

*Sophie Bønding, Lone Kølle Martinsen
& Pierre-Brice Stahl*

The Uses of Pre-Christian Mythologies in Nineteenth-Century Northern Europe

One amongst many

In 1847, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) published a so-called “school mythology”, *Græsk og Nordisk Mythologi for Ungdommen* [Greek and Nordic mythology for young people], a commissioned work intended as an educational book for young people. In his preface, he clarified his views on the need to teach young generations about mythology:

Tænkde jeg nemlig, som vel endnu de Fleste, at *Mythologi* og *Afguderi* var hip som hap, og at Mytherne ei havde andet at betyde end hvad vi Allesammen veed og kan udtrykke langt kortere og klarere, saa man skal kun lære *Mythologi* for at vide, hvad det er *Digterne* spiller paa og de andre Konstnere har villet afbilde, da spildte jeg naturligviis ikke Tid og Flid paa nogensomhelst mythologisk Fremstilling. (Grundtvig 1847: V; emphasis in original)

[Had I believed, as I suppose most people still do, that mythology and idolatry were much of a muchness, and that myths had no other meaning than what all of us already know and can express much more briefly and clearly, so that one should only learn about mythology in order to understand the references of poets and what visual artists mean to portray, then I would not, of course, have wasted my time and effort on any kind of mythological exposition.]

Mythology is more than a mere servant of the arts, Grundtvig asserts; rather, “alle ægte Myther er de tilsvarende Folke-Aanders *Liv-Udtryk*” [all genuine myths are the ‘articulation of life’ of the corresponding people’s spirit], and therefore it was crucial that the Danish youth became acquainted with the myths of their forefathers (Grundtvig 1847: VI).¹ In other words, it was his central assertion that a deep-rooted, primordial connection existed between the mythological worldview of a given people, as expressed in its ancient mythology, and its specific (national) character.

Grundtvig was far from alone in professing such a view. Comparable ideas were common in nineteenth-century culture and politics, expressed in contemporary works by intellectuals across Europe, such as Adam Oehlen-schläger (1779–1850) and B.S. Ingemann (1789–1862) in Denmark, William Morris (1834–1896) in Britain and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) in (what later became) Germany – to name but a few. The infatuation with the pre-Christian, indigenous mythologies and mythic figures shared by these intellectuals was part of a broader Romantic paradigm, occupied with the discovery, (re)invention and cultivation of ancient and medieval pasts in pursuit of national authenticity and identity. The specific national trajectories that emerged are best understood as part of a Europe-wide network of corresponding intellectuals between whom ideas travelled (cf. Leerssen 2016).

The nineteenth century was a period of ‘becoming’. Through cultural and political processes, national borders were negotiated, established, re-negotiated and reestablished. Cultural and political thinkers created, cultivated and propagated conceptions of national, spiritual essences: ‘Germanness’, ‘Danishness’, ‘Britishness’ and so on. Vernacular myths and mythologies, perceived to be rooted in ancient, vernacular pasts which were now (re)discovered and (re)imagined, proved powerful political tools in the shaping of Europe.

As in Grundtvig’s case, this preoccupation with mythology rested on a general revaluation of traditional negative stereotypes of pagan barbarians.

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 * All translations into English are our own.

1 “nu maa jeg ansee det for et af *Folkelivets* store Anliggender, at *Ungdommen* igien bliver bekiendt med sine *Fædres* og *Frænders* Myther” [now I must see it as one of the great purposes of the people’s life to make sure that the youth will once again become acquainted with their fathers’ and kinsmen’s myths] (Grundtvig 1847: VI). For an editorial introduction to the text, see Holst Petersen (2014).

These were transformed into positive images of Europe's pre-Christian, indigenous populations, and their mythological worldviews were now interpreted as expressions of their primordial national characters (cf. Zernack 2011; 2018). These conceptions were indebted to – and indeed part of – the Romantic discovery of the North, prompted by intellectuals such as Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and fertilized by James McPherson's Ossian poems from the 1760s onwards (Leerssen 2016). With the emergence of a 'Northern antiquity' as a separate cultural sphere and an alternative to classical antiquity, new imaginative geographies of North and South arose (Duffy, ed. 2017; Grage & Mohnike, eds. 2017).

Thus, although the long nineteenth century is at the heart of this book, central developments of the preceding centuries laid the ground for the emergence of Romantic conceptions of national belonging. Reflections on these precursors, and indeed on the continuities of such conceptions into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are offered throughout the book.

