

# Marble

## ‘NORTHERN GODS IN MARBLE’

### *The Romantic Rediscovery of Norse Mythology*

[ABSTRACT]

The Norse myths were rediscovered in the late 18th century, and became important to contemporary culture during the first half of the 19th century. The Romantics discussed the usage of themes from Norse mythology; soon, these themes became widespread in art and literature. Their popularity is closely connected with the national ideals and political situations of the period, but they were often given individual artistic interpretations. The Romantic interest in Norse myths and heroes held sway over artists and writers throughout the 19th century.

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#### **Introduction**

Karen Blixen's short story 'Sorrow-Acre', published in *Winter's Tales* (1942) takes place at a Danish country estate in the late 18th century. During a conversation between the baron and his nephew, they discuss Classical versus Norse mythology. The young man has discovered the Norse myths through a recently published work: 'He mentioned the name of the author, Johannes Ewald, and recited a couple of the elevated verses.' The book he refers to is Ewald's play *The Death of Balder* (1775). He goes on to praise the Norse gods:

'And I have wondered, while I read,' he went on after a pause, still moved by the lines he himself had declaimed, 'that we have not till now understood how much our Nordic mythology in moral greatness surpasses that of Greece and Rome. If it had not been for the physical beauty of the ancient gods, which have come down to us in marble, no modern mind could hold them worthy of worship. They were mean, capricious and treacherous. The gods of our Danish forefathers are as much more divine than they as the Druid is nobler than the Augur. For the fair gods of Asgaard did possess the sublime human virtues, they were righteous, trustworthy, benevolent and, even within a barbaric age, chivalrous.' (Blixen 178)

The old baron, however, defends the established mythology of the Greeks. The alleged mildness of the Norse gods he despises as weakness, while admiring the Greek gods for their almighty power. In this encounter, Karen Blixen has given

us a good illustration of the situation in the late 18th century, when new ideas opposed the old ones: the emotions of the *Sturm und Drang* against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, as well as the desire for liberty and the discovery of national identity against the supreme powers of *l'ancien regime*. These opposite forces are here represented by the young and the old man, who use the gods of Valhalla and of Olympus respectively as their allegorical champions.

### The Nordic Renaissance

The Proto-Romantics and Romantics' fascination with Norse mythology must be seen in the light of their period's national ideals. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had changed the political map of Europe. Among the freshly emerged nation states, as well as the old kingdoms, there was a need to define both nations and peoples. The idea of defining the identity of the different nations and peoples by exploring their culture and history was first introduced in the late 18th century by German philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and the Schlegel brothers. Soon, themes from folklore, mythology and history were treated by different authors – and eventually also visual artists – in Germany and in the rest of the Western world.

