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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BÚRI AND ÓÐINN IN THE MARVEL COMICS¹

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine the transformation of the Norse myths concerning Búri and Óðinn in the Marvel comics, and how it results in a distorted and quite erroneous impression among the readers with no substantial knowledge of the subject. This in turn makes us wonder to what extent the evidence in the *Eddur* and *Sagas*, themselves artistic forms from a later period, reflects the authentic myths and beliefs..

Key words. – reinterpretation, Norse mythology, comics, Búri, Óðinn.

“I decided readers were already pretty familiar with the Greek and Roman gods. It might be fun to delve into the Old Norse legends ... Besides, I pictured Norse gods looking like Vikings of old, with the flowing beards, horned helmets, and battle clubs. ... Journey into Mystery needed a shot in the arm, so I picked Thor ... to headline the book. After writing an outline depicting the story and the characters I had in mind, I asked my brother, Larry, to write the script because I didn't have time ... and it was only natural for me to assign the penciling to Jack Kirby”.² Thus Lee recalls the creation of his first superhero inspired by the Norse mythology,³ which unlike the other Marvel

¹ This work is a modified and hopefully improved version of a paper presented at the MEET 2021 conference (14.10.2021).

² Mair & Lee 2002, 157-159.

³ It is a matter of some controversy as to whose creation Thor truly is. Lee (1974, 178-179) explains that it was his idea to create a superhero based on a Nordic deity. On the other hand, Kirby maintained that: “I came up with Thor because I've always been a history buff. I know all about Thor and Balder and Mjolnir, the hammer. Nobody ever bothered

characters, had a predetermined, i.e. fixed genealogy and superpowers. In his view, the deities were primarily superheroes with rounded legendary background, not an excuse to “revive” the *Eddur* for a teenage audience. A decade and a half after the protagonist attained his form in accordance with the ideas for the comic, Thomas continued to adapt the adventures of Odinson by drawing directly from the Scandinavian poems.⁴ At the same time, Kirby had a strong inclination towards the mythologies of yore – an interest that is perceptible from his early work.⁵ In an interview in 1992, he states that: “[I] knew the Thor legends very well, but I wanted to modernize them. I felt that might be a new thing for comics, taking the old legends and modernizing them”.⁶ Undoubtedly, this modernization rather reflects the contemporary American political identity, or in the words of Inge: “they are derivative of popular patterns, themes, and concepts of world culture ... and at the same time, they also serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores, and they speak directly to human desires, needs, and emotions”.⁷ Therefore, taking as a starting point the fact that the comics as a mass media have a significant influence on society, our task will be to discern the “deviations” from the source material; and through a short survey, to determine their impact and influence on the readers’ perceptions.

1. Búri,⁸ who is mentioned in somewhat later sources,⁹ is Óðinn’s grandfather and part of the creation stories, for at the dawn of time, Auðumbla “licked the ice-blocks, which were salty; and the first day that she licked the blocks, there came forth from the blocks in the evening a man’s hair; the

with that stuff except me ... I loved Thor because I loved legends. I’ve always loved legends. Stan Lee was the type of guy who would never know about Balder and who would never know about the rest of the characters. I had to build up that legend of Thor in the comics ... I’m a storyteller. My job is to sell my stories.” (Groth 1990, 81, 92).

⁴ Reynolds 1994, 57.

⁵ Towards the end of 1940s, he created a version of the Roman god Mercury for *Timely Comics* (*Red Raven Comics* #1), who was to be renamed soon after into Hurricane (*Captain America Comics* #1), and treated as a son of Thor. Two years later Kirby drew a version of Thor with a red beard and horned helmet for DC (*Adventure Comics* vol. 1 #75), and in 1957 he created another bearded Thor for *Tales of the Unexpected* #16.

⁶ Green 1997, 18.

⁷ Inge 2001, 217.

⁸ Adapted in the Marvel comics by Kirby and Lee, his first appearance is in *Journey into Mystery* #97 (October, 1963). As Tiwaz he was represented by Simonson and Buscema in *Thor* #355 (May, 1985).

⁹ Búri is mentioned in *Gylfaginning* (13th century), but not the *Poetic Edda*. However, Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál* quotes the skald Þórvaldr blönduskáld (12th century), which indicates that the Icelandic poet used older sources, now lost to us.

