

Geographies of
Knowledge and
Imagination in 19th
Century Philological
Research on Northern
Europe

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Edited by

Joachim Grage and Thomas Mohnike

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CHAPTER ONE

GEOGRAPHIES OF THE NORTH
IN 19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN
COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY:
AN INTRODUCTION

JOACHIM GRAGE, THOMAS MOHNIKE

One of the most prolific fields of knowledge in 19th century humanities was comparative philology, based on the discovery of the Indo-European language family and the laws that seemed to admit the reconstruction of a common history of European languages and—in prolongation—even mythologies, literatures, and people.¹ However, as we would suggest, more than a new method to reconstruct non documented history of mankind, it was a way to establish geographies of belonging and difference in the context of 19th century nation building and identity politics: the populations of Europe were identified as Germanic, Celtic, Slavonic, Latin etc., supposing profound differences between these supposed nation peoples.² I.e. academics depicted Northern Europe often either as the home of liberty, the last wilderness, a refuge of melancholy or birthplace of an industrious Germanic warrior culture, that opposed to Southern Europe's superficiality and laziness and Indian tenderness and eternal wisdom.

In spite of a widely acknowledged consensus about the principles and methods of such philological identification policies, established by central figures as William Jones in Calcutta, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Göttingen and Berlin, Franz Bopp in Paris and Berlin, and Rasmus Rask trav-

¹ Tom Shippey, 'A Revolution Reconsidered. Mythography and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 1–28.

² Cf. Mohnike in the present volume, and Thomas Mohnike, *Géographies du German. Les études nordiques à Strasbourg (1840 et 1945)*, (Strasbourg: Fondation Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2017).

elling all of Scandinavia, through Russia to India and back to Copenhagen, the results depended on local practices and needs. A good case in point is a series of lectures on Norse mythology that the young Danish poet and literary critique Johan Ludvig Heiberg gave at the University of Kiel in the winter term 1824/25. He did so as a lecturer of Danish literature and language, not very successfully, as the historical sources seem to imply³, but full of ambitions. Kiel was at the time part of the Danish kingdom, but it was essentially German speaking—low German on the streets and high German at church and university. This has not been a problem in many centuries, but it began to be considered as such when early nationalists started to identify language use with concepts as nation, people and natural belonging. The post of lecturer of Danish literature and language was created in 1811 in order to counter these tendencies, and to further the idea of a Danish national unity independent of language questions.⁴ Heiberg's lectures on Norse mythology have thus to be considered as part of a political strategy—to create and stabilize identity by teaching a mythology that was unifying the different populations of the kingdom of Denmark as one nation. Heiberg's students were to be convinced of their Northerness that apparently was not evident to them in the first place, and this can be traced in the extend sources.

In fact, Heiberg published his lectures some years later in a small volume entitled *Norse Mythologie. From the Edda and Oehlenschläger's mythological poems (Nordische Mythologie. Aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen)*. In its preface, he insists on the fact that he does not have to explain the work in itself, but he considers of importance to tell the reader that the book is the result of lectures given at the university of Kiel, as if the value of the transmitted knowledge would be depending on the circumstances of its production, considering the “reading” public as its mediated extension of his public of listeners in Kiel. A bit in contradiction to the task of transmitting national unity, Heiberg aids that he asks for comprehension if he had made some mistakes in language as he is a stranger.⁵ In this phrase, the ambivalence of Kiel as a German speaking town within the Danish Kingdom is palpable as in a nut shell.

³ Cf. Ulrike Gerken, ... *um die Nationaleinheit zu begründen und zu befestigen ... Der Beitrag des Kieler Lektorats für dänische Sprache und Literatur zur Identitätsstiftung im dänischen Gesamtstaat (1811–1848)*, *Imaginatio borealis*, 11 (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2007), 128–36.

⁴ Gerken, *um die Nationaleinheit zu begründen und zu befestigen*.

⁵ “Wegen unrichtig gewählter Ausdrücke und Wendungen darf der Fremde um Nachsicht bitten, und wohl auch selbige zu erhalten hoffen.” Johan Ludvig

However, language ambiguity is not the only problem to bridge by Heiberg. In his book, he wants to propose Norse mythology as “our” mythology. He starts his lecture in stating that Norse mythology is of special interest—in a general and local meaning. “Not that it would be more important than i.e. the Indian, or more beautiful than the Greek,”⁶ but first of all, because it is “our” mythology, and in this sense a “Folk poetry” (“Volkspoesie”): “Each people does only know itself and the nature that it is living in. Only in this form, the divine can reveal itself to it.”⁷ This is why, according to Heiberg,

we residents of the cold North, in spite of the disseminations of culture, will always rather sympathize with frost, wolves, fir and oak woods than with the pigeons of Venus, or even with the Indian gazelles, the liquidambar trees and sweet Madhawi winds, that we meet in the lovely poem Sakontala as meaningful symbols of the divinity.⁸