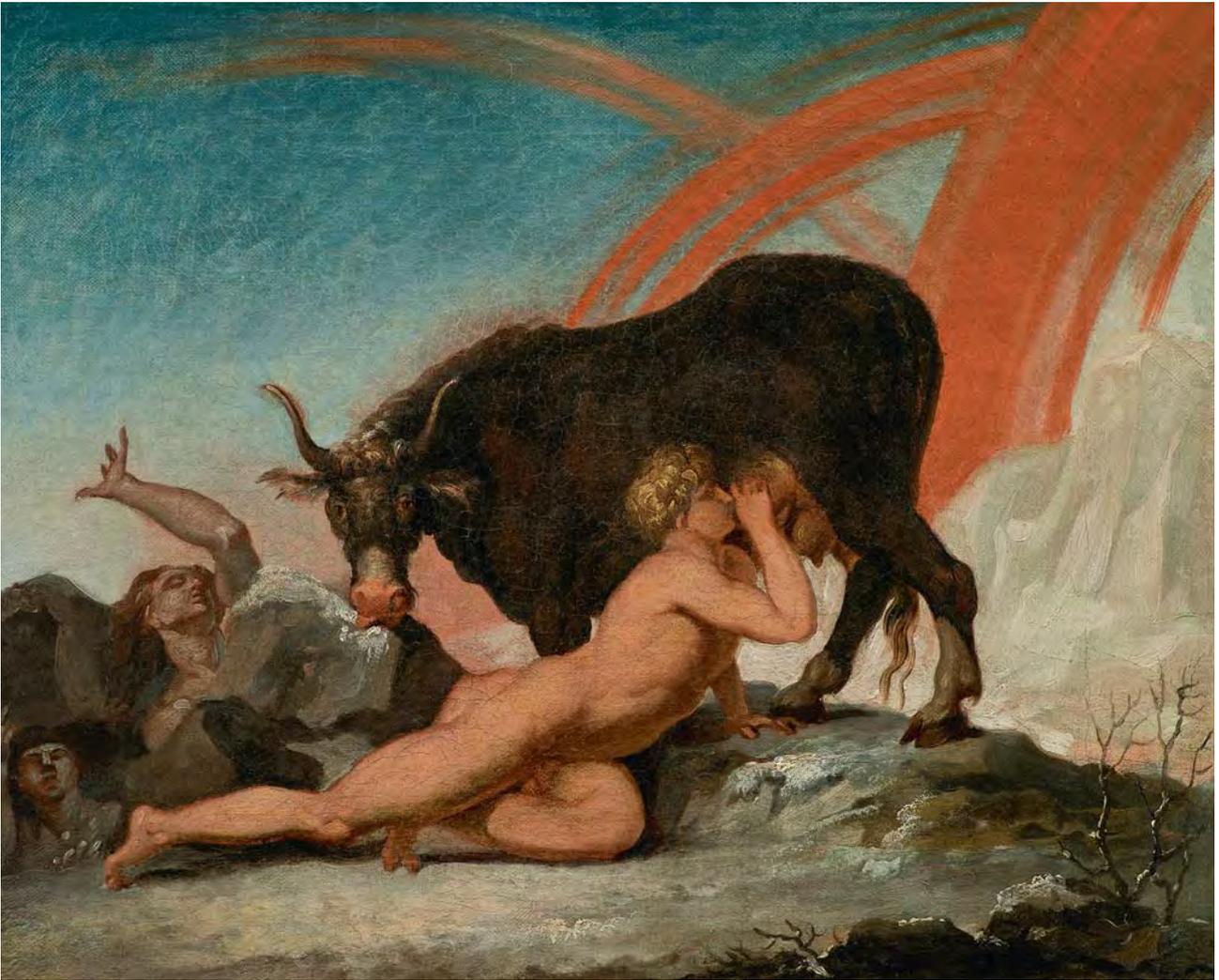
The first attempt to create a literature based on national themes was made as early as the 1760s by the Scottish writer James Macpherson, in his *The Poems of Ossian*, presented as a cycle of ancient, Celtic or Gaelic epics (Macpherson).<sup>1</sup> These poems about mythical heroes became a craze throughout Europe, including in the Scandinavian countries (Mjøberg, vol. 1 37-40; Uthaug 92-93; Ljøgodt, *Historien fremstilt i bilder* 15-16).<sup>2</sup> Each nation now wanted to find its own heroes and to reinvent its own mythical past. For the Scandinavian nations, this necessitated investigations of the history of the saga era and of Norse mythology.

The rediscovery of Norse history and mythology – often referred to as the 'Nordic Renaissance' – took place in Denmark in the 1770s. In 1770, the poet Johannes Ewald (1743-1781) published the historical drama *Rolf Krake* and, five years later, the aforementioned *The Death of Balder*, which are recognized as the works that reintroduced the Norse gods and myths into Scandinavian literature. However, a few years earlier the English author Thomas Gray had addressed the same subject in his poem 'The Descent of Odin' (1768), an interpretation of 'The Dreams of Balder' [Baldrs draumar] from the Elder Edda. Other Scandinavian writers in the late 18th century also used Norse subjects, among them authors that belonged to the circle around the Norwegian Society [Norske Selskab] in Copenhagen (Bliksrud 98-118; Nettum 122-144).

Around the same time, subjects from Norse mythology were also appearing in the visual arts. Two pioneering artists in this respect were the Dane Nicolai Abildgaard (1743-1809) and the Anglo-Swiss Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825). They both studied in Rome in the 1770s, where they became friends. At this time, the two artists started to depict Norse subjects. Fuseli took the inspiration for his drawing *Odin Receives the Prophecy of Balder's Death* (1776) from Gray's poem (Monrad and Nørgaard Larsen 102).<sup>3</sup> Later, he painted *Thor*



III. 1 [Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli), *Thor Battling the Midgard Serpent*, 1790.  
Oil on canvas, 131 x 91 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London]



**III. 2** [Nicolai Abildgaard, *Ymer Suckling the Cow Audhumbla*, (ca. 1777).

Oil on canvas, 37 x 45.5 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, photo SMK Foto]

*Battling the Midgard Serpent* (1790; ill. 1) as his reception piece for the Royal Academy of Arts in London.<sup>4</sup>

Abildgaard's *Ymer Suckling the Cow Audhumbla* (ca. 1777; ill. 2) takes its subject from the Norse creation myth.

Abildgaard also depicted other subjects from Norse and Germanic mythology and history later in his career. Both Abildgaard and Fuseli were scholarly artists who researched new themes not only in Norse mythology but also in the Ossian poems, as well as the works of Shakespeare. These themes offered alternatives to the established mythology of the Classical world, which until this time had dominated Western art and literature. For the Romantics, it was also important that Norse mythology had national relevance.