The aims of this book

This book explores the role of pre-Christian mythologies – especially Old Norse or Germanic mythology² – in the formation of national communities in nineteenth-century Northern Europe. It has two major ambitions. Firstly, we wished to explore the cultural and political utilization of pre-Christian mythologies in the forging of national identities as a Europe-wide phenomenon. Collectively, the chapters of this book offer new theoretical perspec-

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2 Throughout this book, the terms 'Old Norse mythology', 'Norse mythology' and 'Nordic mythology' are used interchangeably – according to the preferences of the contributors – to refer to the mythological material relating to the pre-Christian North, which is preserved (primarily) in medieval Old Norse manuscripts. While these terms are favoured by scholars today, some nineteenth-century mythologists (notably Jacob Grimm) preferred the term 'Germanic mythology', a terminological and cultural construct which encompassed the mythological traditions of Scandinavia and wider Northern Europe, including the area later called Germany; it was used to bolster visions of an original spiritual unity of all 'Germanic' peoples. The term 'Germanic mythology' is used in this volume to refer to this conceptual construct, and we are fully aware of the problematic nature of the term. In fact, this book helps shed light on the processes of identity construction in which its conception was embedded (see especially Leerssen; Halink, this volume).

tives on and considerations of nation-building processes, as well as a range of different case studies that exemplify these processes. Secondly, we wanted to situate N.F.S. Grundtvig amongst his European intellectual contemporaries, many of whom had similar yet different visions and ambitions for the role of pre-Christian mythologies in the emerging national discourses of the time. Although, in international scholarship, Grundtvig's treatment of Old Norse mythology is generally perceived as a significant example of the intellectual trends of his time (Clunies Ross, ed. 2018; Glauser, Hermann & Mitchell, eds. 2018; Leerssen, ed. 2018; Halink, ed. 2019), in Danish and (to some extent) Scandinavian scholarship there has been a tendency to present Grundtvig as a 'lone rider', a unique thinker, with no real contemporary counterparts.³ Taking a more comparative approach, this book demonstrates that we cannot understand Grundtvig's utilization of Old Norse mythology as a resource for nation building in isolation from the contemporary Romantic preoccupation with pre-Christian mythologies through which nation builders across Europe claimed primordial status for their respective nations under formation.

As is evident from the chapters in this book, the Romantic Movement not only coincided with the nation-building processes of Europe, but was also an integral part of the intellectual, cultural and, indeed, political climate in which Europe's nations came to be. In many ways, the study of myth was a quest for a sense of unity, and thus very much entangled with the processes of nation building. The nineteenth century was an 'age of mythology'. In the course of the century, vernacular mythologies, including Nor-

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3 Some have perceived Grundtvig as a cultural giant, comparable only to other cultural giants. Among the more distinct examples are Jakob Balling's comparison of Grundtvig with Dante (1265–1321) and John Milton (1608–1674) (Balling 1993; 1998), and Poul Borum's treatment of him as a poet in a league of his own (Borum 1983). In recent years, several interesting comparisons with contemporary thinkers outside Denmark have appeared, although the focus has not been on their use of pre-Christian mythologies (e.g. Baunvig 2013; chapters in Hall, Korsgaard & Pedersen, eds. 2015 and in Baunvig & Schelde, eds. 2017). Traditionally, Grundtvig's views on Old Norse mythology and the pre-Christian past have been scrutinized for influences from and breaks with Romantic thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), while attention has not yet been paid to how his cultivation of Old Norse mythology was part of a broad contemporary Romantic trend shared among intellectuals across Europe.



☞ *Johan Ludvig Lund, Christian Frederik, 1813. Christian Frederik (1786-1848), Crown Prince of Denmark and Norway, later to become King Christian VIII (1839–1848) of Denmark. This portrait was painted shortly before the Crown Prince was sent to Norway as governor. It shows us how important the legacies of the pre-Christian past were for contemporary politics: a rune-stave and the Edda are important paraphernalia in the portrait of the king-to be. Eidsvoll, Norsk Folkemuseum.*