second day, a man's head; the third day the whole man was there." Snorri describes him as "fair of feature, great and mighty. He begat a son called Borr".¹⁰ Since the silence of the primary sources left a lot of room for numerous inventions, we will focus on his depiction in the comics. With the exception of the legend introduced in *Thor Annual*, identical with the description of Hár,¹¹ already in the *Thor & Hercules Mythological Encyclopedia* we can see an "attempt" to specify the circumstances concerning his birth – that Audumbla gave him his form by licking the ice.¹² This is contrary to the story in *Journey into Mystery*, where Buri comes out of the ice on his own, without the help from the cosmic cow.¹³ On the other hand, Doctor Strange portrays him as the oldest son of the hermaphrodite Giant,¹⁴ which is an interesting concept.¹⁵ Namely, while comparing the first chain-links in the Scandinavian sequence, we can ascertain that the progenitors of the two warring groups are connected by some unexplained, yet existential aspects that indicate how close and intertwined their liaison is. Auðumbla,¹⁶ who after these events quietly departs the scene without leaving any trace in the skaldic poetry; and the ice – the common primordial substance.¹⁷ In that respect, especially important is the narrative in *Thor* #493 where Buri comes into existence in the primordial void Ginnungagap, alongside, and in the same fashion, as Ymir.¹⁸

Since we covered the various Marvel versions of his birth, we will briefly turn our attention to the question of his marital status and the prob-

¹⁰ *Gylfaginning* 6.

¹¹ *Thor Annual* #5. Hár [High] is one of the three collocutors of Gangleri in *Gylfaginning*, and is also an epithet of Óðinn (*Grímnismál* 46; *Hávamál* 109, 111, 164).

¹² *Thor & Hercules Mythological Encyclopedia* #1.

¹³ *Journey into Mystery* #97. Búri's genesis is a matter of disagreement amongst the scholars. Price (2002, 49) thinks that the power of creation lies in Auðumbla, for "under her tongue the first god slowly emerges from the ice". The opposite view is held by Ross (1994, 157-158), who marginalizes the role of the cosmic cow considering the fact that "he is already fully formed when Auðumbla licks him free from the rime-stones ... though it is necessary to give him independent existence, her licking does not create him."

¹⁴ *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* #35.

¹⁵ According to *Snorra Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 5), it was from the sweat of Ymir that the first unnamed pair of Rime-Giants rose.

¹⁶ Since through the feeding of Ýmir and the release of Búri, Auðumbla "unifies" the warring groups (Lindow 2002, 63), some consider her as a mother both to the Giants and the Gods (Turville-Petre 1964, 277). In Marvel's Multiverse, it is said that she is one of the many forms of Gaia (*Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z* #2).

¹⁷ Ефтимовски 2020, 195; Lindow 2020, 21.

¹⁸ On the common origin of the heroes and villains in Marvel, v. *infra*.

lems it raises. Taking as a wife an unidentified Jötunn,¹⁹ he fathers Bor, Mimir and Njord.²⁰ If we follow closely the working patterns in the Norse mythology, the authors are correct – even though Búri is not a product of a reproductive act, it seems that he was unable to escape the need for sexual partner and therefore turned to the only source of women, the Jötnar. As appealing as this suggestion may seem, I find it somewhat unconvincing. Leaving aside the attempts for creating an additional dichotomy between the Æsir and the Giants based on the juxtaposition between the ordinary human act from which Borr is born and the monstrous procreation of Aurgelmir,²¹ the formulation used by the Icelandic poet (“hann gat son þann, er Borr hét“) which is the basis for M. Ross’ hypothesis,²² in itself contains no indications concerning the nature of the birth. Therefore, we believe that placed in a wider context of the Germanic tradition,²³ both Búri and Ýmir were probably hermaphrodites.²⁴ Which leads us to the second question – does his parentage of the gods of wisdom and the seas have any mythological justification? The interpreters of the *Hávamál*²⁵ conjecture that Mímir²⁶ might be hiding behind the anonymous son of Böllþorn, for if he “was the power who possessed inspiration before the Æsir, it is among the giants rather than the gods that we should expect to find him“.²⁷ As for the origins of Njörðr, we have no information, except that after establishing the peace with the Æsir he was sent as a hostage together with his children Freyr and Freya in exchange for Hœnir.²⁸

¹⁹ Since the archaic ettin is connected with the Old Norse jötunn and the Old English eoten (from the Proto-Germanic *etunaz), in the text we will use both Jötunn and Giant (Orel 2003, 86).

²⁰ *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z #2*.

²¹ As well as the incestuous relations of his descendants (Lindow 2020, 21).

²² Ross 1994, 94, 157, 185.

²³ e.g. Tuisto (Tac., *Germ.*, 2. 2), Tveggi (*Sonatorrek*, 25) and probably Billingsr (v. McKinnell 2005, 168).

²⁴ Ефтимовски 2020, 195. For Búri as a substitute for Tuisto (from the Proto-Germanic root *twai – two, and its derivate *twis – double) v. Grimm 1882, 349.

²⁵ *Hávamál* 140.

²⁶ Puhvel 2001, 218-219; Rydberg 1886, 468-469. In some of the Marvel legends he is called a son of Bestla or Bolthorn, and even his brother, and by extension probably nephew of Ymir (*Thor: Asgard's Avenger* #1).

