

# Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and German Culture

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**Abstract** – The perception of Old Norse literature in post-medieval times moves between an aesthetically motivated international interest and its constriction initially to national and then nationalistic concerns. The article examines this development by analyzing how Old Norse material is used for the construction of a German national consciousness from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th. It compares the German reception of Old Norse mythology to that of the Icelandic sagas, focusing on the question of why the mythology was considered a common Germanic heritage and came to be viewed in Germany as German cultural property, whereas the sagas were regarded as Germanic as well as Icelandic. This paved the way for viewing Iceland as an antithesis of the modern world and therefore the ideal landscape of a Germanic antiquity regarded as classical.

**Keywords** – European reception of Old Norse–Icelandic Literature, German reception of Old Norse–Icelandic Literature, nation building, Germanic antiquity, Old Norse mythology, Icelandic sagas, Thule

## Introduction

It is well established that German national consciousness in the 19th and early 20th centuries was constituted with an eye towards the North and by reverting to the history of the Teutons.<sup>1</sup> Despite its remoteness, Iceland received its own place in this construct—if only temporarily—from the end of the 18th century up to the middle of the 20th century. Shortly after 1900 the notion of a Nordic Hellas<sup>2</sup> reveals the projected character inherent in this concept: it imagines an

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<sup>1</sup> See Bohrer 1961; von See 1994; Gollwitzer 1971; Hartwich 2000; Kipper 2002. For a discussion on “imagined communities” and nationalism, see Anderson 1983.

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor is circulated in German language publications as well as others and can for example be found in Niedner 1913: 10; see also Neckel 1922, as well as Ísleifsson 2007.

early bloom of Germanic culture located in the North that set the national origin of German history alongside the advanced civilization of the South—classical antiquity and later Christian culture as well—and placed it in Iceland. Admittedly though, the Icelandic medieval tradition had earlier gradually become a part of German culture in the form of the so-called Germanic mythology. Its figures are, to a large extent, taken from two Icelandic sources—namely, the collections of texts that became known in the modern age under the shared name of *Edda*: Snorra Edda (ca. 1225) on the one hand and the Poetic Edda (ca. 1270) on the other. Although constructions similar to those addressed here with the keywords “Nordic Hellas” and “Germanic mythology” are to be found in other cultural and national contexts, a specific German relationship to Icelandic culture is obvious. It is this aspect that I intend to focus on in this article. To begin with I shall discuss the European discovery of Old Norse mythology during the 18th century, as well as the particular relationship constructed between Old Norse and German mythology and heroic tale in the 19th century. I will then demonstrate how this interest in Old Norse mythology was temporarily sidelined in the beginning of the 20th century when the Germans favoured the world of the Old Icelandic sagas as the vanishing point of their supposed Germanic national identity. Thus, it will be shown that an idea of Old Norse–Icelandic culture had long been integrated into the predominant concept of German prehistory before the National Socialist Party seized power in the name of the so-called Nordic Race.

### The European Discovery of Old Norse Mythology in the 18th Century

Initially, it is necessary to consider briefly the broader context of the German interest in Iceland, i.e., the idea according to which the origins of German history are to be sought with the Teutons. This interest can be traced back to the 15th century and the rediscovery of Tacitus’s *Germania*. The ethnographic text from the first century AD opened the German humanists’ eyes to a world they identified as German antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Awareness of how few sources there were proving this antiquity first arose in the 18th century. At the time, western Europe was searching for an alternative to the dominating aesthetics

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<sup>3</sup> See Muhlack 1989.

of classicism, to the French rule-governed poetics and to their preference for the gods and heroes from classical mythology. Following Rousseau and Ossianism the “savage” and “primitive” was considered sublime and was set against the traditional ideal of beauty. In this context, it became obvious how incomplete the prehistoric sources were for those peoples who could not trace their origins to classical antiquity: there was almost no native material available for the new aesthetic programme in western Europe. If one preferred not just to (re)construct this material, as the Scot James Macpherson (1736–1796) did with the predominant part of his highly influential Ossian cycle of poems, one had to be on the lookout for a substitute. This is programmatically formulated by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), especially in his well-known and controversial treatise from 1796, *Iduna, Or the Apple of Rejuvenation*. From Herder’s perspective, German modern literature could not compete with the great European literatures, because it was “without imagination” and had no mythology of its own.

If the mythology of a neighbouring people, whose roots were also German, gave us a substitute that was so to speak born for our language—that followed it completely and remedied its lack of cultivated fictions—who would take exception to it?<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this rhetorical question a figure of thought was brought into play that seemed subsequently to allow the native deficit to be lifted with the help of foreign—Scandinavian and Icelandic—evidence.

Herder, as well as many of his contemporaries, knew that this possibility existed, thanks to a history of the Danish empire that was written in French in 1755/1756 by Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807), a historian from Geneva, and commissioned by the Danish government. In this context Mallet made the tales from Snorra Edda, as well a few other texts, accessible for the first time in one of the

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<sup>4</sup> “Wenn aus der Mythologie eines benachbarten Volks, auch Deutschen Stammes, uns hierüber ein Ersatz käme, der für unsre Sprache gleichsam gebohren, sich ihr ganz anschliesse, und ihrer Dürftigkeit an ausgebildeten Ficktionen abhülfe, wer würde ihn von sich stossen?” Herder [1796] 1883: 488 (translations from the German in this article are my own). The desire for a native mythology in German in the 18th and 19th centuries is discussed by Williamson 2004.

major modern European languages. The work was immediately translated from French to Danish and then to German, English, Russian, and Polish. It thus quickly spread among European intellectuals. Mallet's work allowed poets such as the British Thomas Gray (1716–1771) and the Germans Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) and Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg (1737–1823) to become aware of the Old Norse material.<sup>5</sup> In 1765, Herder wrote a review for the German translation of the book, enthusiastically recommending it as the “armoury of a new German genius”<sup>6</sup> (on Mallet, see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume).