Interesting enough, Heiberg quotes here twice the same two other mythologies as points of comparison, the Greek and the Indian, that is Sanskrit mythology, and this is symptomatic for the text and the field of knowledge in general. The Greek mythology stands for the classical, post-renaissance tendency to view Roman, and later Greek antiquity as the model and origin of (European) culture. With the above cited discovery of Sanskrit, the Indo-European language family and thus supposed cultural relationship by the Calcutta philologists, some parts of the Indian population resorted as the long lost distant, but noble cousin of European high culture. Norse mythology, its language and people were than the third important cardinal point in this imaginative geography of identities and belonging. This three-part configuration of the cultural geography of Europe and part of India is

Heiberg, *Nordische Mythologie. Aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen* (Schleswig: Königl. Taubstumm-Inst., 1827), VI.

⁶ “Nicht, als ob sie bedeutender wäre als z.B. die indische, oder wohl gar schöner als die griechische,” *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ “Ein jedes Volk kennt nur sich selbst und die Natur, worin es lebt. Nur unter der Form von dieser kann das Göttliche sich ihm offenbaren.” *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ “werden wir Bewohner des kalten Nordens, trotz aller Verbreitung der Cultur, doch zeitlebens dem Froste, den Wölfen, den Tannen- und Eichenwäldern leichter sympathisieren können, als mit den Tauben der Venus, oder wohl gar mit den indischen Gazellen, dem Ambrabaum und der zarten Madhawiwinde, die uns in dem reizenden Gedichte, Sakontala, als bedeutsame Bilder der Gottheit erscheinen.” *Ibid.*



Fig. 1-1. Odin, by J.L. Lund. In: Heiberg, Johan Ludvig. *Nordische Mythologie: aus der Edda und Oehlenschlägers mythischen Dichtungen*. Schleswig: Königl. Taubstummen-Inst., 1827.

quite courant in the field of comparative philology—already William Jones compared the three mythologies in order to reconstruct a common ground, even if he would not look with too much attention to the Northern gods, as they were the Greek gods “in another dress, with an embroidery of images apparently Asiatick.”⁹

The imaginative geography evoked in Heiberg’s lectures witnesses thus a tendency to evoke the populations of Europe and parts of Asia as an original whole, distinct of the world around, but at the same time well-ordered differentiated within, with the help of borders that are not easily to bridge. Paradoxally, he supposes that his public is more familiar with Greek mythology than with its “own” mythology, as are the poets of his time. But this is due to an unconscious tendency to even out all differences, a tendency that he seems to be countered by the rediscovery of what is considered to be the own culture:

If our poets of today still move easier in the forms of the world of the Greek gods than those of the Norse, it is just a result of the generally spread culture, wherein we may see the unconscious attempt to equalise the different nations and national attitudes in order to elevate them to a common human one.¹⁰

Consequently, the supposed rediscovery of a lost, but own heritage through the Heiberg lecture on Norse mythology is moulded by implicit and explicit references to the known Greek and Classical antiquity, clarifying what is considered unknown but own through what is known but stranger.

This might be exemplified by the illustrations that enrich the book. The frontispiece (Fig. 1-1) looks like a drawing of a marble statue: An old bearded man enthroned on an armchair, his left hand pillowed on a long bar, two birds sitting on the chair’s back, one of them whispering in his ears, two wolves lying beneath his feet. The armchair stands on a two-stage pedestal, the old man’s feet are resting on another small pedestal. His legs are dressed with a robe, showing rich drapery, a bear-skin hanging

⁹ Cf. Klaus Bödl, *Der Mythos der Edda. Nordische Mythologie zwischen europäischer Aufklärung und nationaler Romantik* (Tübingen: Francke, 2000), 189.

¹⁰ “Wenn unsre heutigen Dichter sich in den Formen der griechischen Götterwelt noch leichter als in denen der nordischen bewegen, so ist dies nur eine Folge der allgemein verbreiteten Kultur, worin das unbewusste Bestreben liegt, die verschiedenen Nationen und nationalen Ansichten mehr und mehr auszugleichen, und zu einer allgemein menschlichen zu erheben.” Heiberg, *Nordische Mythologie*, 6.

over his chest, so that his right shoulder is naked. The picture is drawn by the German-Danish artist Johann Ludwig Lund (1777–1867). The inscription on the lowest pedestal says, that we have to do with Odin, the highest god in Nordic mythology, but if we had not this name given and if we did not interpret the birds as the two ravens Hugin and Munin and the wolves as Regi and Freki, Odin's well known attributes, we could not be sure, that this was not a picture of an ancient statue showing a Greek or Roman god. Actually, it shows great similarity to representations of the famous statue of Zeus at Olympia, made by the Greek sculptor Phidias between 438 and 432 BC.¹¹ This statue, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was destroyed during the 5th century AD, but it is known by representations on coins (Fig 1-2) and descriptions by ancient authors. It showed the sitting God with the left foot positioned in the front, the right behind. His right hand bore a statue of Nike, the left hand held the sceptre, that was crowned by an eagle, in the height of the shoulder. A robe was covering the lower part of the body and the left shoulder. The footstool was leaned on lions.¹² The Olympian Zeus had a deep impact on the iconography of the God from antiquity (Fig. 1-3) up to the modern age. Phidias' statue was the paradigm for how to represent the enthroned highest god, and obviously, Lund also follows this example by replacing Zeus' laurel wreath with a hair-band, his eagle on the top of the scepter by the ravens, the lions by the wolves, and the robe on his shoulder with a bear-skin.

