VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

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TIMOTHY LIAM WATERS

Materiality and Myth: Encountering the Broken Body in the Eddic Corpus

▼ **ABSTRACT** Material study of the Old Norse mythological corpus has emphasized the role objects play in illuminating the ideologies, beliefs, and cultures of medieval Scandinavians. In interrogating the agency of physical matter in myth, material study attempts to bridge temporal distances between text and audience by establishing a thick description of material. While such studies have tended to focus upon fabricated material, this article makes the case for further study of the body as physical object. It argues that foregrounding the material body demonstrates the permeable boundaries between what medieval Scandinavians understood as human and non-human. To demonstrate the fluidity of this boundary, this article addresses three myths concerned with biological material: the dismemberment of Ymir, the binding of Fenrir, and the pledge of Óðinn. Among the topics discussed are the relationship of the body to the physical world, the impression of uncanniness that surrounds the broken body, and the material agency encountered in instances of corporeal disruption.

▼ **KEYWORDS** materiality, the body, disability, mythological objects, cosmogony, uncanniness

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The Old Norse cosmos begins with a murder. In the primordial time before the earth, sky, and stars were fashioned, the giant Ymir slept. Alongside him, in that eerie space known as *Ginnungagap* which lies between realms of elemental frost (*Niflheimr*) and flame (*Múspell*), the cow Auðumbla licked the salty rime that dripped therefrom. *In illo tempore*, the strange origins of giants and gods alike can be found. From the sweaty arms and legs of Ymir were engendered the race of the *jǫtnar*, while Auðumbla — unwittingly freeing a strange, humanoid figure from the ice — uncovered the progenitor of the *æsir*, Búri.

It was Búri's grandsons, Óðinn, Vili, and Ve who undertook this primordial murder by slaying Ymir and, in so doing, first fashioned the cosmos out of his disintegrated body. As the thirteenth-century mythographer Snorri Sturluson tells us,[1]

> Þá svarar Hár: 'Synir Bors drápu Ymi jǫtun […] ok gerðu af honum jǫrðina, af blóði hans sæinn ok vǫtnin. Jǫrðin var gǫr af holdinu en bjǫrgin af beinunum, grjót ok urðir gerðu þeir af tǫnnum ok jǫxlum ok af þeim beinum er brotin váru'. (*Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* in Faulkes 2005, ch. 7, 11)
>
> > (Then High answered: 'The sons of Bor killed the giant Ymir […] and made from him the earth, out of his blood the sea and the lakes. The earth was made from the flesh, and the rocks of the bones, they made the stones and rubble of the teeth and the molars and from those bones, which were broken.')[2]

This violent cosmogonic event presupposes a continuum between natural objects and the anthropomorphic body parts of the celestial giant. In so doing, the Norse cosmogonic narrative concerns itself primarily with things. To some degree this is unsurprising: a world is, by its nature, composed of things. The world of the eddas is, however, not a physical world, but a narrative world. It consequently consists of *representations* of things, a mimetic amalgamation of details that correspond to but are not themselves of the physical world. The eddic world is a world of the imagination, which nonetheless emphasizes the material that constitutes it. Indeed, such a statement may be extended throughout the Old Norse literary corpus; the narrative worlds of the *Íslendingasögur* and skaldic poetry are also eager to describe — often in meticulous detail — the bounteous wealth of Viking raids, collected tribute, and legal settlements. A brief survey of the sagas

1 Ymir is additionally mentioned in three eddic poems from the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4º); *Vǫluspá* 3, *Vafþrúðnismál* 21 and 28, *Grímnismál* 40. *Hyndluljóð* 33 notes that 'iotnar allir frá Ymi komnir' (in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 293) (all giants come from Ymir). The stanza includes the origin of all *vǫlur* (witches), *vitkar* (sorcerers), and *seiðberendr* (magic users), reinforcing that it is this negative semantic field which the giants inhabit.

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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yields a multitude of examples ranging from the Finnish tribute collected by Þórólfr Skallagrímsson in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* to the wealth amassed by Auðunn throughout *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka*. In addressing the narrative purpose of such things, critics have often stressed the importance of the social networks such objects create and reinforce (Miller 1990; Viðar Pálsson 2017). Other object-oriented epistemologies in saga criticism have further contended that the external ornaments of characters may provide insights into their internal lives. For instance, Ármann Jakobsson (2008) has contended that the material goods represented in the dreams of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdœla saga* allow the critic to not only interrogate the unspoken desires of Guðrún for her future, but also represent her latent agency within the saga narrative. While these critical approaches have produced useful insights into the agency of saga characters and the historical contexts which produced them, little attention has been devoted to the *materiality* of these narrative objects.

Studies of Old Norse mythology have similarly marginalized objects, instead prioritizing, in a parallel to saga studies, the social dynamics that objects in myth create and represent. Indeed, in her seminal study of Old Norse myth, Clunies Ross (1994, 42–44) draws comparisons between the rhetorical techniques of eddic and saga literature, arguing that descriptive elements in the narrative — for instance descriptions of physical characteristics or genealogies — are useful insofar as they prefigure how a given character may act within the myth's plot.[3] The underlying assumption of such interrogative lenses, productive though they may be, insists that objects are of concern only as they relate to human subjects, that they possess power and function only when they directly serve, or in some cases hinder, the agents who act upon them. This subject–object dynamic consequently establishes a rigid binary between the animate and the inanimate and, at the level of the cosmogonic, the binary of the human, 'social' world, and the 'natural' environment. In such a reading, Ymir's dismembered body parts are interacted with directly only during the shaping of the universe by the sons of Bor, but immediately fall into the periphery of subsequent myths as backdrop for the actions of the gods. They matter only because the gods and humanity require a universe in which to operate; furthermore the cosmogonic event reinforces the diametric opposition between the ordered and 'social' *æsir* with the chaotic and 'natural' *jǫtnar*.

The relationship between the human and non-human is always ideologically contingent (Robertson 2008). The conceit of the 'modern' era is, as Latour contended, that we draw a stark division between what we

3 In particular, the concepts of 'negative reciprocity' and 'pseudo-procreation' presuppose that productive interrogation of narrative objects revolves around how objects reinforce the relationship between the *æsir* and the *jǫtnar*, and how raw material is violently extricated from the 'natural' environment and repurposed for the 'social' sphere of gods and humans.

perceive as human and that which we view as non-human. Hence, historical perceptions prior to the Age of Enlightenment would not necessarily have supposed that a material object was devoid of agency. As Latour noted, 'when one reestablishes the common understanding that organizes the separation of natural and political powers, one ceases to be modern' (1993, 13). This is a rigid definition of modernity — and pre-modernity — but one that nonetheless offers a productive heuristic to approach materiality in the Scandinavian Middle Ages.