From the arsenal of Old Norse gods, the first goddess who particularly became an object of fascination was Iðunn. The myths related to this figure do not have extensive evidence; that which does exist is found exclusively in Icelandic sources. The goddess only appears around 900 with the poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni in the poem *Haustlög*, then in Snorra Edda (*Gylfaginning* 26 and *Skáldskaparmál* 2) and finally in the late Eddic poem *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*. In Mallet's work the goddess plays only a small role; nonetheless, in the *Edda Islandorum* from 1665, one could learn more about her.<sup>7</sup> This first printed edition of Eddic texts published by Peder Hansen Resen (1625–1688) was accompanied by translations in Latin and Danish and belonged to Mallet's sources. Out of all the myths that are linked to Iðunn, two aspects were particularly interesting: firstly, Iðunn is the custodian of the apples that, when eaten, guarantee the Aesir eternal youth. Secondly, she is considered the wife of Bragi, the god of poetry. She was thus welcomed by 18th-century recipients as a poetological allegory and as such embodied the call for aesthetic renewal—for poetry's “rejuvenation.” This is demonstrated both by Gerstenberg's “Iduna” poem (1767) and by Herder's *Iduna* treatise, which has already been quoted above. In the 19th century, the allegory lived on in Germany and Scandinavia in the names of poets' societies and journals until in the end it was even usurped by commercial

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<sup>5</sup> With regards to the English reception of Mallet, see Clunies Ross 1998; with regards to Mallet's influence on German poets and intellectuals, see Krömmelbein 1995.

<sup>6</sup> “Rüstkammer eines neuen Deutschen Genies,” reprinted in Herder 1877: 74.

<sup>7</sup> The goddess is briefly mentioned by Mallet in the summary of *Skáldskaparmál* (1756: 126); with Resen she is the object of “*Damesaga*” 52, (see Faulkes 1977). In both references Iðunn appears under her Latinized name Iduna, which was later quite common outside of Iceland.

advertising as a symbol of a modern lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> The tradition of reception that is recognizable here does not have its origins in the Middle Ages; rather it stems from the context of the European debates on aesthetics in the second half of the 18th century. Over time, this context fell into oblivion just as the fact that Iduna as Iðunn originally only has textual evidence in Icelandic sources.

Also Herder only takes up the already established idea according to which Iduna's apples could stand for aesthetic rejuvenation; he aims to "create poems that become eternal the moment Iduna's apple touches them."<sup>9</sup> With the title of his treatise he thus skilfully attaches himself to a smouldering debate, to which he then gives a new twist in that he declares it a fundamental right of German literature to appropriate Old Norse mythology. In order to do so, he stylizes the northerly located, prehistoric era that is responsible for producing these myths as the centre of identity and meaning for all those with Germanic roots: he extends the national antiquity of the Germans to Germanic culture, thus justifying the notion according to which the German past can be found with the Germanic peoples as well as the idea that Old Norse poetry is a predecessor of German national poetry. This construction must have been enormously persuasive: not only did it determine how Germans imagined the North—both the medieval Icelandic tradition and contemporary Nordic countries—far into the 20th century and even today in some circles,<sup>10</sup> it also formed the basis for the appropriation of the gods from the Old Norse myths as German gods.

### Old Norse and German Mythology and Heroic Tale in the 19th Century

There can, however, be no doubt that there are connections between Old Norse sources, especially the Poetic Edda, and the German *Lay of the Nibelungs* (also rediscovered in the 18th century). At the beginning of the 19th century these links gained the attention of the still new

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<sup>8</sup> See Zernack 2009b.

<sup>9</sup> "Dichtungen schöpfen, die unsterblich sind, sobald sie Idunens Apfel berührt," Herder [1796] 1883: 496.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Herder's influence is noticeable also outside Germany, for example in Scandinavia; see Henningsen 2007.

field of Germanic studies (*Germanistik*). The subject of this discipline was exactly the Germanic prehistoric era that Herder had moved onto the horizon of the German search for identity. For scholars such as Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen (1780–1856), the preoccupation with the Poetic Edda and other Old Norse sources was primarily motivated by their relationship to the *Lay of the Nibelungs*. This prompted Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859) to declare the Eddic poems “half” German property.<sup>11</sup> The claim soon no longer applied only to the Nibelung material found in the heroic lays of the Edda, *Völsunga Saga* and a few other Old Norse sources. Rather it came to encompass all mythological references—that is, the entire Eddic literature and more—because without knowledge of them, barely any sense could be gained from the meagre continental Germanic records. An example of this is Jacob Grimm’s (1785–1863) highly influential *Teutonic Mythology* (*Deutsche Mythologie*) from 1835. In the introduction the author refrains from reasoning on the basis of Nordic references. Nevertheless, he subsequently uses them abundantly, because this is the only way he can give meaning to the continental sources.<sup>12</sup> This approach was raised to a principle in 1855 by Karl Simrock (1802–1876) who, right from the start, strived to reconstruct German mythology from what he thought to be the system of Old Norse mythology.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars in the 19th century became increasingly aware that Old Norse and Teutonic mythology—for example, the Óðinn from the Poetic Edda or *Völsunga Saga* and the Wotan from German popular imagination—must not be set as one. But at the same time, knowledge of Old Norse myths gradually spread outside of academia, initially particularly in literature as well as in the visual arts, but later also in music and elsewhere. The differentiations offered by scholars could thus easily be subsumed to national considerations or the artistic will to create. Once more this can be clearly demonstrated for the Nibelung material with the example of Richard Wagner’s famous opera tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, first performed in 1876. Wagner absorbed predominantly Old Norse material for his libretto, in particular *Völsunga Saga*, yet gave his

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<sup>11</sup> W. Grimm [1808] 1992: 142.