## The Gods of the North in Literature

In the early 19th century, subjects from Norse mythology became quite popular among Scandinavian authors and artists (Mjøberg; Grandien; Nykjær). In 1801, the Danish writer Adam Oehlenschläger (1779-1850) published a dissertation defending the use of Norse instead of Greek subjects (Oehlenschläger, *Æstetiske Skrifter*).<sup>5</sup> One of his arguments was that the use of ancient history stimulates the people's love for the fatherland. Norse themes became a part of a national program. According to Oehlenschläger, this material also had the advantage of being more open to interpretation than the more established mythologies (Oehlenschläger, 'Fortale til Poetiske Skrifter'; *Æstetiske Skrifter* 15-16). Furthermore, Oehlenschläger emphasized the allegorical value of Norse myths:

The Asar (gods), and the Jetter (Giants), represent the two conflicting powers of nature; the former represent the *creative, embellishing* nature; the latter the *defacing destructive* one. Lok vacillates between both, as the *variable spirit* of time. ('Argument of the Poem', Oehlenschläger, *Gods of the North* lxxix)

As a poet, Oehlenschläger used Norse themes extensively. With *The Gods of the North* (1819), he realized his dream of an epic based on Norse mythology. The work was also intended as a source of inspiration for other poets, as well as painters and sculptors. Another Danish writer who was interested in Norse themes was N. S. F. Grundtvig, who is best known for his hymns. In 1808, he published a dissertation on Norse mythology in which he, like Oehlenschläger, regards the gods and myths as allegories of the battle between good and evil, and between civilization and barbarism, a view that was held by many intellectuals of the time.

There was also a great interest in Norse themes in Sweden, particularly in the milieu of the Gothic Society [Götiska Förbundet], which included authors such as Esaias Tegnér (1782-1846), Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847) and Pehr Henrik Ling (1776-1839). Tegnér's *Frithjof's Saga* (1825) is a Romantic epic about the life and deeds of the Viking hero Frithjof. It soon became well-known and was translated into several languages; it was also a much-used source among artists. Although the epic's theme is really more literary than historical or mythological, it made Norse subjects highly popular at the time.

In Norway, saga history and Norse mythology were held in high regard as representative of the golden age of the nation; they were seen as an important part of the country's identity. This must be considered against the background of Norway's political situation. With the constitution of 1814, Norway gained a certain degree of independence, but was forced into a union with Sweden. This created an enthusiasm for all things Norwegian – nature, folklore and of course history and mythology. The poet Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845) and his circle urged the use of Norse themes, while the writer Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1807-1875) treated subjects from Norse mythology and history in several poems from the 1830s and 1840s (Mjøberg; Ljøgodt, *Historien fremstilt i bilder* 30).

## Visual Arts

Literature made Norse mythology popular, and soon many – Oehlenschläger included – raised the question of depicting such subjects in painting and sculpture too. In 1812, a Danish theologian called Jens Møller published a dissertation on this topic. Møller's aim was also to stimulate the people's love for the nation (Nykjær). In the years to follow, the cultivation of Norse themes flourished in the milieu of the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen. The art historian Niels Laurits Høyen pursued these ideals; his lectures at the Academy in Copenhagen from the 1820s onwards had a considerable impact on both Danish and Norwegian artists at the time. Høyen stressed the importance of a national art, essentially encouraging the use of subject matters from Old Norse history and mythology. In an influential lecture in 1844, he pointed out that the arts must have their roots in the people and in the history of the nation if they were to have a chance of finding acknowledgement among the people.

Artists often found their subject matters in the original, Norse sources, which were translated into modern Scandinavian languages throughout the 19th century. In 1821-1823, the Elder Edda was published in a Danish translation by the Icelandic scholar Finn Magnusson, who also lectured on Norse mythology at the Royal Art Academy in Copenhagen. Of equal importance were the books on mythology and history published by the historians of the day. In Norway, the pioneering historian P. A. Munch (1810-1863) brought out a book on Norse mythology in 1840.<sup>6</sup> It soon became popular and ran into several later editions. However, many of the painters and sculptors of the period seem to have found their subjects in the works of contemporary authors such as Oehlenschläger, Tegnér or Welhaven.

Despite their different sources, all of these artists faced the same challenge: How should they depict the gods and heroes of the Norse universe? Literary sources were available, but what about visual sources? At this stage, knowledge about the material culture of the Saga era was very limited. The archaeological excavations of Viking ships and graves did not take place until late in the century. There was an abundance of sources for themes from Classical mythology, both literary and visual. In addition, this mythology had an established iconography. For Norse mythology in the first half of the 19th century, the situation was completely the opposite. Artists simply had no idea about how the Old Norsemen had imagined their gods and heroes. They therefore set themselves the important task of developing a Norse iconography. To achieve this, artists drew on the limited material from the saga era that was available, and combined it with models from other cultures and periods such as Greco-Roman antiquity and the European medieval ages. One of the dangers of this, identified by many artists of the time, was that their depictions could become more Classical than Norse (Wilson).

