

    tuki:smiðr:rið:stín:if:þurkisl:þúpmátur:sun:is:hanum:
    kaf:kul:uk:frialsi
    (Toki smith raised [the] stone after Þorgils Guðmundarson,
     who gave him gold and freedom.)

This text opens with a simple clause (subject noun phrase, verb, direct object), followed by an adverbial phrase (preposition, proper noun), and a relative (adjectival) clause beginning with the relative pronoun is (Old Norse es/er). In the opening noun phrase, the personal name Toki is paired with an attribute, smiðr. In basic semantic terms, this noun denotes an occupation: ‘smith’, ‘craftsman’ (what particular skill or skills Toki professed are not specified). The very fact of its inclusion in the inscription, however, forcefully and even rhetorically poses the question of its wider connotations: the extent to which it classifies Toki with a social identity rather than merely stating a fact about him, and the extent to which it is an assertion of a status of which the bearer can be proud. There is a neat,
Fig. 1. The Hørning rune-stone (after von Friesen 1933).

It is just possible that **kul** in the inscription represents the word for ‘coal’, ON **kol**, rather than gold, **gull**, but I consider this implausible.

With this monument, Toki repays Porgils by acknowledging and memorializing not only the fact of the latter’s power and his exercise of that power, but also the man himself. At the same time he takes a traditional monumental form to assert his own social advancement, and raises his own memorial. The same eleventh-century **parvenu** Toki (a term that is not used here in a pejorative or mocking manner) apparently raised another rune-stone now at the church of Grensten, Middelsom district, Viborg county (Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, no. 91), some thirty kilometres to the north of Hørning, with the inscription:
kúþ:hiab:þaR:saR

(Toki smith raised this stone after Refli, son of Askir Bjarnarson. God help their souls.)

Made explicit here is a further significant point that is only implicit on the Hörning stone. Toki has a Christian power to pray for the conferment of the freedom of salvation on the souls of the departed, however subordinate he was to them in secular life.

The personal attribute smiðr occurs on one further Danish rune-stone, again from northern Jutland, about forty kilometres east of Grensten at Kolind on Djursland (Sønder Djurs district, Randers county: Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, no. 108). This inscription,

smiþr:asuíþaR

(Tosti raised this stone after Tofi, who died in the east, his brother, Ásviðr’s smith),

is syntactically ambiguous, in that one cannot tell whether the nominative smiðr is in apposition to the subject of the main clause, Tosti, or that of the subordinate clause, Tofi. It is nevertheless significant in testifying, around the same date as the Grensten and Hörning stones, to the client status of a smith, in this case to the character Ásviðr (cf. Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, col. 873-4, for a valiant attempt to link the phrase to Tosti as part of an enveloping formula). Yet the smith is still celebrated, despite his social dependency, whether he raised the stone or was commemorated by it; and in what is certainly the immediately post-Jelling phase, the very layout of all three of these inscriptions consists of a remarkable, if modestly reduced, appropriation of the epigraphical, symbolic and decorative archetype provided by the great Jelling stones. When we put these inscriptions in the context of Viking-period archaeology and Norse mythology, it becomes clear that this artisanal self-confidence was no minor detail of social history and change. At the beginning of the Christian Middle Ages, such was the reflex of a major and long-standing issue that had already been contested in a way that left a profound impression on both of those wider categories of record.
Craft-production and Viking culture

It is no coincidence that material involving craft-production lies at the centre of a major archaeological and historical controversy over the definition and dating of the other end of the Viking Period – its inception – that has been keenly debated for some fifteen years now. The basis of this discussion has been the results of excavations in the Jutlandic North Sea coastal town of Ribe, where a major campaign began in 1970 (Bencard et al. 1981-90). There is a clear sequence of development in the eighth century here, starting in the first decade of the century dated by the construction of a well-dendrochronologically assigned to AD 704 or just a few years after that. The site was divided into regular plots, which were subsequently maintained or respected through several decades’ use, presumably seasonal, by a variety of craftsmen as workshop and market pitches. The presence of the characteristic North Sea trading-block coins known as sceattas in these layers indicates both a monetized economy at the site and its place within a series of early urban ports and trading sites that were founded around the Channel and North Sea – and into the Baltic – in the seventh and eighth centuries (Clarke and Ambrosiani 1995, 5-54).