<sup>12</sup> J. Grimm [1835] 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Simrock [1855] 1887: 6.

protagonists names from the German Nibelung tradition, naming Oðinn Wotan, Sigurðr Siegfried, Brynhildr Brünnhilde, etc.<sup>14</sup> He thus contributed to the popularization of the Old Norse material as German cultural property, although in a different way from Jacob Grimm. It can be shown that the idea of a Teutonic–German mythology strongly fed from Wagner’s universe of myths far into the 20th century.

### Old Norse Myths in the Wilhelminian Empire

The development described above reached its peak during the Wilhelminian Empire (1888–1918). Motifs from Norse mythology and heroic tale now spread throughout German culture, or at least farther than ever before and farther than ever after, admittedly though without superseding the myths from classical antiquity. Other than in literature, the visual arts, music, and academia, Norse myths could now be found in everyday culture, in arts and crafts, journalism, religious discourse, commercial advertisements, and political propaganda. The many examples to be mentioned here document the astonishing ability of myths to adapt to the conditions of practically every medium. The Norse myths appear in texts, images, music, and especially combinations of these media: illustrated books, operas, musical plays, commercial advertisements, and political propaganda. As visual media increasingly dominated the culture of the 19th century, Norse myths also became the object of mass-circulated images. Popularized stereotypical representations of the gods appeared, for example, on postcards used for spreading advertisements and propaganda, or on so-called trading cards.<sup>15</sup> Such representations clearly contributed to consolidating the collective pictorial knowledge of the Norse myths. At the same time they require an existing, common horizon of understanding without which the Norse motifs would never have been able to unfold their commercial and propagandist functions. In the German Empire this horizon was shaped by the reception of Wagner, whereas in the Wilhelminian Empire it was supplemented by a widespread passion for the Nordic countries, as well as an enthusiasm for Vikings: a Germanophilia, which Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941) shared with

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<sup>14</sup> For details, see Björnsson 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See Zernack 2009b.

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many of his subjects—including oppositional artists and intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> In this context allusions to allegedly Germanic myths connoted modernity and national identity.

Popularizing depictions like these may have contributed to the fact that Iðunn and Baldur, Loki, Ragnarök, or the Valkyrie were considered part of German—in the emphatic sense national—cultural heritage. As such, Felix Dahn (1834–1912), the tireless popularizer of all things Germanic, began in 1880 to insert Norse material into a German tradition in the countless editions of his book *Walball. Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen*. In doing so, he tellingly links himself almost word for word to Herder:

This mythology is the mirror image of the magnificence of our own people, how this people presented itself in its simple, harsh, but powerful, pure character. In this sense the Germanic tales about gods and heroes are invaluable treasures, an eternal “fountain of youth” of our people’s heritage: Whoever immerses their selves in it with a noble heart, will be lifted from it, their souls rejuvenated and invigorated, because the greatest asset of Germans on earth remains the German people itself.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between national consciousness and modernity is more than clear in the metaphor of the “fountain of youth of our people’s heritage.” Against this backdrop, the book creates continuities again and again between the prehistoric gods and events occurring at the time of its printing: it identifies for example Odin/Wotan with Goethe’s Faust and allows Bismarck to enter Walhall as the last of the Einheriar.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Zernack 1996, 2009a.

<sup>17</sup> “Diese Götterlehre ist das Spiegelbild der Herrlichkeit unsres eignen Volks, wie dies Volk sich darstellte in seiner einfachen, rauhen, aber kraftvollen, reinen Eigenart; in diesem Sinn ist die germanische Götter- und Heldensage ein unschätzbare Hort, ein unversiegender ‘Jungbrunnen’ unsres Volkstums: das heisst, wer in rechter Gesinnung darein niedertaucht, der wird die Seele verjüngt und gekräftigt daraus emporheben; denn es bleibt dabei: das höchste Gut des Deutschen auf Erden ist: - sein deutsches Volk selbst.” Dahn 1880: 213.

<sup>18</sup> Dahn 1880: 260–262, 308–309. Regarding Dahn’s idea of the Teutons, see Kipper 2002.



At the time, there were a large number of handbooks and surveys of Norse mythology written by scholars but for a lay public. Many of them were part of a debate on the reform of secondary education, which suppressed classical studies for the sake of national education—including “Germanic” mythology.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, stories about Norse gods that were considered Germanic or even German seem to have been quite common around the turn of the century, especially in the educated middle class.