According to Høyen and others, folk culture was perhaps the most important source for these artists. The different peoples supposedly preserved elements of an unbroken tradition that could be traced back to ancient times – for the Scan-



**III.3** [Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *The Death of Balder*, 1817.  
Oil on canvas, 142 x 178 cm. Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi, Copenhagen,  
photo Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi]

dinavian people meaning to their Viking forefathers. Thus, in many history paintings with Norse subject matters, artefacts such as tapestries and wooden carvings appear. This idea became a central element in National Romantic thinking, which was echoed later in, for instance, the folk life paintings of Adolph Tidemand.

Not everyone shared the Romantic enthusiasm for Norse themes. The movement's opponents used arguments that were partly practical, such as pointing out the lack of Norse models, and partly aesthetic, claiming the Northern culture to be crude and lacking the refinement of the Classical world (Meldahl and Johansen 164-166; Ljøgodt, *Historien fremstilt bilder* 26-30). Echoes of this debate could be heard in Scandinavian countries throughout the 19th century, in parallel with the artists' attempts to give the Norse gods physical form.

### **Northern Gods in Marble**

Two of the Danish artists who depicted Norse themes were Johan Ludvig Lund (1777-1867) and Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853), both professors at the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen from 1818. Eckersberg's first large



**Ill. 4** [Johan Gustaf Sandberg, *Valkyries Riding to Battle*, (ca. 1820).  
Oil on canvas, 140 x 210 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, photo Erik Cornelius]

work as a history painter depicts a mythological subject, *Loki and Sigyn* (1810). Some years later, he painted *The Death of Balder* (1817; ill. 3) as a reception piece for the Academy.

The subject matter is based partly on the Elder Edda, and partly on Oehenschläger's drama *Balder the Good* (1807). The death of Balder and related myths had drawn the attention of both writers and painters since the late 18th century.

In Sweden, artists in the circles around the Gothic Society and The Society for the Study of Art [Sällskapet för Konststudium] took on the challenge of depicting Norse subjects.

In 1814-17, Pehr Henrik Ling gave a series of lectures in Stockholm, urging the use of Norse myths in the visual arts. In 1818, the Gothic Society organized the first of a series of exhibitions, asking for works with subjects from Norse history and mythology. Johan Gustaf Sandberg (1782-1854) displayed a drawing at this exhibition entitled *Valkyries Riding to Battle*, a subject he later also executed as a painting (ill. 4).

**III.5** [Bengt Fogelberg,  
*The Asa Gods:*  
*Balder, Odin, Thor*, ca.  
1850. Reproduced after  
an old lithograph,  
photo Nordnorsk Kunst-  
museum, Tromsø]



The Valkyries were war goddesses who sometimes participated in battle, but whose main task was to bring slain warriors to Valhalla. They were introduced to the modern public in Ewald's *The Death of Balder* and appeared occasionally in the works of Oehlenschläger and other authors. The first visual depictions of the Valkyries were probably Daniel Chodowiecki's illustrations for Ewald's work. Later, different artists, such as the Danish sculptor H. W. Bissen and the Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo, attempted to visualize these forceful women, who also made their entrance on the opera scene in Richard Wagner's cycle *The Ring of the Nibelungen*.

At the exhibition of the Gothic Society, the sculptor Bengt Fogelberg (1786-1854) showed three statuettes of Norse gods: Odin, Thor and Frey. During the following years, Fogelberg made large-size marble versions of the statues, commissioned by King Carl XIV Johan. As the first king of the Bernadotte dynasty, holding the thrones of both Sweden and Norway, Carl Johan wanted to be associated with Nordic history; he particularly favoured depictions of Norse history and mythology, as did his son Oscar I. He was probably inspired by Napoleon's fascination with the Ossian legends (Björk 2005).

In the final versions of Fogelberg's godly trio, Frey was replaced by the popular Balder (ill. 5).



**III. 6** [Herman Ernst Freund, *Loki*, 1822.  
Statuette in red clay, height 29 cm.  
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen,  
photo Ole Haupt]

These statues demonstrate the iconographic challenges which the artists faced in depicting such motifs. All the sculptures seem to have Greek or Roman models. Thor, for instance, is obviously modelled on Classical statues of Hercules. However, to distinguish him as a Nordic god, Fogelberg has equipped him with a bear skin and with his sledgehammer, *Mjölmir*. These were to become Thor's standard attributes in later 19th-century depictions. The standing Odin, holding a spear and a shield and wearing a crown, seems to take statues of Jupiter as its model. The problem of a Nordic subject depicted in a Classical style was pointed out by a contemporary writer, Axel Nyström, in 1835. On *Odin*, he comments: 'At first glance, all ideas about a Greek god are forgotten. The impression is Romantic, but by no means modern, while the image has a Classical pose. It expresses great force, but calm and simple, without exaggeration or affectation.' In spite of the Classical elements, Nyström concludes that the overall impression is Nordic, as the head belongs to 'a Jupiter, but not a Greek one [...] there is wisdom, but the Wisdom of Vala' (quoted from Nordensvan 272-273; my translation).