There are two aspects of the finds at early Ribe that have been argued to require us to revise our understanding of the beginnings of the Viking Period. Firstly, the upper workshop layers include mould fragments from the production of ‘Berdal’ brooches. This brooch-type occurs in the earliest west Norwegian ‘Viking-period’ graves in association with Insular metalwork – putatively Viking loot – which had thus, reasonably, been dated to c. 800 or later: after the Lindisfarne raid (AD 793). At Ribe, however, such brooches might have been produced almost any time in the second half – certainly within the final quarter – of the eighth century, and the Norwegian graves may consequently be earlier in date. Along with other clear evidence of contact between Scandinavia and Britain before the year 793 (Myhre 1993), we could, consequently, have a less sharply defined beginning and chronological terminus post quem for the material-cultural complexes we regard as typical of the Viking Period. In interpreting the foundation of Ribe, meanwhile, Mogens Bencard himself and other Danish scholars have attached particular significance to the political (royal) authority implicit in the controlled and deliberate establishment of the site, which can be linked to further major strategic projects in this part of Denmark during the following twenty to thirty years, namely the Kanhave
Canal on Samsø and a rebuilding of the Dannevirke at the southern border of Jutland/Denmark (Bencard 1990, 159-62; Axboe 1995).

The undisputed motive for royal powers to found and control early towns like this was to encourage and then profit from trade: providing a guaranteed market place, with security and protection, and taking toll of the activities there. Bencard properly stresses the point that this was not just a matter of local infrastructure, but that Ribe linked Jutland with an international exchange system. But it was still just a small gateway, and towns were to remain essentially marginal to economic and social life in Scandinavia itself until the end of the Viking Period. The coinage used at Ribe – and later Hedeby – scarcely circulated outside of the ‘town’, and a long-established exchange-system must simply have continued everywhere else. As a medium of exchange, coinage tends to neutralize the social relationships implicit in transactions, whereby, for instance, ‘gifts’ and friendship or marriage alliances sit comfortably together. There is ample evidence of the particular social value of both prestigious imported goods and specially skilled craftsman-producers within Scandinavia for centuries before the foundation of Ribe (Hedeager 1992; Lund Hansen 1987; Müller-Wille 1977).

In the two centuries leading up to the start of the Viking Period as historically defined (by the Lindisfarne raid), however, there is evidence of particular stress within the Scandinavian economy. Some prestige items were still being imported from the west: for instance a range of glass vessels that Ulf Näsman has traced from places of production in south-eastern England and the Rhineland around the North Sea littoral to places of deposition predominantly in eastern Scandinavia (Näsman 1986). Precious metals, however, were evidently falling into short supply. Where previously large gold bracteates had been produced as iconographically decorated amulets, flimsy cut or stamped gold-foil figures known as guldgubber became the medium of only dimly understood religious expressions. Silver becomes rarer, increasingly alloyed with copper, or simply replaced by copper alloys. In the second half of the eighth century a significant new factor in the Scandinavian economy was opening up, as trading routes between eastern Scandinavia and the Moslem caliphate of Baghdad via the Russian rivers came into being, eventually supporting an influx of precious goods including silver, silk and glass beads in exchange for products such as furs and honey. With a date for the foundation of an ‘urban’ site at Staraja Ladoga as early as c. 760, it is tempting to speculate that a
favourable economic turn of events in the east such as this may have helped to trigger the sudden, violent inception of plundering for equivalent treasures in the west, but as yet it is impossible to see such material results in the east earlier than c. 800 (Franklin and Shephard 1996, 3-26; Hårddh 1996). Yet the contrast between east and west still seems potentially significant. While it may have been a small and tentative step in that direction, the foundation of Ribe did not prove to be the opening stage of a process of assimilation of Scandinavia to north-western Europe. The population of Norway in particular could have been stimulated to exploit its existing connexions with western Europe in a far more drastic way.