There are more precise indications, however, that the reception of myths mostly occurred in specific milieus.<sup>20</sup> In addition to a few circles of poets, such as the so-called *Kosmische Runde* (cosmic circle) in Munich, the *Burschenschaften* (fraternities), and the Wagnerian Bayreuther Kreis, these included numerous groups that belonged to the so-called *Völkisch Movement*.<sup>21</sup> This movement, which could be defined as a type of religious nationalism, integrated the “Germanic” myths into its religious discourse while at the same time misappropriating them for political propaganda. Here, Wagner’s influence is often recognizable: he inspired not only numerous operas that had German, Norse, and Icelandic themes, but also—from around 1900—a noticeably large number of dramatic adaptations of relevant material.<sup>22</sup> To a large degree, these concerned so-called initiatory dramas (*Weibespiele*), neo-pagan religious cultic dramas, which were to help the new *völkisch* national religion—devoid of Judeo-Christian influence—become a ritual practice of its own. Inspired by Wagner’s concepts of the “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) and “art religion” (*Kunstreligion*), the initiatory dramas also derived their motifs from Norse mythology and sagas.<sup>23</sup> By far the most favoured was the god Baldur, who—like Siegfried alias Sigurd the Dragonslayer—was honoured as a type of Germanic messiah. As such, he carried traits of Apollo, Christ, Parzival, and Lucifer: a saviour, who was, at least symbolically, to bring light into the darkness of the national depression and help overcome the unease of the people with the “kleindeutsches Reich”—the “small German”

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<sup>19</sup> See Baden 2009.

<sup>20</sup> A number are identified in Zernack 1996: 496–504.

<sup>21</sup> See Puschner 2001.

<sup>22</sup> A list (which needs to be supplemented) with examples from Fischer 1986.

<sup>23</sup> See von Schnurbein 1994; Zernack 1997.

Empire without Austria—and with its internal contradictions. Here, we can turn to one of the *Baldur* plays by Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867–1952) as an example. Fahrenkrog, a painter and writer, played his role in the *völkisch* milieu as the founder of the religious movement referred to as the Germanic Faith Community (*Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft*).<sup>24</sup> Wayland the Blacksmith—the protagonist Völundr from the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*—was another mythological figure with whose help the anticipation of a national rebirth in the near future was expressed. Before Wagner published a draft of the play *Wayland the Blacksmith* in 1872, he had already introduced a national interpretation of this figure when he identified Wayland with the German people in *The Artwork of the Future* (*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*) in 1850.<sup>25</sup> Fahrenkrog also dedicated a play to the blacksmith published as *Wölund* in 1914.

For the adherents of the *Völkisch* movement, the figures from Norse mythology provided national role models and as such, they frequently had to serve as associations, political propaganda for the numerous *völkisch* alliances, associations and magazines. From 1896 to 1933, the mouthpiece of the *völkisch* collective movement was the *Mitteilungen des Allgemeinen Deutschen Schriftvereins* (Proceedings of the General German Language Association) under the title *Heimdall. Zeitschrift für reines Deutschtum und All-Deutschtum* (Journal for Pure Germanness and All-Germanness). In the name of the Norse god Heimdallr, the magazine represented a pan-German imperialism targeting, last but not least, Germans living outside the borders of the German Empire. Their numerous alliances and associations communicated their political claims, also with the help of Norse myths, primarily on propaganda stamps and postcards, which had their golden age as a new mass medium around 1900 and were ideally suited for advertising and propaganda. In addition to regional and Germanic motifs of all sorts, the propaganda postcards from the “Verein Südmark,” the “Bund der Deutschen in Niederösterreich,” as well as the “Alldeutscher Verband” and other so-called national protection unions (*Schutzvereine*) depicted numerous mythological motifs: again and again Odin/Wotan and the Valkyries, but also rather marginal figures such as the giant Þjazi (see Figure 1). It is a

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<sup>24</sup> Additional Baldur plays can be shown to some extent also after the end of the empire, among them Pannwitz 1919; Overhof 1927; Prellwitz 1924.

<sup>25</sup> See Dusse 2007: especially 60.

similar political actuality to Dahn's *Walhall*, where Bismark is represented as Wotan on one of the propaganda cards from the "Verein Südmark" during World War I (see Figure 2).

Within the context of the Bismarck cult, Norse myths are frequently found beyond the propaganda from national protection unions as well. The Prussian prime minister and later chancellor of the Reich, who was primarily associated with Odin/Wotan, but also with Baldur, Loki, and Siegfried/Sigurd, also knew how to use Norse mythology as a political instrument. This can be gleaned from the so-called "Hoedur speeches" (*Hoedurreden*) with which, in 1885, the chancellor promoted an offensive colonial policy for the German Empire in front of the German "Reichstag." He underlined this with allusions to the myth of Baldur's death, which stood for the endangering of the German "rejuvenation of the people" (*Völkerfrühling*).<sup>26</sup> Approximately ten years earlier, Dahn had celebrated German imperialism as the politics of Thor's hammer, with a similar effect, in order to give it the solemnity of an ancient national tradition.<sup>27</sup> The principle is always the same: the mythological embellishment heightens claims that are actually political to the metaphysical.<sup>28</sup> The world war created a further wave of mytho-political allusions which again moved Baldur to the foreground.<sup>29</sup>

In the German empire, the reception of Norse mythology was probably circulated most within commercial advertising.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, here too when considered from a social historical viewpoint, the references clearly indicate the bourgeois middle class as the milieu of origin. At the same time, the proportion of Nordic material in the huge treasure of motifs used in advertising was on the whole marginal, despite the fact that there is a surprisingly large amount of evidence for the commercial reception of Nordic myths. To cite some examples, there were magazines (*Iduna*, *Freya*, etc.), publishers (*Baldur-Verlag*, *Asgard-Verlag*, *Edda-Verlag*, etc.), boats (the coastal battle cruiser *Aegir*, the imperial yacht *Iduna*, amongst others)

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<sup>26</sup> Kohl 1898: 278–280.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Zernack 1997: 150.