With these works, Fogelberg became the first sculptor in modern times to deal with Norse subjects. Only a few years later, the Danish sculptor Hermann Ernst Freund (1786-1840) started to work with similar themes. As a student and assistant of Bertel Thorvaldsen in Rome, Freund was schooled in the Classical universe. However, inspired by the art patron Jonas Collin, he soon turned his attention to the world of the Norse gods. On Collin's initiative, a competition calling for art works with Norse subjects was arranged in 1820. Collin saw



**III.7** [Nils Blommér, *The Water-Sprite and Ägir's Daughters*, 1850.  
Oil on canvas, 114 x 147 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, photo Erik Cornelius]

that Freund was sent an invitation for this and also sent him a copy of Oehlen-schläger's *Gods of the North*. The art historian Julius Lange regarded this as a turning-point, not only in Freund's artistic career, but even for the development of a Norse iconography (Lange, *Udvalgte Skrifter* 141-142). Freund participated in the competition with several *bozzetti* in 1822, and won a prize for *Odin*. However, his statuette *Loki* (ill. 6) is regarded as a more successful attempt at the depiction of a Nordic figure by most art critics and historians (Poulsen 315).

In the 19th century, Loki was interpreted as the personification of evil in Norse mythology, and it is this aspect that gives Freund his focus here. Later, Freund also executed *The Ragnarok Frieze* (1825-26), a relief depicting the Norse deities, for Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen.<sup>7</sup>

The Norse gods also appear in several works by the Swedish painter Nils Blommér (1816-1853). Originally specializing in subject matters from folk tales, he eventually turned to the mythological world. In *The Water-Sprite and Ägir's Daughters* (1850; ill. 7), he combines a figure from Northern folklore with creatures from Norse mythology.

This reminds us that the Romantics regarded folk culture as a live link to the Old Norse culture, as expressed by Høyen and others. In other paintings, such as



**III. 8** [Carl Peter Lehmann, *Frithjof Slaying two Trolls at Sea*, 1826.  
Oil on canvas, 86 x 115 cm. Bergen Kunstmuseum, photo Bergen Kunstmuseum]

*Freya in Search of her Husband* or *Freya and Heimdall*, Blommér has a more genre-like approach to mythological subjects, reflecting a change in the ideals of history painting.

In Norway, artistic life was not as developed as in the other Scandinavian countries, but had to be built up more or less from scratch. Art as well as literature played an important part in the young nation's self-image. Nature and folk life were preferred themes, but gradually subjects from history and mythology found a following. The Danish-born artist Johannes Flintoe (1787-1870) settled in the Norwegian capital Christiania (present day Oslo) in 1811 (Alsvik 10-15). He was genuinely interested in ancient history. Though he only executed one real history painting as far as we know, he played an important part in transmitting new ideas from the milieu in Copenhagen to Norway. An early attempt at a Norse subject is *Frithjof Slaying two Trolls at Sea* (1826; ill. 8), a scene from *Frithjof's Saga* painted by Carl Peter Lehmann (1794-1876), another Danish-born artist (Haverkamp; ill. 8).



**Ill. 9** [Knud Baade, *Heimdall Summons the Gods to Battle*, 1828. Oil on canvas, 150 x 101.5 cm. Norsk Folkemuseum, Oslo, photo Norsk Folkemuseum]

One of the first Norwegian artists who devoted himself whole-heartedly to subjects from Norse mythology was Knud Baade (1808-1879). His first attempt in the genre was *Heimdall Summons the Gods to Battle* (1828; ill. 9. Willoch; Ljøgodt, 'Knud Baade als Historienmaler'; Ljøgodt, *Måneskinnsmaleren*).

This was painted when Baade was studying with Eckersberg at the Academy in Copenhagen; the young Norwegian was obviously well acquainted with the contemporary fascination with Norse mythology. Later in life, Baade would recount: 'The mysteriousness of Norse mythology had great appeal to me in my youth. Heimdall Calling the Gods to Battle and Hermoder in Helheim were childish attempts during my stay in Copenhagen.' (Baade's autobiographical note).<sup>8</sup> Baade's painting represents Heimdall, guardian of the gods, blowing his horn to call the gods to battle at Ragnarok – the apocalypse of Norse mythology. This scene is described in the Norse poem 'Voluspa' in the Elder Edda. Baade, however, seems to have found his motif in a poem by Oehlenschläger, 'The Prophecy of Vola' [Volas Spaadom], from *The Gods of the North*. Here the end of the world is foretold:

Upon the bridge,  
Heimdaller perch'd blows fearfully his horn  
to rise all nature to th'eternal strife;  
While Jormundgardur lifts his head and hisses.  
(Oehlenschläger, *Gods of the North*)

In the background, Odin and Thor arrive, as in the epic, while in the lower left corner two troll heads peek out at the scene, probably the giants fretting at the sight of the gods gathering for war. The picture was shown at the Copenhagen Academy Exhibition of 1828 and was later acquired by King Carl Johan, whose interest in Norse mythology has already been mentioned.