dic, Germanic, Frisian, Irish, Polish, Estonian and Basque (re)constructed and (re)imagined through a combination of written sources and contemporary folklore (Leerssen 2016; this volume). Vernacular mythologies were appropriated and actualized and, along with vernacular languages, became a central category for anchoring the new national communities, and creating new ‘modern myths’ of these nations (cf. Shippey 2005; Leerssen 2013; 2016). As stories and imaginary story-worlds from the past, actualized in what was understood as new poetic effusions of national spirits, these mythologies were central ingredients in the formation of national discourses and collective identities. Through the medium of fiction, mythological worlds populated by otherworldly creatures were brought to life and came to constitute collective frames of orientation for the populations of the emerging national communities. On the one hand, each nation constructed their own mythology. On the other hand, these mythological universes became known across national divides. They became pivotal to the construction of imagined communities (cf. Anderson 2006 [1983]) at different levels of social integration – in nations as well as pan-national movements (e.g. Scandinavianism). Importantly, the occupation with pre-Christian mythology in the nineteenth century was not just an intellectual pursuit. This may be illustrated with a painting. In 1813, the Danish painter Johan Ludvig Lund (1777–1867) made a portrait of the then Danish-Norwegian Crown Prince, Christian Frederik (1786–1848). At the time, Norway was part of the state of Denmark (and had been since 1536), and in 1813 the Crown Prince was to be sent to Norway as a governor.

Lund depicted Christian Frederik as a confident, learned and intellectual sovereign, surrounded by objects that emphasized his status as a modern and enlightened royal successor. Among them is a book with the title *Edda* (it is unclear whether it is the Poetic or the Prose Edda), linking him to the mythological heritage of the North. This heritage is also invoked through the rune-stave, which bears an inscription meaning “Nidaros”, the medieval name of the city of Trondheim, which according to Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* (c. 1230) was the epicentre of the famous King Olaf II’s reign (1015–1030). Fuelling this narrative, Lund used mythological and historical heritage from a foundational ‘golden age’ to depict the Crown Prince, thus demonstrating the importance of culture for political power and legitimacy.

Lund suggests that in the future, Christian Frederik could become what Olaf was in the past, a great Northern king.⁴

Unforeseen by Lund in 1813, over the coming year Norway would pass into Swedish rule in a cascade of turbulent events. On 14 January at the Treaty of Kiel, Norway ceded to Swedish rule. However, on 17 May the Norwegian emancipatory movement declared Norway independent by passing the Eidsvoll Constitution and installing Christian Frederik as king of Norway. This independence lasted until 10 October, when Norway entered into a personal union with Sweden under Swedish rule. Christian Frederik abdicated and receded to Denmark, where he was later crowned as King Christian VIII (1839–1848), occupying as he did – according to Grundtvig – “Danmarks Skjoldung-Sæde” [Denmark’s seat of the Skjoldungar; i.e. the lineage of Danish legendary kings] (Grundtvig 1840: 4).

Myth and mythology

The concepts of *myth* and *mythology* are at the core of this book. However, as scholarly concepts they are far from uniform. Both are used across academic disciplines, but are defined or tacitly understood in a variety of ways.⁵ In this book, the role of myth and mythology in nation-building processes is explored by scholars from various disciplines, and the concepts are used with slight variations in meaning. The reader will encounter *myth* understood as traditional and authoritative stories that include superhuman agents (such as gods). Myth in this sense of the term is generally thought of as a central vehicle for the transmission of religious traditions and worldviews, thus constituting an ingrained part of religion as a cultural phenomenon (Jensen 2009: 1–4; Segal 2015: 3–5). Examples are stories about Odin and Thor, as transmitted in the Eddas and (re)discovered and (re)invented in the

4 The motif of the foundational king in a golden past was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. In Denmark, King Frederik VI (1768–1839) was sometimes designated as or compared to Frode Fredegod or other legendary and historical kings, affiliating him with the ancient past of the kingdom (e.g. Grundtvig 1815; 1839).

5 For discussions of the concepts of myth and mythology and their evolutions, see, for example, Feldman & Richardson (1972); Detienne (1992); Lass (1997); Lincoln (1999); Bolle (2005); Jensen (2009); Segal (2015); Husser (2017).

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Several chapters in this book explore the rise of fantastic, mythic creatures, rooted in ancient mythologies, in the popular imagination of the nineteenth century (Baunvig; Bønding; Martinsen, this volume).