²⁷ Davidson 1990, 168. The location of Mímisbrunn underneath the root that runs toward the area of the Jötnar, suggests a connection, perhaps a primary one, between Mímir and the Giants, despite the fact that we know that in the nearer mythical past he was a member of the Æsir (Lindow 2002, 232). In *Thor* #240, Mimir is described as “the Gigant who did guard the Well“.

²⁸ Mímir on the other hand, went to the Vanir in exchange for Kvasir (*Ynglinga saga* 4).

In the absence of any clearer indicators concerning the motives of the authors, we can only speculate that the common denominator of the new triad should be sought in the position and genealogy of Bor, Njörðr и Mímir, who are representatives of the different cosmic zones and social groups.

With the creation of Asgard, forgotten by his kin, Buri, assuming the name Tiwaz, relocated in Nastrond.²⁹ The choice of the new pseudonym is quite intriguing from an etymological point: the Old Nordic theonym Týr, which some scholars associate with the Proto-Germanic noun *Tiwaz (god, divinity), probably derives from the PIE *dyéw-/ *diw- (cf. skt. Dyauś)³⁰ – an epithet of Buri mentioned in the *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z Update* #2.³¹ This episode is reminiscent of Eliade's synthetic assessment that in various mythologies, the creators of the heavens and the entire cosmos have a tendency to disappear from the cult (though not the mythology), in order to make room for the more dynamic forces³² – in our case Óðinn, Vili and Vé. For they create Miðgarðr from the body of the fallen proto-Jötunn Ýmir, and in doing so put an end to the initial "rule" of the Ice Giants.³³ In the meantime, the blood of Brimir³⁴ was used for the production of vine that was

²⁹ *Thor* #355; *The New Mutants* #82.

³⁰ West 2007, 167-168; Kroonen 2013, 519; Wodtko, Irslinger & Schneider 2008, 70-71.

³¹ In Marvel, Tiwaz is the original sky-father who after the defeat abdicates in favor of Bor (*Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z Update* #2; *Thor* #355). Yet, when discussing his mythical counterpart, it should be emphasized that this version has no basis whatsoever, even as a hypothesis. Though for Eliade (1958, 80) Tiwaz is a sky-father, according to West (2007, 167), "it is preferable to suppose that he once had another name, which came to be supplanted by the title 'God'".

³² Eliade 1987, 122.

³³ *Grímnismál* 40-41; *Vafþrúdnismál* 21; *Gylfaginning* 7. With the exception of the cunning Bergelmir, who with his wife boarded *lúðr*, the rest of the Giants drowned in the ocean, which is Ýmir's blood (*Vafþrúdnismál* 35; *Bēowulf* 1687-1693). This legend is mentioned in the *Thor Annual* #5. The story about the survival of Þrúðgelmir's son is an attempt to rationally explain how the Jötnar lived on even after the great flood, and according to Branston (1955, 63), bears all the marks of an interpolation, probably under the influence of the *Old Testament*. As for the myth of Bergelmir and the depiction in the *Genesis*, Turville-Petre (1964, 276), maintains that they are not in any way identical: "it has often been said that there was no flood in the Norse creation myth, and that Snorri, knowing the story of Noah, felt the need of one. It must, however, be admitted that Snorri's story is altogether unlike the biblical one, and has closer affinities with some recorded among primitive peoples". In the *Vafþrúdnismál* Bergelmir is depicted as a direct descendant of Ýmir, i.e. as his nephew (*Vafþrúdnismál* 29). The Marvel creators on the other hand, do not specify their relation (*Thor Annual* #5).

³⁴ An alternative name for Ýmir (*Völuspá* 9).

stored in the barrels of the wise eagle Lerad.³⁵ The Scandinavian Læraðr is not a bird, but a tree in the middle of Valhöll, identified with the Holly Ash,³⁶ whose leafs were food for the goat Heiðrún.³⁷ On the other hand, we encounter the motif of fermentation in *Skáldskaparmál*, when the dwarfs Fjalar and Galar create the mead of poetry from the blood of Kvasir.³⁸

In the 60's, Marvel not only allowed its villains to get away with it, but moreover, made their unresolved threats a constant and defining feature of the heroes (*v. supra*); after Ymir successfully regenerates, Odin creates an abyss with an interdimensional chain, through which the Jotun army is tossed into Muspelheim and captured by the resident demons. Eventually, Wotan³⁹ lures Aurgelmir⁴⁰ himself into the fiery circle of the volcanic area.⁴¹ Here we can observe that the distortions of the mythology are the result not only of the creative imagination, but also, the borrowings from other sources, namely Hesiod's *Theogony*.⁴²

³⁵ *Thor: Blood Oath* #2. According to Hár on the branches of the Sacred Ash sat the wise yet unnamed eagle (*Gylfaginning* 16). This version of the unnamed eagle is present in the comics as well (*Loki* vol. 2 #2).