The picture shows, that representing Nordic mythology was mediated by the ways of representing classical mythology. On the one hand this is an expression of the claim for dignity of Nordic mythology, on the other hand it may result in a lack of authentic visual sources for the depiction of Nordic gods in the beginning of the 19th century.¹³ Behind the meeting of Nordic mythology and Greek-Roman classical art stands an encounter of

¹¹ Cf. Judith M. Barringer, 'Zeus at Olympia', *The Gods of Ancient Greece. Identities and Transformations* Edinburgh Leventis Studies 5 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 155–177. We like to thank Anna Schreurs-Morét for the hint to the connection between Lund and Phidias.

¹² "An der Fußbank waren Löwen (die man als Stützen erklärt hat) ... Zeus saß feierlich aufrecht ..., der linke Fuß war vorgestellt, der rechte zurückgestellt. Umgekehrt war der rechte Arm vorgestreckt, die Hand trug die Nike ... Die Linke des Zeus stützte das Szepter, das sie in Schulterhöhe faßte, auf ... Von Gewändern wird nur das Himation genannt, das um Unterkörper und linke Schulter ging." G. Lippold, 'Pheidias', *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Neue Bearbeitung. Vol. 38 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1938) 1919–1935, here 1922.

¹³ Cf. Knut Ljøgodt, "Northern Gods in Marble." *The Romantic Rediscovery of Norse Mythology*. *Romantik* 1 (2012): 141–165, here 146.

knowledge coming from different places and cultures. This is also mirrored in Lund's and Heiberg's own history. Lund's view on mythological figures and scenes was coined by two long stays in Rome, before he got the position of a professor at Copenhagen's academy of art. In Rome, he had close connection to the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, who also found his aesthetic ideals in classical ancient sculptures.¹⁴

It may be accidental, that Lund was born in Kiel, where Heiberg later gave his lectures, but there is an obvious connection between Lund's visual concept and Heiberg's aim to make the students of Kiel familiar with "their" mythology. However, when Heiberg released his lectures as a book, he addressed a broad German speaking audience, for which the inherent comparison to Greek mythology was even more useful. The message for people who did not know much about old Norse literature and culture is clear: It is not difficult to understand Nordic mythology, because it is akin to the Greek. So it was helpful to become acquainted with the northern gods in classical shape and in the romantic presentation of the Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger, whose epic poem *Nordens Guder* (1819, *The Gods of the North*) was a main source for Heiberg.



Fig. 1-2. Coin from Elis district in southern Greece illustrating the Olympian Zeus statue. In: *Nordisk familjebok*, 2. ed., vol. 33, Stockholm 1922, 757.

¹⁴ Cf. Hannemarie Ragn Jensen, 'Herman Schubart og J.L. Lund'. *En bog om kunst til Else Kai Sass*. Ed. Hakon Lund. (København: Forum, 1978), 309–319.



Fig. 1-3. Seated Zeus, marble and bronze, Roman copy of Greek statue, 1st century A.D., Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The knowledge of mythology and national belonging that Heiberg sought to produce is thus situated,¹⁵ bound to the conditions of its production, that is to the place in the institutional, political, social and, in more general terms, cultural geography of its time—even if its ambition is to transgress the local and accidental, to develop forms of knowledge that are applicable everywhere in the world. This tension between local conditions and delocalized ambition is common trait of scientific knowledge in the modern period, be it in the natural sciences or humanities,¹⁶ and it is this tension that has triggered our curiosity when planning the project that informed the present volume.

Working at the universities of Freiburg and Strasbourg, that are not far away from each other but parts of different national cultures and scientific systems, we are interested in the relation between the venue of the production of knowledge and the imaginative geography that is implied in the representation of knowledge or that emerges from this knowledge. Our subject, Scandinavian Studies, has different institutional roots and a respectively different history at our universities, although or even because Strasbourg has been changed political belonging between France and the German Empire several times during history. These different institutional histories would have an impact on how Scandinavian Studies developed as an academic field. In Germany, it emerged from German philology as a national philology, because the early investigators in German language and literature considered the Nordic ones as closely related to their own and used Nordic texts and language relics to tell and to understand the history of their own culture. In France, Scandinavian languages and literatures were seen as part of the field of foreign literature (*littératures étrangères*). In both cases, Comparative Philology provided scholars with arguments for identification or alienation—it had also an impact on the mapping of humanities.