The present essay seeks to interrogate the marginalized materiality of the eddas in this light. It contends that movement away from subject–object epistemologies and a reorientation towards the concept of material agency nuances our understanding of medieval Scandinavian ideologies and reframes scholastic discussion concerning the biological materialism present in Norse myth. In so doing, this essay draws on the methodological approach to medieval materiality established by Kellie Robertson (2008; 2010) to argue that object-oriented study yields a more flexible boundary between previously held oppositional binaries like 'social' and 'natural', and invites the opportunity to bridge the temporal distances between modern textual reception and medieval ideologies.[4] The argument of this essay takes its departure from previous medieval materialism by additionally contending that *biological* material represents a critically overlooked element of the narrative world. In such a figuration, the distinction between environment and human in the Old Norse cosmogonic myth is not an inflexible boundary, but a permeable membrane. Flesh is shaped into dirt, teeth and molars shaped into stone. In the moment of the earth's construction, the environment itself becomes ontologically multiple: it is at once inanimate and anthropomorphic, biological and artificial.[5] This ontological multiplicity brings with it the inevitable implication that such distinctions are perhaps more indicative of modern reception of the text, rather than medieval attitudes. Subsequently, the present essay will begin with a re-examination of the materiality of the Ymir myth before considering other myths concerned primarily with corporeal material, namely the pledge of Óðinn's eye and the pledge of Týr's hand.

What can these myths tell us about medieval Scandinavian ideologies concerning the human and the non-human? What can they tell us about ideologies concerning the relationship of the human and the divine? To answer these questions first requires an acknowledgement of the limitation of our sources. Extant mythological narratives, rooted in the pre-Christian, oral traditions of Scandinavia, are preserved in post-conversion

4 Robertson (2010) in particular, though focused on materialism in Chaucer, traces a critical overview of materialist theory, and suggests methods for the application of material-oriented heuristics.

5 The ontological multiplicity of objects and *things* is discussed at length in Bennett 2010.



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manuscripts which date to almost three centuries after the conversion of Scandinavian countries. This history of reception complicates any discussion of the pre-Christian past: to what extent are the myths of the eddas representative of an 'authentic' pre-Christian tradition? The pursuit of discovering the 'true' pagan traditions of medieval Scandinavia has long dogged the field of Old Norse studies; and indeed, this approach has led, in previous decades, to a mode of examination of mythological texts that attempts to remove the perceived agendas and aesthetics of Christian compilers. As Dubois has noted, such approaches tend to 'atomize their texts, plundering them for evidence of specific points but less often attempting readings that synthesize or unite' (1999, 174). The image of the cohesive, monolithic myth tradition given by Snorri falters upon closer inspection of textual and archaeological evidence. There is no sense of a uniform pre-Christian religion that extended across Scandinavia; rather, the rituals and beliefs of the pagan north were a diverse blend of regionally variant traditions often transmitted, exchanged, and influenced by each other (Dubois 1999; Brink 2007; Gunnell 2013; 2015).

It is therefore appropriate to speak not of a Norse pre-Christian religion, but of religious systems. As such, a discussion of Norse mythology — which is ultimately rooted in religion — must conceive the 'discursive spaces' (Schjødt 2017; 2018) surrounding it not as Christianized palimpsest, but as a bricolage of cultural artefacts united in theme and ideology. The 'truth' of the Norse myths must therefore not have diminished after conversion — a fact indicated by their preservation with or without Christian editorial commentary — but remained culturally relevant in the way such 'mythic schemas' represented the human experience (Clunies Ross 1998, 11–20). The scholar of Norse myth must avail themselves of all available evidence possible to augment the historical context in which these ideologies were formulated. This includes consideration of literary *and* archaeological material.

Such an approach to myth is aligned with the critical lens of the 'material turn', which long emphasized the wide-ranging applicability of new materialism in archaeology (Olsen 2010; Hedeager 2011). In essence, to probe the past is to encounter things of the past both in the ground and in the mind. In the literary sphere, the 'material turn' finds its roots in Marxist concepts of production and commodity, used to interrogate the knowledge embodied by objects in capitalist systems. Such commodity-oriented epistemologies are not well suited for the study of pre-industrial societies; however, more recent scholarship like that of Jane Bennett (2010) and Bill Brown (2001; 2003) has pivoted from such Marxist approaches to emphasize the concept of *agency* across the human–material divide that offer a more applicable approach to medieval material. In encountering material in narrative or in the soil, we begin to bridge the temporal distances created by modern reception of ancient traditions, the cultural

artefacts of which — per Levi Strauss — no longer possess the symbolic value they had for their original audiences.[6] At the literary level, this approach has usually been applied to those mythic objects fabricated for specific use among the gods (Wikström and others 2019; Knutson 2019). However, such materialist approaches have yet to be applied to physical *bodies*. The oversight of biological material in Norse mythological studies is particularly striking for several reasons. First, archaeological examinations of biological materials have already begun to encounter the agency of their subjects. The recent chromosomal study of the individual discovered in 1968 at Suontaka Vesitorninmäki, Hattula, Finland strongly suggests the reclaimable potential of biological materialism in discussions of Viking Age agency, at least as concerns gender and identity.[7] The success of such heuristics in other disciplines may therefore offer similar advances for mythologists. Second, materialist scholarship has already noted the phenomenology of the body as 'a thing among things' (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 163), a constituent part of the material world and therefore inseparable from it. Third, the origin of the Norse cosmos as the product of the slaying and dismemberment of Ymir demands a materialist approach because it establishes a clear biological–material continuum for the inhabited universe.

Materiality and Cosmogony

To return to the example of Ymir, the temporal and symbolic distance of this primordial act may be overcome through interaction with its corporeal components. Previous attempts to understand the nature of Norse cosmogony have often taken the form of comparativist studies (Schröder 1931) and reconstructionist approaches (Meyer 1907; 1909). The more recent examination of the micro-macro equation of Indo-European cosmogonies undertaken by Bruce Lincoln (1986; 1991) takes steps towards the proposed approach to biological material in myth. The anthropomorphic–environmental homology proposed by Lincoln is readily apparent within the Ymir myth: the skull of the giant, being the highest point on the body, becomes the highest point in the environment, the sky; blood corresponds to its liquid, environmental counterpart, the oceans; bones, being rigid and firm, correspond to their counterpart, stone and so on. The

6 Levi-Strauss (1978) contended that the presence of cultural objects in mythic narratives could be decoded and understood through the lens of what such mythic artefacts symbolized.