³⁶ *v. Lindow* 2002, 207.

³⁷ *Gylfaginning* 39; *Grímnismál* 25. From her udders mead runs so copiously, that all the einherjar get fully drunk on it.

³⁸ *Skáldskaparmál* 57.

³⁹ We find him under this name in *Captain America: Hail Hydra* #1.

⁴⁰ Aurgelmir [mud-yeller] is another name for Ýmir (*Vafþrúdnismál* 30-33; cf. *Heroic Age: Villains* #1).

⁴¹ *Journey into Mystery* #98.

⁴² 617-713, 820. cf. Apollod., *Bibl.*, 1.6.3. After all, as Grimm (1883, 575) points out, there are certain analogies between the Greek myths of creation and the Norse beliefs: "As the Edda has a Buri and Borr before Odin, so do Uranus and Kronus here come before Zeus; with Zeus and Odin begins the race of gods proper, and Poseidon and Hades complete the fraternal trio, like Vili and Ve. The enmity of gods and titan is therefore that of ases and giants." Additionally, according to Littleton (1970, 108-109), "It is our contention that the events just described contain all the essential ingredients of the "Kingship in Heaven" theme: First, there is a three-generational line of descent (although bifurcated); second, there is the mutilation of the first-generation "king" (i.e., Odin's cutting up Ymir); third, there is the banishment of a descendant of this first-generation being by one who has usurped power from him (Bergelmir is the logical inheritor of Ymir); fourth, the final and perpetual holder of power (Odin) is, together with his siblings and offspring, defined as an altogether different sort of supernatural being (i.e., "Gods" or Aesir, as opposed to "Giants" or Jötnin; cf. the Greek distinction between "God" and "Titan"). And finally, there is a battle between these Aesir and the Giants, a battle that seems to be equivalent to that between the Olympians and the Titans (or Giants, too, for that matter)".

After the supposed death of Odin and the battle with Hela, Tiwaz found the unconscious Thor in the avalanche and brought him to his castle.⁴³ When he recovered, the Thunderer was sent to Frigga, without knowing that his savior was in fact his grandfather. Tiwaz appears again in *The New Mutants*,⁴⁴ where he plays a key role in the defeat of the Mistress of the Darkness.⁴⁵

2. The mythological profile of Óðinn,⁴⁶ reconstructed from the rich archaeological and literary material is far more complex, which in turn presents us with a greater opportunity to observe the ways in which his manifestation was transformed throughout the comics, and this will be our starting point of comparison.

The superhero narratives that span across many a number of issues, often require of us to suspend our critical thinking, including the necessity to “forget” that certain older elements in the biography are inconsistent with some later information; or alternatively, to accept the most of convoluted explanations as to why these inconsistencies are not really inconsistencies after all.⁴⁷ As a result, the true origin of the one-eyed áss,⁴⁸ often conveyed only through the short stories of Odin himself, is shrouded in mystery. It is presumed that he is a son of Bor,⁴⁹ and brother of Vili and Ve,⁵⁰ with whose help he defeats the monstrous Surtur.⁵¹ In another oration, Alföðr reveals that the two riders sacrificed themselves so that he can escape the fire demon.⁵²

⁴³ *Thor* #355.

⁴⁴ *The New Mutants* #82; #83.

⁴⁵ *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z Update* #2.

⁴⁶ In the Marvel comics he was adapted by Kirby and Lee, and appears for the first time in *Journey into Mystery* #85 (October 1962).

⁴⁷ Arnold 2011, 138.

⁴⁸ *Thor* #355.

⁴⁹ According to the story in “A guide to Norse Religion”, Buri creates Odin, Vili and Ve, with no mention of Bor (*Thor* #493).

⁵⁰ *Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #7.

⁵¹ The sources speak of only one clash between the gods and Surtr, which was fatal for Freyr (*Völuspá* 52-53).

⁵² After their deaths, Odin’s divine properties increased for the powers of Bor’s sons merged with his own, creating the Odinförce as a result (*Thor* #349). There are indications that Vili and Vè (*weljan – will and *wiha – holy) are not separate deities, but rather personifications of different aspects of Óðinn – the ecstatic passion of creation (Paxson 2017, 96; Kroonen 2013, 578-579, 585). In that sense, Keyser (1847, 112) construes the triad as “Spirit, Will or Power, and Holiness” assuming a kind of Germanic trinity in Vili and Vè which subsequently “blended together again in the all-embracing World-spirit – in Odin”.