The relation between situated knowledge and imaginative geographies that we know from our own experience is not only the subject of our pro-

¹⁵ Notion inspired by Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99; Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Christoph F.E. Holzhey, *Situierendes Wissen und regionale Epistemologie. Zur Aktualität Georges Canguilhem und Donna J. Haraways*, Cultural Inquiry (Wien/Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2012).

¹⁶ David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place. Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Science.culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Christian Jacob, ed., *Lieux de savoir* (Paris, France: Albin Michel, 2007); Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ject but also a pre-condition of our studies. Maybe the self-awareness of this relation is a consequence of our localization in a binational context. Although the project has been located at two Institutes of Advanced Studies (FRIAS in Freiburg and USIAS in Strasbourg) with different venues, we think it is able to reflect about this relation from a meta-perspective, which again is rooted in time and space. During the two years of funding by FRIAS and USIAS we have shared the same office—first in Strasbourg, then in Freiburg—and invited colleagues from other universities and institutes to collaborate in a workshop in Strasbourg in June 2014 and in an international conference in Freiburg in 2015, bringing with them their own academic provenience.

The results of these exchanges and discussions are published in the present volume and in a forthcoming monography, written by the editors. The monograph will analyse the general development of this field of knowledge outside Scandinavia, its institutionalization in an attempt to dress a geography and history of philology of the North of the long 19th century. In the present volume, the contributors elaborate these dynamics in analyzing the changing and conflicting versions of imaginative geographies that the actors of comparative philology evoked by using Scandinavian literatures and cultures. They also show how these seemingly delocalized scientific models depended on ever different local needs and practices. By this, the present volume becomes a first distinctly transnational dynamic geography and history of the philological knowledge of the North—not only as a history of a scientific discourse, but also as a result of doing and performing scientific work.

Most of the sources philologists all over Europe related to when they dealt with ancient nordic language, literature, and mythology, came from Iceland – and these broad academic and popular interests in Old Norse Literature had a deep impact in the process of nation building in Iceland, as Clarence Glad shows in his chapter. The examination of the own literary and cultural tradition produced a contradictory relationship between the cultural constructions of North and South: on the one hand, northern mythology was seen as a counter-balance to Greco-Roman mythology, on the other hand, Iceland was imagined as the “Hellas of the North,” not only by Icelanders, but also by scholars and academics in Copenhagen, where the ideological fundamentals for this self-conception were created in the beginning of the 19th century. The case study of the Icelandic scholar Sveinbjörn Egilsson shows, how the preoccupation with Greek literature is linked with a nascent Icelandic cultural nationalism. The translator of the Homeric epics into Icelandic and the advocate of the classical lan-

guages as school subject was also involved in constructing Old Icelandic literature as the classical literature of the North.

Geographical notions played also a significant role in early comparative linguistic studies. In his chapter Lars Erik Zeige discusses the so-called geography of language, as it is represented in the polyglot maps of Gottfried Hensel in the 18th century, and in linguistic geography projects of the 19th and 20th century. He shows, that linguistic maps of the North were a popular way to produce and revise scientific knowledge of languages and dialects in Scandinavia and helped to explore the spatial dimension of language variation. Seen in the context of nation building in the 19th and early 20th century these maps have an ambiguous function. On the one hand, it was a national project to explore the richness and varieties of the national language, on the other hand the maps undermined the concept of national unity by showing the inner plurality of language in the nation states.

Ballad studies seem to be at the first glance a very national endeavour in the long 19th century, and indeed it is. However, as Lis Møller argues in here article, it is a national activity often conducted in a transnational network. Local needs and transnational circulation of works influenced the kind of knowledge actors in Ballad studies created. Her article analyses in detail the dialog and exchange of Wilhelm Grimm with his contemporary Danish colleagues, especially Rasmus Nyerup, chief librarian of the university library in Copenhagen. Grimm was fascinated by the Danish ballad heritage, partly because it was already at the time very good documented, partly he saw it as part of a common, Germanic heritage that could serve as an interesting tool to throw light and explain the German ballad tradition. Nyerup and his Danish colleagues helped Grimm to gain access to non-published sources and served with explications, where local cultural or specific linguistic knowledge were needed, and showed to be highly influenced in content and form in their proper edition project of Danish ballads. However, this influence was not as straight forward as it may seem at a first glance.

