

**Nordic Mythology B**  
**DIS - Fall 2011**  
**ECH 3 credit course**

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**  
**Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer**

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Bettina Sommer is mag. art. in the History of Religion, University of Copenhagen 2006. She is a specialist in Nordic Religion and Scandinavian Folklore and has published articles on Nordic Religion in periodicals.

Teaches Nordic Mythology at the University of Copenhagen. With DIS since 2006.

**Office Hours**

By appointment. Please call between 10 AM and 10 PM.

**Class Meetings**

Tuesdays 13:15 - 14:35

Fridays 13:15 - 14:35

**Vestergade 10, room A32**

**DIS Contacts:**

Jakob Lorentzen, ECH Program Director, [jlo@dis.dk](mailto:jlo@dis.dk)

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**Class Format**

Lectures, questions and answers, and class discussion. Field studies. Examinations, quizzes, and research papers.

## 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 problemfields 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.

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

Finally, we will take a brief look at modern Asa-worship revival and at Nordic mythology in popular culture.

Field trips 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 attached 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, October 25, 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 Trips

- 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, Sep 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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, Sep 21<sup>st</sup>, 1.00-3.00 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, Oct 26<sup>th</sup>, 9:50 AM. -12:00 AM.**

We will meet above the **Islands Brygge** Metro-station.

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

### Course Evaluation

10-minute quizzes:	each 5 %
30 minute midterm exam:	15%
Research Paper: 8 -9 pages	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 or handprinted papers, **or an electronic version, 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 notes are mandatory.

**It is important that you read the file on DIS forum: Advice on the research paper.**

**Disabilities**

Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Maryn Wells ([mwe@dis.dk](mailto:mwe@dis.dk)) to coordinate this. In order to receive accommodations, students should inform the instructor of approved DIS accommodations within the first two weeks of classes.

**Attendance**

You are expected to attend all DIS classes when scheduled. If you miss multiple classes the Director of Teaching and Learning, and the Director of Student Affairs will be notified and they will follow-up with you to make sure that all is well. Absences will jeopardize your grade and your standing at DIS. Allowances will be made in cases of illness, but in the case of multiple absences you will need to provide a doctor's note.

**Academic Honesty**

Concerning plagiarism and violating the rules of an assignment: DIS expects that students abide by the highest standards of intellectual honesty in all academic work. DIS assumes that all students do their own work and credit all work or thought taken from others. Academic dishonesty will result in a final course grade of "F" and can result in dismissal. The students' home universities will be notified. DIS reserves the right to request that written student assignments be turned in electronic form for submission to plagiarism detection software. See the Academic Handbook for more information, or ask your instructor if you have questions.

**Laptops**

While the use of laptops is welcomed in class for taking notes and for academic purposes, students are expected to refrain from using them for personal purposes such as Facebook, sending of e-mails, etc. The use of laptops for such purposes will jeopardize your grade.

**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.

*The Vinland Sagas. The Norse Discovery of America*. Trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.

**Text Collection (binder) -- NB: 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. 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".
7. 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".
8. 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.
- 9. 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.
- 10. "The Lay of Erik" (Eiriksmál).
- 11. "The tale of Völsi" (Völsa thátttr).
- 12. Excerpt from Snorri Sturluson, "The Saga of Hákon the Good" (in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, 1220's). Translated by L.M. Hollander, Austin, Texas, 1995.
- 13. "King Gautrek". In: Pálsson, Hermann and Edwards, Paul (ed. and transl.), *Seven Viking Romances*. Harmondsworth (Penguin Books) 1985, pp. 138-170.
- 14. "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.
- 15. Excerpt from Snorri Sturluson, "The Saga of St. Olav" (in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, 1220's). Translated by L.M. Hollander, Austin, Texas, 1995.
- 16. Lévi-Strauss, Claude: *The Structural Study of Myth*. In: *Structural Anthropology*. Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 1967. P. 224-225.
- 17. Dumezil, Georges: *The three functions*. In: Segal, Robert A. (ed.): *Theories of Myth*, vol. 6. New York, Garland Publishing, 1996. P.161-165.
- 18. Gaiman, Neil: *American Gods*.
- 19. 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.
- 20. 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:

### ***1. Friday, Aug 26***

Introduction: Nordic Mythology

#### **Joint session in 10-A32**

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?