While Vikings certainly profited from plundering and slave-trading, there was no diminution in the vital importance of the craftsman-producer in Viking culture. The most infamous aspects of that culture required a supply of the best possible weapons, armour and ships. In the colonies in Britain and Ireland, the foundation and growth of Dublin and York reflect the economic – we might even call it ‘commercial’ – face of the Viking Scandinavian expansion, although of course extensive areas were also occupied for rural and coastal settlement, based on farming and fishing. It is important to recognize how crucial the economic element was to Viking culture. The range of the economic activities reflected in the material-cultural history of the Vikings – from rural to urban settlement, agricultural to virtually industrial production, and sheer commercial entrepreneurialism – might, in modern terms, be regarded as pragmatically and healthily diversified. A comparison of how these were reflected in the archaeological and mythological records deriving from this period, however, implies that there was a serious and dynamic tension between various groups and activities in the Viking culture itself.

The tool cult

The Viking Period in Scandinavian archaeology is marked by a considerable increase in the number of known graves furnished with artefacts as grave goods. That this practice was an ostentatious and assertive statement made by those responsible for the burials is clear enough, although precisely how we can translate or should re-articulate that statement in our own scholarly language is anything but an easy matter to determine. Despite this, however, and despite the fact that there was still considerable
regional and chronological variation in burial practices within Viking-period Scandinavia, the burial record does provide us with concrete insights into the material character of Viking Scandinavian culture and some of its cultural values.

It is, indeed, one of the clearest reflections of what mattered in that culture that so many men’s graves include metalworking tools. These have been surveyed and studied as ‘smiths’ graves’ (Müller-Wille 1977). It is in fact an issue of some debate whether all can really be identified as the burials of men who worked as smiths (Straume 1986), but if some such burials represent the appropriation of the material attributes of the smith in a purely symbolic mode, that only underlines the cultural importance attached to this activity. Smiths’ graves (sc. graves containing tools) are known in Scandinavia from several periods over half a millennium preceding the Viking Period, but there is a dramatic increase in frequency that may in fact have begun – interestingly, in view of the Ribe evidence just discussed – in the eighth century (Grieg 1922, 71-2; Arwidsson and Berg 1983, 22-3), before a further threefold increase in the Viking Period itself. Raw figures such as these may seem of doubtful significance in light of the generally higher frequency of furnished graves in the Viking Period, but it is clearly the case that it was in the Viking Period, and the Viking Period alone, that the deposition of metalworking tools in men’s graves became common rather than exceptional. The increase in frequency is also accounted for overwhelmingly by deposits of tools appropriate to heavier, iron working rather than finer, non-ferrous metalwork. If these graves do represent metalworkers, they were blacksmiths rather than jewellers.

About three-quarters of the c. 250 graves with tools of the Viking Period counted by Müller-Wille contained just one or two tools (a hammer, tongs or file), but around fifty had a set of three to five tools and there is a small group of seven special burials with extensive tool-kits like the famous example from Bygland, Kviteeid municipality, Telemark, Norway (Blindheim 1963) (Fig. 2). Of special importance is the fact that these tools are often associated in graves with the weapons that are the normal status symbols of the Viking warrior – and which again could be placed in the graves as such symbols, whether or not the deceased buried there had actually used or been prepared to use them. In the case of Bygland, the impressive quantity of tools, including silver inlaid spearheads, may represent the products of the smith. The identity and status of the smith thus does not seem to have been alternative to that of the warrior. In *Egils saga Skalla-
Fig. 2. The tools from the Bygland smith's grave (after Müller-Wille 1977).

Grímssonar, in fact (Ch. 58), we are told of the burial of Skalla-Grímr with his weapons and his tools. Curiously, very few tools have yet been found within the relatively rich Viking-period burial record of Iceland (Eldjárn 2000, 407-8).