7 This study concluded that the uncovered individual possessed an XXY chromosomal composition, potentially indicating an intersex identity of the deceased, see Moilanen and others 2021.



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universe of Norse myth is therefore quite literally an *embodied* universe: trans-corporeal in the sense that 'corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"' (Alaimo 2008, 238).

Christopher Abram (2019) has also noted this trans-corporeal dynamic in the Ymir myth but contends that it is not the whole cosmos which is created from Ymir's dismemberment, only the world inhabited by gods and men. For Abram, the mutilation and subsequent restructuring of biological material establishes 'a world which is separated from the rest of creation and which exists to serve as an *oikos* specific to the figures who come to be regarded [...] as gods' (Abram 2019, 55). *Miðgarðr* is bounded specifically to protect the civilization of men and gods from the *Útgarðr*, which represents the realm of the uncivilized wilderness.[8] Indeed, *Grímnismál* makes explicit mention of this dynamic when Óðinn notes that the realm was specifically created for mankind, 'Enn ór hans brám gerðo blíð regin miðgarð manna sonom' (*Grímnismál* 41 in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 65) (and out of his eyebrows the happy gods made Miðgarðr for the sons of men). This unambiguous statement about the foundation of Miðgarðr represents a stark division between the natural world and human/divine world to Abram. Yet, no explicit information relating to the creation of the other 'nine realms' which constitute the Norse cosmos is provided in either *Vǫluspá* 2 or *Vafþrúðnismál* 43. The relevant verses relating to the creation narrative mention only Miðgarðr and Jǫrð (earth). Whether the omission of the eight other realms should be interpreted as signifying a separate origin to that of the Ymir narrative, or whether it is implied that they too are the product of this cosmogony is impossible to know for certain. As Neil Price has succinctly stated, 'There is no fully comprehensible geography of the Norse cosmos, nothing that really makes coherent sense in the poems and stories' (Price 2020, 32). The origins of the cosmos are similarly incoherent without the assumption that the cosmos too — barring the primordial realms of *Múspell*, *Ginnungagap*, and *Niflheimr* — stem from Ymir's corpse.

However, the interconnectivity between the natural and the human worlds implied in such an interpretation overlooks the rigid binary between inhabited space and wild space reinforced in the myths. The giants, lurking on the margins of 'civilized space', are anthropomorphized representations of chaotic nature in the same way as their progenitor is. Indeed, the biological components of Ymir's body are employed as the raw material needed to form the cosmos. The gods and other beings that inhabit the world can only do so because the raw material represented by the dismembered body can be shaped into something valuable to society but, paradoxically, also to the natural world (Clunies Ross 1994, 127–39).

8 In making this point, Abram draws upon the work of Kirsten Hastrup (1990) and her discussion of the Miðgarðr–Útgarðr opposition.

Earthly inhabitants are as reliant upon the natural world as they are on the cultivated world, just as the creation of the natural world was reliant on the primordial cultivation of raw biological material. The ontological multiplicity of the world continuously creates uncertainty concerning where the boundaries between what is classically considered natural and cultivated are. Landscape and human activity are consequently two aspects of the same phenomenon. In Kirsten Hastrup's words, 'the opposition between wilderness and culture dissolves' (2008, 53).

But what can this biological material tell us in its own terms? The critical element of the Norse cosmogony is that Ymir's body is *broken* into its base components. It is in its disassembly, its fragmentation, that the agency of this material as a *thing* — material that indexes 'a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable' (Brown 2015, 4) — can be found. Rooted in Martin Heidegger's concept of *das Ding* (1971), the 'thing theory' popularized by Bill Brown has sought to interrogate the agency of things independent of human objectification; for in fact, the opposition of *objects* and *things* lies at the heart of this critical approach. Within this framework, *objects* signify codes 'by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful', whereas *things* defy human explication (Brown 2015, 4). Hence the disassembly of Ymir's body — a collective system of physical material that reinforces the natural/social binary — turns this biological material into *things* before it is reassembled into the new, interpretable collective which is the physical world. As Brown notes,

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us; when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (Brown 2015, 4)

There is a subsequent pattern to Ymir's body that can be traced within the cosmological narrative: object [Ymir's body] → thing [disassembled parts] → object [the physical world]. However, the nature of this pattern refuses cyclicity. The value of Ymir's dismembered body parts is not, as it were, continuously recycled. The individual body parts remain static in their position within the text and, in contrast to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we do not see the first men and women created being fashioned out of the clay of the earth — that is, placing Ymir's body in a continuous cycle that turns the body to earth, earth to the body. This contradicts Lincoln's observation that 'in truth, cosmogony and anthropogony can be — and were — regarded as separate moments in one continuous process of creation' (Lincoln 1991, 9). For indeed, the first humans, Askr and Embla, are not of the soil. Their names are those of trees, Ash and Elm. *Grímnismál* 40



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perhaps problematizes a rejection of recyclability, for the stanza states — albeit in only one half-line — that the hairs of Ymir were fashioned into trees: 'baðmr ór hári' (*Grímnismál* 41 in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 65) (trees out of hair). Snorri does not confirm this, nor is there any elaboration concerning the connection between Ymir's hair and humanity within the poem itself. Indeed, the statement of the poem immediately following in stanza 41, that Miðgarðr was shaped by the gods out of Ymir's eyelashes for the sons of men, reinforces the continued separation between humanity and Ymir imposed by the Æsir. This imposed separation becomes even more apparent when Snorri writes of Miðgarðr,

> Hon er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggr hinn djúpi sjár, ok með þeiri sjávar strǫndu gáfu þeir lǫnd til bygðar jǫtna ættum. En fyrir innan á jǫrðunni gerðu þeir borg umhverfs heim fyrir ófriði jǫtna, en til þeirar borgar hǫfðu þeir brár Ymis jǫtuns, ok kǫlluðu þá borg Miðgarð. (*Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* in Faulkes 2005, ch. 7, 12)
>
> (It is circular on the outside, and there the deep sea lies out around it, and along the shore of that sea, they [the Æsir] gave land in which to dwell to the family of giants. But on the inner side of the earth, they constructed a fortification all around the world against the animosity of the giants, and they used the eyelashes of the giant Ymir for that fortification, and they called that fortification Miðgarðr.)