Forty-eight years following the debut of the original triad in *Journey into Mystery* #97,⁵³ Fraction and Immonen introduced the fourth brother Cul who, after the death of Bor, proclaimed himself king. Ruling Aesheim, the firstborn sowed fear for centuries, up until Odin sealed him deep beneath the ocean.⁵⁴ In order to gain the wisdom as to how to defeat him, Wotan sacrificed his eye to Yggdrasil.⁵⁵ In the aftermath of his triumph, Aesheim was razed to the ground and renamed into Midgard, while the land was sowed with salt so that “no God would ever live there again”.⁵⁶ Based on the available sources, there is no direct counterpart to Cul. Yet, his enmity toward Asagrim,⁵⁷ as

⁵³ Bor's two brothers, Mimir and Njord, who were introduced in 1975, and 1978 respectively, are absent from this narrative.

⁵⁴ *Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #7. It is interesting to point out that according to the Norse myth of the origin of the earthquakes, Loki was caught in Franangrsfors and bound with the intestines of his son Narfi or Nari, while Skaði placed a poisonous serpent above him (*Lokasenna* 65; *Gylfaginning* 50) – an action that Eliade (1958, 207) localizes at the bottom of the sea. If Eliade's interpretation is accepted, then we can draw an analogy with the confinement of the Serpent deep beneath the ocean.

The act of Loki's bounding is mentioned in *Loki* vol. 2 #4. Though a daughter of Þjazi in the Norse mythology, in the *Fear Itself* series Skaði is presented as a child of Cul.

⁵⁵ *Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #7. Here yet again we encounter a distortion of the myth in order for the development of the plot about the battle between the two brothers. Indeed, Yggdrasil is mentioned in a sacrificial context in the *Hávamál*, but only as the tree on which the pierced Óðinn hung for nine days and nine nights. His true *passio* is the sacrifice of himself – one part of Rúnatýr died, while the other survived the sacrifice in order for it to become a recipient of the sacrifice (*Hávamál* 137-144). Even though the primary sources do not mention Odinsleep – a particular element which makes the comic's version of Odin so unique, it would seem that this state of his was inspired directly by Odin's shamanism. In *Thor* #274, Odin sacrifices his right eye to Mimir in exchange for the knowledge to prevent Ragnarok. The yearning for wisdom (*Gylfaginning* 15) and the deprivation of physical sight is an attempt for control over the forces of chaos in all their different manifestations (Ross 1994, 219), including Ragnarök, when Óðinn rushes to Mímisbrunnr in order to seek the council Mimir's head (*Gylfaginning* 51).

⁵⁶ The custom of purifying or consecrating the destroyed city with salt, and the cursing of anyone who would dare to rebuild it, was widespread in the ancient Near East (v. Gevirtz 1965, 52-62). Of course, the best known example is the destruction of Carthage, but this was proven to be a modern myth, probably inspired by the Old Testament story about the capture of Shechem (*Judges* 9:45). v. Ridley 1986; Stevens 1988. There is no such custom recorded amongst the Germanic tribes; on the contrary, obtaining salt was considered a sacred function, a gift directly from the gods for which even blood was shed. (v. Tac., *Ann.* 13:57; *Amm. Marc.*, 28:5).

⁵⁷ “Leader of the Æsir“ (*Álvur kongur* 8). In the Anglo-Saxon *Nine Herbs Charm* it is said that Woden killed a snake with “nine glory twigs” (Storms 1948, 55).

well as the epithet “The Serpent”⁵⁸ could be a reference to Níðhoggr - a serpent-like creature that gnaws the roots of the Cosmic tree.⁵⁹ Thousands of years later, the God of Fear⁶⁰ is released from his ancient prison and calls upon the “Worthy” to spread fear and chaos,⁶¹ which corresponds to Níðhoggr’s representation in the *Völuspá* as an important symbol of the destructive elements in the Universe, and of the impending annihilation.⁶² An additional parallel could be drawn between the two of them, for in the description of Náströnd, the land of the dead, the prophetess explains how Níðhoggr feed with the blood of the slain (*Völuspá* 39, 66). In a similar fashion, anguished from thirst, the young son of Bor reached the camp of the sleeping Giants and sucked their blood (*Journey into Mystery* #625).

Born a warrior, Bor trained his son “how to fight, how to rule, how to serve”, but not how to generate his own dreams.⁶³ Wandering through the bare Midgard, Odin created a new race which was to be his legacy. It was a controversial act that the arrogant creator of the Cosmos did not approve of,⁶⁴ and consequently, the humans were punished with suffering and enduring any and every pain that he could conjure.⁶⁵ *Journey into Mystery* offers a different version of the creation of humanity: when Thor gave a piece of the Tree of Life to Mimir, the king immersed it in an enchanted spring. The life that dripped from it fell on a pair of seeds planted by Odin, and thus the first humans, Aske and Embla, were born.⁶⁶ The issue concludes with a short note from the editors: “Freely translated, the tale you have just read is part of the Norse legends which deal with the birth of mankind and the days before the beginning of time”.⁶⁷ However, the concern at hand is not the translation per se, which, as authors themselves point out is only loosely based on the

⁵⁸ When after forty days and forty nights Cul finally faces Odin, he denies that they are brothers, calling himself “the Serpent that will feast on the World” (*Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #7).