The publication of ballads as national monuments is an important subject even in Kim Simonsen's chapter. Simonsen follows the footsteps of the Danish antiquarian and natural historian H. C. Lyngbye, when he went to the Faroe Islands in order to investigate in seaweed and algal flora. However, Lyngbye's interest in the Faroe Islands was much more holistic, being as much interested in nature as in cultural practices as Faroese wedding rituals and the ballads, and one of the foremost results of the travel was the publication of the *Sigurd Ballads* in 1822, the Faroese balade version of the Nibelungen cycle. Simonsen explores how these activities inte-

grated into the larger network of Romantic philological studies, a network that was administered in much by the very active Copenhagen philologue Carl Christian Rafn and the *Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab* (The Royal Nordic Society of Antiquaries) that he cofounded with members from almost all over the world. The transnational circulation of these “paper monuments” and mutual reception has an influence on the construction and interpretation of local data, as can be shown in the Faroese case.

Annette Lassen analyses the history of another “paper monument,” the Danish translations of the Icelandic sagas by N.M. Petersen. Petersen, first professor of Nordic languages at the University of Copenhagen, used many neologisms in his translations, i.e. new words and expressions based on Old Norse, unknown to his public. Inspired by the Copenhagen-based scholarly milieu of his time, Petersen attempted to strengthen the Danish language and people against what he felt like the threat from the South, in particular from the German language and culture. Lassen analyses Petersen’s language policy and shows, to quote her “how N.M. Petersen intended to build up—and strengthen—Denmark and the North with new words.”

In his contribution, Thomas Mohnike argues that beginnings of Scandinavian studies in France are to be found in the Orientalist milieu of the Société asiatique in Paris that in turn has been inspired by the discovery of the Indo-European language family and its supposed cultural counterparts, and that this field knowledge is thus highly influenced by the imaginative geographies evoked by these scholars and methods. He bases his argument on an analysis of the work of Frédéric-Guillaume Bergmann, professor of foreign literature in Strasbourg from 1838/9 to 1871 at the French Faculté des lettres, and then professor of German Philology at the German Kaiser-Wilhelms-Universität zu Strassburg. Bergmann had studied within the philologist milieus in Göttingen, Berlin and Paris and is clearly influenced by the apriorities of comparative philology. However, probably due to the status of Strasbourg as a at least bilingual town, the geographies and histories of identity and belonging are more ambiguous and less clear cut: instead of purity of origins, he looks often for blending and mixture.

Joachim Grage examines the beginnings of studies in Nordic literature in the German speaking academic world, where Scandinavian languages and literatures were part of the broad field of German philology. While the main focus during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century was lying on Old Norse literature, the great literary success of Henrik Ibsen initiated an examination of modern nordic literature both in philological research and in academic teaching. But as Grage shows, this new awakened interest was almost exclusively focussed on Ibsen, who was seen as a solitaire not

only in Norwegian or Nordic, but also in European literature. As far as Ibsen was construed as a specific Norwegian author, the scholars draft an exotic picture of this land and its literary tradition.

Finally, Britta Irslinger explores the beginnings of Celtic philology in Europe, particularly in Ireland. Even if Celtic literature and culture were seen as part of the Germanic world in 18th and 19th century's comparative philology, the geographical imaginations of the cultural spheres changed, depending on different theories of the Celtic language's origin and the age of literary records. Irslinger argues, that there are significant differences between philological studies inside and outside Ireland, because scholarship in Celtic literature was an important contribution to the construction of Irish national identity. In contrast, German scholars were claiming a close relation between Celtic and Germanic antiquity, while the British view on Celtic culture was linked with the question, if it was part of British history and culture. The discussion about the origins of the Celtic language lead also to a broad interest in medieval Irish literature which was conceptualized as an equivalent of the Homeric epics—a notion that Clarence Glad has analysed with regard to Old Norse literature in the first chapter of this book.

He who has no reason to express his gratitude is a poor person. This cannot be said about us. Thanks to Laura Muller-Thomas, Kimon Mouzakis and Maëlle Partouche who as student assistants were effective help all over the project, and Emma Herweg when preparing the manuscript for publishing, to Teresa Woods who carefully and with patience assured a high level of English of the texts of the volume, none of which was written of an English native speaker. Our thankfulness goes even to the teams of the two institutes of advanced studies that funded our project two all too short years, the FRIAS and the USIAS, and to the team at Cambridge Scholars for a professional editor's support.

CHAPTER TWO

ANCHORING THE NORTH: THE GEOGRAPHY OF NORTH AND SOUTH IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ICELANDIC IDENTITY AND NATIONAL LITERATURE

CLARENCE E. GLAD

Introduction

Around the middle of the 20th century many Scandinavian philologists maintained that there were fundamentally three sources of Western civilization, namely, Greco-Roman, Christian and Nordic. Icelandic medieval literature had been placed side by side with the Bible and the classical literature of the Greeks and Romans “as one of three illuminating beacons in the spiritual life of mankind”¹ as Ólafur Lárússon, the rector of the University of Iceland, remarked in a speech welcoming the Norwegian crown prince when he visited the University in 1947. The views expressed by the rector were common among members of the Icelandic School of philology, such as Björn M. Ólsen (1850–1919), Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974) and Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1899–1984), most of whom referred to foreign philologists in support of their claims.² Many of them had juxtaposed Ice-

¹ Ólafur Lárússon, *Árbók Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaárin 1946–1947* (Reykjavík, 1947), 92.: “... eitt hinna þriggja skæru ljósa í andlegu lífi mannkynsins. Þeim hefur verið skipað við hlið Bibliunnar og hinna klassisku bókmennta Grikkja og Rómverja.” All translations of Icelandic and Danish are mine.