Askr and Embla, as with all mankind, are products of the natural world but unconnected to the world the giants represent. They are very much the product of the Æsir's creation. Both *Vǫluspá* 17–18 and *Gylfaginning* remark that the first humans, Askr and Embla were given *ǫnd* (breath), *óðr* (spirit), *lá* (blood), and *litr* (countenance) by the gods Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr. Nothing is said of clay, dirt, or stone during the creation of mankind. Even if one takes the unique statement of *Grímnismál* 40 at face value, there remains little to suggest a sense of a cyclical renewal between earth and body when encountering the physical matter of the giant.

Yet neither is the corpse of Ymir refuse, a typical status for butchered carnal remains. The repugnance of death forces us to keep corpses at a distance, peripheral in the sense that we relegate them to designated spaces outside of day-to-day life. However, while dismembered and disassociated from their biological collective, these body parts take on new forms that, while not functionally active, are nonetheless vital to the cosmogonic narrative. As Peter Schwenger has remarked,

> Debris, that unorganized residue of the physical and metaphysical homes we construct for ourselves, finds its most melancholy incarnation in the corpse. Residue of a subject, the corpse is the final ironic closure of the gap between subject and object — ironic because

> to become in this way object it is also to become abject. (Schwenger 2006, 157)

The dissected body of Ymir defies explication from both Lincoln's and Schwenger's theoretical perspectives. Within the extant texts, it is neither portrayed as openly recyclable, nor is it waste to be left rotting. It is neither a *thing* which is 'abject', nor is it an item of loathing, a piece of filth, and an object of repugnance. It has not lost its usefulness and, indeed, has not been violently rejected despite the body-collective's disruption or separation from its living self (Kristeva 1982, 2–4). The broken body of Ymir, mined of its primordial resources and moulded into new being lies somewhere in the semantic field between abject and recyclable: disassembled yet not debased, commodified but not economized.

Ymir's physical liminality demands elucidation. If this biological matter is neither refuse nor recyclable, what then is its utility to the narrative? The bricolage of mythology proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) provides some insight for, as he notes, 'To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it' (1966, 23). For Lévi-Strauss, myth is itself a bricolage, an assembly of available parts that allow the native *bricoleur* to formulate meaning. Such a formulation contrasts Brown's contention that *thingness* obstructs understanding. Encountering this mythological material in its broken state perhaps communicates meaning because it is broken. It is not the blood inherited from Ymir, not the recyclability of clay and flesh that reaffirms the human connection to the natural world. The ontological multiplicity of the environment is shared with humanity as a direct result of the sober rationale that our physiology is reminiscent of that of the anthropomorphic body parts of Ymir. In encountering the myth of Ymir's breaking and earthly formation, we encounter our own mortality and the inevitability of our own decomposition, our own breaking, our own material nature. We are *things among things*.

Materiality and the Divine Body

The dismemberment of Ymir is not the only instance of biological material within the mythological corpus. Nor is it the only mythological narrative that may be further elucidated through a conscious study of materiality. In his 1971 lecture *'Le Borgne' et 'le Manchot'* (The One-eyed and the One-handed), Georges Dumézil observed parallels to the one-eyed Óðinn and one-handed Týr myths in antiquity — both in the legendary histories of Roman historians Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and also in the legends of ancient Iran — but was ultimately dissatisfied with such



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comparisons.[9] For Dumézil, these comparisons were weakened not only by the substantial disparity in meaning, location, and narrative use of *le borgne* and *le manchot* between the Roman and Scandinavian narratives, but also by the apparent absence of other comparable figures in Indo-European myth or folklore (1974, 17–28). Nonetheless, subsequent scholarship in the field of mythology has continued to pursue a comparative approach in analysing the significance of divine mutilation (Grottanelli 1978, 1979, 1983; Carey 1983; Lincoln 1991; Kershaw 2000), while the material of the myths has largely gone overlooked.

Both the Codex Regius and the *Prose Edda* describe how Óðinn, a god of wisdom and war, placed one eye into *Mímisbrunnr* in the pursuit of knowledge. Likewise, Týr, a god of victory and bravery, volunteered his right hand as collateral to bind the wolf, Fenrir. Within these myths, both gods' pledges directly correlate to their defining characteristics: Óðinn pledges a biological means of acquiring sensory information for greater wisdom, and Týr pledges his right hand — the sword hand — which is vital not only for combat, but also for gaining glory and success in war.

In considering the materiality of these divine body parts, their itinerary after they are pledged is of interest. Yet, while these exchanges are intrinsically linked to the defining characteristics of their former possessors, little to nothing is recorded regarding what happens to these body parts after their exchange. Certainly, the position or use of Óðinn's eye and Týr's hand is far less clear than that of Ymir. Only the location of Óðinn's eye is mentioned explicitly in the extant eddic corpus, and that briefly. The *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* 28 remarks,

> Ein sat hon úti, þá er inn aldni kom
> Yggiungr ása, oc í augo leit:
> 'Hvers fregnit mic, hví freistið mín?
> alt veit ec, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt:
> í inom mæra Mímis brunni.'
> Dreccr mioð Mímir morgin hverian
> af veði Valfǫðrs– vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?
>
> (Alone she sat outside, when the old one came,
> the frightening one among the Æsir and looked into her eyes:
> 'why question me, why test me?
> I know it all, Óðinn, where you hid the eye:
> in the famous well of Mímir.'
> Mímir drinks mead every morning

9 Dumézil previously attempted to address the questions of *le borgne* and *le manchot* in *Mitra-Varuna* (1940, 163–88) and *Mythe et épopée* (1968, I, 423–38).

From the pledge of the Val-Father – will you know more, or what?)

(*Vǫluspá* in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 7)

Hence, the location of Óðinn's eye must be at the bottom of the well. Whether it continues to be used in its new location is more difficult to say. The fact that Mímir 'dreccr mioð morgin hverian af veði Valfǫðrs' (drinks mead every morning from the Val-Father's pledge) may mean, as John Lindow has postulated, that Óðinn's eye is now being used as a drinking vessel (2001, 231–32). If this is indeed the case, it is the only moment in which an eye is conceptualized in such a way. A more probable explanation may be, as A. G. van Hamel argued, that the *veði Valfǫðrs* is here used as a poetic device to refer to the well itself (1925, 293–305). The implication of such a reading is that the eye remains stagnant in its location, post-mutilation.

