

# Nordic Mythology

**Spring 2009**

**ECH 3 credit course**

**Tuesdays and Fridays 13:15-14:35, room 10-A12**

A study of the myths, cults, and traditions of the pre-Christian Nordic peoples, emphasizing the Viking period, as expressed in contemporary literature, eyewitness reports, archaeological finds, and art. All readings are in modern English translations

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## **Instructor**

**Morten Warmind**

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Morten Warmind is Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Copenhagen. He is Ph. D. & mag. art. in the Sociology of Religion, specialist in Germanic and Celtic religions. Teaches 'Sociology of Religion' at University of Copenhagen. Author of articles on Celtic and Germanic religion in periodicals and anthologies. Co-author and translator of an annotated source-collection on Norse religion (Old var Årle, Copenhagen, Gad 1989) as well as a monograph on Celtic Mythology (Keltiske guder og helte, Politiken 2001). With DIS from 1990 to 1997 and again since 2000.

## **DIS Contacts**

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## **Office Hours**

By appointment. Please call between 10 AM and 10 PM (or better yet use SMS!).

## **Class Format**

Daily class will be comprised of lectures, questions and answers, and class discussion. Written work will include examinations, quizzes, and a research paper. Additionally, the class will be going on three separate field studies, placed throughout the semester.

## Objectives

This course, taught at the upper-division level, is an introduction to the religion and mythology of the pre-Christian Norsemen, especially from the Viking Age, through the study of literary and mythological texts (the Prose and Poetic Eddas, sagas, and contemporary eyewitness accounts), runes, legal texts as well as archaeological findings.

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Read and identify primary sources of Nordic Mythology.
- Read and classify the varieties of Icelandic Saga-literature.
- Name and identify the characteristics of the main Nordic deities as they are reflected in the sources.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the world-view and culture of the Scandinavian Viking Age.
- Distinguish and analyze the main problem fields of Nordic Mythology.
- Demonstrate a familiarity with the main theoretical approaches to mythology.
- Critically analyze and evaluate the sources, as well as the primary problem fields of the study of Nordic Mythology.
- Compose a research paper which will demonstrate ability to identify and analyze a problem and to apply the appropriate theoretical approaches to the proper sources.

## Content

The course will begin with a brief introduction to the realm of Nordic mythology. Next we will consider the origins of the Vikings and evaluate the sources of our present day knowledge of the ancient North Germanic peoples, their cults and religion.

We will begin a detailed study of the pre-Christian Norse myths with Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, comparing Snorri's version of the myths as found in Eddic and some Skaldic poetry. We will evaluate Snorri's attitude to his mythological material and discuss possible Christian influences.

In order to appreciate the full scope of saga-literature, we will also consider the romantic fairy-tale elements in the Saga of the Völsungs.

Finally, after also reading and considering the literary and mythological aspects of Hrafnkel's Saga and Njal's Saga, we will analyze the sagas as anthropological source material, as well as literature.

Field studies to museums and archaeological sites will help us reconstruct Viking spiritual life. No previous courses in mythology are necessary.

### Course Requirements

Attendance and active participation in class discussion  
 Two quizzes (10 minutes each)  
 One midterm exam (30 minutes)  
 One research paper (8-9 pages)  
 Final exam

PLEASE NOTE: All written assignments, quizzes and exams MUST be completed to pass course.

### Reading Assignments

The reading for each class meeting is indicated in the syllabus. It is assumed that students are prepared and will be active participants in class discussion.

**Please always bring the assigned readings to class as well as this syllabus.**

### Written Assignment

•The research paper (8-9 pages) is **due Tuesday, March 17 at the beginning of class.**

The research paper is on a topic selected by the student together with the instructor. The purpose of this paper is to allow the student to work in-depth on a specific topic of special interest. Individual meetings to discuss the term paper can be arranged.

### Tests

- 2 10-minute quizzes (key dates, names, identifications, definitions). For dates, see syllabus
- 30-minute midterm test (definitions and a short essay). For dates, see syllabus.
- Final two-hour exam (identification and significance, one essay covering the content of the entire course).