² Such as Henrik Schück (1855–1947), Andreas Heusler (1865–1940) and William Paton Ker (1855–1923). In the late 19th century the foreign authorities referred to included Rasmus Bjorn Anderson (1846–1936), William Morris (1834–1896), as well as August Boltz (1819–1907) and Josef Calasanz Poestion (1853–1922), whose works *Aus Hellas, Rom und Thule* (1887) by Poestion and *Island und Hellas* (1892) by Boltz were well-known to Icelandic intellectuals.

land and Old Norse material with literary aspects of the Greek heritage in particular and had thus put firmly in place building blocks in the construction of the imaginative geography where Iceland as *Hellas of the North* and Greece as *Hellas of the South* featured significantly.

This imagined status of Old Norse literature was built on earlier philological work which had generated a scientifically constructed geography of knowledge based on a comparison of Old Norse and ancient Greek literature, in particular. This constructed geography began to take shape late in the 18th century and early in the 19th century as Nordic scholars participated in the invention of tradition, an invention which has been described as the “cultivation of culture,” i.e. the deliberate cultivation of historical continuity in an attempt to establish a group’s collective distinctiveness.³ This was facilitated by the comparison of Old Norse and ancient Greek literature which contributed in Iceland, for example, to the revitalization of the country’s literary heritage and to the formation of an Icelandic self-image. The comparison shaped the view of many philologists with regard to the historical relationship of Iceland and Greece and of the impact of Hellenic culture in Iceland. Finally, the comparison of Iceland and Greece had an impact not only on Icelandic cultural nationalism but also on Icelandic political nationalism early in the 20th century.

Icelanders readily accepted the idea that “their” literary heritage could be favourably compared to ancient Greek literature, although the political implications of such comparisons varied from a pan-Scandinavian political ideal to exclusive claims of Icelandic ownership of Old Norse literature. Indeed, after having gained sovereignty in 1918 and especially after the foundation of the Republic of Iceland on 17th June, 1944, the nationalization of medieval culture brought Iceland into open conflict with other Nordic countries, especially in the so-called manuscript debates between Icelandic and Danish authorities and in disputes over the national origins of the saga literature.⁴ The issue by the middle of the 20th century was not

³ Joep Leerssen, ‘Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture’, *Nations and Nationalism* 12, no. 4 (2006): 559–78; Joep Leerssen, *The Cultivation of Culture. Towards a Definition of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, Working Papers. European Studies, Amsterdam 2 (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2005), and Joep Leerssen, ‘Introduction: Philology and the European Construction of National Literatures’, in *Editing the Nation’s Memory. Textual Scholarship and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle and Joep Leerssen, *European Studies* 26 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 13–27.

⁴ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, ‘Interpreting the Nordic Past: Icelandic Medieval Manuscripts and the Construction of a Modern Nation’, in *The Uses of the Middle*

only the relative status of Nordic medieval literature as part of Western civilization but also to whom the “glorious” Nordic medieval past really belonged, whether the sagas were Norwegian and pan-Scandinavian or exclusively Icelandic. In these “ownership” disputes a complex interplay of philology and national culture comes to the fore in a key-period in Iceland’s national development. Since then, Icelandic historians have generally assumed the crucial role of Old Norse Literature in Icelandic nation-building.

The process of canonizing Old Norse literature can be described as a conscious anchoring of the North and its literature in the South. By placing Icelandic/Old Norse literature alongside the perceived greatest cultural achievements of the world, Scandinavian intellectuals thrust Iceland and the North from the periphery towards the centre as one of the main sources of Western civilization. One can trace and analyze the origin and development of this imaginative geography of Old Norse literature and its cultural and political nationalist implications in both Scandinavian and, more specifically, Icelandic philological contexts. Theoretical perspectives of imagology and studies in cultural nationalism will inform my analysis.

I. General Context⁵

The national identity of Icelanders used to be intricately intertwined with their literary heritage. Even before we can speak of conscious attempts at nation-building in a modern sense, it was above all their language and the ancient writings that determined the image and status of the Icelanders among nations and simultaneously their own perception of themselves. When the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask (1787–1832) suggested in 1816 the establishment of an *Icelandic Literary Society* he remarked:

Every Icelander who is not entirely ignorant of the world will recognize that the ancient Norse tongue is the chief basis of Iceland’s renown; for were it not for the [old] poetry, the sagas and the language, the mother of all the languages of Scandinavia, hardly any man in foreign lands would

Ages in Modern European States. History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins, ed. R.J.W Evans and Marchal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 52–71.

