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When Objects Misbehave

Materials & Assemblages in the Ancient Scandinavian Myths

<https://doi.org/10.1515/fabula-2020-0014>

Abstract: This article explores new possibilities for the interpretation of myths. It asks how people in the past configured their world and its complex interactions, to which their orally-constructed stories bear witness. It is assumed here that myths contain structures of belief, cognition, and world-making beyond their immediate subject matter. This article focuses specifically on the preservation of material objects in myths throughout their transmission from changing oral narratives to written form. We should not assume that objects in oral traditions simply color the narratives; rather, these representations of materials can provide clues into the mentalities of past peoples and how they understood the complex interaction between humans and materials. As a case study, I examine the Old Norse myths, stories containing materials that reinforced Scandinavian oral traditions and gave the stories traction, memory, and influence. In doing so, this article hopes to help bridge materiality studies, narrative studies, and folklore in a way that does not privilege one particular source type over another. The myths reveal ancient Scandinavian conceptions of what constituted an “object,” which are not necessarily the same as our own twenty-first century expectations. The Scandinavian myths present a world not divided between active Subject, passive Object as the Cartesian model would enforce centuries later, but rather one that recognized distinctive object agencies beyond the realm of human intention.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel schlägt neue Herangehensweisen für die Interpretation von Mythen vor. Die zentrale Frage ist die, wie die Menschen in der Vergangenheit ihre Welt und ihre komplexen Interaktionen interpretierten, und untersucht ihre mündlich konstruierten Geschichten. Eine Grundannahme ist, dass Mythen Strukturen des Glaubens, der Erkenntnis und der Weltgestaltung jenseits ihres unmittelbaren Gegenstandes enthalten. Die Untersuchung konzentriert sich speziell auf die Bewahrung materieller Objekte in Mythen und den Prozess der Übertragung mündlicher Erzählungen in ihre schriftlichen Form. Wir sollten nicht davon ausgehen, dass Objekte in mündlichen Überlieferungen

einfach die Erzählungen illustrieren; vielmehr können Darstellungen von materiellen Gegenständen Hinweise auf die Mentalitäten vergangener Völker geben und ihr Verständnis der komplexen Interaktion zwischen Mensch und Material. Als Fallstudie untersuche ich die altnordischen Mythen, Geschichten, die Objekte enthalten, die skandinavische mündliche Traditionen verstärkten und den Geschichten Zugkraft, Erinnerungswürdigkeit und Einfluss gaben. Materialitätsstudien, Erzählstudien und Folkloreforschung werden hier zusammengeführt, ohne eine dieser Herangehensweisen zu privilegieren. Die Mythen offenbaren alte skandinavische Vorstellungen von dem, was ein „Objekt“ auszumachen pflegte. Sie waren nicht unbedingt mit denen unserer eigenen Denkweisen des einundzwanzigsten Jahrhunderts vergleichbar. Die skandinavischen Mythen präsentieren uns eine Welt, die nicht zwischen aktivem Subjekt und passivem Objekt unterscheidet, wie es das kartesische Modell Jahrhunderte später erzwingen würde, sondern eine, die unverwechselbare Objektagenturen jenseits des Bereichs der menschlichen Absicht anerkannte.

Introduction

As individuals of the twenty-first century, we have preconceived, engrained expectations about what constitutes an “object” and how one is supposed to behave. Case in point: we expect that objects do not behave – they are, after all, simply objects. These twenty-first century expectations are partially the product of centuries of philosophical thought on the nature of humankind and, by extension, the nonhuman. René Descartes’ seventeenth-century dualist ontology theorized two forms of beings in the world, only one of which can become a Subject, capable of agency and consciousness. By contrast, objects under this model contain neither characteristic of agency nor consciousness. When we consider the centuries of human-material interactions in daily social life prior to the Enlightenment, the perception of objects as inactive, passive entities has a remarkably short history. This realization has important ramifications for examining pre-Enlightenment sources in order to understand the ancient past.

Thor’s hammer provides an iconic example of an ancient object, both material in the amulets worn by ancient Scandinavian men and women and immaterial in their oral stories about the Norse god Thor and his exploits with the giants. These oral stories survive in the form of myths, stories that have survived over many centuries to the present day. Current scholars recognize myth as a nebulous genre that strives toward narratives of “timeless truths” and which quite often presents

itself as unchanging (cf. Ben-Amos 1992). I define “myth” here as an oral tradition that communicates, among other things, content based on local sacred thought. But like all forms of oral tradition, myths are historical artifacts, produced in a particular cultural context and then subject to continuous processes transmission and historical change, in which the intermingled agencies of the creators of the stories, their audiences, subsequent generations, and even the twenty-first century scholar are all entangled (Lihui 2015, 374).

Instead of considering myth as a generic or static textual genre, folklorists have argued for the importance of treating myth as a fluid genre of communication that articulates the practices that people in the past adopted to engage other traditions and communicative practices (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 163). The reformulation of myth as a communicative practice rather than a textual type is crucial for studying the transformation of oral information and memory into written form and the possibilities for recuperating information about oral practice in the past from the surviving texts. This paper thus assumes that myths, as communicative practices, contain traces of folk belief, cognition, and world-views that dynamically persisted over time (cf. Dundes 1965). In order to conduct this work, folklorists, cultural anthropologists, and specialists in cultural studies use meticulous analytical tools for gathering historical-specific information on the oral traditions of past communities from non-contemporaneous sources.

