

SCAN 335-001 (2022/23 T1) VIKINGS AND OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Term 1: Tuesday / Thursday 15:30 - 17:00 Leonard S. Klinck 200

Acknowledgement

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Welcome to SCAN 335!

This course is designed for students with little or no background knowledge of Norse mythology and the history, literature and mythology of the “Vikings.” After an introduction to the necessary historical context (the development of early Scandinavian/Northern Germanic societies and the lead-up to the so-called Viking Age), we will be reading key texts written and/or compiled roughly two centuries after the conversion to Christianity, followed by a discussion of modern literary, cinematic, religious, and political appropriations.

It is essential that students are fully aware of the implications of the fact that there are virtually no “original” textual documents. Almost everything we will read about Nordic gods, giants, and trolls, or about the beginning of the world, was written in post-pagan times, frequently with very specific religious or political agendas. It is equally essential to keep in mind that the “Vikings”-- a highly problematic term in itself--did not produce any written accounts. Virtually all the texts about “Vikings” were written by enemies or descendants--that is, by outsiders (many of whom were their victims and understandably biased against the “Vikings”), or by later Scandinavians who lived in different social and religious environments. From the very beginning, the Viking world was an observer construct, a highly revealing and successful instance of cultural packaging that continues to this day. Problems of content (“What are these myths about?”) and methodology (“How can they be analyzed?”) therefore cannot be separated from issues of distortion (“How did early Christian observers view these myths?” and “What political agendas were they made to serve?”). These concerns are reflected in the principal learning outcomes:

Learning outcomes (LO) for the mythology portion:

- LO1** *What are these myths about?* Describe the major features of Old Norse mythology within their climatic, historical and political contexts.
- LO2** *How can we analyze them?* Apply chief interpretive theories to analyze the function of myth-telling and the relationship between myth and history in the old Scandinavian world
- LO3** *Why can't we trust the “original” versions?* Discuss the difficulties arising from the condemnation and/or appropriation of primarily oral pagan myths by literate Christian observers
- LO4** *What use were they later put to?* Identify and assess the religious, nationalist, and racist driving later appropriations of Norse mythology (referred to in the course as ‘relay station’)
- LO5** *How do they appear today?* Analyze contemporary media, cultural and social phenomena in light of the materials studied.

Learning outcomes for the Viking portion of the course:

- LO1** Describe the political, social, geographic and climatic factors contributing to the First Age of Scandinavian Expansion
- LO2** Discuss the “Viking Age” as a principal source of the political and cultural agendas driving the construction of a specifically Northern identity (from Viking Metal to neo-paganism)
- LO3** Identify the colonial dynamics that mark part the social evolution of the commonwealth of Iceland from 800 to 1260.
- LO4** Assess the role of literature (especially the Icelandic sagas) as a form of cultural mediation between the “Viking Age” and the post-Viking world
- LO5** Analyze contemporary media, cultural and social “Viking” phenomena--from neo-paganism to Viking Metal--in light of the materials studied.

Reading Material:

The following texts will be available in the UBC Bookstore:

Anon., *The Vinland Sagas* (Penguin Classics)

Anon., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (Penguin Classics)

Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (Norton)

Students should bookmark this online text:

Völuspá (“Prophecy of the Seeress”)

[The Poetic Edda: Voluspo](#)

SCAN 335 Course overview

Introduction:

A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine,
(“Free us, o Lord, from the Fury of the Northmen”)

Tuesday, 6 September

Imagine Day. No class.

Thursday, 8 September

Course introduction

Introduction to the course. Important past influences (“relay stations”). Linguistic and terminological essentials (e.g., relationship between “Germanic,” “German,” “Old Norse,” and “Scandinavian”; what does “Viking” mean?). Formalities.