⁵⁹ *Grímnismál* 32-33. Depicted in the same way as he is in the *Eddur*, Nidhogg appears in the Marvel Comics some 28 years earlier than Cul (v. *Thor* #339). Though Nidhogg and Cul exist in the same universe, this is not an obstacle for our proposed identification, for they are never mentioned together in a same issue, or a same storyline.

⁶⁰ Some scholars interpret Níðhoggr as “the Dread Biter” (Bellows 1936, 19; Branston 1955, 76).

⁶¹ *Fear Itself* #1.

⁶² *Völuspá* 66.

⁶³ *Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Bor is one of the gods that created the Universe with the use of the Galactus Seed (*Thor* vol. 3 #7).

⁶⁵ *Thor* vol. 3 #7.

⁶⁶ *Journey into Mystery* #103.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

sources, but the fact that they provide no additional clarification that Þórr is chronologically too far removed from *illud tempus*, king Mirmir is a fictitious character, and the true creators of Askr and Embla are the three brothers: “When the sons of Borr were walking along the sea-strand, they found two trees, and took up the trees and shaped men of them: the first gave them spirit and life; the second, wit and feeling; the third, form, speech, hearing, and sight. They gave them clothing and names: the male was called Askr, and the female Embla”.⁶⁸ In *Völuspá*, the stanzas concerning Askr and Embla follow the catalogue of dwarfs, and there is a certain possibility that the first male and female were a creation of theirs, while the gods endowed them with life⁶⁹ - “breath gave Óðinn, spirit gave Hœnir,⁷⁰ vital spark gave Lóðurr, and fresh complexions”.⁷¹ On top of that, since there is no parallel in the Nordic mythology portraying the punishment of the human race, it may be assumed that what we have here is a “contamination” from the Greek mythology, or to be more precise the myth of Pandora.⁷²

Let us return to Marvel's Odin. As his power grew, he yearned for the day when he would become the leader of the gods. During the great war between the Asgardians and the Jotuns, the architect of Asgard left the battle in order to pursue a Frost Giant, and in doing so, fell into a trap set by a powerful sorcerer, who was waiting for him. “The heir of Bor”⁷³ arrived at the spot right away, but it was too late, for the wind was already scattering what was left from the snowy form of his father. Before he disappeared completely, Bor asked of his son to find a sorcerer strong enough to bring him back, and told

⁶⁸ *Gylfaginning* 9.

⁶⁹ Lindow, *Norse mythology*, 62-63.

⁷⁰ The parallelism in the accounts of the creation of mankind leads some scholars to assume that behind the mysterious god in the *Old Edda*, hides the second brother of Óðinn (Daly 2009, 50; Paxson 2017, 101); however, this suggestion is neither convincing nor generally accepted (v. Þorgeirsson 2011, 37-40; Lindow 2002, 179-181). Hœnir is one of the nine gods that survives the Ragnarök (*Völuspá* 63; cf. *Thor* #294). The *Eddur* on the other hand, give no information for the fate of Vili after the creation of Askr and Embla. Only in the *Heimskringla* Snorri tells the story of how Vili and Vé took over the rule in the period of Óðinn's long absence, and shared his wife for they believed that he was never to return (*Ynglinga saga* 3; cf. *Mighty Thor* vol. 3 #5). Loki knew this story, and used it on one occasion to silence Frigg (*Lokasenna* 26). According to the disembodied eye of Odin, Vili and Ve were amongst the nine that survived the Twilight of the Gods. Together with Vidar and Vali, the sons of Bor discovered the discarder Gungnir and turned into the composite being Odin – the new All-Father of the next age (*Thor* #294).

⁷¹ *Völuspá* 18. An adaptation of this myth can be seen in *Thor Annual* #5.

⁷² Hes. *Op.*, 60-105.

⁷³ Burs arfþegi – an epithet of Odin's, mentioned in *Hyndluljóð* 30.

him that his spirit will remain in the snow until the time of his return. Indifferent to his pleas, Odin returned to the victorious camp and announced the king's death.⁷⁴ As time passed, he did not try to rescue his father, instead reigning in his own right as the All-Father and taking care of the newly born Thor. Seeking vengeance, Bor promised Odin that he would stop harassing him, if he were to take the son of the fallen king and raise him as his own. One week later king Laufey fell in battle, and Odin, oblivious to the impending doom, took Loki with him in order to appease Bor's spirit.⁷⁵ Later it was revealed that the whole scheme was an illusion created by Loki, who with the help from Hela,⁷⁶ the goddess of death, traveled back in the past and stirred the battle between the old enemies in order to get rid of Bor, and in doing so to secure his place in the royal family.⁷⁷ But why?