These sources, of course, are not without their challenges. Firstly, oral traditions often lack named authors, which would provide insight into why these narratives were created and persisted over time. Secondly, owing to the complex, dynamic processes of transmission, scholars are working from a version of oral tradition whose form and content has encountered a number of redactions, including deliberate modifications from one generation to another. Thus, establishing a specific historical and social context for oral tradition beyond a broad geographic region and an approximate timeframe often proves difficult. With source-critical methods, we can approach the study of myths as ethnographic sources beyond their literary value. The folklorist and historian of religion H. R. Ellis Davidson suggested that the study of myths was not something contrary to reality, but rather “a search for the deeper understanding of the human mind” (1964: 22). With this particular pursuit in mind, we should be careful not to become too caught up in the anonymity of folkloric sources at the expense of overlooking the important fact that these narratives meant something specific to the people in the past who created the stories and performed them. Recent folkloric and anthropological research have made significant efforts to recognize the agency of past peoples in producing oral narratives. Oral sources contain rich traces of these people who otherwise would remain mostly invisible in the subject matter (cf. Price 2012).

As a case study, I will concentrate on the myths of the non-literate communities of Iron-Age Scandinavia (ca. 700 to 1000 AD) and the cultural-specific information that these mythic narratives contain. This work suggests that the myths can shed light on ancient Scandinavian configurations of the world and its complex interactions (cf. Gunnell 2014). The Old Norse term *fornsiðr*, “custom of the ancient past” expresses the strong connection of tradition and heritage to spirituality that broadly informed how one lived in ancient Scandinavia (Price 2008). The desire of ancient societies for the preservation and transmission of cultural memory informed their oral traditions; their stories therefore contain fragments of this cultural knowledge. After all, oral traditions are not snapshots of a specific historical moment but rather express complex “cartographies” of communicative practices and discourses (Briggs 2008; cf. Briggs and Bauman 1992). The Scandinavian myths, preserved in the Old Norse language, are no exception. The medieval Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), a prominent recorder of the Norse myths, seems to have believed that eddic poetry provided authentic information about ancient Scandinavian culture and traditions. Throughout his *Prose Edda* text, Snorri refers to the oral traditions of the ancient Scandinavians in such a way that he seems to expect his medieval readers to be already well acquainted with them (Gunnell 2014, 21). Regardless of whether medieval audiences interpreted these myths as factual or fabulated (and Snorri takes great pains to convince them of the later), audiences nevertheless understood the myths as products of the complex accumulation of beliefs, thoughts, and practices, generated over centuries.

The Scandinavian myths feature many of the aforementioned source-critical challenges shared by other ancient oral traditions as well as ones common to Old Norse studies by virtue of the circumstances according to which Old Norse sources have survived. To begin with, the texts which preserve these oral narratives are not contemporaneous to the Iron-Age Scandinavian communities that created and first performed them. While we can date the medieval manuscripts with approximate accuracy, it is difficult to determine which information preserved in the texts is rooted in ancient Scandinavian oral traditions of storytelling and performance, content which was later modified in some way, and what pieces of information are due to the changes of thirteenth-century individuals who recorded and possibly emended the myths.

This concern over the non-contemporaneous nature of the sources is further exacerbated by the apparent cultural differences between medieval Iceland and Iron-Age Scandinavia, namely religious difference. The recording of the pagan traditions of ancient Scandinavia by Christians on Iceland particularly worried scholars of the inter-war generation who concluded that folk traditions rooted in pre-Christian times must be so ‘contaminated’ and corrupt that the medieval

sources must be inappropriate for the study of the earlier Scandinavian traditions (cf. Heide and Bek-Pedersen 2014, 11). Few scholars would argue that Christian traditions and broader Continental European literary culture had no influence on the Old Norse texts, but the extent to which these medieval influences modified information about ancient Scandinavia has elicited decades of debate on the role of orality on the production Old Norse literature (Sigurðsson 2005).

Given these challenges, specialists have offered a few approaches to interrogating the available source material in absence of more specific information about the transformation of Scandinavian oral tradition into compiled and recorded texts on medieval Iceland. First, one approach is to simply use the medieval manuscripts to study medieval Icelandic literary culture. Secondly, some scholars have alternatively offered careful hypotheses to account for the role of oral tradition in disseminating information that recurs in seemingly related passages across different Old Norse texts (cf. Andersson 1964; Clover 1985). A third option, as Gunnell (2014) proposes, is to place less stress on the historical value of the source material and to reorient our questions towards exploring why people in the past told narratives, how they understood them, and why and how traditions persisted and changed over time (Gunnell 2014, 23), since the mentalities and beliefs of past individuals lack any proper “origin” in time and space (cf. Schjødt 2014, 50). Even within the centuries-long time frame of ancient Scandinavia, oral traditions constantly evolved in form and meaning, continually adapting and changing in complex ways (cf. Ong 1982; Foley 2002). Thus, rather than attempting to “peel back the layers” from the medieval textual shell in order to reveal “original” ancient Scandinavian mentalities, we might find it more productive to place these various actors into dialogue with each other and recognize their intertwined agencies. As Old Norse scholars increasingly argue, evident in these approaches is the need to compare medieval evidence with more readily dateable sources, including skaldic verse, in order to investigate the traces of earlier Scandinavian oral traditions. This study therefore seeks to embrace the ambiguity between what is ancient Scandinavian information and which is medieval Icelandic in the texts by examining elements in the myths that seem particularly resistant to change or modification from ancient Scandinavian to the medieval period, namely the role of material objects within these oral narratives. I also question what this information can tell us about mentalities in the past or, to use the terminology of Margaret Clunies Ross, how the Norse myths encode “the major conceptual fields of early Scandinavian thought” (Ross 1994–1998, 34).