Tuesday, 13 September

The Viking Age

Discussion of the geographic, environmental, social and political preconditions of the “Viking Age” as well as the general history of Norse expansion (from raiding and trading to settling and colonizing) up to the settling of Iceland

Suggested preparatory work

What are the “MWP” and the “LIA,” and why are they important to our course? What is primogeniture? What was allegedly the worst year in human history? (YouTube knows.) Who was Alcuin of York? Where are Lindisfarne and Saaremaa? What famous battles were fought in England in 1066?

Thursday, 15 September

The Viking Age (continued)

On the settling of Iceland.

Section II:

Fire and Ice, Gods and Giants

Tuesday, 20 September

The Origin and Structure of “Middle Earth”:

From *ginnungagap* to Asgard

Goals: (i) Understand Norse creation myths as troublesome texts that (a) distort the orally communicated tales they profess to record, and (b) are caught in the tension between obvious Christian influences and the retention of pagan components. (ii) Apply comparison between Norse and other creation myths (e.g., Greek, Babylonian). (iii) Relate spatial configuration to racial boundaries

Read:

Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 27-41 (“Before the Beginning” and “Yggdrasil”)

Also read “*Völuspá*” stanzas 1-20

[The Poetic Edda: Voluspo](#)

(don't worry about the many names, though some will be familiar)

Thursday, 22 September

Snorri's Problem

Goal: Analyze the various techniques used by Snorri that allow him to ascribe a certain historical reality to the Old Norse gods without committing blasphemy.

Tuesday, 27 September

The Great God Odin

Basic message: He's complicated.

Read:

Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 43-47 (“Mimir's Head”); 69-83 (“Master Builder”); 125-151 (“Mead of the Poets”)

Thursday, 29 September

The Aesir-Vanir War:

A Case Study in the Forensics of Mythology

Goal: Apply competing explanations of the Aesir-Vanir

war

as an example for two fundamentally different explanations of the role of mythology. Is the “war” a reflection, however distorted, of historical events (e.g., the invasion of Indo-European warrior societies), or is it the Norse variant of a distinct way of organizing reality?

Carefully read “*Völuspá*” stanzas 21-27

[The Poetic Edda: Voluspo](#)

Tuesday, 4 October

What is a Troll? (And other inter-racial problems)

A discussion of the origins, characteristics and functions of the various “races” that feature prominently in Old Norse mythology (trolls, giants, frost giants, elves, dwarves).

Read:

Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* 107-123 (“Freya’s Unusual Wedding”); 179-197 (“Apples of Immortality”); 199-209 (“Story of Gerd and Frey”)

Thursday, 6 October

Simple and Good, Cunning and Evil: Thor and Loki

Read:

Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* 49-67 (“Treasure of the Gods”); 91-106 (“Children of Loki”); 153-177 (“Thor’s Journey to the Land of the Giants”); 211-228 (“Hymir and Thor’s Fishing Expedition”)

Tuesday, 11 October

**“Some Say the World will end in Fire”:
Ragnarök and the End of All Things**

Read:

Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* 229-end (“The Death of Balder”, “The Last Days of Loki”, “Ragnarok”)

Also read “*Völuspá*” stanzas 27-65 (end)

[The Poetic Edda: Voluspo](#)

Thursday, 13 October

Ragnarök continued

Tuesday, 18 October

First in-class exam

Section III:

Women, Wolves, and Dragons: *The Saga of the Volsungs*

Thursday, 20 October

Special session: “Grimm’s Gamble”

Goal: Analyze (i) Jakob Grimm’s transfer of methods developed in diachronic linguistics to the study of evolution of myths, and (ii) the use of Norse mythology in Grimm’s Pan-Germanic Mythology for the purpose of modern European nation-building.

Tuesday, 25 October

Discussion of the first half of *Volsunga Saga*.

Special emphasis on:

- (i) Fluctuating species boundaries and animal mythology in *Volsunga Saga*: From metaphoric and legal wolves to genuine shapeshifting
- (ii) Valhalla recruitment: The Volsung family as a result of Odin's warrior breeding program

Read: *Volsungs*, 1-55

Thursday, 27 October

What is a dragon?