Under Kirby, Marvels' approach becomes more complex and, as Hatfield called it "pantheonic", for the heroes and the villains are pitted against each other in crude, often hyperbolized and symbolic symmetry. Implicitly, every author's peculiar mythology is a compromise between the complex narrative design of the classical myth, and the stark moral dualism of the comics which is a testimony that has a meaning solely in context of the universal ideological conflict. Therefore, the distorted image of Loki's adoption and his antagonism towards Thor, fits into the general structure where the heroes and the villains have common roots, and possess similar or complementary powers.⁷⁸ The God of Mischief is not a son of Odin's, but rather his sworn

⁷⁴ *Thor* vol. 2 #7.

⁷⁵ *Journey into Mystery* #112.

⁷⁶ Hela, in accordance with the mythological genealogies, is a daughter of Loki and Angerboda (*Dark Reign Files* #1; cf. *Gylfaginning* 34); yet, the paradox created in the *Journey into Mystery* #645 negates the parentage of Laufeyson, and in *Thor: Tales of Asgard* by Lee & Kirby #1 in his place mentions "the being who would one day be called Odin and a goddess whose name and image have been lost in antiquity." Regarding the changes in the origin of the new villain in the MCU, Pearson, the screenwriter on *Thor: Ragnarok*, on November 17th for *Yahoo news* explains: "allegedly" the daughter of Loki ... But that had never been the plan for the screen treatment. We had decided that she's like this ghost of Asgard's past that's come back". Later on in the same article it is maintained that her depiction as the Thunderer's sister, emphasizes the dark side of Odin, and more importantly, raises the stakes in the climactic battle that will keep the viewers in suspense.

⁷⁷ *Thor* #600. Borr's name (*Gylfaginning* 6) is not mentioned in the wars recorded in the *Völuspá*. Additionally, his heir is differentiated as the first and oldest of the Æsir (*Gylfaginning* 3) with whom the rune F is connected: "Óss er algingautr, Valhallar vísi, Ásgarðs jöfurr" (Page 1999, 22), and therefore the possibility that we are dealing with some ruler of Ásgarðr can be safely ruled out.

⁷⁸ Hatfield 2013a, 137, 140, 149.

blood-brother, an assumption based on a rather confusing verse from the *Lokasenna*.⁷⁹ Another intervention can also be observed concerning his genealogy: in the *Eddur* the leader of the Giants from Jötunheimr is presented as a mother of Loki,⁸⁰ while Fárbauti,⁸¹ his real father, inspired the name of Laufey's wife.⁸²

As for the All-Father, contrary to the Marvel universe, where this title is bestowed upon a number of heroes, as well as villains,⁸³ Sturluson knows of only one progenitor of gods and men.⁸⁴ In the later sources there is a discernible tendency to increase the number of Odin's divine sons, yet the epithets with the suffix –föðr⁸⁵ suggest that the pre-Christian poets perceived Alföðr simply as a "patron of everyone".⁸⁶ Similarly, his comics version is a father to more sons than he himself can remember.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ *Lokasenna* 9.

⁸⁰ Instead of the expected traditional patronymic Loki Fárbautason, in the *Old Edda* the metronymic Loki Laufeyjarson is being used.

⁸¹ *Skáldskaparmál* 16; *Gylfaginning* 33.

⁸² *Journey into Mystery* #112.

⁸³ E.g. Thor, Cul (*Fear Itself* #1), Ultron (*New Avengers: Ultron Forever* #1).

⁸⁴ *Gylfaginning* 9.

⁸⁵ E.g. Sigföðr (victory-father), Valföðr (slain-father), Herföðr (host-father).

⁸⁶ McKinnell 2005, 147-148.

⁸⁷ *Thor* vol. 5 #10. Vidar is a product of the alliance with the Giantess Grid (*Thor: The Legend* #1; cf. *Skáldskaparmál* 18), and brother of Vali (*Thor* #293; his mother according to the *Baldrs Draumar* 11 is Rindr); after the conclusion of the First war in the world (*Völuspá* 21) he was banished from Asgard (*Thor: The Legend* #1). In order to guarantee the peace between the two warring races, Odin married Frigga – the daughter of Frey (*Mighty Thor* vol. 2 #18). The result of this union are Tyr (*Angela: Queen of Hel* #3; cf. *Skáldskaparmál* 9; in the *Hymiskviða* 5 Týr's father is the Jötun Hymir, who in *Thor* #379 is mentioned amongst his ancestors), Hermod (*Thor: Asgard's Avenger* #1; cf. *Gylfaginning* 49; concerning his relation to Odin v. Lindow 2002, 173) and the twins Hoder (*Loki* vol. 2 #2; cf. *Skáldskaparmál* 13) and Balder (*Thor* vol. 3 #10; cf. *Völuspá* 32). Óðinn and Frigg are the counterparts of the Old English Woden and Frig, and the Lombardic Godan and Frea (Paul. diac., *Hist. Lang.* I.8); however, the form Frea, mentioned by Paul the Deacon, parallels the Old Norse Frigg, not Freya – the sister of Freyr (McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 18; *Gylfaginning* 24). In order to produce a worthy heir whose power would derive both from Asgard and Midgard, Odin approached the old Terra Mater in her most sensual form – Jord (*Thor* #301; cf. *Gylfaginning* 9; *Skáldskaparmál* 4; for the identification of Jörð and Frigg v. Branston 1955, 117-118). Few months after the birth of Thor in a cave created by the All-Father, he was taken to Asgard and handed over to Frigga (*Thor Annual* #11; the circumstances surrounding the birth of Thor to a great extent reflect the myth of the Dictaeon Cave: v. Hes., *Theog.*, 477-484). Later, Phoenix reveals herself to him as his biological mother manifested in the form of Firehair (*Avengers* vol. 8 #42).