Mythic Materiality

As I have explored, oral transmission is by no means a static process. That said, not all structures and information preserved in oral traditions are equal – some aspects are more readily subject to change and modification than others. Pernille Hermann (2014) has promoted memory as a useful framework for identifying aspects of ancient Scandinavian culture that are resistant to change, located in both oral and non-oral sources (e.g. material objects and landscapes). She argues that memory was an important “mental and cultural resource” for the writing of the medieval texts that preserve older Scandinavian traditions (Hermann 2014, 14). Hermann’s acknowledgement of the importance of physical objects, as well as verbal sources, to preserving memory has also been the subject of some folklore scholarship. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett convincingly argued for the importance of materials to the study of Folklore, particularly in the ways that objects shape experience and encode memory (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, 336). Following this attention to the ways in which both speech-acts and materials encode and preserve memory within a cultural context, I suggest that objects, preserved either as physical materials or as an intangible representation in storytelling, undoubtedly contains traces of cultural traditions, if in very different ways. After all, both “pots and poetry” were created by the same people and thus belong to the same cultural context of ancient Scandinavia (Hedeager 2011, 3, as cited in Morris 2000, 27).

Texts and materials therefore deserve to be studied together with greater interdisciplinary attention in ways that do not place these source types in competition with each other for the authoritative source of “historical truth.” Literary scholars, for their part, have had a tendency to consult the archaeological record in order to determine whether the texts portray historically-realistic circumstances (Hines 2016). But there are other productive ways to approach material and textual traces of the past in complimentary, interdisciplinary efforts. For my part, instead of looking for a material testimony that competes with oral and written testimonies of the past, I examine the myths’ engagement of materials as indication of ancient Scandinavian belief and practice. Material objects, after all, occupy an important space in the oral history of myths and other folkloric sources. Archaeologist Neil Price has often discussed how pagan narratives and performative behavior can inform material traces (cf. Price 2010). On the other side of this coin, physical materials in Iron-Age life can similarly inform daily behaviors and practices as well as find their way into narratives and traditions. Careful attention to the materials in oral narratives can therefore shed light on the complexities of cultural traditions in the past. This work largely relies on materiality studies, an interdisciplinary field related to but distinct from Archaeology

as the study of how things inform behavior and cognition. Materiality illuminates how people make things but also how things make people. Materiality, emphatically, is a process, not a substance, in which matter literally matters itself (cf. Miller 2005; Coole 2013). Our world, and that of past peoples, is full of objects that both guide and constrain human action and thought. Elliott Oring has urged folklorists interested in the reflection of worldviews in oral history to elaborate on the worldview itself and the conditions and experiences that engendered and sustained human mentalities (Oring 2006, 209). Materiality offers productive frameworks for identifying and articulating that process. For, as Oring has pointed out, “every event, each human behavior, is a unique occurrence brought about by the interaction of particular objects, in particular places, at particular times and under particular conditions” (Oring 1989, 358; emphasis added). The study of objects that we encounter in the Scandinavian myths, hailing from a very real cultural context and communities of practice in ancient Scandinavia, is part of this endeavor to articulate the cultural effects of those object interactions.

Material objects found in the Scandinavian mythic narratives have roots in the daily experience of Iron-Age life. While determining the extent to which everyday materials may have inspired the oral representation of objects would prove difficult, it is perhaps more productive to treat oral representations of materials as products of ancient Scandinavians in their own right, shaped by cultural- and time-specific world-views and ideas about the nonhuman. Mythic materials, spun with magic and belief in the oral narratives, reinforced the myths and gave the stories memory and influence. Therefore, to dismiss the mythic objects as simply “fiction” is to severely obscure the greater cultural context that produced the myths and that survived throughout the continuum of oral tradition.

Many of the objects mentioned in the Norse myths had likely circulated through numerous media forms long before they were recorded in written poetic form in medieval manuscripts. Monument iconography, art on more perishable media such as woodcarvings, and skaldic poetry offer sources that are contemporary to Iron-Age Scandinavia and provide evidence for the early development, transformation, and dissemination of the mythic narratives that later emerged in written forms (Kopár 2016, 190). The iconographic evidence therefore can shed invaluable light on where and when particular mythical heroes (and objects) in the myths were known and in what specific cultural contexts. The infamous Thor’s hammer presents one of the most widespread mythic materials across media forms in Northern Europe (cf. Lindow 1994, 2001, 27–28). The hammer, as described in the eddic poem *Hymiskviða* for instance, plays a significant role in the myth about Thor’s fishing trip expedition to acquire a kettle from the giant Hymir (cf. Lindow 2016). The myth describes an iconic scene in which Thor captures the Midgard serpent with his fishing hook and strikes the monster’s head with the