### Field Studies

- All-day field study trip to the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, The ship-shaped burials in Gl. Lejre, the Viking fortress in Trelleborg and the church in Fjenneslev. **Saturday, February 28, 9:30 AM - approximately 5:30 PM.**  
Meeting Time and Place 9:30 AM Frue Plads.
- Visit to the National Museum to view the exhibition of Danish prehistory on **Wednesday, March 4, 15:00-17:00 PM.** We will meet in the foyer of the National Museum, Frederiksholms Kanal 12.
- Visit to the Arnamagnean Institute at the University of Copenhagen (New KUA) to view the Manuscript Collection of Medieval vellum and paper originals of the Icelandic sagas and Eddic poetry on **Wednesday, April 15, 10:00 -12:00 AM.** We will meet above the **Islands Brygge** Metro-station at **9:55.**

*Please note that participation in all field trips is mandatory.* Exams and quizzes will contain questions which have only been addressed on field studies.

### Course Evaluation

2x 10-minute quizzes:	5 % (each)
30 minute midterm exam:	15%
8-9 page research paper:	30%
Final exam:	35%
Class attendance and participation:	10%

PLEASE NOTE: All written assignments, quizzes and exams MUST be completed to pass course.

### General Information

•**Assignments must be turned in on time, which is at the beginning of class on the day due.** Late papers will be penalized by a third of a grade per day, e.g. an A- paper three days late will count as a B- paper.

•**All written assignments must be typed or computer printed with best quality printing on plain, white paper.** Handwritten papers are not acceptable.

•Papers must be written in accordance with the conventions listed in the MLA Handbook (available from DIS reference-library) and the DIS document Writing Papers at DIS: Some general recommendations. Bibliographies and endnotes are mandatory.

### Required Reading

Davidson, H.R. Ellis: *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964

*Hrafnkel's Saga and other Stories*. Trans. Hermann Palsson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970

*The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Carolyne Larrington. Oxford 1996: Oxford University Press

*Njal's Saga*. Trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960.

*The Saga of the Volsungs. The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Introduction and Translation by Jesse L. Byock. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990.

Sturluson, Snorri: *The Prose Edda*. Trans. Jean I. Young. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971.

Tacitus: *Germania*. Trans. H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967.

### Text Collection -- Note: Not all texts required, see syllabus!

1. Excerpt from Peter Madsen et al, "Valhalla 1. Ulven er løs". Bagsværd, 1979, pp. 3-10. Transl. Bettina Sommer.
2. "A Short Outline of Danish Prehistory". In E. Munksgaard, *An Archaeological Guide*. London 1970, p. 18.
3. List of principal sources for Nordic mythology, compiled by Wera Hildebrand.
4. Text collection concerning Nordic prehistory: Info sheets prepared by the course professor, excerpts from Bent Rying, *Denmark - Introduction, Prehistory*,

- Copenhagen 1989, excerpts from Steen Hvass and Birger Storgaard (eds.), *Digging into the Past*, Århus 1993.
5. "Runes". Excerpts from Haugen, Einar, *The Scandinavian Languages*. Cambridge 1976, pp. 148-149, 170-173, 226-227.
  - 6.
  7. Excerpts from Snorri Sturluson, "The Ynglinga Saga" (in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, 1220's). Net edn., Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE.
    - a. "1. Of the Situation of Countries"; b. "2. Of the People of Asia", "3. Of Odin's Brothers"; c. "4. Of Odin's War with the People of Vanaland"; d. "5. Odin Divides his Kingdom: also concerning Gefion"; e. "6. Of Odin's Accomplishments", "7. Of Odin's Feats", "8. Odin's Lawgiving"; f. "9. Of Njord's Marriage"; g. "10. Of Odin's death".
  - 8.
  9. Viking Age history and background.
    - a. Ramskou, Thorkild, "The Vikings in the Context of Their Age", (Fact Sheet, Denmark), Copenhagen 1976.
    - b. Haywood, John, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, pp. 8-11, "Causes of the Viking Age"; 12-15, "Timelines"; 16-21 "Origins of the Vikings".
  - 10.
  11. Worship in Lejre and Uppsala.
    - a. Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicle* (ca. 1018), I, 9, on the cult at Lejre. Transl. L. Hemmingsen.
    - b. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (ca. 1070), IV,26-27. Transl. Morten Warmind.
  - 12.
  13. Excerpts from Saxo "Grammaticus", *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1215). From Fischer, P. (transl., vol. 1) and Davidson, H.E. (commentary, vol. 2), *The History of the Danes*, Cambridge 1979-80.
    - a. "Introduction", vol. 1, pp. 1-2; "Saxo's Preface", vol. 1 pp. 3-9; Book I, vol. 1 pp. 11-35; notes on Book I, vol. 2, pp. 25-38; Book II w. notes.
    - b. Book III, vol. 1 pp. 65-90; notes on Book III, vol. 2 pp. 51-63.
  14. "The Lay of Erik" (*Eiriksmál*).
  - 15.
  16. Haugen, E., "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil". In *To Honor Roman Jakobson ... Vol II*, The Hague 1967, pp. 855-868.
  17. "The tale of Völsi" (*Völsa thátr*).
  18. Excerpt from Snorri Sturluson, "The Saga of Hákon the Good" (in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, 1220's). Translated by L.M. Hollander, Austin, Texas, 1995.
  19. "King Gautrek". In: Pálsson, Hermann and Edwards, Paul (ed. and transl.), *Seven Viking Romances*. Harmondsworth (Penguin Books) 1985, pp. 138-170.
  20. "The Funeral of the Rus-Chief". Excerpt from Ibn Fadlan: *Risala*. Translated by Tina Sass. Full text in German translation in Togan, Ahmed Zeki Validi, *Ibn Fadlân's Reisebericht, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 23,4, Leipzig 1939.
  21. Excerpt from Snorri Sturluson, "The Saga of St. Olav" (in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, 1220's). Translated by L.M. Hollander, Austin, Texas, 1995.
  - 22.
  - 23.
  24. Honko, Lauri, "The Problem of defining Myth", in: Dundes, Alan (ed.), *Sacred Narrative. Readings in the Theory of myth*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984, pp. 41-52.