Van Hamel's explanation has some plausibility — an eye would be a rather ineffective drinking vessel. Such a reading suggests that the eye itself gains a certain level of agency. The eye is defined by its removal, but the well also becomes defined by the eye. However, this reading has little support, as kennings and *heiti* mentioning the well are scarce. Indeed, the only apparent *heiti* that explicitly mention *Mímisbrunnr* are in *Vǫluspá* 28 and *Gylfaginning*, the latter of which directly cites *Vǫluspá* as its source. *Vǫluspá* 27 states:

[…] á sér hon ausaz aurgom forsi
af veði Valfǫðrs— vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

([…] she sees the muddy flood pour
from the pledge of the Val-father – would you know more or what?)

(*Vǫluspá* in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 6–7)

The image of pouring, much like drinking in *Vǫluspá* 28, juxtaposes Heimdallr's hearing, another biological, though possibly more abstract, amputation with Óðinn's eye — a connection made explicitly in the previous stanza.[10] The fact that the flood emanating from the *veði Valfǫðrs* is *aurugr* (muddy or chalky) only reinforces a well image.

10 William Sayers (1993) gives extensive treatment of Irish parallels for Heimdallr. In particular, Sayers's treatment of Heimdallr's *hljóð* in *Vǫluspá* 27 (traditionally rendered as 'hearing') suggests the possibility that what Heimdallr pledged was not his faculty to hear, but rather his ear itself. A facial disfigurement — alluded to by his apparent ugliness in *Skírnismál* 28 — would seem to confirm the loss of his ear; and indeed, this would position Heimdallr in the same semantic field of bodily disintegration present in the eddas.

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Furthermore, an association with Mímir is evident in Óðinn's portrayal in the literary corpus. *Vǫluspá* 45 states that Óðinn consults with Mímir's head at the onset of Ragnarǫk and Snorri records multiple kennings for Óðinn as Mímir's friend. The association may be further strengthened in the recognition that Óðinn's pledged eye is in close proximity to Mímir's dismembered head. Chapter 4 of *Ynglinga Saga* alone of the mythological literature records how Mímir's head was taken during the Æsir–Vanir war and eventually sent back to Óðinn. It was Óðinn who then cast spells on the head to preserve it in order to consult with Mímir. Yet only Mímir's head — not Óðinn's eye has any practical function post-mutilation.

Nor does Týr's hand. We are told nothing of the hand after its consumption by the wolf. *Lokasenna* 38 records one of the few key references to the hand-pledge:

> Þegi þú, Týr! þú kunnir aldregi
> bera tilt með tveim;
> handar innar hœgri mun ec hinnar geta,
> er þér sleit Fenrir frá
>
> (Shut up, Týr! You could never
> deal honestly between two people;
> I must mention that hand, the right [one],
> Which Fenrir tore from you.)[11]
>
> (*Lokasenna* in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 104).

Presumably, the hand remains in the stomach of the wolf or is digested. Nonetheless, in the moment of its consumption it ceases to be important, disregarded as nothing more than waste at that point. In both cases of godly mutilation, the body part is given value in the moment of sacrificial *do-ut-des* exchange, placed into a status of broken liminality, and subsequently lost to obscurity (Schjødt 2008). It no longer functions within a biological–numinous economy of exchange, much as the constructive potential of Ymir's body ceases in the moment of its assembly into the natural environment. Rather, in becoming *thing*, the hand becomes othered, passing into the realm of enigma and lingering on the periphery of mythological narrative. In such instances, one might expect to encounter fetishism. Yet there are no extant instances in rune stone decoration or symbolic iconography of either the eye or the hand alone. Nor are there any recorded references to the creation of religious relics of these body parts, as occurs in the Christian tradition with the saints, and the apostles.

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11 My own translation based on the translation of *Loki's Quarrel* 38 in Larrington 2014, 87.

This is not to say that relics of the Scandinavian legendary past were unknown. As William Layher (2009) has observed, the Icelandic *Lögmanns-annáll* records that sometime around the first years of the fifteenth century, a certain Arne Olafsson encountered, among several explicitly Christian relics, the hilt of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's sword and the tooth of the legendary Starkaðr.[12] Further sightings of the tooth were noted in *Annales Ryenses* around the year 1252, and in *Norna-Gests þáttr* in which the narrator describes a fight between Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Starkaðr, 'En ek tók annan jaxlinn ok hefi ek með mér. Er sá nú hafðr í klukkustreng í Danmörk ok vegr sjau aura. Þykkir mönnum forvitni at sjá hann þar' (*Norna-Gests þáttr* in Guðni Jónnson 1954, ch. 7, 323–24) (And I took one of the two teeth and have it with me. It is now held on a bell-string in Denmark and weighs seven ounces. People think it a curiosity to see it there). However, these three texts date to considerably after the pre-Christian period. While a tooth of Starkaðr lies in the same semantic field as Óðinn's eye and Týr's hand, being a disembodied, biological *thing*, the nature of its encounter with human subjects is clearly a product of medieval, Catholic relic fetishism rather than an identifiable practice during the pre-Christian period.[13] Moreover, the relics of Sigurðr and Starkaðr are those of historical men grounded in mundane reality, not the relics of 'pagan' gods.

While no representations of the eye and the hand have been identified, possible representations of their *absence* have been. In their 2014 study, 'An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo', Neil Price and Paul Mortimer note thirteen depictions of faces with deliberately absent eyes in Northern Europe *c.* AD 500–950: seven from Sweden, three from Denmark, one from Germany, one from England (Sutton Hoo), and one from Russia (Staraja Ladoga) (2014, 531). While the orientation of the altered eyes varies, Price and Mortimer note that many of these alterations appear to have been the result of intentional marring — the eyes were originally cast and later intentionally punched out (2014, 522).

12 Arne records that during his time as 'penitencaiarius ollum norænum monnum' sometime between 1404 and 1405, he saw the cloak of the Virgin Mary, the cloak of John the Baptist, and the swaddling clothes and belt of Christ. In an obscure city he refers to as *Affrica* — Layer (2009, 4) notes this is probably a garbled reference to Aachen — he saw relics of the legendary North, 'j þeim stad. Er Affrica heitir. Sa hann hiallted af sverdi Sigurðar Fofnes bana ok mælltist honnum þa .x. fot langt [...] þar var oc taunn er sogd var ur Starkadi gamla. Var hun þverar handar a leingd oc breidd. Fyrir þat er j holldinu hafdi stadit' (*Islandske Annaler indtil 1578* in Storm 1888, 288).