There is, indeed, a regional variation in the distribution of smiths’ graves in mainland Scandinavia that may reinforce our confidence that this practice had a real and even conscious significance within the Viking Period itself. The great majority of these burials are from Norway, although there are examples in Denmark, and the British Isles. There are also particular clusters of these graves close to major iron-extraction areas of the period, such as the Møsstrond area of inner Telemark (Martens 1988), corroborating the connection between the burial practice and practical metal-production, rather than the phenomenon being merely a symbolic appropriation of
smiths’ attributes solely for the purposes of display. A further intriguing feature of this distribution is the way in which the distribution of graves containing tools is complementary to that of a smaller number of non-funerary hoards of tools in Denmark and on Gotland. Archaeologists specializing in the Viking Period have long been characteristically, and somewhat puzzlingly, cautious about attributing such deposits to anything other than accidental loss, or an unplanned failure to retrieve material intended to have been temporarily buried for safe-keeping. Votive, sacrificial hoarding had had a very long tradition in prehistoric Scandinavian ritual practices indeed, which, despite considerable changes in the seventh and eighth centuries AD, could properly be described as continuing unbroken into the Viking Period (Geisslinger 1967). The complementary deposition of categories of artefact primarily in graves in one area and votive hoards in another is a familiar pattern (Hines 1989). We can therefore endorse Müller-Wille’s cautious suggestion (1977, 192) that some at least of these deposits may represent a further facet of the tool cult (cf. also Halsall 2000 for a lively critique of traditional Viking archaeology).

Tool deposits, of both these kinds, are thus regular enough for us to conclude that they had a substantial cultural function, while the hierarchical ordering amongst the smiths’ graves implies both that smiths could aspire to a relatively high social status and that men of high social rank did not regard it as beneath them to display such skills. In a direct and straightforward way, then, this evidence exemplifies the enormous importance of craft-production in Viking-period Scandinavian life and culture. But the form of the archaeological evidence is not merely an automatic reflection of practical realities. Those realities were, we can suggest, modulated in the form of a tool cult. Toki’s inscriptions represent one of the innovative ways in which Christianity, with its intense desire to monopolize and control cult, could adapt to its own purposes the weight and momentum that these practices otherwise maintained throughout the Viking Period. Another alternative may have been funerary monuments portraying tools, of which a few examples are known from Denmark (Müller-Wille 1977, 135-7). The medieval Church, in fact, had never had any great problems in appropriating exceptional craft skills to its own ideology as a sign of virtue and saintliness (Dodwell 1982, 44-83). It seems, however, to have created rather more anxiety in case of Norse pagan mythology.
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The Edda as social history

No eddic poems attempt to explain the human world more comprehensively than do *Voluspá* and *Rígsþula* – unusually, two poems preserved in different sources, but appropriately placed side-by-side by Ursula Dronke at the head of her edition of the mythological poems of the Edda (Dronke 1997). Both of these poems also take full cognizance of the facts of flux and change over time in human history; indeed one may argue that they do this in a way that constitutes the most effective argument for regarding them as essentially non-Christian in structure. That would not automatically make the case for the pre-Christian origin of the poems rather than their being anachronistic compositions in a medieval Christian context, although I believe that the contextual evidence that has already been outlined adds considerably to the case for reading both poems as essentially Viking-period in both form and content.

Neither poem makes any acknowledgement of an eternal deity. The human audience is identified as the [megir] *Heimdalar*, ‘kinsmen of Heimdallr’, in the opening invocation of *Voluspá* (st. 1: for reasons of consistency with the arguments about the text of the poems put forward here, all quotations are from the edition of Neckel, rev. Kuhn, 1983), while Rígr is portrayed as the begetter of the three human social classes in *Rígsþula*. The identification of Rígr with Heimdallr is made in the prose introduction to *Rígsþula* in the fourteenth-century Codex Wormianus rather than in the poetic text itself. However there is a further, related parallel between the two poems that can be argued to support the case for their antiquity considerably more than the uncertain age of the explicit identification of Rígr with Heimdallr counts against it. In the noble class, Rígr passes his name on, eventually as a title, first to Rígr jarl (st. 36,5), and then to Jarl’s son Konr ungr, who *eiga gat* Rígr at heita, ‘earned the right to be called Rígr’ (st. 45, 6-7).