25. Wender, Dorothea, "The Myth of Washington", in: Dundes, Alan (ed.), *Sacred Narrative. Readings in the Theory of myth*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984, pp. 336-42.
26. Lincoln, Bruce: "From the Second World War to the Present (and Possibly a Little Beyond)". In: Lincoln, Bruce: *Theorizing Myth. Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago and London 1999, pp. 141-151.

### **Reference Reading**

Brøndsted, Johannes: *The Vikings*. Trans. Kalle Skov. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.

Dumézil, Georges: *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. Ed. Einar Haugen. Berkely: Univ. of California Press, 1973.

Foote, Peter & David M. Wilson: *The Viking Achievement*. Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970.

Jones, Gwyn: *The Norse Atlantic Saga*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986.

Littleton, C. Scott: *The New Comparative Mythology*. Berkely: Univ. of California Press, 1973.

Saxo Grammaticus: *The History of the Danes, Books I-IX*. Trans. Peter Fischer. Ed. Hilda E.R. Davidson. Vols. 1-2. Cambridge: Brewer, 1979-80.

Turville-Petre, E.O.G.: *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### FRIDAY, 23 JANUARY

Topic: Introduction to Nordic Mythology

Readings: “Valhalla”. Binder text 1.  
 “The List of Rig” (*Rígsthula*) pp 246-252 in *The Poetic Edda*

Reading instructions: Read the comic for background. Read *Rígsthula*, a poem from the tenth century twice. What is the poem about?

### TUESDAY, 27 JANUARY

Topic: Roots of the Vikings

Readings: Tacitus: *Germania chapters 1-12, 23, 38-43*  
 Outline of Danish Prehistory Binder text 2

Reading instructions: Tacitus wrote this book in AD 98 - about 700 years **before** the Vikings. Just read through the chapters, and pay particular attention to statements about religious beliefs and customs. Remember that the book contains notes, maps and an index!

Familiarize yourselves with the Danish prehistory.

### FRIDAY, 30 JANUARY

Topic: Outsiders' opinions

Readings: Thietmar of Merseburg, Binder text 11a  
 Adam of Bremen. Binder text 11b

Reading instructions: These are some of our best contemporary sources for Viking religion so they should be read with some care. Notice the different tendencies of each writer and their different types of information.