The more you remember about Smaug, the better.

Read: *Volsungs*, 56-65

Tuesday, 1 November

Women and the Cycle of Increasing Violence

Reading and discussion of the second half of *Volsungs*.

Special emphasis on:

- (i) Relationship between *Saga of the Volsungs* and the *Nibelungenlied* with special emphasis on historical echoes and the dynamics of reduction/assimilation of historical events (tribal migrations, the defeat of the Burgundians and the death of Attila).
- (ii) A recipe for never-ending violence: The axes of kinship vs. the axis of loyalty and the the ambivalent role of women as both aggressors and peacemakers

Read: *Volsungs*, 66-108

Section IV:

Vinland: At the Outermost Margin

Thursday, 3 November

First Contact: Introduction

Discussion of the Norsemen's trans-Atlantic ventures. The reading of the two Vinland-related sagas (which differ from each other in important respects) will be complemented by additional material related to Helge Ingstad's Schliemann-like discovery of the Viking site at L'Anse aux Meadows and more recent research into Norse-Inuit encounters.

Tuesday, 8 November

Vinland Sagas I

Read:
Grænendinga Saga

Thursday, 10 November

No class. Fall reading break.

Tuesday, 15 November

Vinland Sagas II

Read:
Eirik's Saga

Thursday, 17 November

Discussion of the two main female characters: Gudrid the Far-Traveled and Freydis Eiriksdottir

Tuesday, 22 November

Second In-class exam.

Section V:

Return, Afterlife and Appropriations

Thursday, 25 November

The Viking Hoax Industry

Norse forgery industry: “Evidence” that the Norse were the first Europeans to cross the Atlantic and to venture as far west as B.C. and California. Students will analyze this phenomenon as a mixture of competition among immigrant groups and emerging national philologies.

Tuesday, 29 November

J. R. R. Tolkien and Old Norse Mythology

Thursday, 1 December The Dark Legacy: The Nazi North

The Viking World in Nazi scholarship and its role in creating the notion of a Nordic master race.

Tuesday, 6 December

From Myth to Marvel: The Recycling of Thor from the 1960s onwards

or
Norse Neo-paganism

Final exam

Date t.b.a.

Evaluation

In-class exam 1	30%
In-class exam 2	30%
Final Exam <u>or</u> Term Paper	40%

There is no participation mark in this class. However, the instructor reserves the right to raise the overall grade in cases of superior in-class work.

Details

In-class exams

Initial quiz section will count for less (around 20%-30%) of the mark followed by an essay (choice of topics) of 450 words each.

Notes: Instructor will post notes on Canvas after (almost) every class. The notes are the basis for all exams. Names that appear on the notes need to be memorized; otherwise, not.

Final exam

The format of the final exam is similar to that of the in-class exams. The quiz section will count for less (around 15%) and there will be two essays of 450 words each. For the second essay, students may choose a more independent and open topic.

Term paper

Papers should be no less than 12 and no more than 15 double-spaced pages in length. If necessary, use MLA or Chicago citation guidelines (see <http://www.liunet.edu/cwis/cwp/library/workshop/citation.htm>). Students opting for the term paper **must present the instructor with a three-page draft outlining methodology and the basic thesis as well as the main sources by late November.** The term paper is due on the date of the final exam (t.b.a.) or four days prior to the end of the exam period, whichever is later.

Students must propose a topic themselves, following these guidelines.

1. I do not provide topics. You must come up with your own.
2. The topic must be related to SCAN 335.. You can add other material (Scandinavian or not), but the paper must at least in part deal with in-class material.
3. The topic must be original. No rehash of in-class discussions.