<sup>28</sup> Zernack 2009b.

<sup>29</sup> See Zernack 2007.

<sup>30</sup> For a more extensive discussion with a number of examples, see Zernack 2009b.

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and houses (*Villa Aegir*, *Haus Iduna*, etc.), figures and motifs from Norse (or Norse–Germanic) mythology (and a few from heroic poetry) that advertised insurance companies (*Iduna*, *Freia*). There were also motorcycle vehicle factories (*Fafnir*, *Freya*), laundries (*Iduna*, *Aegir*), restaurants (*Freya*, *Café Asgard*, etc.) and producers of optical devices (*Baldur*) as well as bicycle manufacturers (*Freya*, *Aegir*, etc.), oven manufacturers (*Baldur*, *Wotan*, *Walküre*), sewing machines (*Freia*, *Frigga*, *Walküre*, etc.). In addition, there were light bulbs (*Thor*), cigarettes (*Walküre*, *Rheingold*, *Sleipner*), phonograph needles (*Aegir*), sparkling wines (*Baldur*, *Rheingold*), chocolate (*Edda-Schokolade*), cars (*Aegir*, *Freia*, *Fafnir*), medical instruments (*Iduna*), military equipment (*Thor*), and much more (see Figures 3–5). The advertising effect achieved by these mythological names obviously resulted from their assumed modernity—their ability to “rejuvenate”—and not from parallels between the mythological motifs and the products they were promoting. Few of these firms and products survived the times with these names; already before the middle of the 20th century the trend ebbed away. The motifs from Norse mythology could only temporarily compete with the gods of classical antiquity as advertising media.

Advertising is also instructive within our context since it not only spreads names but especially images of Norse gods. In addition to adverts, commercial poster stamps and trading cards are also informative because they show the stereotypical images of gods that dominated the contemporary pictorial knowledge. Between 1894 and 1934 there were at least ten series of trading cards with images from the Norse realm of the gods, which were usually passed off though as “German” or “Germanic” (see Figures 6–7).<sup>31</sup> There is evidence that commercial advertising was interested in motifs from Norse mythology beyond the Wilhelminian Empire (see Figure 8), nonetheless, obviously not with the same intensity.

In the Wilhelminian Empire, the reception of the Norse myths is characterized by their complete and utter acceptance as obviously Germanic or German: Although a substantial portion of the motifs and figures are known to be exclusively Icelandic or Norse references—in addition to the previously mentioned goddess Iðunn,

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<sup>31</sup> Zernack 2009b: 338.

there was Ægir, the personification and sometimes the giant of the ocean (but in postmedieval times he was usually considered a god); the god Heimdall; the motif of Ragnarök; and many others—yet Iceland did not play any role as a cultural geographic parameter. Its traditions were used—directly and indirectly—but only as incorporations into the canon of German culture as national property.

### Thule: The Anti-Modern World of the Icelandic Sagas

It was only at the dawn of the 20th century that Iceland as a place came into view. Once again, the island’s medieval traditions were of central importance—now, however, predominantly in the form of the Icelandic sagas. Unlike the tales of the Norse gods with their mythical staging, the sagas are set in the island’s actual topography, described in minute detail. Thus they cannot be linked to another culture. Nevertheless, a way was found in which the Icelandic sagas could also be assimilated into German nationalism.

Initially, as the Norse myths gained attention in the 18th century, Iceland was remote from the continent’s perspective: “a cold miserable island”<sup>32</sup> “at the end of the inhabited world.”<sup>33</sup> This perception was not at all grounded in experience, since travelling to Iceland was only made possible later. With the supposedly realistic descriptions in the Icelandic sagas, however, the cultural–geographical landscape of Iceland began to attract attention. At that point in time, northern Europe was generally perceived as a whole as one giant cultural region, without any differentiation between its inhabitants—Celtic, Germanic, and Slavonic.<sup>34</sup> Even Mallet considered the Poetic Edda as Celtic and hence his readers understood a direct relationship between the Norse material and the Gaelic poems by Ossian. This is evident, for example, in the German translation of Ossian by the Jesuit priest Michael Denis (1729–1800) published in Vienna in 1874. Amidst the reconstructions of the Ossian poems there are translations of *Völuspá*, *Baldur’s draumar*, *Hákonarmál*, and other Old Norse poems. In a similar way, in 1773 within the context of his discussion of Ossian (in *Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder der alten Völker*), Herder

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<sup>32</sup> “Eine kalte elende Insel,” Schlözer 1773: 3.

<sup>33</sup> “Am Ende der bewohnten Welt,” Herder [1784–1791] 1828: 285.