Another relevant work by Baade is the drawing *The Prophecy of Vala* (1843; ill. 10).

Vala is the seeress of Norse mythology. In the Elder Edda, the story is that Odin summons her and she prophesies the fate of the gods and the world, ending with Ragnarok. Once again Baade must have found the subject in Oehlenschläger's 'The Prophecy of Vala' from *The Gods of the North*. In Oehlenschläger's poem, as well as Baade's drawing, Thor is surrounded by the giants he has slain, and out of the vapor of their blood Vala appears. The same subject can be found in the Danish artist Andreas Ludvig Koop's painting *Vala Appears to Thor* (1823).<sup>9</sup> Romantic interpretations in art and literature vary, as we see, from the original Edda Poem. Baade's pictures are examples of how artists found their subjects in the literary works of the day, and not necessarily in the original Norse sources.

The debate over the use of Norse subjects in the visual arts reached Norway in connection with the decoration of the newly erected University buildings in Christiania around the middle of the century (Ljøgodt, "... nordiske Marmorguder"). Originally, Adolph Tidemand was asked to paint a scene from Saint Olaf's saga, but this project was abandoned – partly due to opposition against the theme. In 1852, the University's arts committee decided that they wanted a sculpture for the main hall. The young sculptor Julius Middelthun (1820-1886) was approached, and he accepted the commission eagerly. Middelthun had studied at the Academy in Copenhagen and had acquired an interest in Norse themes through the lectures of Høyen and the writings of Oehlenschläger. At this time, he was living in Rome and belonged to the circle of Scandinavian artists that included, amongst others, the abovementioned Bengt Fogelberg, Nils Blommér, and the Swedish sculptor Johan Peter Molin (1814-1876); all were interested in Norse themes. Middelthun naturally discussed his task with his friends and colleagues, of which the Swedish writer Gunnar Wennerberg writes in his diary:

The choice of subject matter was left to him [Middelthun]. First he had thought of a Minerva, but that was opposed, first by Blommér, then by me. Later, we talked about his other ideas: Idun, Snorre Sturlason and Heimdall. He spoke well for himself, with both historical and poetical understanding. He himself preferred his idea about Idun. I argued for Snorre, without anything against Idun. (Quoted from Gran 84; my translation.)



**Ill. 10** [Knud Baade, *The Prophecy of Vala*, 1843.  
Pencil and watercolour on paper, 406 x 472 mm. Bergen Kunstmuseum,  
photo Bergen Kunstmuseum]

Middelthun sent sketches of the different subjects back home, including *Idun* (ill. 11), pictured carrying a basket of the apples of youth.

However, Middelthun's fascination with Norse themes met with scepticism from certain circles in Norway. Johan Sebastian Welhaven, who as a poet had himself treated motifs from Norse mythology, was heavily opposed to these themes in the visual arts. As a member of the University's arts committee, he wrote to Middelthun in the autumn of 1852, arguing against the artist's suggestions: 'You seem to favour subject from the Norse myths. I am sceptical



### III. 11

[Julius Middelthun, *Idun*, (ca. 1852-53).  
Statuette in red clay, height 33 cm.  
Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur  
og design, Oslo, photo Børre Høst-  
land]

about the idea, as I find these subjects unsuitable for the visual arts. I am surprised whenever I hear that sculptors are urged to make us Northern gods in marble.' (Quoted from Gran 87-89; my translation.) An important argument was that no original images of these gods existed which could be used as models. Probably on account of this opposition, Middelthun abandoned his ideas. Another sculptor who eagerly encouraged the use of Norse themes was Christopher Borch (1817-1896). For the frontispiece of the University, he suggested a relief of Odin seeking wisdom with Mime. But this project was not realized either: the University of Christiania never got any 'Northern gods in marble'.

One major project that *was* executed was Oscarshall, a neo-gothic building constructed for King Oscar I of Sweden and Norway at Bygdø outside of Christiania around the middle of the century. The King commissioned works by Norwegian artists of the day that depicted themes from Norwegian nature, folk life and history. The sculptor Hans Michelsen (1789-1859) made four statuettes of Norwegian kings from the saga era. As an overall theme for the decoration program, *Frithjof's Saga* was chosen. The painter Hans Gude (1825-1903) executed a series of landscapes from Sognefjorden, where the saga is supposed to have taken place. Here Christopher Borch got a chance to depict Norse themes, and made a series of reliefs with scenes from Tegnér's epic (ill. 12).