ALL REQUESTS CONCERNING THE FINAL EXAM (E.G., RESCHEDULING DUE TO ILLNESS OR UNIVERSITY ACTIVITIES) MUST BE DIRECTED TO ACADEMIC ADVISING. ALL CASES OF PLAGIARISM (SEE <http://www.vpacademic.ubc.ca/integrity/policies.htm>) WILL BE FORWARDED TO THE DEAN'S OFFICE.

University and Course Policies

Academic Integrity

The academic enterprise is founded on honesty, civility, and integrity. As members of this enterprise, all students are expected to know, understand, and follow the codes of conduct regarding academic integrity. At the most basic level, this means submitting only original work done by you and acknowledging all sources of information or ideas and attributing them to others as required. This also means you should not cheat, copy, or mislead others about what is your work. Violations of academic integrity (i.e., misconduct) lead to the breakdown of the academic enterprise, and therefore serious consequences arise and harsh sanctions are imposed. For example, incidences of plagiarism or cheating may result in a mark of zero on the assignment or exam and more serious consequences may apply when the matter is referred to the Office of the Dean. Careful records are kept in order to monitor and prevent recurrences. A more detailed description of academic integrity, including the University's policies and procedures, may be found in the **UBC Calendar: Student Conduct and Discipline**.

<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/Vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,0,0>

Academic Concessions

Under UBC's academic concession policy (<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,329,0,0>), students seeking academic concession for any of three reasons: conflicting responsibilities; medical circumstances; and compassionate grounds, would take the following steps. If you miss marked coursework for the first time (assignment, exam, presentation, participation in class) and the course is still in-progress, please submit a Student Self-Declaration as soon as possible.

<https://www.arts.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2019/10/Student-Self-Declaration-Form-1.6-Arts.pdf>

If this is not the first time that you have requested concession or if classes are over, you are required to fill out the Arts Academic Advising's online academic concession form, so that an advisor can evaluate your concession case.

Academic Accommodation

Academic accommodations help students with a disability or ongoing medical condition overcome challenges that may affect their academic success. Students requiring academic accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (previously known as Access & Diversity). The Centre will determine that student's eligibility for accommodations in accordance with Policy LR7: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Academic accommodations are not determined by your instructors, and instructors should not ask you about the nature of your disability or ongoing medical condition, or request copies of your disability documentation. However, your instructor may consult with the Centre for Accessibility should the accommodations affect the essential learning outcomes of a course.

Class Preparedness

For every class you are expected to have required reading and/or due assignments completed, and are ready to participate in discussions. If you require additional audio/visual equipment for a

presentation or project in class, please notify me through email at least 3 business days before the class so that I can reserve the equipment.

Respectful Classroom Environment

Effective learning depends on all of us being comfortable interacting informally with each other about subjects that can sometimes get heated. That makes what is important in every college classroom especially important for us: that the classroom should be a comfortable environment in which everyone feels welcome and respected. This means thinking about the things we say, not perpetuating stereotypes, and apologizing if we say something we didn't mean. It also means contacting me if something happens in our class discussions or on the Course Blog that makes you uncomfortable - or if you believe your own words or actions have made someone else in the class feel uncomfortable - so that we can talk about how to make things better.

Academic Freedom

The classroom is a place for the open discussion of ideas and issues. The points of view expressed by the instructor represent a professional perspective of media history, theory and contemporary issues, and you and your peers are expected to contribute. However, if at any time you wish to further discuss an issue taken up from class, or do not feel comfortable to engage, please feel free to contact the Instructor.

Early Alert

We participate in the Early Alert Program which helps me support students who are facing difficulties that are interfering with school. If you are feeling stressed, please notify the TA or one of the instructors and indicate that you would like assistance. While we are not trained to help with personal problems, we can get you help from people who can assist you. Any information that they receive from you or us is strictly confidential and is in the interest of your academic success and wellbeing. For more information, please visit [EarlyAlert](#). Course Bibliography.

THIS SYLLABUS IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE AT THE DISCRETION OF THE INSTRUCTOR