hammer. The ninth-century skaldic poem *Ragnarsdrápa* by Norwegian poet Bragi Boddason contains the earliest reference to this myth with vivid imagery of the story's material objects: Thor's hammer, the fishing line, the hook responsible for capturing the Midgard serpent. As Kopár argues, the iconography of this mythic scene on commemorative monuments sheds light on the use of myth in wide cultural and social contexts. She identifies the survival of four stone carvings (and possibly more) from Scandinavia and the British Isles which detail imagery from this myth (Kopár 2016, 203). An eleventh-century ornamented runestone from Altuna, Uppland, Sweden (U 1161) reveals a man on a boat, holding a hammer or axe in his right hand and grasping a fishing line in the other. A tenth century carved stone slab from Gosforth, Cumbria, England, known as the "Fishing Stone" similarly shows a figure holding what appears to be a hammer in his right hand and a fishing line with large bait in his left. The wide additional material evidence for Thor's hammer amulets (cf. Zeiten 1997; Staecker 1999; Nordeide 2006; Jensen 2010; Sonne 2013) and neck-rings (cf. Andersson 2005; Novikova 1992) further suggests the role of this icon in Iron-Age daily life throughout Scandinavia. The widespread presence of these objects across contemporary and later sources support the argument that these objects cannot be simply the inventions of medieval authors but were rather a part of the transmission of ancient Scandinavian oral traditions that particularly resisted later changes and emendations. We should not assume then that objects in the myths simply color the narrative; rather, objects can provide clues into the mentalities of past peoples and how they understood the complex interaction between humans and materials (cf. Knutson 2019).

Scandinavian Mythic Objects and Human-Nonhuman Assemblages

As I will examine in this section, the Scandinavian myths reveal ancient understandings of objects that depart from our modern expectations which have been influenced by post-medieval and Enlightenment philosophies. Instead, the Scandinavian myths seem to focus on object-oriented agencies, thereby appreciating materials as active in their own right and not simply the antithesis of the Cartesian Subject. The thirteenth-century Old Norse text *Skáldskaparmál*, authored by Snorri Sturluson, references a myth detailing the creation of the treasures of the gods. This myth details a clear origin story for these six objects, specifying how they were created, by whom, and for what purpose. Snorri refers to the objects as "treasures" (*gripir* in Old Norse) with a semantic emphasis on

their high value rather than a generic word for “thing” such as *hlutr*. Old Norse words connoting “treasure” have been used elsewhere in Old Norse texts, including when characters are praised for being a “treasure” (*görsemi*).¹ The semantic range and useage of “treasure,” attributed to both humans and objects in Old Norse, may signal the ways in which both humans and nonhumans were thought to express agency, as I will later explore.

Apart from the six treasured materials in *Skáldskaparmál* as well as Freyja’s Necklace of the Brísings mentioned in other narratives, the surviving Scandinavian myths tend to not identify any provenance or creator for material objects – many objects seem to simply already exist in mythic time. *Skáldskaparmál* therefore offers a unique instance in which objects are afforded special, direct attention in the mythic narratives. In this myth, the infamous trickster deity Loki procures six treasures in connection with seeking compensation for allegedly cutting off the golden hair of the goddess Sif. The dwarves Eitri and Brokkr each fashion three items in competition for creating the most precious object. The myth explains that the dwarf Eitri first presented his creations, followed by Brokkr:

Geirrinn nam aldri staðar í lagi, en haddrinn var holdgróinn þegar er hann kom á höfuð Sif, en Skíðblaðnir 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 níundu hverja nótt mundi drjúpa af honum átta hringar jafnhöfgir sem hann. En Frey gaf hann göltinn ok sagði at hann mátti renna lopt ok lög nótt ok dag meira en hvern hestr, ok aldri varð svá myrkt af nótt eða í myrkheimum at eigi væri ærit ljóst flar er hann fór, svá lýsti af burstinni. Þá gaf hann Þór hamarinn 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 (Sturluson 1998, 42, lines 20–34).

The spear would never stop its thrust; and the hair would grow to the flesh when it came upon Sif’s head, and Skíðblaðnir would have a favoring breeze when the sail was raised, in whatever direction it might go, but could be folded together, like a cloth and be kept in Frey’s pouch if he desired. Then Brokkr brought forward his gifts. He gave to Odin the ring and said that every ninth night eight rings of the same weight would drop from it. To Frey he gave the boar, saying that it could run through air and water better than any horse, and it could never become so dark with night or gloom of the Murky Regions that there should not be sufficient light where he went, such was the glow from its mane and bristles. 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.²

1 See *Njáls saga* in Sveinsson (1954): “*gersemi ert þú, hvat þú ert mér eftirlátr.*”

2 All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

At first glance, these treasures – the spear Gungnir, Sif’s golden hair headpiece, the ship *Skíðblaðnir*, Odin’s ring *Draupnir*, Frey’s boar, and Thor’s hammer *Mjölñir* – appear to meet our expectations of material objects. The myth explains that the divine objects can be carried, wielded as tools, and stored away when not in use. There is, however, a highly problematic exception. Frey’s boar, identified in other myths by the name *Gullinborsti*, disturbs modern presumptions of what constitutes a passive “object,” and indeed raises the question of why the myth specifies the animal, an animate being, as a treasured “object” at all. According to the myth, the dwarf *Brokkr* fashions *Gullinborsti* in much the same way that the dwarves *Dain* and *Nabbi* skillfully make *Freyja*’s battle-hog in the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* (Lay of *Hyndla*).³ Here, the Cartesian division of active Subject, passive Object collides with the myth’s own framework, for the dualist model cannot recognize *Gullinborsti* as a material object. By what standards, then, did the ancient Scandinavian mental model conceive of the boar as an object?