### ***2. Tuesday, Aug 30***

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.

### ***3. Friday, Sep 2***

**Election of two class-representatives.**

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.

### **Saturday Sep 3<sup>rd</sup>:**

**Field Study Trip** - 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!

#### 4. Tuesday, Sep 6

##### 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 Tour to Western Denmark – Thursday Sep 8<sup>th</sup> – Saturday, Sep 10<sup>th</sup>*

#### 5. Tuesday, Sep 13

##### 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.

#### 6. Friday, Sep 16

##### 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.

## 7. Tuesday, Sep 20

### Everyday religion, private cult, and folklore

#### Joint session in 10-A32

**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.

## Wednesday Sep 21<sup>st</sup>:

**Field Study Trip** – The National Museum. 1.00-3.00 PM.

We meet in the foyer of the National Museum, Frederiksholms Kanal 12 at **1.00 PM**.

## 8. Friday, Sep 23

### The Vanir

#### READINGS:

Snorri: *The Prose Edda*, p. 48 – p. 63, line 1.

Davidson: *Gods and Myths*, pp. 73-110

“Skirnir’s Journey” (*Skirnismál*) pp. 61-68 in *The Poetic Edda*

Snorri: *Ynglingasaga*. Binder texts 7e and 7d

Binder text 24. Dumézil: The three functions.

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? Consider how Dumézil’s theory could be relevant for Nordic religion.

## 9. Tuesday, Sep 27

### Odin

#### Joint session in 10-A32

#### 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.

### 10. Friday, Sep 30

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

#### 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?

### Long Program Tour – Saturday Oct 1<sup>st</sup> – Sunday Oct 9<sup>th</sup>.

### 11. Tuesday, Oct 11

#### 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*

Binder text 22: Lévi-Strauss: *The Structural Study of Myth*.

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? Consider how Lévi-Strauss’ theory could be relevant for the myths about Loki and Balder.

### 12. Friday, Oct 14

#### 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.

**13. Tuesday, Oct 18**Theories of myth**Joint session in 10-A32**

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?

**14. Friday, Oct 21**Viking religion. An overview

READINGS:

Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*. Binder text 18.

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

**15. Tuesday, Oct 25**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.

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

**Wed., Oct 26<sup>th</sup>:**

**Fieldtrip to The Arnamagnean Institute, KUA. 10:00 - 12:00 AM.** We meet above the Metro-station "Islands Brygge" at **9:50**.

**16. Friday, Oct 28**Vinland Sagas. Did the vikings discover North America

READINGS:

The Vinland Sagas

Reading instructions: Your first sagas! Read them for events, not characters. Compare events in the two different tales. Ponder what could be historical – and what not.

**Optional Tours and Travel Break – Saturday Oct 29<sup>th</sup> – Sunday, Nov 13<sup>th</sup>**

**17. Tuesday, Nov 15**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.

**18. Friday, Nov 18**Saga of the Völsung

## 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?

**19. Tuesday, Nov 22****Quiz (10 min.) at beginning of class – Does NOT include today's readings**Njal's Saga

## READINGS:

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

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.

***Optional Tours – Friday, Nov 25<sup>th</sup> – Sunday, Nov 27<sup>th</sup>:*****20. Tuesday, Nov 29**Njal's Saga

## READINGS:

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

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.

**21. Friday, Dec 2**Njal's Saga

## READINGS:

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

Reading instructions: See materials on Forum.

**22. Tuesday, Dec 6****Joint session in 10-A32**Modern Asa-worship in Denmark.

READINGS: to be announced.

**23. Friday, Dec 9****Joint session in 10-A32**Nordic mythology in popular culture.

## READINGS:

Neil Gaiman: *American Gods*. Binder text 24.**Schedule is subject to change if necessary with as much notice as possible.**