13 Patrick Geary (1986) has explored the material significance of relic culture in medieval Europe, emphasizing the blurred human–non-human division these biologically originated relics represented. Geary's approach concludes that the value of studying such objects lies in 'the relationships relics could create as subjects' among donors, patrons, traders, and pilgrims (1986, 183).



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Speculation on what function these artefacts played in the day-to-day lives of their creators and audiences aside, such examples serve to demonstrate the pervasiveness of such symbolism. Notably, there is no individual representation of the lost eye — merely the face from which it is missing. What appears significant in these artefacts is the fact that something is *absent* from the collective assemblage that forms the body. As with Ymir, the emphasis of these myths centre around disruption and breaking.

In contrast to the Ymir narrative, however, the disruption of these divine bodies does not necessarily equate to *thingness*. The *thingly* status of Óðinn's eye, for instance, must be questioned because, although separated from the body, the eye does in a sense continue to function for Óðinn. Because the eye stays in the well, Óðinn benefits from wisdom and the pledge Óðinn made remains active. The same cannot be said for Týr because his pledge is broken. When Týr gave his hand as collateral to Fenrir, it was on the condition that Fenrir be let free of the chains the Æsir fix on him:

> Þat er eitt mark um djarfleik hans, þá er Æsir lokkuðu Fenrisúlf til þess at leggja fjǫturinn á hann, Gleipni, þá trúði hann þeim eigi at þeir mundu leysa hann fyrr en þeir lǫgðu honum at veði hǫnd Týrs í munn úlfsins. En þá er Æsir vildu eigi leysa hann þá beit hann hǫndina af þar er nú heitir úlfliðr, ok er hann einhendr ok ekki kallaðr sættir manna. (*Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* in Faulkes 2005, ch. 7, 25)
>
> (That is a sign concerning his courage, that when the Æsir coaxed Fenriswolf so as to place the fetter Gleipnir upon him, he did not trust that they would let him go until they gave Týr's hand to him as a pledge and laid it in the mouth of the wolf. And when the Æsir would not release him, then he bit the hand there at the place now called the wolf-joint, and he is one-handed and is not called a reconciler of men.)

When the gods do not fulfil their end of the bargain, Týr's pledge is forfeit and lost to perpetual obscurity. So too is his honour and reputation for swearing oaths lost. Loki remarks in *Lokasenna* 38, 'Þegi þú Týr! Þú kunnir aldregi bera tilt með tveim' (*Lokasenna* in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 104) (shut up Týr! You could never deal straight between two people). The loss of Týr's hand appears more semantically aligned with a sacrifice, for Týr enters into his agreement with the wolf knowing that the gods will violate this pact; and yet, the loss of Týr's hand continues to eternally link god and wolf. As Marcel Mauss has argued, a given object binds a giver and a receiver together, blurring the line between the human and non-human as '[objects] are never completely detached from those carrying out the exchange' (Mauss 1990, 33). The lost hand, in such a formation, symbolically reinforces the role Gleipnir performs as fetter, cementing an association between the two figures that echoes throughout the eddic corpus.

Encountering the material absence of Óðinn's eye, we face the uncanniness of uncertainty. Neither 'living' in the sense that it remains a part of the biological collective, nor dead in the sense that it ceases to have any value or function, the physical eye's absence and its seemingly contradictory unknown status post-mutilation are deeply unsettling. Whether this absence is to be interpreted as a direct representation of what Óðinn gained from the loss of the eye (i.e. wisdom) is difficult to say conclusively. Certainly, the *result* of the pledge is the acquisition of numinous knowledge — that is, insight (Schjødt 2008, 104–34). Óðinn's pledge defies Mauss's criteria for given objects as it remains unclear to whom the eye is given: the well may be Mímir's, but the eye does not appear to be. Yet there is a tangible acquisition of numinous knowledge, whether received from an unknown individual or from the nebulous 'natural' world, and one which is concerned with a divine sense of sight.

The uncanniness of the eye, however, does not appear to be connected to physical gaze. A 'thick descriptive' reading of Óðinnic instances of eyes and seeing reveals no unique optic power, for while Óðinn is known to have a fierce gaze, so too is Þórr.[14] The skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* emphasizes Þórr's gaze, portraying him both as a fierce looker and seer, aspects one might readily apply to a god associated with wisdom like Óðinn. Consequently, it appears that it is not the gaze of the eye which is the distinguishing mark of Óðinn's pledge, being a shared trait with a fellow battle-associated god. The divine gaze is perhaps predominantly a marker of aggression rather than unique Óðinnic optic capacity. A re-examination of our assumptions is necessary when considering such depictions. The mystic and the numinous appear not in the pledged eye, but in its loss.[15] Does the uncanniness of the absent eye stem, as in the case of Ymir, from the broken or disrupted status of the body?

Hávamál 85–89 provides key examples of such uncanny–broken dynamics, not always with clear-cut boundaries. In these four stanzas, the broken status of objects is consistently reinforced. The *brestanda boga* (breaking bow), *rótlausom viði* (rootless tree), *brotno sverði* (broken sword), *val nýfeldom* (fresh corpse), and *húsi hálfbrunno* (half-burnt house) are encountered as material *things* in Bill Brown's sense, broken debris that manifests agency in resisting human use (*Vǫluspá* 85–89 in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 30). Importantly, at the end of stanza 89, the newfound state

14 Óðinn is referred to as *báleygr* (burning-eyes) by Snorri in both *Gylfaginning*, ch. 20 (where he quotes *Grímnismál* 47) and in *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 24 (where he quotes Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *Hákonardrápa* 6). The Óðinnic name is used elsewhere in the skaldic corpus in Gísl Illugason's *Erfikvæði* about Magnús berfœttr 1, wherein the term *Báleygs viðu* (the fiery-eyed one's trees <Óðinn's> trees [Warriors]) is used to describe Magnús's enemies, Steigar-Þórir Þórðarson and Egill Áskelsson.

15 *Grímnismál* 47 additionally names Óðinn as *bileygr* (unsteady eyes).