The common thread that unites the six divine objects in a cohesive assemblage by Norse standards, is *object agency*. In recent years, the transdisciplinary efforts of New Materialists have worked to reconceptualize agency and recognize the ways in which agentive capacities are distributed across both animate and inanimate entities (cf. Barad 2003; Coole 2013). New Materialist scholarship seeks to rehabilitate the possibilities for monist philosophy, developed by Descartes’ contemporary Baruch Spinoza, which rejects *a priori* distinctions between matter and instead maintains that all matter is continuous and the outcome of the same natural processes, rather than the product of two separate processes, only one of which necessarily leads to an agentive Subject. Similar to a monist perspective, the myth of the treasures of the Scandinavian gods unmistakably emphasizes the agentive behavior of the objects themselves, rather than describing them as purely passive tools. Each object in the “divine treasures” assemblage acts according to its own, individual agency – in the manner of an object, not a human. Odin’s spear propels forward autonomously in its thrust. The hammer *Mjölñir* swings independent of Thor until it reaches its target and then changes direction of its own accord and flies back to the thunder god. The ring *Draupnir* self-replicates without any prompting. The artificial golden locks created for Sif rests on her head initially as a headpiece before attaching itself and growing into hair. And *Gullinborsti*, whose animacy and agency is as readily apparent as the actions of the other divine gifts, duly traverses across air and over water. The boar is just as much as an object as the other treasures – and the five other treasures

³ There are some doubts as to whether the battle-hog in *Hyndluljóð* refers to Freyr’s boar in Snorri’s *Edda*, as Larrington (2014) points out, but both texts independently suggests that the boar(s) were “made” by dwarves.

are certainly as agentive as the boar. The Scandinavian mythic objects, integral agents in their own right, shape spaces and relations to other beings around them and enable social action.

The agentive quality of objects in the myths is further accentuated by the common practice of designating personal names to objects. The Scandinavian myths, after all, rarely refer to an object in the narrative by a standard, anonymous term. In the Scandinavian cosmology, a hammer is rarely just a hammer or a ring simply a ring. The dwarves, for instance, assign Odin's ring the name Draupnir while Frey's ship that folds into a cloth is called *Skíðblaðnir*. In a separate myth, Odin's auger, the tool used for drilling into the deepest mountain in order to claim the mead of poetry, bears the name Rati.⁴ The use of personal names in the oral narratives effectively favors the recognition of unique personality traits we today typically attribute to human subjects over the anonymity often automatically designated to inanimate objects in the modern world. The Scandinavian oral traditions instead embrace personal names for agentive entities, both human and object, as if objects too have unique features and characteristics. The assignment of personal names to objects communicates the special status of materials in this domain. The Scandinavian cultural context that produced the Norse myths by no means privileged personal names as a decidedly "human" or even "animal" characteristic, but instead used names as markers that applied equally to all entities capable of some sort of agency.

In addition to their individual animacy, independent of the gods' own agency (which this paper assumes operates in a human-like manner, rather than non-human), the material objects detailed in the *Skáldskaparmál* myth feature distributive agency as a coherent assemblage, the 'treasures of the gods.' Defined as groupings of diverse elements, assemblages can be understood as 'living arrangements' of the interactions between humans and materials in the world (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Buchanan 2015, my emphasis). Assemblage theories generally understand these human-material relations as operating on 'flat' ontological terms, in which both humans and nonhumans have resounding capacities to act (cf. DeLanda 2006). This premise repositions agency as an egalitarian, animating force across assemblages and their constituent parts. Agency, then, is both individual as well as distributive and congregational. Drawing from Spinoza's monist philosophy of affect in her seminal monograph *Vibrant Matter*

⁴ The eighteenth-century Icelandic manuscript *SÁM* 66, housed at the Árni Magnússon Institute, Iceland, features illustrations of scenes from the Norse myths, based on the stories recorded in earlier thirteenth century medieval manuscripts. Page 74v of *SÁM* 66 depicts Odin and the giant Baugi using Rati to drill into the mountain. The illustration identifies four "subjects" with four personal-name labels: Odin, Baugi, the object Rati, and the mountain, named Routbiorg.

(2010), Jane Bennett develops the notion of distributive agency, in which an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to “the vitality of materialities that constitute it” (Bennett 2010, 34). Assemblages generate power through their individual parts and the ways these parts interact; the agency of assemblages therefore is not governed by any central agent but rather is the result of the complex network of relations within the assemblage. The assemblage’s ability to produce action is therefore distinct and greater than the sum of each part’s individual agency (cf. Bennett 2010, 24).