<sup>34</sup> See Kliemann-Geisinger 2007.

had published a translation of *Baldrs draumar*. The poem corresponded particularly well to the new aesthetic interest in the sombre and the sublime.<sup>35</sup> However, in 1796, in the treatise *Iduna*, Herder already saw differences between the Celtic and Northern Germanic; now he expressly kept the “Normans” at a distance from the “Gaelic” and grouped them with the Germans amongst the “Teutonic tribes”:<sup>36</sup> obviously Herder’s extension of the German prehistoric cultural space was accompanied by a change in his opinion of northern Europe, which was now “Germanized.” Nonetheless, it took another good century before first Scandinavia and then Iceland also became embodiments of this Germanic north, *germania germanicissima*, as Klaus von See has shown in a number of fundamental studies.<sup>37</sup>

During the entire 19th century, the question as to which role Iceland could actually play for Germanic antiquity arose at most occasionally among scholars. The scholarly dispute between Norwegians and Germans about the origins of the Eddic lays is one example of how highly charged this question was for the Germans. Their significance for German culture was dependent on the lays being understood as a common Germanic cultural expression. This in particular, however, was denied by the Norwegian Sophus Bugge (1833–1907): according to his—always disputed—“borrowing hypothesis,” the development of the Norse myths dates back only to the Viking age, when the Scandinavians on the British Isles came into contact with classical and Christian culture.<sup>38</sup> The reaction of the Germanist Karl Müllenhoff (1818–1884) bears witness to what was at risk: Germans’ entitlement as legitimate heirs to the Icelandic traditions and thus the possibility to reclaim them for German culture by constructing a common antiquity for all Germanic tribes. Furiously, Müllenhoff complains that the Norwegians deny the Germans’ right to the Icelandic treasures by contesting Germanic unity. In particular, he was outraged by German scholars who dared to take “the same Nordic point of view.” He accused these scholars, among them the Munich-based historian of law Konrad Maurer (1823–1902)—an “Icelander at heart”—of “not having their feet on

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<sup>35</sup> See von See et al. 2000: 386.

<sup>36</sup> Herder [1796] 1883: 497.

<sup>37</sup> Now collected in von See 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Bugge 1881–1889.

the ground of German academia created by Jacob Grimm.” Ultimately they observed “the Germanic realm and rest of the world from the Heckelberg,” the Icelandic Mount Hekla, and not “from their original unity.”<sup>39</sup> Everything depended on the correct, national German perspective: with its help, Old Germanic literature could be discovered in Iceland.

At the start of the 20th century, an outsider to academia, the former minister Arthur Bonus (1864–1941), indicated that this could be claimed not only for “the Edda,” but also for the Icelandic sagas. With his three-volume *Isländerbuch* he introduced a veritable change of era in the German reception of Old Norse–Icelandic literature:<sup>40</sup> motivated by a vehement critique of civilization he shifted the sagas into the foreground, accusing the Wagner-influenced reception of mythology of being “romantic.” In contrast, he construed the allegedly realistic descriptions of the Icelandic Family sagas as an alternative to modernity. With the Old Icelandic *mikilmenni* he set a heroic individual at the centre, who, through his own strength, shrugs off oppressive social conditions, without ever calling for them to be improved. This endeavour to cope with the problems of civilization through a cult of heroism already had a tradition at the time of Bonus, which is also noticeable in the reception of Norse mythology and goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Julius Langbehn (1851–1907) amongst others. Thus, Bonus’s reading of the sagas complied with a need for identification, which was typical of the day, especially in the middle classes. Here the hero of the saga was met with interest as a paradigm of the autonomous personality, who manages to gain power and social esteem through his own will and not by being born into a privileged class. Scholars—usually Germanists—and teachers felt drawn primarily to this concept of the “strong-spirited” personality of the sagas (“Sagapersönlichkeit”).<sup>41</sup> Amongst those to be mentioned here is the influential Andreas Heusler (1865–1940) from Basel; Heusler was a professor in Berlin

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<sup>39</sup> Müllenhoff 1890–1920, vol. V: 62, 64, 66. Müllenhoff’s distrust of Maurer not least fed from Maurer’s support for the Icelanders’ political struggle for independence. In addition, the reproach against Maurer might include an allusion to his studies into the traditional idea of Mount Hekla being the place of hell.

<sup>40</sup> Bonus 1907. More extensively regarding the significance of Bonus for the German image of Iceland, see Zernack 1994: 215–223, 348–354.

<sup>41</sup> See Zernack 1994: 50–76.

for many years at the start of the century and, being especially interested in Germanic antiquity, he contributed a number of translations to Bonus's *Isländerbuch*. These translations were only a small part of Heusler's own systematic efforts to popularize the Icelandic sagas—and especially their style of speech—in German.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Bonus caught the attention of Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930), a publisher from Jena who, as a follower of the life reform movement (*Lebensreformbewegung*), was enthusiastic about everything that was (allegedly) originally Germanic. Since 1911, Diederichs had been publishing a large-scale book series—for which he prepared with a journey to Iceland. The series, consisting of translations of Old Icelandic literature, was the so-called *Sammlung Thule* (“Thule Collection”; see Figure 9).<sup>43</sup> The title alone reveals the project's impulse to update, which was underlined by the publisher's advertisement:

Ragnarök, the dawn of the peoples, overshadows the occident. If we are to avoid being annihilated by it, if we are to survive as a people, we will have to become aware of ourselves. We have to return to the deepest roots of our strength. Already in the last decade our instincts have led us to Norse Literature. However, the Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg, whom we sought out have drawn upon deeper sources themselves. Today these sources lay in the ancient poems of the north. We need only find our way to them. “Thule” opens this way for us.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> These efforts are also demonstrated in his contributions to the Thule series (see footnote 43) as well as in a number of articles; see for example Heusler 1917, 1920, and 1934. Regarding Heusler's attitude towards Old Icelandic literature, see the essays in Glauser & Zernack 2005 and Zernack 2008: 252–255.

<sup>43</sup> Thule. Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa, 24 vols., ed. F. Niedner Jena: Diederichs 1911–1930. New edition 1963–1967.