**TUESDAY, 3 FEBRUARY****Election of two class-representatives**Topic: The Sources

Readings: Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*. Binder texts 7a, 7b and 7c  
*The Prose Edda*, pp. 7-19  
 “Introduction” by Sigurdur Nordal  
 “Translator’s Foreword” by Jean I. Young  
 “The Deluding of Gylfi” by Snorri Sturluson p. 29 - p.34, line 8  
 Principal sources. Binder text 3

Reading instructions: This class is meant to give you an idea about the most important sources we have. You have already read an Eddic poem, so we will concentrate on the most outstanding author about Viking mythology in Medieval times, Snorri Sturluson (died 1241). The introduction should be read with some care. Try to form a picture in your mind of Snorri when you read the excerpts from his writings. How was he thinking about the past he describes?

***Short Program Study Tours*****TUESDAY, 10 FEBRUARY**Topic: A Viking cosmology?

Readings: Davidson: *Gods and Myths*, “The World of the Northern Gods”, pp. 23-47  
 “The Seeress’s Prophecy” (*Völuspá*) pp. 3-13 in *The Poetic Edda*.  
 Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, “The Deluding of Gylfi” p. 34, line 9 – p. 48, line 9

Reading instructions: Davidson is meant to provide background information and should be read either first or last. We may not discuss her writings much in class, but it is assumed that you are aware of them. Read the *Völuspá* once or twice, but do not try to comprehend everything in it. No one can and we will discuss it thoroughly in class. Make a note of how Snorri uses the Eddic poems for his writings.

**FRIDAY, 13 FEBRUARY**Topic: Death**Quiz (10 min.) at beginning of class - includes today’s readings.**

Readings: “The Funeral of the Rus-Chief”. Excerpt from Ibn Fadlan: *Risala*. Binder text 20  
 “The Lay of Erik” binder text 14

Reading instructions: Ibn Fadlan is an eye-witness. Please read his account very carefully and compare it to our much later accounts of the realm of the dead.

**TUESDAY, 17 FEBRUARY**

Topic: Everyday religion, private cult, and folklore

**Literature-search** - Head Librarian Peter Hyldekjær will come in first half hour to instruct on literature-search and inform about the library facilities pertinent to your Research Paper.

Readings: “The tale of Völvi” binder text 17  
Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*. Binder text 21

Reading instructions: The public cult of the gods is one thing, the private house cult is another. These texts possibly show us a glimpse of the latter. We will also discuss whether possible hints of this may be found in later folklore.

**FRIDAY, 20 FEBRUARY**

Topic: The Vanir

Readings: Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, p. 48 – p. 63, line 1  
Davidson: *Gods and Myths*, pp. 73-110  
“Skirnir’s Journey” (*Skírnismál*) pp. 61-68 in *The Poetic Edda*  
Snorri: *Ynglingasaga*. Binder texts 7e and 7d

Reading instructions: Read Davidson for background. Reading the various texts by Snorri, look for similarities and discrepancies. What could be the reason for the differences?

**TUESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY**

Topic: Odin

Readings: Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, p. 63, line 2 – p. 69, line 2. and p. 100, line 10 – p. 103, line 3  
Davidson: *Gods and Myths*, pp. 48-72 and 140-153  
“Sayings of the High One” (*Hávamál*), pp. 14-38 in *The Poetic Edda*  
“Vafthrudnir’s Sayings” (*Vafthrudnismál*), pp. 39-49 in *The Poetic Edda*  
“Grimnir’s Sayings” (*Grímnismál*), pp. 50-60 in *The Poetic Edda*

Reading instructions: We will concentrate on the poems in class, so make sure that you read *The Prose Edda* very carefully and make a note of anything you wish to ask about. Think about the Viking concept of knowledge and wisdom which was quite different from ours.

**FRIDAY, 27 FEBRUARY**

Topic: Thor

Readings: Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, p. 69, line 3 – p. 80, line 26 and p. 103, line 4 – p. 110, line 12  
 “Harbard’s Song” (*Hárbarzljod*), pp. 69-77 in *The Poetic Edda*  
 “Thrym’s Poem” (*Thrymskvida*), pp. 97-101 in *The Poetic Edda*  
 “All-Wise’s Sayings” (*Alvíssmál*), pp. 109-113 in *The Poetic Edda*  
 “Hymir’s Poem” (*Hymiskvida*), pp. 78-83 in *The Poetic Edda*

Reading instructions: Please read the poems with some care. What is their purpose? What different images of Thor do they project? How does this fit with Snorri’s image of Thor?

**SATURDAY, 28 FEBRUARY**

**Field Study** - Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Viking fortress in Trelleborg and the church in Fjenneslev.