The myths organize Gungnir, the golden headpiece, Skíðblaðnir, Draupnir, Gullinborsti, and Mjöllnir into a heterogeneous assemblage. As such, in addition to their individual object agencies, the treasures of the gods operate as an agentive assemblage, capable of power greater than the sum of their individual agencies considered separately. Aside from Sif’s golden headpiece, which I will discuss later, the treasures of the gods are able to act with distributive, decentralized agency in order to aid the gods in their anticipation of Ragnarök, the final battle at the end of the world. Indeed, a number of Scandinavian myths consider material objects indispensable to this purpose. For instance, Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* text recounts a Scandinavian myth concerning the god Frey and his wooing of the giantess Gerðr. Frey dispatches his servant Skirnir to pursue Gerðr and, in exchange for this errand, bequeaths his magic sword to the boy (Sturluson 2005, 31, lines 21–22). In the poetic version of this myth, *Skírnismál*, Frey explains to Skirnir that the sword magically fights on its own “*ef sá er horscr, ef hefir*,” (“if wise be he who wields it”) (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 71). Stanza 52 of the eddic poem *Völuspá*, meanwhile, forewarns the ramifications of this object exchange, warning that the fire giant Surtr is approaching from the south and that the sun of the war gods shines from his sword (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 12). Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal (1923) interpreted this passage as indication that Surtr slays Frey with the same sword he had once exchanged for Gerðr. In either case, the trade of the magic sword leaves Frey weaponless at the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök. Divine objects in the Scandinavian myths thus retain considerable value and importance, not least when their agentive powers help the gods fight the monsters during Ragnarök. Across the various attestations of the Frey story, the myths unequivocally consider the sword’s transfer of owners a tragic loss and a detriment to the assemblage of the gods and their various objects, resulting in the loss of distributive power.

Forming multiple, often overlapping human-nonhuman assemblages throughout the Scandinavian myths, objects transform the gods and their actions in ways that exceed the gods’ own agentive potential. As an agentive assemblage, such materials effectively mobilize the gods and provide them with supernatural abilities that form a cohesive opposition to the giants and monsters. Assemblages

make themselves most apparent by their effects and similarly, by the interruption of these effects. Quite tellingly, the Scandinavian deities are substantially weakened without the objects given to them by the dwarves. The loss of Frey's sword alone devastates the gods and indicates an underlying expectation that each god and material is expected to contribute to the greater cause. The lively materials assemble and reassemble in various configurations throughout the gods' adventures in the myths, sometimes temporarily exchanging owners, but in all cases the assemblages' agentive abilities provide the gods protective and powerful capacities for action. For example, *Skáldskaparmál* mentions Loki's ownership of a pair of magical shoes. Together with these shoes, he can run through air and over water just as much as Freyja's feathered cloak affords its user special flying abilities.⁵ The eddic poem *Þrymskviða* narrates the giant Thrym's theft of Thor's hammer, upon which Thor requests Freyja's feathered cloak for Loki to retrieve the weapon in Jötunheim, land of the giants. In another myth, Loki borrows the same item from Freyja in order to travel to Jötunheim upon the kidnapping of the goddess Idunn. In both attestations of the object, the transformative cloak changes users, creating alternative, if temporary, human-nonhuman assemblages in order to afford Loki the ability to fly between the realms of the gods and the giants and to successfully reclaim what belongs to the gods. In each of these myths, the human-nonhuman assemblage of Loki and the feathered cloak generates new distributive power that neither the god nor the object alone have. The fact that the assemblage changes is also noteworthy: it is not Freyja who uses her own cloak to venture to the land of the giants; she instead grants Loki permission to borrow the item and the assemblage network between gods and objects therefore temporarily shifts.

I have explored material objects in the myths, which can, and often do, act independently of the gods. For this reason, the objects are not simply passive "tools," but rather entities that in their both individual and distributive assemblage agencies offer the gods additional power and influence. The *ad hoc* grouping of the treasures, with its diverse array of materials, is assembled for the explicit purpose of anticipating Ragnarök and in this regard, the agencies of the treasures are distributive and united for common purpose. The ancient Scandinavian world-view, as captured in the surviving myths, does not appear to distinguish traditional Cartesian Subjects, such as gods and giants, from objects on the basis of agency. Rather, material objects are capable of acting independently and in support of the gods in ways that are distinct from the gods' own realm of possible action. Following this observation, I will now examine the ways in which objects in the myths escape human expectations and intentions.

5 "Þá var hann víðs fjarri. Loki átti skúa er hann á lopt ok lög." (Sturluson 1998, 43, lines 2–3).