<sup>44</sup> “Ragnarök, Völkerdämmerung liegt über dem Abendlande. Soll sie uns nicht vernichten, sollen wir als Volk nicht untergehen, müssen wir uns auf uns selbst besinnen. Wir müssen auf die tiefsten Wurzeln unserer Kraft zurückgehen. Der Instinkt dafür führte uns schon in den letzten Jahrzehnten zur nordischen Literatur. Aber die Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg, zu denen wir als Suchende kamen, haben selbst aus tieferen Quellen geschöpft. Hier in der nordischen Urdichtung liegen diese Quellen zutage. Es gilt nur, daß wir selbst den Weg zu ihnen finden. Dieser Weg liegt durch ‘Thule’ offen.” Publisher's catalogue from 1922.



Diederichs obviously only had a vague idea of the dating and genesis of Old Norse literature. Nonetheless, for someone doubting the meaning of progress, it was above all a relic of a pre-modern world. The title of the introductory volume, which gives an impression of presenting “The Culture of Iceland in the Viking Age,”<sup>45</sup> confirms this perspective of interpretation. It hardly does justice to the medieval sources, but nonetheless it found support in the idea that the representations in the Icelandic sagas in particular were historically authentic—an idea that was held by some scholars, but that was even then highly disputed and that is obsolete today. As a consequence, the allegedly, genuinely transmitted “pagan” matter of the texts appeared as an autochthonous Icelandic creation, barely influenced by the Catholic Middle Ages. This Icelandic world of the sagas was thought to represent a culture free of the evils of civilization, thus directly leading to the supposed Germanic origins.

Similar to Bonus’s *Isländerbuch*, the *Sammlung Thule* thus subjects the Icelandic sagas (as well as the Eddic tradition and additional prose texts) to a general critique of civilization and to the national interest. The use of stereotypical metaphors, which is inherent in the reception of the sagas, shows that this way of updating the material was obviously plausible at that time. The metaphors are accompanied by the same topos of renewal that was already in place in the perception of Norse myths and indicated their modernity. In the context of the sagas it is found in a characteristic variation, namely in images of untainted “freshness” usually associated with water and air. Thus, reading the *Íslendingasögur* seemed like “diving into the sea” or “like the refreshing break of the waves.”<sup>46</sup> “Harsh sea air” that “should be able to harden us in order to stand upright in a world full of devils” was also mentioned.<sup>47</sup> One could gain the impression here that the reception of the sagas held a utopian potential. However, at least in the introductory volume for *Sammlung Thule* that was published in 1913, it can be seen that the popularization of Old Icelandic literature is aimed primarily at criticizing contemporary political conditions. Here, the “heroic men of Old Iceland” were again measured against

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<sup>45</sup> Niedner 1913.

<sup>46</sup> “Eintauchen in ein Meeresbad,” A[venarius] 1906: 587; “wie erfrischender Wellenschlag,” Koppin 1911: 600.

<sup>47</sup> “Sollte uns stählen können zum Aufrechtstehn in einer Welt voll Teufel,” Heusler 1930: 93.

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Bismarck, the “iron creator of our empire”: an obvious sign that in evoking the “genius of Germanic greatness” through the translations, less thought was given to the future than to a figurative restoration of a past epoch of German history.<sup>48</sup> The regressive character of this utopia is also revealed in that Iceland is identified with “Thule,” the name for *ultima Thule* handed down in classical literature that stands for a country on the northern edge of the world or a new world in the west, giving hope for renewal.<sup>49</sup> Its application to Iceland alludes to an early Germanic advanced civilization, which was supposed to be on the same cultural level as the known great civilizations, especially the Greek and Roman. As the title of the translation series at Diederichs’s publishing house, the name Thule stood for a Germanic continuity, promising something ancient and at the same time maintaining its unremitting validity, or, as announced in the publisher’s advertisement in its characteristic religious diction (1922): “Thule is not history; Thule is the eternal Germanic soul.”<sup>50</sup>

“Thule,” however, is primarily another name for the Nordic Hellas, the classical landscape of a non-classical people. It still resonates with the idea that had granted the Nordic material the interest of European intellectuals in the 18th century: the idea that the Nordic sources could help to overcome classicism and replace it as an ideal of art. This thought, however, was based on the assumption of having discovered non-classical material! The status as the alternative *par excellence* always remained attached to the Norse myths, whereas identifying Iceland with Thule implies the postulate of a new Germanic classical period. In the early 20th century, German Scandinavianists and Germanists, especially Gustav Neckel (1878–1940), worked on outlining this. In 1927, Neckel claimed that “nothing romantic can in truth be found in the land of Snorri, rather it is Norse Classicism.” Moreover he thought he could recognize “Winckelmann’s values in Old Icelandic literature”: “great contours,” “noble simplicity,” “not the quiet, but the powerful greatness.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Niedner 1913: vi. The text was reprinted in its original version in 1920.

<sup>49</sup> See von See 2006; Mund-Dopchie 2008; Romm 1994: 157–171, 207–211.

<sup>50</sup> “Thule ist nicht Vergangenheit, Thule ist die ewige germanische Seele.” Publisher’s catalogue from 1922.

<sup>51</sup> “Nichts Romantisches findet sich in Wahrheit im Landes Snorris, vielmehr die nordische Klassik,” “große Kontur,” “edle Einfalt,” “nicht die stille, aber die kräftige Größe,” Neckel 1928: 1–2. See also Neckel 1922 and 1933.