⁵ This section describes the research project “Icelandic philology and national culture 1780–1918” (2014–2017), supported by The Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNIS). Project leaders: Clarence E. Glad and Gylfi Gunnlaugsson. Institution: The Reykjavik Academy (www.akademia.is).

know of the nation or the country, nor have any interest in it, any more than any other savage people or desert.⁶

Iceland was at that time part of the Danish absolute monarchy. After its abolition through the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1848–49, the degree of self-government enjoyed by Icelanders increased gradually, step by step. In 1845 the Althing had been re-established as an advisory assembly and in 1874 it obtained legislative powers with the introduction of a new constitution. During the governor period (1874–1904) the topic of increased autonomy dominated political discussions. In 1904 Icelanders obtained Home Rule with a minister residing in Reykjavík and in 1918 Iceland became a sovereign state in a personal union with Denmark. During the national sovereignty negotiations, Icelanders pressed their demand for autonomy with a submission that largely echoed the qualities identified by Rask as justifying the Icelanders' claim to be treated as a nation among nations:

Alone among the Germanic nations, the Icelandic people have preserved the ancient tongue that was common to all of Scandinavia 900–1100 years ago so little changed that every Icelander can today still understand and reap full benefit of the literary treasury of the ancient culture of this and other Nordic nations. And through the language a separate nationality, separate customs and a separate culture have been preserved. And through this language, the consciousness of the country's uniqueness with respect to our neighboring nations has always been present among the people. These things, a separate language and a separate culture, we believe create for us a historical and natural right to full independence.⁷

⁶ “Sérhver íslenskur maður, sem ekki er öldungis ókunnugur í heiminum, mun viðurkenna, að gamla norrænan sé sú helsta undirrott Íslands sóma; því væri ekki gamli skáldskapurinn, sögurnar og aðaltungan, móðir allra tungumála á Norðurlöndunum, þá mundi varla nokkur maður í framandi löndum þekkja þjóð eða land, né heldur forvitnast þar um, framan en um aðra villipjóð eður eyðimörk.” See: Jón Sigurðsson, *Hið íslenska Bókmenntafélag. Stofnan félagsins og athafnir fyrstu fimmtíu árin 1816–1866* (Köbenhavn, 1867), 62.

⁷ “Íslenska þjóðin hefir ein allra germanskra þjóða varðveitt hina fornu tungu, er um öll Norðurlönd gekk fyrir 900–1000 árum, svo lítið breytta, að hver íslenskur maður skilur enn í dag og getur hagnýtt sjer til hlítar bókmentafjársjóði hinnar fornu menningar vorrar og annara Norðurlandþjóða. Með tungunni hefir sjerstakt þjóðerni, sjerstakir siðir og sjerstök menning varðveitst. Og með tungunni hefir einnig meðvitundin um sjerstöðu landsins gagnvart frændþjóðum vorum ávalt lifað með þjóðinni. Þessi atriði, sjerstök tunga og sjerstök menning, teljum vjer skapa oss sögulegan og eðlilegan rjett til fullkominis sjálfstæðis.” Guðmundur

The passage exemplifies the ambiguity that commonly characterized the Icelanders' attitude towards their language and ancient writings: on the one hand, a common Nordic/common Germanic heritage, on the other, and simultaneously, the unique national heritage of Iceland.

Towards the end of the 18th century a change of perspective took place in European intellectual circles that increased the significance of the literary heritage preserved in Icelandic manuscripts for the way the Icelanders viewed themselves. Speculation on the origins of Language and Culture shifted to an interest in what characterizes and distinguishes peoples and their cultural worlds. Now language came to be seen as the primary factor in distinguishing nations, and the highest form of language use, written and oral literature, as the purest manifestation of the national character—and the older the literature was, the better.⁸ Scholars attempted to establish a connection between language, ethnicity, and nationality as a means of creating national myths of origin.

The discourse of Icelanders who were engaged in the study and/or editing of Old Norse literature in the long 19th century should be seen as part of the international discussion on Old Norse/Icelandic cultural heritage and on national culture in general. Through their research and writings scholars played a part in shaping Icelandic identity. At times this was at odds with the use of the same heritage, or a part of it, in the creation of a common Nordic/pan-Germanic identity: Different theories of the origins of particular genres of the ancient literature produced different views of the national character that the literature was supposed to reflect.

The material in the Icelandic manuscripts that most nations felt they had a claim on were the myths found in Snorra Edda and the Eddic poems. In fact, the original reception of the Eddas outside Iceland can be said to have consisted largely of presenting their mythology as a counterbalance to Greco-Roman mythology; it was used to create an image of “the North” rather than of individual nations. Scholars discussed the use of Norse myths in romantic poetry, and the origins and national significance of the mythological heritage of the Eddas. Most Scandinavian scholars emphasised the Nordic in this heritage but many German intellectuals viewed the Norse myths as displaying “Germanic” elements. Others maintained that these myths had Oriental origins, exhibiting signs of Eastern natural phi-

Hálfðanarson, “Hver á sér fegra föðurland”. Staða náttúrunnar í íslenski þjóðernisvitund., *Skírnir* 173 (1999): 311.