An equivalent replacement of the father(-creator) figure is silently embodied in *Voluspá* in the disappearance of Heimdallr from the new world after the battle of Ragnarök. Having recognized this theologically significant fact, it becomes very tempting to see a parallel between the arrival of the controversial character *inn ríki*, ‘the powerful one’, in *Voluspá* stanza 65 – the Hauksbók stanza (possibly written by the same scribe as wrote the Codex Wormianus: Dronke 1997, 61) that seems so easily dismissable as a simple Christian interpolation – and the successive
holders of the name or title Rígr. One recognizes that Rígr konungr is portrayed as wrestling power from Rígr jarl by his own abilities rather than descending from above as inn ríki does. Altogether, though, the mid-fourteenth-century written copies of both poems show at most only a superficial concern to adhere to good Christian doctrine, and it consequently appears less reductive to give serious credence to the case for an alternative, non-Christian, explanation for this structural parallel.

There is certainly a case to be made that both poems are fundamentally directed less by concerns with religious dogma (be that pagan or Christian) than by human social issues to which the introduction of Christianity was only indirectly relevant. Rígsþula accounts for a hierarchical class system (I find it misleading to refer to these as ‘three estates’: cf. Dronke 1997, 174-208). The practical concerns of this class ideology can be shown to have had early roots, and indeed to have been culturally topical issues from the Viking Age onwards. The perspective in Rígsþula, as that in Völuspá, is that from the top of the social hierarchy; as Ursula Dronke points out (loc. cit.), Rígsþula reads well as a truncated version of a royal genealogical panegyric. There are many common elements to, or common activities associated with, the aristocratic lifestyle in both poems. Most explicit of these are the responsibilities and distinctions of being concerned with warfare, philosophy and government, and the related, educational pleasures of sport and gaming (Rígsþula sts. 32, 35-38 and 43-48; Völuspá, sts. 6, 8-9 and 21. Cf. Gurevich 1969; Larrington 2002).

The endorsement or claiming of these activities for this class is done by association in Völuspá, and thus less directly than in Rígsþula. Even more indirectly but nonetheless definitely implied to be distinctive features of aristocratic behaviour are hunting and collecting rather than agricultural work for subsistence, and a conscious and heightened sexuality. Faðir (of Jarl) is first seen in Rígsþula making his bow and arrows (st. 28), items that were treated primarily as hunting equipment and are rarely represented amongst weaponry in burial deposits. Jarl learns these skills (st. 35) and Kong ungr practices them (st. 46). Farming for production is a job for the class of Karl’s descendants (sts. 22 and 24). In Völuspá, likewise, the gods of the golden age do not have to farm their food, and again in the new world after Ragnarök the gaming pieces with which they formerly teflðo í túni (st. 8) are found lying in the grass like seed (st. 61) from which munó ósánir acrar vaxa, ‘fields will grow without being sown’ (st. 62,1-2). Similarly it is with Móðir that sensuous female beauty is first portrayed and
appreciated in Rígsþula, with a perfect example of the shifting male gaze:

Keisti fald, kinga var á bringo,
síðar slæðor, serc bláfán;
brún biartari, brióst líóşara,
háls hvítari hreinni miollo.  (st. 29)

‘Her headdress was arranged on her head, there was a pendant coin on her breast, [she wore] a wide dress with a train and hanging sleeves, and a variegated tunic; [her] eyebrows were brighter, her breast more radiant, her neck whiter than clean freshly-fallen snow.’

In Völuspá, the disruptive effect of sexuality in the gods’ lives is first implied by the sexual element in the arrival of the three pursa meyiar, ‘maidens of the giants’ (st. 8, 5-6), and then echoed in the antagonistic roles acted out between the gods and the next characters appearing to be referred to using the feminine pronouns hón and hana, Gullveig and Heiðr.