The Misbehaving Object & Assemblages of Personhood

Following Heideggerian philosophy, theorists have argued that it is precisely when objects misbehave, when they resist or escape the immediate control of their makers and users – “when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy” (Brown 2001, 4) – that we register their presence (cf. Appadurai 1986). This observation has informed the development of “Thing Theory” in literary studies. The survival of myths today in textual form has made them seductive objects of study for literary theories and models, including anthropomorphism. Jane Bennett for her part has suggested that a touch of anthropomorphism can provide a useful metaphor, making us self-conscious of the world “filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations” (Bennett 2010, 99). The danger of over-anthropomorphizing objects and treating myths purely as fiction, however, is the tendency to talk about things as if they were fictional, imaginary, metaphysical objects, infused with human agencies and traits, without any basis in reality. In doing so, we stop short of discussing physical matter in a serious, much broader sense and comprehending the capacity of matter to act within their own repertoires of intentionality and at their own tempos. Anthropomorphism thus can impede our understanding of how humans act in the manner of humans, a tick in the manner of a tick, marble in the manner of marble (Joyce 2015, 21). As such, materials behave within their own specific realm of possible action, within which they have the potential to act in ways that change according to different situations and under different constraints. Therefore, as much as objects in the ancient Scandinavian myths can support and complement the actions of the gods, they also “misbehave.” By this term, I mean the instances in which objects act contrary to human expectations and intentions. This attention to the misbehavior of objects seeks to avoid commitment to the notion that agentive objects are somehow like people and therefore must behave like people.

Although many material objects which appear in ancient Scandinavian oral traditions contain magical properties and indeed are prized possessions of the gods, they are hardly perfect objects. Scholars have often unconsciously diminished the fundamental role that objects play at Ragnarök in pointing out that these divine objects contain flaws. Thor’s hammer, the most prized and iconic of the divine objects, is the most obvious example. While the lightning maker will never miss its target when thrown, the dwarf Eitri makes the hammer shaft too short so that Thor can only hold it with one hand. And in a confrontation with

Thor, the giant Skrymir manages to magically redirect the blows of the object that supposedly cannot miss its target. However, rather than interpreting these objects as flawed *per se*, I would argue that we can more productively interpret each treasure as a “misbehaving object.” I use “misbehavior” here not in the sense of the object’s failure to obey its owner but rather, of having a fluid and adaptable capacity to act in complex ways that are independent, unexpected, and sometimes contradictory. As Bennett reasons, object assemblages are never entirely reducible to the contexts in which their owners place them (Bennett 2010, 5). The hammer Mjölnir leaves Thor’s hand entirely, effectively killing giants on its own terms. Regardless of its relationship to animate beings, namely Thor, the object is able to act according to its own agency and intentionality.

In the same way that objects in the Scandinavian oral traditions exist and behave, at least partially, beyond the realm of their owners’ intentions, as assemblages, they also problematize the boundaries of the individual. Recent anthropological work has pointed out that modern Western conceptions of individuality and identity have long dominated traditional scholarship (cf. Meskell 1996; Boutin 2016). These ontologies have assumed and promoted a conception of the human subject as an “autonomous and independently motivated and intentioned actor” (Clark and Wilkie 2006, 334). The recent interdisciplinary attention to the concept of “personhood” encompasses a recent movement to appreciate that constructs of identity and individuality are not universal across space and time. Personhood, comprised of many situationally sanctioned facets, constitutes a socially-situated and performative persona, as has been particularly argued in Archaeology (cf. Fowler 2004; Joyce 2005; Knappett 2005). This model tests the bounds of subject-object relations and revisits previously accepted human-centered theories of action for understanding the behavior of objects. In his 1661 *Treatise*, Baruch Spinoza posited a fundamental continuity between humans and inanimate beings (Spinoza 1661, 102–103). More recent theorists such as Bruno Latour have further deconstructed the distinction between subject and object, arguing that the world is full of ‘quasi-subjects’ and ‘quasi-objects’ (Latour 1993, 10–11). Judith Butler’s foundational work in rethinking gender as relational, not essentialist, has paved way for understanding “personhood” the sum of bundled relations, a confederation of human and nonhuman elements (cf. Butler 2011; Bennett 2010, 22). Present in each of these theories is the notion that “personhood” is not strictly an animate, biological body but rather an heterogenous assemblage of humans and nonhumans. And indeed, we find other items endowed with object agency and personhood across Old Norse literature and Viking archaeology, not least swords and magic staffs (cf. Gardela 2016; Brunning 2019; Lund 2017). In funerary contexts, swords and staffs tend to be buried very close to the deceased, suggesting a special connection to the buried person. Swords and staffs are some-

times found in the archaeological record bent, broken, burnt, or stoned – particular treatment in funerary contexts that strikingly resembles the treatment of some individuals during funerals, especially people who dealt with magic during their lifetime (cf. Aannestad 2018). Both examples of the special roles of swords and staffs in ancient Scandinavian funerary contexts reveal deliberate considerations of these objects as extensions of the deceased individual and thereby convey an understanding of personhood that extends beyond the body to include agentive objects.

To further illustrate this notion of personhood, we may look again to the Scandinavian mythic materials. The first example, Sif's hair, serves to challenge our modern assumptions of the goddess's sense of personhood. The myth begins with Sif waking up and discovering that her long golden hair has been maliciously cut off. Suddenly, the hair that was once a "part" of Sif and an iconic component of her identity had been eliminated and the boundaries of her personhood have shifted to no longer include her hair. The dwarfish invention of the golden headpiece, an object in its own right, is therefore gifted to Sif as replacement. Once the object is placed on her head, it becomes attached to the body. The once artificial 'object' became a naturalized component, indistinguishable from Sif's Personhood, a boundary which encompasses both agentive entities, human and nonhuman.