⁸ Kirsten Gomard, ‘A Nationalist Controversy About Language. Were the Languages in the Nordic Countries Nordic?’, in *Northbound. Travels, Encounters, and Constructions 1700–1830*, ed. Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), 195–217.

losophy. Until the late 19th century the Eddic poems were commonly considered to predate the settlement of Iceland but then some scholars began to ask whether they might have been composed in Iceland.

The national origins of various other genres of the ancient literature are, in one way or another, ambiguous and open to dispute, most notably the skaldic poems, kings' sagas, and legendary sagas (*foraldarsögur*). Even the sagas of Icelanders were often read for what they were believed to reveal about the national character of other nations. While it was generally believed that the sagas of Icelanders had taken shape as oral narratives that had later been committed verbatim to parchment, Norwegians were able to maintain that they were based on a Norwegian storytelling tradition. With this in mind, it is understandable how eagerly Icelanders embraced the "book prose" theory when it appeared—with its tenet that the sagas should be viewed first and foremost as the works of educated and conscious "authors."

To the general public in Iceland, the ancient literature remained alive and current. It was constantly copied and read. Paper manuscripts from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries show that the legendary sagas and chivalric sagas (*riddarasögur*) enjoyed greater favour among the common people than other saga genres. *Rímur* were also most commonly composed from legendary or chivalric sagas. The settings of both types lie outside Iceland, and so it seems likely that the general population of Iceland read such sagas for their entertainment value. Scholars then began to promote the more highly regarded types of literature as specific, Icelandic, national heritage.

The cultural identity of a nation takes shape and develops through comparison with what is perceived as being different in other nations and with what is held to be similar or in common with one's own. The cultural identity of nations and ethnic groups does not respect state borders. A cultural identity can also develop out of an association with other perceived national identities that may be distant in time and space. The attitudes that manifested themselves in Icelanders' research into their ancient literature were thus strongly influenced by comparison with ancient Greek culture.

European nationalism arose originally as an ideology in a cultural environment characterized by an idolization of the ancient classical world. The nationalist discourse changed the classicist discourse; the focus of attention moved from the Roman Empire to ancient Greece. An appreciation of the Greek "Golden Age" and the cultivation of the human qualities that it had espoused became a part of the *Bildung* of *Gymnasium* ("education of grammar school") students. Great emphasis was placed on the patriotism of the ancient Greeks. Thus ancient Greek culture could be used to engender a sense of duty towards one's own nation. The Icelandic Golden Age,

mutatis mutandis, was tailor-made to be used in the same way. There is much to indicate that such attitudes were promoted by educators in Iceland in the 19th century, perhaps most notably by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791–1852), who was both one of the most prolific philologists and one of the most influential teachers of the period. Before discussing Sveinbjörn’s life and work, we will turn to Iceland’s capital early in the 19th century, i.e. Copenhagen.

II. The Cultural Milieu in Copenhagen early in the 19th Century

Scientific knowledge is influenced by localized practices and concrete venues such as institutes of higher learning, museums, scholarly networks and the publication of significant texts. Most medieval manuscripts related to Nordic history were located in Copenhagen but throughout the 19th century Icelandic philologists, in collaboration with their Danish colleagues, were instrumental in the dissemination of Old Norse texts. Danish and Icelandic ethnic identity was blurred early in the 19th century but increased knowledge of Old Norse culture, through the publication of Old Norse texts and discussions about Old Norse Language and Culture increased ethnic sensitivities and spurred innovative geographical imaginations with regard to the assumed significance and relationship of Old Norse, Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.

In the early in 19th century Copenhagen was full of a thriving cultural discourse, discussing e.g. the usefulness of Greek and Old Norse mythology in poetry, visual art and sculpture. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) had addressed the issue in the periodical *Die Horen* (1795, 1796) and in 1799 a prize-essay competition was launched by the University of Copenhagen on the topic: “Would it be beneficial for Nordic belles lettres if Old Norse mythology were introduced and generally accepted by our poets instead of Greek (mythology)?”⁹ All those who submitted essays, i.e. Jens Möller (1779–1833), Ludvig Stoud Platou (1778–1833) and Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), were positive towards the use of Old Norse mythology. Oehlenschläger defended Old Norse mythology as being less overused than the

⁹ “Var det gavnligt for Nordens skønne Litteratur, om den gamle Nordiske Mythologie blev indført, og af vore Digtere almindelig antaget i Stedet for den Græske?” See: Jöran Mjöberg, *Drömmen om sagatiden*, vol. 1: Återblick på den nordiska romantiken från 1700-talets mitt till nygoticismen (omkr. 1865) (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1967), 98–99.