### Ghosts and Bogeymen

As late as 1866, the Norwegian art historian Lorentz Dietrichson raised the question of Norse topics in the visual arts (Dietrichson, *Skandinaviska Konst-Exposi-*



III. 12 [Christopher Borch, *Frithjof and King Ring*, 1849.  
Relief in plaster, 59 x 77 cm. Oscarshall, Oslo, photo The Royal Court]

tionen 59). The Romantic interest in these themes held its sway over the artistic imagination well into the second half of the 19th century. A new generation of artists, who could be described as Late Romantics, became interested in themes from Norse history and mythology. In Denmark, Constantin Hansen (1804-1880) painted *The Feast of Ägir* (1857), another subject related to the conflicts between the Asa gods and the evil forces represented by Loki. In particular, the fascination with Norse themes flourished among a small group of Swedish and Norwegian painters in the 1860s and 1870s (Björk, 'Från Ragnar Lodbrok til Laokoon'). The most important were the Swedes Mårten Eskil Winge (1825-1896) and August Malmström (1829-1901), and the Norwegian Peter Nicolai Arbo (1831-1892), who had studied together in Düsseldorf in the 1850s, and who all specialized in Norse subjects. While Malmström favoured subjects from the heroic sagas, the myths of the Norse gods were depicted in paintings by both Winge and Arbo.

At the Scandinavian Exhibition in Copenhagen in 1872, Winge showed his *Thor Battling the Giants*, and Arbo his major works *The Valkyrie* and *The Wild Hunt of Odin* (ills. 13, 14, 15).<sup>10</sup>

These pictures are all forceful representations of Norse deities, rushing through the sky, prepared for battle. We might say that they bring the gods into action, in contrast with the earlier, more serene presentations. Both the Valkyries and Thor had been popular among poets and artists since the beginning of the



M. E. Winge  
Stockholm



**III. 14** [Peter Nicolai Arbo, *The Valkyrie*, 1869.  
Oil on canvas, 243 x 194 cm. Nasjonalmuseet for kunst,  
arkitektur og design, Oslo, photo Jacques Lathion]

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**III. 13** [Mårten Eskil Winge, *Thor Battling the Giants*, 1872.  
Oil on canvas, 484 x 333 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, photo Erik Cornelius]



**III. 15** [Peter Nicolai Arbo, *The Wild Hunt of Odin*, 1868.  
Oil on canvas, 169 x 241 cm. Drammens Museum, on long term loan to  
Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, Tromsø, photo Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum]

century. *The Wild Hunt of Odin*, on the other hand, is in addition to Freund's *The Ragnarok Frieze* one of the few attempts to visualize all the Norse gods in one work. The subject matter is inspired by Johan Sebastian Welhaven's poem, 'Asgaardsreien' [The Wild Hunt of Odin], from 1845. The subject of the Norse gods is blended with the traditional European legend of 'der Wilde Jagd'. In his important work *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835), Jacob Grimm had identified this as an example of how elements of pagan religion could survive into Christian times as daemonic phenomena (Grimm vol. 1 765-766), The artist also knew depictions of this motif by other German artists, such as Joseph Führich and Rudolf Friedrich Henneberg (Ljøgodt, *Historien fremstilt i bilder* 102-105). Another visual source was August Malmström's painting *Bråvallaslaget* (1860-62), in which the gods appear in the sky above the combatants (Lange, 'Historiemaleren Peter Nicolai Arbo'). Arbo used various sources, from mythology and folklore as well as contemporary literature and art, to create this grand composition.

Contemporary critics regarded these pictures as essentially ethical allegories, rather than representations of real deities, a view already held by early 19th-century writers such as Oehlenschläger and Grundtvig. The Romantic tradition was still alive – but not for long. The critics, headed by Julius Lange, took a sceptical position with regard to the depiction of Norse myths. In his review of the Scandinavian Exhibition of 1872, Lange was highly critical of the mythological works of both Arbo and Winge, referring to them as ‘Ghosts and Bogeymen’ (Lange, ‘Den svenske og norske Kunst’ 443). At this stage, Realism had become the dominant force of art and literature. Within the boundaries of the new movement’s ideals, there was little or no room for the Late Romantics’ imaginary depictions of the Norse myths.

