

Syllabus (pensum) for NOFI 200-300  
Spring term 2019

# Body Symbolism of Old Norse Mythology

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The aim of the course is to allow students to get acquainted with the primary sources of Old Norse mythology by following motifs connected with bodies and body parts. These are quite abundant in ON myths and provide a framework for comparison of analogous and interconnected myths within the corpus. The study of primary texts will be followed by collective critical readings of selected scholarly articles or chapters in monographs and discussions about the merits and limits of presented interpretations. Students will get a structured overview of Old Norse myths by close reading of the primary sources and extracting information from them and will train their eye to follow motifs and structures across the corpus and discern similarities and differences. Part of the seminar work will consist of experimental and visual forms of interpretation (mind maps, diagrams, drawings, narrations) as preparatory stages for the oral presentation and written term paper.

## A. Sources

*The Prose Edda : Norse mythology* (Penguin classics), transl. J. Byock, London: Penguin Books 2005.  
(*Gylfaginning, Skáldskaparmál*)

*The Poetic Edda* (The world's classics), transl. C. Larrington, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996. (*Völuspá, Hávamál, Vafþrúðnismál, Grímnismál, Hymiskviða, Þrymskviða, Alvíssmál, Hyndluljóð, Sigdrífumál, Baldrs draumar*)

*Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla*, Volume I, transl. A. Finlay & A. Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London 2011 (*Ynglinga Saga*)

*Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*, transl. N. Kershaw, Cambridge University Press 1921 (*Sörla þáttur*)

*The saga of King Heidrek the Wise = Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra (Icelandic texts)*, ed. & transl. Ch. Tolkien, London: Thomas Nelson 1960. (*Heiðreks gátur = the Riddles of Heidrek*)

## B. Secondary Literature

Nordal, Guðrún: *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2000. (pp. 239-268, 271-308)

Chandler, Daniel: *Semiotics for Beginners* (chapter on tropes: <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem07.html>)

Johnson, Mark: *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987. (chapter 4, “Metaphorical Projection of Image Schemata”)

Lincoln, Bruce: “The Indo-European Myth of Creation”, *History of Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Nov., 1975), The University of Chicago Press, pp. 121-145

# Course plan (updated)

14. Jan 2019: Orientation meeting (orienteringsmøte)

## Lesson 1

15. Jan 2019: Intro, overview of the semester plan, lecture on the sources of ON mythology.

**Reading for next time:** *Gylfaginning* (chapters on cosmogony, theogony, anthropogony, 'dvergogony', myth of Mimir and Kvasir = aitiologies of wisdom-sources)

## Lesson 2

22. Jan: The diachronic aspect of ON myth. Discussion and comparison of the “-gonies” (structure and motifs) and focus on the role of bodies and body parts in them.

**Reading for next:** *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* (description of individual gods and a selection of aitiological myths where gods lose or transform body parts); *Gylfaginning* – description of the cosmos and Ragnarök, *Grimnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*

**Homework:** Bring a graphic drawing of ON cosmos according to your interpretation based only on the primary texts (please ignore the fantasy nonsense on the internet)

## Lesson 3.

29. Jan: The synchronic aspect of ON myth. Discussion and comparison of the characters of gods and their actions with the focus on the role of bodies and body parts. Discussion on the features and structures of ON cosmology, differences in sources, surreal aspects. Body symbolism and the problem of literalism and unification of variants.

**Reading for next:** *Völuspá*, *Hymnluljóð*, *Sigrdrífumál*, *Baldrs draumar*

**Homework:** Compare systematically these four poems both with regard to structure of the narrative and to motifs. Find as many similarities and differences as you can. Bring your findings in the form of Venn diagram or spreadsheet or mind map. Look for body symbolism. The Two Worlds system - Look for implicit pairs of opposites associated with this duality: Male/female? Control/lack of it? Culture/nature? Safety/danger? Overt/hiddenness? Find others!

## Lesson 4.

5. Feb: Presentation of your findings on the four poems. Discussion on the typical narrative structures of ON mythology. The opposition of Miðgarðr (Ásgarðr) and the Otherworld (Underworld). The aligned pairs of opposites.

**Reading for next:** *Hymiskviða*, *Brymskviða*, *Alvíssmál*, plus Hrungnir and Útgarða-Loki episodes from *Snorra Edda*

**Homework:** Compare systematically these five narratives both with regard to structure of the narrative and to motifs. Find as many similarities and differences as you can. Bring your findings in the form of a Venn diagram or a spreadsheet. Look for body symbolism.

## Lesson 5.

12. Feb: Presentation of your findings and discussion. Question of cosmic structure, narrative structure, salient and repetitive features of the symbolic system. The “Hero’s Quest” and its variation. The role of body and body parts within this framework. Wrap up of the “primary sources” part of the seminar.

**Reading for next:** Guðrún Nordal: *Tools of Literacy* (chapter on kennings and body parts) and the riddles from *Hervarar saga*

**Homework:** bring kenning examples, 5 attested, 5 of your own creation based on the principles; think through following questions and prepare to talk about them: how do

kennings work? Is there an overlap between kenning and metaphor? How do the riddles of *Hervarar saga* work? In which respect they are similar to kennings and in which not? What is the pleasure of riddles? Why people play with them?

19. Feb & 26. Feb - No seminar / I am travelling abroad (to Útgardr) / Use the time for reading of the Mark Johnson's text in advance. It is rather long and difficult.

### Lesson 6.

5. Mar: Discussion on kennings, especially metaphoric kennings, kennings and riddles, kennings and metaphors. Kenning game (guessing the meaning of attested or newly constructed kennings, double kennings, triple kennings...).

**Reading for next:** Daniel Chandler: *Semiotics for Beginners* (chapter on tropes)

**Homework:** bring 3 everyday examples of body-related metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony; 1 example of each in ON myth

### Lesson 7.

12. Mar: Discussion on the basic tropes, how they are distinguished, how they function, to which extent they can be found in ON mythology. Everyday examples of tropes, poetic examples, mythological examples.

**Reading for next:** Mark Johnson: *The Body in the Mind* (chapter 4, "Metaphorical Projection of Image Schemata")

**Homework:** Prepare answers to a series of helpful questions accompanying Johnsons's text (will be provided).

### Lesson 8.

19. Mar: Going through Johnson's text and making sure everybody gets the details. Discussion about the answers to the accompanying questions. Application of the framework to ON myth and opinions on it.

**Reading for next:** Bruce Lincoln: *Indo-European Myth of Creation*.

**Homework:** Answers to accompanying questions to the article.

26. Mar: No seminar / I am giving a lecture in Prague

### Lesson 9.

2. Apr: Discussion on Lincoln's article: the commonalities and specifics of Old Norse case. Relation to cosmogony and communal sacrifice. Comparative perspective.

### Lesson 10.

9. Apr: No lesson – instead participation in International Postgrad Conference in Old Norse Studies in Bergen 08-10 (11) April 2019.

### Lesson 11.

16. Apr: Presentation of the chosen term projects in the form of student conference.

### Lesson 12.

23. Apr: Reserved for unsolved questions and discussions from previous sessions.

### Lesson 13.

30. Apr: Collective wrap up on the topics and findings.