A particular alertness on the reader’s part to what might seem to be casual and even accidental allusions to these realistic themes in these poems is justified by cross-reference to the material context described in the preceding section, most clearly so in the case of the economic activities. Rígsþula manifestly presents a scheme in which it is the two lower classes that are the working, productive ones. The class of hræll is straightforwardly the basal group of agricultural labourers. More specialized agricultural skills of training oxen, making ploughs, constructing barns and carts, and ploughing itself, belong to Karl, one of whose sons is Bóndi (st. 22 and st. 24, 5). The names of his other sons, meanwhile, imply social and military service (Hatr, Dregr, Hóldr, Pegrn), and other productive skills are represented by Smiðr (st. 24, 3-4). The attitude to the smith here is pejorative only in terms of the role being conspicuously assigned to a middle class in a poem prioritizing an aristocratic perspective, but its inclusion even in this brief form is enough to evoke a recurrent stigmatization of the smith figure elsewhere in eddic poetry and other Norse literature. This is most obvious in the persistent identification of dwarfs as craftsmen, and vice versa, as in the case of Reginn. That skilled smiths are viewed as highly valued and respected figures, but nonetheless vulcanic and menacing to the good order of society, especially the aristocracy and above all royalty, is perfectly represented by the figures of Völundr and Skalla-Grímr. It is interest in this regard to note that the poetic diction used in
Völundarkviða contains no epithets that directly endorse or value Völundr’s technical skill; rather he is referred to more than once as huntsman and lord: veðreygr scyti, ‘the huntsman with a weather eye’ (sts. 4, 2 and 8, 6) and vísi álfa, ‘prince of elves’ (sts. 13, 4 and 32, 2) – the latter term both times in the speech of Niðuðr (or his wife), although the narrative itself also once refers to Völundr as álfa lióði, ‘countryman or leader of elves’ (st. 10, 3), thus associating itself, one may suggest, with the antagonistic perspective of the royal family.

Those attempts to circumscribe the figure of the skilled craftsman ideologically coincided with the growing economic importance and social potential of such manufacturers and the attempts by the governing social elite to harness and control those forces demonstrated archaeologically by the Viking-period tool cult and the evidence from Ribe. This does not mean, though, that literature enacts a crude and simple suppression and stigmatization of the producer. In the golden age in Völsþád even the gods appear as makers: after building their own hórg og hof, ‘sanctuaries and temples’, afla logdo, auð smiðo, tangir scópo oc töl gorðo, ‘they laid down hearths, made precious objects, fashioned tongs and forged tools’ (st. 7, 7-8). But that was all they needed to do before passing over to play as a pastime (st. 8), until the arrival of the giants’ daughters. This is immediately followed, most significantly, by the decision to create the separate order of producers – the dwarfs (st. 9). There is a strong though contrastive echo between this sequence and that of the creation of humankind (sts. 17-18), where three Æsir, mighty and loving (oðr gir oc ástgir) come out of their own group and beget, or rather vivify, the as yet lifeless Askr and Embla. Since we can be aware of the dwarfs being made for a purpose, the question arises of what humankind was made for. There is an answer in the poem: they are to follow laws, life and fate (st. 20, 9-12); to follow a destiny that can be prophesied (st. 22) and which involves performance in battles and rituals for the gods. Productivity, in this cosmological scheme, has been passed from the gods to the dwarfs, and the model human activities are both more closely in line with the ideals of Rígsþula and directly accommodated to the service of the gods. So complete is the congruence between aristocratic and divine interests in this that it seems an inescapable realization that the formula can be read either way. The poem is thus not simply a pious pre-Christian legitimization of a privileged human order but rather seems to express full recognition that the pagan divine order is an idealization of human life. (I thus differ from Larrington’s suggestion
[2002, 70] that the exemption of the gods from work represents a royal, above an aristocratic, ideal.) It does indeed appear to be a feature of the late traditional Norse religion to conceive of divinity in humanist rather than transcendental terms. This, rather than a tolerant and patronizing later medieval Christian euhemerism, may best account for the continuing respect for pre-Christian mythology in the Middle Ages, and the adaptation of traditional rites to the new religion.