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of these former *objects* is one not to be trusted: 'verðit maðr svá tryggr, at þesso trúi ǫllo' (let no man become so trusting as to trust all of these). Presumably, this distrust is due to their broken nature. However, the level of distrust for these objects is not uniform because they vary in the degrees of uncertainty. On one hand, there are broken swords and half-burnt houses. Such objects cannot function in their capacity either as weapons or as shelter. One should not try because they are overtly dysfunctional. However, these *things* are listed alongside breaking bows, rootless trees, and fresh corpses, the practicality of whose avoidance is unclear, but the uncertainty of which appears substantially greater than the other items in the list. One could perhaps argue that a rootless tree, deprived of an essential mechanism for its survival, defies logic; moreover, the newly 'dead' man may really be alive and dangerous. How can the tree remain living? How can the newly dead man be so eerily reminiscent of the living? In such capacity, they straddle a liminal state between two categories. This is the same uncertainty encountered with Ymir's corpse, simultaneously natural and constructed. Such explanations underscore Ernst Jentsch's observation that that uncanniness stems from, 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate' (Jentsch 1997, 11). The *brestanda boga* (breaking bow) seems different. It is in the *process* of breaking and, perhaps, its uncertain quality stems from the lingering question of when it will fully become *thingly* debris.

For Freud and his contemporaries, the notion of uncanniness was not defined by repulsion or fear alone. Rather, it is a specific type of fear; one that derives explicitly from its origin in familiarity. That Freud emphasizes the German word *unheimlich*, quite literally translated as 'un-homely', signifies the necessary departure an object must make from its status as recognizable, comfortable, and indeed safe to us in order to procure an uncanny aura (Freud 2003, 124–34). In this sense, the alteration of the body is the ultimate example of uncanniness. In it we encounter a version of ourselves that, while intimately familiar, is nevertheless unsettling in the difference it represents.

Notably, uncanny status is not one of absolute stasis. This is precisely the concept Masahiro Mori (1970) demonstrated in proposing a spectrum of uncanniness in his article 'Bukimi no Tani Genshō'. In his study, Mori modelled the reaction of humans to various human-like robots and demonstrated a distinct curve in his model he termed 'uncanny valley', wherein affinities (*shinwakan*) for different human representations dipped sharply as factors of stillness, motion, and human likeness varied. At the bottom of the 'uncanny valley', representing the uncanniest phenomenon, are the undead, followed immediately by the actual dead. Here Mori noted, 'the sense of eeriness is probably a form of instinct that protects us from proximal, rather than distal, sources of danger. Proximal sources of

danger include corpses, members of different species and other entities we can closely approach' (Mori 2012, 100). Uncanniness, at its various levels and severity, is nonetheless related directly to the uncertainty and mystery a viewer experiences. It is perhaps best to approach these scenes of willing self-mutilation as intentional mythological enigmas. Medieval Icelandic law codes offer little information on disfigurement and mutilation. *Grágas* explicitly mentions mutilation once, and deals only with the price to be paid if a slave is injured. William Ian Miller has remarked that, 'The extent to which torture and maiming was expected or legitimate is hard to determine', citing instances in *Sturlunga saga* (which records numerous hand-hewings, leg-hewings, and geldings) as well as *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hrafnkels saga*, and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (Miller 1990, 196–97). Other instances of single-eye blinding include those of Ármoðr by Egill Skallagrímsson (*Egils saga*, ch. 72), Þorleifr and Kálfr by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld (*Hallfreðar saga* in Moðuvallabók, ch. 6), and Gunnar Lambason by Skarphéðin Njálsson (*Njáls saga*, ch. 130).[16] These references to maiming and disability, however, are either rare or unelaborated, and it is difficult to know exactly what function disability played, or how it was perceived societally. Lois Bragg has noted this apparent discrepancy, stating,

> We find the mythological views about contact with the supernatural and the related notion of a trade-off of a body part for superhuman abilities, and at the same time we notice a general disinterest in impairments as they might affect a character's competence, though there does seem to be some concern for the dangers to society and some desire for cures. (1997, 175)

There are certainly moments of bodily uncanniness in *Íslendingasögur* such as *Grettis saga*, where Glámr (a revenant encountered by the saga's protagonist, Grettir) is known both for his fierce gaze and his distorted body. Particular emphasis is placed by the saga on Glámr's uncanny body, 'hann er ólíkr nǫkkurri mannligri mynd' (*Grettis saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936, ch. 35, 119) (he is unlike any human form) and the ghostly powers of his eyes, 'ok þat er haft síðan fyrir orðtœki, at þeim ljái Glámr augna eða gefi glámsýni, er mjǫk sýnisk annan veg en er' (*Grettis saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936, ch. 35, 123) (and that has afterwards become an expression about those who have hallucinations, that Glámr lends his eyes to them or they have been given Glámr-sight).

Yet this uncanniness seems to stem from his status as un-dead — the nadir of Mori's uncanny valley — rather than any dismemberment. Indeed, Grettir's defeating blow to Glámr severs his head, which is subsequently

16 My thanks to Rue Taylor who graciously pointed me to these instances of maiming. Rue addresses acts of blinding in his forthcoming dissertation.



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placed between his buttocks. At the level of the human and anthropomorphic monster, disruption of the body cannot be converted into something productive as it is with the gods. Likewise, the hero Starkaðr is mocked in *Víkarsbálkr* 39–40 concerning the time Þórr tore off his eight arms:[17]

> Sjá þykkjaz þeir á sjálfum mér
> jötunkuml átta handa,
> er Hlórriði fyr hamar norðan
> Hergríms bana höndum rænti.
>
> (They think they can see the giant-marks of the eight arms on myself where Hlórriði < = Þórr> tore off the arms of Hergrímr's slayer [= Starkaðr] north of the crag) (*Víkarsbálkr* in Clunies Ross 2017, 283–84)

A similar story is recorded in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, where Starkaðr (Starcatherus) is described as *a gigantibus editus* (born of giants), a fact revealed by the biological defect of having too many hands (*Gesta Danorum*, VI in Friis-Jensen and Fisher 2015, ch. 5.2, 378–79). Þórr subsequently rectifies Starkaðr's monstrous nature by tearing away the excess limbs so that he might better resemble humanity. In both *Grettis saga* and the narratives concerning Starkaðr, the loss of these body parts is the direct cause of derision, quite in contrast to the narratives concerning Óðinn's eye. Týr, though mocked for the loss of his hand in *Lokasenna* 38, nevertheless succeeds with his pledge in the sense that Fenrir is successfully bound. Týr intentionally sacrifices his hand, knowing the pledge will not be upheld, but conscious of the greater good, and greater peace that can be achieved as a result.