A second and broader concept of myth is also present here: myth in the sense of a pervasive popular conviction or credo. The American “rags to riches” myth is a conspicuous example (Segal 2015: 3–5): the conviction that it is possible for a person (often through hard work and honesty) to rise from poverty to great riches. Such convictions or credos exist independently of any one story that exemplify it; whether it is ‘true’ in any factual sense is irrelevant – the point is that it holds power over people’s minds. Roger Lass’s functionalist definition encapsulates this aspect of myth well: “a myth in the widest sense is a story or image that structures some epistemic field (knowledge, thought, belief) in a particular culture” (Lass 1997: 4). An example pertinent to the subject of this book is the so-called myth of an original peasants’ freedom in the North, which became widespread in the nineteenth century. The conviction that some kind of proto-democratic society had existed in the ancient North was founded in Tacitus’ *Germania*, and was utilized as a tool to press for democratization processes, not least in Scandinavia (Sørensen & Stråth, eds. 1997; also Mohnike; Martinsen; Jón Karl Helgasson, this volume).

Both of these conceptions of myth are found in this book, illustrating the fact that this is a contested scholarly concept with a variety of meanings across academic fields.⁶ In addition, this calls for caution when analyzing the utilization of pre-Christian myth and mythology among nineteenth-century thinkers, as it is important to be aware how these concepts were understood by the mythologists whose work we study. Their evolution in the hands of nineteenth-century Romantic thinkers is explored in the contributions of Joep Leerssen and Thomas Mohnike, respectively.

This book explores how pre-Christian mythologies were reimagined and actualized in the new modern myths of nations. However, it must be noted that this distinction between ‘pre-Christian’ and ‘modern’ myths is an analytical classification that should not be conflated with ‘original mythology’ and later ‘artificial reception’. We know today that any pursuit of an original version of a pre-Christian myth is futile in light of their embeddedness in

oral culture (Gunnell 2005; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004; Glauser 2007; Harris & Reichl 2012; Hermann 2017). The oldest written records of pre-Christian myths and their later modern interpretations are both part of ever-present mythologizing processes through which widely shared convictions are naturalized. In this sense, as famously expressed by Roland Barthes, myth is that which “goes without saying” (Barthes 1972 [1957]). Myths continue to shape cultural identities across the globe.

Approaches

A traditional way of approaching the formation of national discourses of belonging in the nineteenth century is through the concepts of ‘nationalism’ and ‘nation building’. A rich related research field has emerged. Scholars taking different approaches, often categorized as ‘modernists’ (e.g. Gellner 2006 [1983]; Anderson 2006 [1983]; Hobsbawm & Ranger, eds. 1983), ‘perennialists’ (e.g. Seton-Watson 1977; Hastings 1997) and ‘ethno-symbolists’ (e.g. Smith 1998; 2009), have captured central aspects of European societies and collective identity formation in the nineteenth century.⁷ While theories of nationalism have defined central aspects of European societies in

6 Often in today’s popular parlance – and sometimes in scholarly parlance – *myth* is taken to be synonymous with ‘false belief’, ‘popular misconception’, or simply ‘a lie’. That is, myth is something that does not hold up in the face of science and rationality and, therefore, must be debunked as fake or non-factual (Segal 2015: 5). The association of myth with unreason has its roots in Classical antiquity but was amplified and accentuated during the Enlightenment, when myth was generally seen as unreliable and untruthful (Jensen 2009: 17–22). This view of myth lived on alongside its nineteenth-century Romantic rehabilitation (which is the focus of this book), and was formative for the institutionalization of history as a university discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century. The debunking of myth became the hallmark or the noble purpose of good scientific history, and myth and history were constructed as binary opposites. Today it is generally accepted that the distinction between myth as ‘untruth’ and history as ‘truth’ is far from clear cut. It has been demonstrated how history writing, especially (but by no means only) in the nineteenth century, effectually served to invent new myths of nations to mobilize people by providing them with a new identity and frame of orientation (cf. e.g. Lorenz 2008; Berger 2009; 2011; Assmann 2011). Still, the use of the term *myth* to designate an untruth persists.

7 Many more scholars have contributed to the debates and theoretical constructs of nationalism studies, both before and after the 1980s. The philosopher and historian Hans Kohn is often described as the first scholar of nationalism in a modern sense, with his now seminal book *The Idea of Nationalism* (2005 [1944]).