We can even supplement the case for close reading with such sensitivity to allusions to a real struggle to confine the power of the producing groups within society by considering the aristocratic-mythological treatment of relations between the sexes through various forms of myth and image. Eroticism emerges from the mythological literature as one of the most manifestly serious forms of pleasure. It is dangerous and instructive as well as delightful. The archetype in this respect can be found in the stories of Óðinn’s amorous adventures – for instance the seduction of Billings mær and Gunnlöð – (Hávamál, stts. 96-110), yielding experience and the gift of poetry, and his lying with the seven sisters to gain geð þeira alt oc gaman, ‘all their desire and pleasure’ (Hárbarðsljóð, st. 18). The brief invocations of aristocratic sexuality in Rígsþula and Völuspá thus stand upon the footings of an idealization of the triumphant and experienced male lover as artist, philosopher and hero. One can thus argue that a further refinement of the socially particular perspective of these mythological poems is that it represents solely male interests. It has no pretensions to encompass or represent any female perspective as well. Rather, the power of the female, to captivate and outwit the male as well as in her special craft – spinning and weaving yarn and fate – is taken as one of the givens of the dramatic scene: the orlog seggia, ‘declaring of fate’, that the mejiar margs vitandi, ‘maidens knowing about many things’, lay down for men (Völuspá, st. 20). The best of men are challenged to exploit and profit from this power – just as they exploit the productivity of technology and the land, and of subordinate craftsmen and farmers – as best they can.

Conclusion

It is not suggested that the economic and social tensions one can thus claim to see reflected in the eddic poetry were historically peculiar to Viking-period Scandinavia rather than being universal and constant issues. Ar-
chaeology does, however, show clearly how they developed in a particular way to a particular prominence in the Viking Period and up to the beginning of the Christian Middle Ages in Scandinavia, and in a cross-disciplinary perspective this seems to shed significant light on the background and transmission of the mythological material. Given the uncertainty and even controversy over the dating of eddic poems, it is hardly surprising that Old Norse scholars have been reluctant to use them as sources for social history. But one of the particular advantages of archaeology is that it writes a history of the *longue durée* much more readily than a punctuated chronicle of events; and a historical perspective concerned principally with long-term processes of development renders a specific point of composition (if any such thing can really be conceived of in the case of most eddic poems) far less significant an issue.

A cross-referencing between works of literature and the historical context in which they originated has had a chequered academic career, although the primary bone of contention has been not so much the fact that such links can relatively easily be drawn as the relevance of such ‘historicism’ to either literary criticism or history themselves. The integrated study of archaeology and literature, by contrast, is hugely under-developed. As a major twentieth-century critical school, it is (or should have been) Marxism that came closest to a mature materialism, although the Marxist substitution of structure and system for substance actually left this potential unfulfilled. It would still appear, *prima facie*, though, that the relevancy of archaeology to mythology proposed here accords with one of the most persistent propositions of Marxist literary theory – that literature as ideology and superstructure enacts a consistent distortion, control and even suppression of basic, economic truths.

We find, however, that the situation was rather more nuanced than this. In the case of the social status and cultural representation of the craftsman, the material record does not simply fill gaps left conspicuously in the literature. On the contrary we have a rich body of representations in both fields; the differences are principally ones of attitude and vary even within both categories of record. Rather, then, than resolving the evidence into a blunt ideological conflict between base and superstructure, we can recognize the more subtle and creditable, negotiated construction of a stable state of affairs out of the imperfectly harmonized, powerful forces involved. It is undeniably significant that the material record leans towards an endorsement of the value of practical, utilitarian, power; the literature towards an
ideological and idealistic order that marginalizes such forces. But the two sides were able to reach a compromise, and that was a compromise that had to be constantly re-enacted in practical life. That re-enactment had then to be reflected dramatically in myth, rather than standing as a static opposition in a cosmological paradigm of gods, men and dwarfs.

In the end, however, we can justify this material- or cultural-historicist approach with three quite simple points. For the archaeologist, mythology provides an explicit expression of the significance of phenomena present in the material record. For the literary historian, archaeology can identify topics in the mythological record whose significance could otherwise be unappreciated. And when we look at the issue of sequence, a comparison of the two bodies of evidence allows us to form far more sophisticated ideas about why we have the body of mythology that comes down to us. It survived, not as a collection of literary museum pieces, but because it remained vital, in a real world, for individuals with critically alert and appreciative minds. We will retrieve most of that vitality now, by appreciating its character and function in the same open-minded way.

References


