

Mythology and Nation Building

N.F.S. Grundtvig and His European Contemporaries



Edited by · Sophie Bønding, Lone Kølbe Martinsen & Pierre-Brice Stahl

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*Sophie Bønding,
Lone Kølle Martinsen
& Pierre-Brice Stahl
(eds.)*

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Preface

Mythology and Nation Building is the fruit of the ongoing collaboration between Aarhus University and Sorbonne University in the field of Nordic Studies. The idea of a conference and subsequent publication on the role of pre-Christian mythologies in nation-building processes of the long nineteenth century crystallized in the Summer of 2015 at the International Saga Conference in Zürich and Basel. The project became concrete in 2017 with an international and interdisciplinary conference organized by Sophie Bønding and Pierre-Brice Stahl entitled *Mythology and Nation Building: N.F.S. Grundtvig and His Contemporaries*. The aim of the conference was to shed new light and offer new perspectives on the role of pre-Christian mythologies in the formation of national communities in nineteenth-century Northern Europe. The conference took place 26–27 January 2017 in the old building of the Latin quarter at Paris Sorbonne University – known as Sorbonne University since 2018. The speakers came from fifteen different universities in ten different countries, representing different disciplines and scholarly traditions, thus allowing the theoretical object to be approached from a wide range of perspectives. This book, edited by the organizers of the conference and Lone Kølle Martinsen, who joined the editing committee in 2019, is the result of the papers presented at and the discussions that took place during the conference.

Neither the conference nor the book would have been realized were it not for the generous support of the Grundtvig Study Centre at Aarhus

University; in particular we wish to thank the former and current directors, Michael Schelde and Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig. We would also like to thank the research programme REIGENN at Sorbonne University and the research programme at the Department of the Study of Religion at Aarhus University. In addition, the Hielmstjerne-Rosencroneske Stiftelse offered a generous grant that allowed us to include many illustrations. Special thanks to Sanne Lind Hansen, our editor at Aarhus University Press. Last but certainly not least, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and, of course, especially, all the contributors to this book for their dedication. We hope this book will contribute not only to the ongoing debate on the role of pre-Christian mythologies in the formation of national identities across Europe in the long nineteenth century, thus helping to situate N.F.S. Grundtvig among his European contemporaries, but also to the growing discourse on mythology and collective identity formations at large.

Aarhus and Paris, 24 March 2020

*Sophie Bønding,
Lone Kølle Martinsen
& Pierre-Brice Stahl*

Introduction

The Uses of Pre-Christian Mythologies in Nineteenth-Century Northern Europe

One amongst many

In 1847, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) published a so-called “school mythology”, *Græsk og Nordisk Mythologi for Ungdommen* [Greek and Nordic mythology for young people], a commissioned work intended as an educational book for young people. In his preface, he clarified his views on the need to teach young generations about mythology:

Tænkde jeg nemlig, som vel endnu de Fleste, at *Mythologi* og *Afguder* var hip som hap, og at Mytherne ei havde andet at betyde end hvad vi Allesammen veed og kan udtrykke langt kortere og klarere, saa man skal kun lære *Mythologi* for at vide, hvad det er *Digterne* spiller paa og de andre Konstnere har villet afbilde, da spildte jeg naturligviis ikke Tid og Flid paa nogensomhelst mythologisk Fremstilling. (Grundtvig 1847: V; emphasis in original)

[Had I believed, as I suppose most people still do, that mythology and idolatry were much of a muchness, and that myths had no other meaning than what all of us already know and can express much more briefly and clearly, so that one should only learn about mythology in order to understand the references of poets and what visual artists mean to portray, then I would not, of course, have wasted my time and effort on any kind of mythological exposition.]

Mythology is more than a mere servant of the arts, Grundtvig asserts; rather, “alle ægte Myther er de tilsvarende Folke-Aanders *Liv-Udtryk*” [all genuine myths are the ‘articulation of life’ of the corresponding people’s spirit], and therefore it was crucial that the Danish youth became acquainted with the myths of their forefathers (Grundtvig 1847: VI).¹ In other words, it was his central assertion that a deep-rooted, primordial connection existed between the mythological worldview of a given people, as expressed in its ancient mythology, and its specific (national) character.

Grundtvig was far from alone in professing such a view. Comparable ideas were common in nineteenth-century culture and politics, expressed in contemporary works by intellectuals across Europe, such as Adam Oehlen-schläger (1779–1850) and B.S. Ingemann (1789–1862) in Denmark, William Morris (1834–1896) in Britain and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) in (what later became) Germany – to name but a few. The infatuation with the pre-Christian, indigenous mythologies and mythic figures shared by these intellectuals was part of a broader Romantic paradigm, occupied with the discovery, (re)invention and cultivation of ancient and medieval pasts in pursuit of national authenticity and identity. The specific national trajectories that emerged are best understood as part of a Europe-wide network of corresponding intellectuals between whom ideas travelled (cf. Leerssen 2016).

The nineteenth century was a period of ‘becoming’. Through cultural and political processes, national borders were negotiated, established, re-negotiated and reestablished. Cultural and political thinkers created, cultivated and propagated conceptions of national, spiritual essences: ‘German-ness’, ‘Danishness’, ‘Britishness’ and so on. Vernacular myths and mythologies, perceived to be rooted in ancient, vernacular pasts which were now (re)discovered and (re)imagined, proved powerful political tools in the shaping of Europe.