### **The Romantics and the Norse Myths**

The Norse myths were rediscovered in the late 18th century, and during the Romantic period they became popular sources of inspiration for art and literature, in particular in the Scandinavian countries. This was closely connected with the political thinking of the period, and in particular with the ideals of national cultures and identities. For a freshly emerged nation state such as Norway, it was important to link the present with the glory of the past. In old, powerful kingdoms like Denmark and Sweden, the lineage to ancient history was also emphasized. We should recall that Denmark had been on the losing side of the Napoleonic war, and later in the century was the victim of German aggression. Sweden also had its losses, giving up Finland to Russia, and in addition it had a new royal dynasty with a need to legitimize itself. In different ways, the Norse themes became a part of national programs in these countries.

However, once introduced, the Norse myths started to develop a life of their own in art and literature. One of the alluring aspects of these themes was the fact that they did not have an established iconography and thus were open to interpretation and even poetic license, as Oehlenschläger pointed out. The artists, it seems, chose freely from different themes and different kind of sources. More often than not, the works of contemporary writers such as Oehlenschläger were preferred to the original Norse sources. This suggests, I believe, that the artists were not so occupied with recreating a Norse iconography as they were with the myths and stories as subject matter. It was a matter of finding original and interesting – and very often obscure – motifs for works of art: artistic interest prevailed over antiquarian research.

A good example of this is can be found in the oeuvre of Knud Baade. We have already seen two of his works, both with subjects from Norse mythology taken from Oehlenschläger’s *The Gods of the North*. A recurring motif in his work is the lonely warrior. In a painting from 1850, *Scene from the Era of Norwegian Sagas* (ill. 16), a Viking stands alone on the top of a cliff, contemplating the moonlit sea.

The lonely Viking, the last of his kind, is a motif we also know from Romantic poetry, such as Geijer’s ‘The Last Warrior’ [Den siste kämper] and Welhaven’s ‘Coastal Scene’ [Kyst-Billede]. Baade’s painting is probably not a representation



**III. 16** [Knud Baade, *Scene from the Era of Norwegian Sagas*, 1850.  
Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 119.5 cm. Collection of Asbjørn Lunde, New York,  
photo Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, Tromsø]

of any concrete story or scene from Norse mythology, but more likely reflects the melancholy mood of an encounter with a hero of the ancient past, perhaps inspired by the poems of Geijer or Welhaven. According to Baade's own statement, it was the 'mysterious and poetic Element' that appealed to him in the Norse myths (Baade's autobiographical note). Rather than an antiquarian reconstruction, Baade prefers a poetical interpretation of the Norse myths – like so many other artists of the Romantic era.

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## Notes

My interest in this topic theme derives from my research for my book on Norwegian history painting in the 19th century, *Historien fremstilt i bilder* (Oslo: Pax, 2011). The book's focus is on Norwegian art history, a perspective that is also evident in this article. However, I have also attempted to include examples from Danish and Swedish art, as well as to demonstrate the background in contemporary Scandinavian literature. Further references can be found in this book.

- 1 The Ossian poems were originally published in three different volumes: *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Fingal* (1761-62), and *Temora* (1763). In 1765, they were published together in an edition entitled *The Works of Ossian*. The authenticity of the poems was discussed both at the time of their publishing and by later generations. Today, the general opinion seems to be that the poems are based on old sources, edited and given literary form by Macpherson.
- 2 Henrik Wergeland was so fascinated by the Ossian poems that he even took for one of his alter egos Siful Sifadda, a derivation of Sulin Sifadda, one of the hero Chuchullin's horses.
- 3 Fuseli's drawing belongs to the collections of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
- 4 A reception piece was a work of art that an artist made as a sort of application to become a member of an Art Academy.
- 5 Adam Oehlenschläger, 'Forsøg til Besvarelse af det ved Kiøbenhavns Universitets fremsatte Priis-spørsmål: "Var det gavnligt for Nordens skønne Litteratur, om den gamle, nordiske Mythologi blev indført og almindelig antaget, istedet for den Grædske?"' (1801).
- 6 P. A. Munch, *Nordens gamle Gude- og Heltesagn* (1840). Reissued in several later editions under the title *Norrøne gude- og heltesagn*.
- 7 *The Ragnarok Frieze* was unfortunately lost in a fire at Christansborg Palace in 1884.
- 8 Knud Baade, letter to Thorvald Christensen, dated Munich March 29, 1872 This letter consists mainly of an autobiographical note. A sketch of the note is found in the National Library, Oslo. The latter is published in Didrik Grønvold, ed., 'Av Knud Baades papirer'. *Kunst og Kultur*, 1926.
- 9 Koop's painting belongs to the collections of the Royal Academy of Arts, Copenhagen.
- 10 There are two large versions of Arbo's *The Valkyrie*. The 1865 version belongs to the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, while the 1869 painting illustrated here belongs to the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo. *The Wild Hunt of Odin* was also executed in two versions; the 1868 painting illustrated here belongs to Drammens Museum and is on long-term loan to the Art Museum of Northern Norway, Tromsø, while the 1872 version belongs to the National Museum in Oslo.