🔥 *W.G. Collingwood, Althing in Session, nineteenth century. One of the most persisting myths in Nordic history is that of an original peasants' freedom. The idea held that once upon a time a proto-democratic society existed in the North, the 'thing' where all people would meet on equal terms to take part in political decision making. This myth grew in nineteenth-century Scandinavia, as democratization processes took place across Europe. The word 'thing' was used to designate the parliamentary bodies of Denmark, Iceland and Norway: Folketinget (Danish), Alþingi (Icelandic) and Stortinget (Norwegian), respectively. British Museum.*

the nineteenth century, scholars themselves have also been quite captivated by these theories – ever since the first social constructionist works began to appear in the early 1980s as part of a general deconstructionist and post-modern paradigm. Just as a main trend of the 1970s was to cite, interpret and pay homage to Karl Marx and Marxist analysis (in different variants), so scholars from the 1980s onwards have cited, interpreted and paid homage to scholars of nationalism in multiple ways. Just as nationalism as an ideology has been conceived “to begin as Sleeping Beauty and end as Frankenstein’s monster” (Minogue 1967: 7), nationalism theories have grown explosively, gaining a life of their own. While the analytical tools of nationalism studies are diligently employed in this book, we leave aside the traditional introductions of nationalism theories. We ask instead how intellectuals of this time used pre-Christian mythologies to establish and celebrate national discourses of collective identity. Thus – in unison with such scholars as Isaiah Berlin (2000 [1965]), John Hutchinson (2013) and Joep Leerssen (2013) – we perceive culture as an agency in political processes, rather than a by-product.⁸

The chapters that follow examine a wide range of cultural products, including novels, poetry, academic works, theatre, newspapers, travel accounts, public lectures and personal correspondences, demonstrating both how pre-Christian mythologies were used in identity constructions in the nineteenth centuries, and that many of these myths are still inherent in national discourses today. In addition to nationalism theories (e.g. those of A.D. Smith, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner), the chapters approach the subject with reference to a variety of other theoretical perspectives, including conceptual history (Reinhart Koselleck), anthropology

8 Especially Leerssen has charted a course for a focus on Romanticism as a central component in nation-building efforts, not least with his definition of Romantic nationalism: “Romanticism and nationalism, each with their separate, far-flung root-systems and ramifications, engage in a tight mutual entanglement and *Wahlverwandschaft* in early-nineteenth-century Europe; and this entanglement constitutes a specific historical singularity. We can give this singularity a name: Romantic nationalism. And we may understand that to mean something like: the celebration of the nation (defined in its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in political consciousness-raising.” (Leerssen 2013: 28).

(Philippe Descola; Paul Veyne), sociology (Max Weber; Émile Durkheim), hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer; Günter Figal) and cultural memory studies (Jan Assmann; Renate Lachmann). As such, this book situates itself at the nexus between the vast field of nationalism studies and the rich field of research on the reception of Old Norse mythology in modern times.⁹

Gefion

Although this book bears the term “nation” in its title, it is essential to acknowledge the plurality of discourses of belonging that were connected to different levels or spheres of collective identity, including groups, communities, regions, countries and nations. The mythic figure Gefion who adorns the cover of this book serves as an illustration of this point. This deity of Old Norse mythology was in the nineteenth century mainly known through Snorri Sturluson’s accounts in *Ynglinga saga* and *Gylfaginning*. In these texts, we learn that Odin sends Gefion to the North, where King Gylfi gives her land to plough. With the help of her four sons, who are turned into oxen, dragging her plough, she manages, says Snorri, to separate from Sweden a piece of land, which she then drags into the sea and calls Selund (Zealand). In the Romantic nineteenth century, Gefion served as a symbolic figure in several discourses of collective identity. To some she was an allegory for Scandinavian unity (Halink 2017: 136–137), as in Eleonora Charlotta d’Albedyll’s poem *Gefion skaldedikt i fyra Sanger* [Gefion, a Poem in Four Cantos] (1814). To others, she represented Denmark as a token of Danish national identity. Grundtvig, for example, (most often) saw her as a personification of Denmark. In *Det Danske Fiir-Kløver* [The Danish Four-Leaf Clover] (1836), he explained that Gefion was the queen of King Skjold, the legendary, foundational king of Denmark, and interpreted her as “Fæderne-Landet’ i moderlig Skikkelse” [the father-land in maternal form] (Grundtvig 1836: 42).

Embedding Gefion in a national context, the painter and illustrator Lorenz Frølich (1820–1908) painted *Gefion pløjer Sjælland ud af Sverige*

9 Including but certainly not limited to such excellent contributions as Wawn (2002 [2000]), Shippey (2005), Lassen, ed. (2008), Jón Karl Helgason (2017), Clunies Ross, ed. (2018) and Halink, ed. (2019).