Meeting Time and Place 9:30 AM Frue Plads. Return ca. 5:30 PM or later!

**TUESDAY, 2 MARCH**

*Please have your term paper topic, purpose and main sources ready in writing on this day*

Topic: Loki and Balder

Readings: Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, p. 80, line 27 – p. 86, line 4 and p. 97 – p. 100, line 9  
 Davidson: *Gods and Myths*, pp. 176-189  
 “Loki’s Quarrel” (*Lokasenna*), pp. 84-96 in *The Poetic Edda*  
 “Baldr’s Dreams” (*Baldrs draumar*), pp. 243-245 in *The Poetic Edda*

Reading instructions: Please read the poems first and see if the impressions you form correspond to the image found in Snorri’s text. Is Loki evil? Does Balder remind you of someone?

**WEDNESDAY, 4 MARCH**

**Field Study** – The National Museum. 15.00-17.00 PM.

We meet in the foyer of the National Museum, Frederiksholms Kanal 12 at **15.00 PM**

**FRIDAY, 6 MARCH**

Topic: Saxo Grammaticus

**Test (30 min.) at beginning of class – NOTE includes today’s readings.**

Readings: Saxo Grammaticus *History of the Danes*: “Preface”, binder text 13a and “Book Three”, binder text 13b

Reading instructions: Saxo is very different from the other authors you have read. He is verbose and rather more difficult to read. Try to make a list of the different stories he tells. He also tells a story of Balder. Ponder the differences and similarities.

**TUESDAY, 10 MARCH**

Topic: Theories of myth

Readings: Lauri Honko: “The Problem of Defining Myth”. Binder text 24:  
NOTE: pp. 44-48!  
Einar Haugen: “The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil” Binder text 16.

Reading instructions: Note that you must only read a few pages of Honko - they are there to give an idea of the various ways of looking at myths so read them first. Read Haugen carefully. He explains Dumézil’s theory and then makes his own. How are they different?

**FRIDAY, 13 MARCH**

Topic: More theories of myths

Readings: Bruce Lincoln: “From the Second World War to the Present (and Possibly a Little Beyond)”. Binder text 26  
Dorothea Wender: “The Myth of Washington”. Binder text 25

Reading instructions: The text of Wender is basically for fun - it might be best to read it last. Read Lincoln carefully and try to find out what his point of departure might be. He offers a blueprint for working with myths - can we apply it?

**TUESDAY, 17 MARCH**

**Research paper due at the beginning of class**

Topic: Viking religion. An overview

Readings: Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*. Binder text 18

The purpose of this class is to provide a synthesis of what we know about actual Viking Age religion.

**FRIDAY, 20 MARCH**

Reserved for special purposes

*Long Program Study Tours***TUESDAY, 14 APRIL**

Topic: The social world of the Saga-Age

Readings: To be announced

The purpose of this class is to begin our reading of the sagas with an overview of Saga-Age customs and beliefs.

**WEDNESDAY, 15 APRIL**

**Field study to The Arnamagnean Institute, KUA. 10:00 - 12:00.** We meet above the Metro-station "Islands Brygge" at **9:55**.

**FRIDAY, 17 APRIL**

The saga as fairy-tale: Saga of the Völsungs

Readings: *Saga of the Volsungs*, chapter 1-20, pp. 35-66

Reading instructions: To create order in a rather chaotic text, try to find a few themes that run through this part of the story.

**TUESDAY, 21 APRIL**

Topic: Saga of the Völsungs

Readings: *Saga of the Volsungs*, chapter 21-44, pp 67-109

Reading instructions: Think of the character of Brynhild - what guides her actions - if anything? What is the role of Odin?

**FRIDAY, 24 APRIL**

Topic: Hrafnkel's Saga

**Quiz (10 min.) at beginning of class - includes today's readings**

Readings: *Hrafnkel's Saga*

Reading instructions: What is the guiding principle behind Hrafnkel's actions? Why does Sam loose in the end?

**TUESDAY, 28 APRIL**

Topic: Njal's Saga

Readings: *Njal's Saga*, Ch. 1-81

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.

**FRIDAY, 1 May**

Topic: Njal's Saga

Readings: *Njal's Saga*, Ch. 82-132

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.

**TUESDAY, 5 May**

Topic: Njal's Saga

Readings: *Njal's Saga*, Ch. 133-end

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.