It may well be that a medieval audience recognized a difference between the maiming of the gods and the maiming of men, that the two functioned differently and occupied different semantic fields: one of law, one of divinity. Indeed, the sacrificial exchange in these instances of maiming serves as another barrier between the world of men and the world of gods. While the gods can sacrifice parts of themselves that directly correspond to their mythological or symbolic function, mankind cannot. The warrior who loses his hand in battle may no longer be a warrior — though there is still use for him, as *Hávamál* 71 contends. Moreover, the presence of

17 *Víkarsbálkr* is preserved in *Gautreks saga*; however, the saga does not make mention of Starkaðr's limbs in the prose narrative. Layher (2009) has demonstrated that the eight-limb reference in the poem may invoke the giant Starkaðr mentioned in a *lausavísa* by Vetrliði Sumarliðason who is *steypði* (thrown down) by Þórr (*Lausavísa* in Fulk 2017, 425–26). Whether the scars of the Starkaðr in *Víkarsbálkr* are those left behind after a violent amputation by Þórr, or whether they are birthmarks inherited from his giant forebear, remains ambiguous.

biological materiality at the divine level appears inversely related to its presence in profane space.

Evidence of this dynamic can be observed in the burial of a Viking member of the Great Heathen Army who died sometime around AD 873, when the army took winter quarters at Repton. The buried warrior suffered a gruesome death, having sustained several spear or sword wounds that pierced through his skull, his leg, and finally through his hip, which emasculated him. However, among the various objects buried with this individual — a jackdaw wing, a scabbard, a sword, a silver Thor's hammer — a boar's tusk was thrust in between his thighs, 'perhaps to serve as a proxy for his missing penis' (Fleming 2010, 229). In contrast to his divine counterparts, the ambiguity generated by an absent body part is not tolerated. Rather, it becomes necessary to replace it. The disrupted biological collective must be made whole again for the interred warrior. Whether this replacement implied an improvement, a representation, or some other symbolism to those Vikings burying their fallen comrade is uncertain.

Some clarity might be gleaned from the symbolic connotations of eyes and male sexual organs. Freud's psychoanalytical approach to the uncanny noted the conflation of these body parts as a microcosm of the larger theory of the 'castration complex'. In a case study of E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sandman*, Freud demonstrated the latent anxiety of children about the loss of their eyes, and connected fears of eye-loss to later anxieties concerning castration. As a consequence, Freud argues, 'the uncanny attaches directly to [...] the idea of being robbed of one's eyes' (Freud 2003, 135–41). In the case of the interred Viking, social anxiety concerning a literal castration cannot be endured and must, even posthumously, be corrected. For Óðinn, however, what Freud would surely interpret as a symbolic castration becomes far more complex: Óðinn is not castrated, but rather *gains* greater sight through the sacrifice of his eye. In essence, the act becomes an inverted castration, and one that further divides sacred space from profane space. Mundane body-*things* cannot approach the uncanniness of divine corporeal material.

The directionality of the relationship — whether the sacrifice of a particular body part defines a god or, inversely, whether the characteristics of a god determine what body parts must be sacrificed — is unclear. This uncertainty may be intentional. Wrapped in enigma, the *thingness* of these dismembered bodies is meant not to be rationally understood, but to emphasize the separation of the human and the divine: to see without sight, to listen without hearing, to defend without a hand. The purposefully ironic gesture of such myths in conjunction with an apparent lack of historical fetishism signal the intentional resistance of these mythological moments and their *things* to understanding. As Lotte Hedeager has noted regarding the agency of objects, Norse mythological narratives display 'a



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fundamental belief in a cognitive world of "otherness"' (2011, 11). Hence, we may posit further that dismembered body parts of the eddic corpus are given a life and an agency of their own which is obscured from an audience. They exist within their own private spheres on the edges of the mythic world, themselves not signifying but in their absence nonetheless present. Given value but not economized, they manifest their *thingness* in resisting the ability to locate, identify, and explain them.

The Material Frontier

Material hermeneutics offer new and exciting horizons for mythological studies. In foregrounding the material of myth — not as props and ornamentation within narratives, but entities that drive plots, act upon subjects, and resist objectivity — new materialism reframes previous approaches to the medieval period by offering diverse epistemologies. These approaches invite scholarship to consider the ways in which the Scandinavian Middle Ages were often shaped by things: What networks of social obligation and animosity are created by the treasure of Fáfnir in *Vǫlsunga saga*? How does the cursed sword Tyrfing assume agency by forcing violent action in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*? How can the objects forged for the gods by Eitri and Brokkr in *Skáldskaparmál* shape the function of the gods — rather than functioning for them? When material becomes the primary focus of study, and when it is studied at a privileged vantage, the traditionally accepted divisions between the human and the non-human begin to muddle.

However, in viewing the prospects of this material frontier, in understanding that one of its largest benefits lies in re-examining the 'social' and 'natural' boundaries of mythological ideology, the importance of biological material cannot be overlooked. The body is just as much a part of a narrative or lived world as any other thing. This is a point Norse mythology makes from its onset: the world itself is, in every sense, a body. Indeed, just as the world is an assembly of things, so too is the body. It is quite literally a *þing* in the Old Norse sense — a meeting or assembly — composed of the gathering and interaction of bone, blood, and flesh. Bodies constantly gather things to themselves. They rely on water and food from a multitude of sources; they require clothing and shelter; and they occasionally produce other bodies. In opening this material frontier, it behooves scholars of Scandinavian mythology to keep the story of Ymir in mind: materialism in the Norse myths cannot be fully discussed without acknowledging that corporeal materialism constitutes a substantial substratum of this theoretical school.

This article demonstrates that the 'social–natural' boundary may be more permeable in the Norse myths than previously considered. In doing

so, considerations regarding other binary relationships (like that of the divine–mundane, the uncanny–known) all play critical roles in communicating medieval attitudes towards material. It is with these ideologically contingent boundaries that further biological materialism in the field of Norse myth may yield new insights. Where one boundary falls away in privileging material, another may appear more rigid. Further explorations that consider the biological materialism of mythic figures like Kvasir, Mimír, Mokkurkálfi, Þiazi, or any of the personified natural phenomena (Máni, Sól, etc.) offer the exciting possibility to further expand the horizons of biologically oriented materialism within the field. These figures, though they are only a few examples from the mythological corpus, quite literally embody the complex and often obscure dynamics of object–subject relationships. Rather than focusing on the social relationships or purely symbolic functions they perform within the myths, a consideration of their *thingness* may further demonstrate their effect on medieval perceptions.

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