Admittedly, though, such speculations had even less appeal than the Old Norse myths that were considered Germanic or German; therefore they remained limited to the scholarly milieu and a few *völkisch* imitators. For everyone else—as long as they could not travel there—Iceland was at best “the land of the Edda,” and as such it surfaces sporadically in popular representations on trading cards: exotic and secluded (see Figure 10).

### Concluding Remarks

The German nationalistic abuse of “Nordic” culture and literature is often flatly attributed to National Socialist ideology. Of course there is evidence for a National Socialist glorification of Old Norse literature and mythology, mistaken for a Germanic or even a German tradition.<sup>52</sup> But it is obvious, though, that the reception of Old Icelandic literature after 1933 is only the epilogue of an earlier phase of interest in this subject. This article has shown that a huge amount of Germanic material already existed at the beginning of the 20th century that had been charged with “modern” and “national” meaning during the decades before, in particular—though not exclusively—in the Wilhelminian Empire. A good example of this is a deluxe edition of the Poetic Edda published by the Askanischer Verlag in Berlin as late as 1943. Imitating a medieval manuscript, the book contains an almost fifty-year-old translation of the Eddic lays by Hugo Gering (1847–1925), illustrated with black-and-white reproductions of watercolours by the *völkisch* artist Franz Stassen (1869–1949), who had already begun to depict Eddic motifs at the end of the 19th century.<sup>53</sup> What the Nazis meant by “nordisch” were primarily their racist ideas with which Old Norse–Icelandic motifs could easily be assimilated in their philosophy, having been treated as an epitome of the “Germanic” past for more than one hundred years. Needless to say, the material itself is not to be blamed for this. All the same, it may still be necessary to come to its defence, whether against the suspicion of being ideological in itself or against a new misunderstanding.

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<sup>52</sup> See for example Bollason 1990.

<sup>53</sup> *Edda. Götterlieder/Heldenlieder* 1943.

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To sum up, the attention given to Old Norse literature in the modern age moves between an aesthetically motivated international interest during the second half of the 18th century and its initially national and then nationalistic constriction later on. This development can also be observed beyond German-speaking areas; also in the Scandinavian countries (and occasionally elsewhere) Norse materials serve as components of foundational discourses of identity which, not inevitably but nonetheless frequently, serve nationalist ideologies.<sup>54</sup> Here, however, unlike with the German reception, there is no need for a detour through the construction of a common Germanic history. German national consciousness is dependent upon the claim of a Germanic antiquity. As an ideal landscape it allocates this epoch first a romantic and then a classical image of Iceland that gains its contours just as much from the German present as from the island's medieval literature.



Figure 1. Postcard, edited by “Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen” around 1900. The postcard is part of a series of twelve “Monats-Karten” designed by the artist Hans Kaufmann. Instead of the usual Latin names of the months German names are used (in this example “Nebelmond” instead of “November”). The cards are illustrated with motifs from “Germanic” mythology, in this case the giant Þjazi. Typically there is no hint that this character is only known from Icelandic sources: in the context of the series it is presented as an element of Germanic mythology epitomizing German national identity.

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<sup>54</sup> See Clunies Ross & Lönnroth 1999.



Figure 2. Propaganda postcard edited by “Verein Südmark” during World War I: *Two soldiers see the apparition of Bismarck in the guise of Wodan. (Zwei Soldaten erscheint Wodan in Gestalt Bismarcks.)* © Pictura Paedagogica.



Figure 3. Advertisement for Edda-Chocolade produced by the Saxonian chocolate manufacturer Petzold & Aulhorn from *Die Woche* 20, 1904. The advertisement not only refers to the Old Norse “Edda,” it also depicts a valkyrie, one of the most favorite motifs from Norse mythology in German culture after Richard Wagner’s opera *Die Walküre* (1876). Everything in this advertisement suggests modernity, as it was in fact new and “modern” to eat chocolate in a raw state instead of drinking it with milk.

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Figure 4. Poster stamp (between 1900 and 1918) of Geka-Werke in Offenbach am Main, a manufacturer producing flashlights. For once a Norse god, Thor, is shown without any explanatory text. 49×40 mm.



Figure 5. Advertisement for “Iduna-Heilapparate” from *Die Woche* 47, 1900, promoting an electric medical device to be used as a remedy for neurasthenia, sciatica, articular gout, rheumatism, cold feet, gastric trouble, intestinal, liver and kidney diseases... 45 × 125 mm.



Figure 6. Card 3 of the trading cards series 276 *Nordische Göttersage* (1894) by the Liebig Company, a manufacturer of meat extract. The card depicts “Donar fighting against the Midgard serpent and the giant of frost,” thus showing a characteristic mixture of German and Norse mythological motifs.



Figure 7. Card 6 of the trading cards series 1050 *Die Edda* (1934) by Liebig Company depicting *ragnarök*, the end of the Norse gods. Liebig cards were available in various languages.

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Figure 8. Advertisement of the Saxonian engine works “Aegir” from *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 1921. The firm produced rotary current motors. Aegir, in the Icelandic sources either a personification or a giant of the sea, is often depicted with a trident in modern times. As a borrowing from the Roman Neptune this attribute turns him into a god of the sea: a Germanic parallel to the sea gods of classical antiquity. 40×60 mm.



Figure 9. The “Thuleschiff,” a stylized viking longboat, decorated the covers of all volumes of the *Sammlung Thule*. This is the 4th volume, published in 1922 and containing Andreas Heusler’s translation of *Njáls saga* from 1914.





Figure 10. Card 3 of the trading cards series 846 *Island, das Land der Edda* (1912) by the Liebig Company.

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