Like Sif's hair, the myths commonly associate Freyja with her own identifiable possession: the magical necklace of the Brísings. More than a mere symbol of its owner, the necklace actively embodies Freyja's very emotions. The poem *Þrymskviða* recounts the giant Thrymr's theft of Mjöllnir, to which Thor responds by suggesting that Freyja marry the giant in order to retrieve the hammer. Freyja becomes enraged at the prospect of this marriage and her necklace, simultaneously conveying her emotions, jerks and shatters of its own accord. Here, the boundary of "Freyja" and her persona does not preclude the necklace. The necklace, on one hand, contributes to the embodiment of the goddess and the vibrant materials that constitute her Personhood, while on the other hand, the object nevertheless still retains its own discrete actions. As a result of its singular associations with Freyja, Thor borrows the necklace in order to assume the disguise of Freyja (cf. Larrington 2014). Scholars have often interpreted the necklace of the Brísings as a passive, gendered emblem of Freyja in the same way that Mjöllnir is Thor's (cf. McKinnell 2000). This interpretation, however, reduces mythic objects, however active in their own right, to mere semiotic and literary functions. While the necklace may indeed belong to Freyja and mimic her emotions, it is worth exploring the extent to which the necklace of the Brísings maintains its own agency – in the manner in which a necklace does so, not a human. There is little to suggest in the myths that Freyja "controls" the

behavior of the necklace; the myths, however, do reveal a range in the necklace's possibilities for action. After all, as part of an assemblage with Freyja, the object shatters at the prospect of marrying a giant but then does not do so when faced with a similar position with Thor, demonstrating a range of agency and behavior in different circumstances. As such, the necklace forms an assemblage, first with Freyja and then temporarily with Thor and, in its behavior and misbehavior, it problematizes the boundaries of personhood and identities of these gods by drawing unexpected attention to itself when it reacts in anger in one situation while remaining inactive in another. The necklace of the Brísings is, in other words, an actant in its own right, and the Scandinavian myth recognizes that objects do in fact affect other bodies in ways that are unexpected and beyond the realm of human intentionality.

Objects, therefore, problematize the boundaries of the human. We do not expect objects to form a part of ourselves and our self-reflections of personhood, nor do we anticipate objects to detach themselves from this personhood just as effortlessly. Sif's golden hair headpiece becomes a fundamental component of her identity, transforming from a peculiar thing to simply an unassuming object, its immediacy no longer readily apparent. The headpiece consequentially cultivates greater attentiveness to the nonhuman forces that operate outside the human body but can nevertheless become a fundamental part of it (cf. Bennett 2010, xiv). Meanwhile, Freyja's necklace raises attention to itself as a misbehaving object by unexpectedly betraying angered emotions as much as the goddess does herself. To take a final example, the myths unequivocally identify Thor as the giant-slayer. And yet, it is the hammer and the hammer alone that actually slays the giants. Mjölnir leaves Thor's hand whenever it flies in action, effectively killing giants on its own terms. This observation makes the boundary of Thor's personhood particularly nebulous – the object does not need to be physically attached to the god in order to form an assemblage and contribute to Thor's identity as an individual. Mjölnir simultaneously misbehaves, acting within its own independent range of agency, but at the same time informs Thor's strong identification with giant killing. As Bennett reasons, this nuanced understanding of thing agency “does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes” (Bennett 2010, 32).

Conclusion

I have sought to examine myths of ancient Scandinavia as sources rooted in oral traditions and therefore daily life and practice. While recognizing that these myths, preserved in their current textual form from medieval Iceland, are sources of both ancient Scandinavian practice and the interconnected interest of the later medieval literary culture, I have attempted to focus on elements in the oral traditions that are arguably resistant to change, namely the presence and treatment of objects in the narratives, in order to focus on the mentalities and world-views of people in Iron-Age Scandinavia. Modern western culture often remains resistant to the notion that records of the past can be accurately preserved through any medium apart from written text – “it seems impossible to accept that memories, rituals, or stories can be transmitted orally over hundreds of years” (Gazin-Schwartz 2011, 66–67). And yet, stories, images, materials all lead oral lives, subject to different tempos of change over time, depending on the context of transformations and modifications that result from the communicative processes of reception and transmission.

This work has also demonstrated the productivity of greater interdisciplinary attention to different forms of sources, without privileging one form over another, for materials and text “provide equally eloquent testimonies to the mental landscape of the past” (Price 2008, 162). It is my contention that ancient Scandinavians conceived of agency (human and nonhuman) differently than the twenty-first century individual might and we should not take this point for granted in our interpretations of Scandinavian folkloric and mythic materials. If the surviving mythic narratives can provide some indication, the ancient Scandinavian myths reveal some understanding of objects as actants in their own right, as both individual objects as well as their distributive agency within assemblages with non-humans and humans. It is the moments in the myths where objects “misbehave” that they draw particular attention to themselves and their role in constructing a sense of personhood. Finally, scholars do not need to uncover similar material objects, as described in oral and literary narratives, in the archaeological record in order to take materiality in oral traditions seriously. Indeed, these materials in oral narratives need not necessarily have ever existed in physical form at all – more important is that these oral narratives contain cognitive structures for how people in the past understood, for example, the difference between humans and materials, distinctions that are quite different in some ways from twenty-first century life.

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