As in Grundtvig’s case, this preoccupation with mythology rested on a general revaluation of traditional negative stereotypes of pagan barbarians.

* All translations into English are our own.

1 “nu maa jeg ansee det for et af *Folkelivets* store Anliggender, at *Ungdommen* igien bliver bekiendt med sine *Fædres* og *Frænders* Myther” [now I must see it as one of the great purposes of the people’s life to make sure that the youth will once again become acquainted with their fathers’ and kinsmen’s myths] (Grundtvig 1847: VI). For an editorial introduction to the text, see Holst Petersen (2014).

These were transformed into positive images of Europe's pre-Christian, indigenous populations, and their mythological worldviews were now interpreted as expressions of their primordial national characters (cf. Zernack 2011; 2018). These conceptions were indebted to – and indeed part of – the Romantic discovery of the North, prompted by intellectuals such as Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and fertilized by James McPherson's Ossian poems from the 1760s onwards (Leerssen 2016). With the emergence of a 'Northern antiquity' as a separate cultural sphere and an alternative to classical antiquity, new imaginative geographies of North and South arose (Duffy, ed. 2017; Grage & Mohnike, eds. 2017).

Thus, although the long nineteenth century is at the heart of this book, central developments of the preceding centuries laid the ground for the emergence of Romantic conceptions of national belonging. Reflections on these precursors, and indeed on the continuities of such conceptions into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are offered throughout the book.

The aims of this book

This book explores the role of pre-Christian mythologies – especially Old Norse or Germanic mythology² – in the formation of national communities in nineteenth-century Northern Europe. It has two major ambitions. Firstly, we wished to explore the cultural and political utilization of pre-Christian mythologies in the forging of national identities as a Europe-wide phenomenon. Collectively, the chapters of this book offer new theoretical perspec-

2 Throughout this book, the terms 'Old Norse mythology', 'Norse mythology' and 'Nordic mythology' are used interchangeably – according to the preferences of the contributors – to refer to the mythological material relating to the pre-Christian North, which is preserved (primarily) in medieval Old Norse manuscripts. While these terms are favoured by scholars today, some nineteenth-century mythologists (notably Jacob Grimm) preferred the term 'Germanic mythology', a terminological and cultural construct which encompassed the mythological traditions of Scandinavia and wider Northern Europe, including the area later called Germany; it was used to bolster visions of an original spiritual unity of all 'Germanic' peoples. The term 'Germanic mythology' is used in this volume to refer to this conceptual construct, and we are fully aware of the problematic nature of the term. In fact, this book helps shed light on the processes of identity construction in which its conception was embedded (see especially Leerssen; Halink, this volume).

tives on and considerations of nation-building processes, as well as a range of different case studies that exemplify these processes. Secondly, we wanted to situate N.F.S. Grundtvig amongst his European intellectual contemporaries, many of whom had similar yet different visions and ambitions for the role of pre-Christian mythologies in the emerging national discourses of the time. Although, in international scholarship, Grundtvig's treatment of Old Norse mythology is generally perceived as a significant example of the intellectual trends of his time (Clunies Ross, ed. 2018; Glauser, Hermann & Mitchell, eds. 2018; Leerssen, ed. 2018; Halink, ed. 2019), in Danish and (to some extent) Scandinavian scholarship there has been a tendency to present Grundtvig as a 'lone rider', a unique thinker, with no real contemporary counterparts.³ Taking a more comparative approach, this book demonstrates that we cannot understand Grundtvig's utilization of Old Norse mythology as a resource for nation building in isolation from the contemporary Romantic preoccupation with pre-Christian mythologies through which nation builders across Europe claimed primordial status for their respective nations under formation.

As is evident from the chapters in this book, the Romantic Movement not only coincided with the nation-building processes of Europe, but was also an integral part of the intellectual, cultural and, indeed, political climate in which Europe's nations came to be. In many ways, the study of myth was a quest for a sense of unity, and thus very much entangled with the processes of nation building. The nineteenth century was an 'age of mythology'. In the course of the century, vernacular mythologies, including Nor-

3 Some have perceived Grundtvig as a cultural giant, comparable only to other cultural giants. Among the more distinct examples are Jakob Balling's comparison of Grundtvig with Dante (1265–1321) and John Milton (1608–1674) (Balling 1993; 1998), and Poul Borum's treatment of him as a poet in a league of his own (Borum 1983). In recent years, several interesting comparisons with contemporary thinkers outside Denmark have appeared, although the focus has not been on their use of pre-Christian mythologies (e.g. Baunvig 2013; chapters in Hall, Korsgaard & Pedersen, eds. 2015 and in Baunvig & Schelde, eds. 2017). Traditionally, Grundtvig's views on Old Norse mythology and the pre-Christian past have been scrutinized for influences from and breaks with Romantic thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), while attention has not yet been paid to how his cultivation of Old Norse mythology was part of a broad contemporary Romantic trend shared among intellectuals across Europe.



✎ Johan Ludvig Lund, Christian Frederik, 1813. *Christian Frederik (1786-1848), Crown Prince of Denmark and Norway, later to become King Christian VIII (1839–1848) of Denmark. This portrait was painted shortly before the Crown Prince was sent to Norway as governor. It shows us how important the legacies of the pre-Christian past were for contemporary politics: a rune-stave and the Edda are important paraphernalia in the portrait of the king-to be. Eidsvoll, Norsk Folkemuseum.*