3. In order to observe how the changes in the Marvel comics could potentially influence the perception of the readers, we conducted a small survey, in which ten participants on the age between 23 and 42, answered a short questionnaire comprised of three or four questions, depending on the answer of the first one:

1) Were you familiar with Norse Mythology before you started reading the Marvel Comics?

If not,

2.1) Did it spark enough your curiosity, so that you felt an urge on some occasions to read something more for a certain event or a character, or to compare particular depictions and information?

2.2) Does Cul seem like a mythological character to you?

2.3) What is your impression of Buri/Tiwaz?

If yes,

3.1) Do you consider the comics to be a good source for a beginner?

3.2) Did you perceive any of the changes in relation to the original mythological depictions?

Three of the respondents gave a negative answer on the first question. Regarding their answers to the next three, an identical pattern can be observed – the comics have sparked their interest in Norse mythology; Cul, injected in the mythological milieu, is perceived as an authentic character, not only because of his powers and abilities, but also because of his weaknesses; while Tiwaz is regarded as a Highfather and a supreme being.

Amongst those who had some previous knowledge of Norse mythology, though there is a certain difference of opinion, most (roughly 80%) believe that the comics are an inadequate source for a beginner, for “in the comics the mythology is often used only partially, and combined with some other elements, or the authors take too great a liberty in changing certain stories, characters and locations from the original sources”; “the comics are not staying true to the sources, e.g. Loki, in no way can be of the same age as Thor”; “there are other publishers, such as Dark Horse, who unlike Marvel, create stories that are more consistent with the sources”. As for the perceived changes, most examples were in context of the outer appearance, especially the blonde hair and the futuristic suit of the beardless Thor.

Now, as mentioned, only 10 people participated in the survey – a number, needless to say, nowhere near enough for it to be representative, let alone conclusive. Yet, it is interesting, and perhaps indicative, that the opini-

ons of the respondents parallel the experiences of Gaiman, who in the introduction to his *Norse Mythology*⁸⁸ explains that “My first encounter with Asgard and its inhabitants was as a small boy, no more than seven, reading the adventures of the Mighty Thor as depicted by American comics artist Jack Kirby, in stories plotted by Kirby and Stan Lee and dialogued by Stan Lee’s brother, Larry Lieber. Kirby’s Thor was powerful and good-looking, his Asgard a towering science fictional city of imposing buildings and dangerous edifices, his Odin wise and noble, his Loki a sardonic horn-helmeted creature of pure mischief. I loved Kirby’s blond hammer-wielding Thor, and I wanted to learn more about him. I borrowed a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen* by Roger Lancelyn Green and read and reread it with delight and puzzlement: Asgard, in this telling, was no longer a Kirbyesque Future City but was a Viking hall and collection of buildings out on the frozen wastes; Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable and dangerous; Thor was just as strong as the Mighty Thor in the comics, his hammer as powerful, but he was . . . well, honestly, not the brightest of the gods; and Loki was not evil, although he was certainly not a force for good. Loki was . . . complicated”.

This nicely illustrates the somewhat ambivalent role of the comics – on the one hand, they can, and often do, spark an interest in the particular mythology on which the stories in the comics are based upon, but on the other, the authors, especially the Marvel ones (at least according to our respondents), deviate too far from the source material. In a way, this is implied by Lee himself, who, when discussing the origin of the superhero, explains that “before starting the series, we stuffed ourselves to the gills with Norse mythology, as well as almost every other type of mythology – we love it all! But you’ve got to remember that these are legendary tales – myths – and no two versions are ever exactly the same. We changed a lot of things – for example, in most of the myths Thor has red hair, Odin has one eye, etc. But we preferred doing our own version”.⁸⁹ It goes without saying that this approach, understandable in itself, may leave an uninformed reader with a fallacious impression pertaining to the original source material. Gaiman’s experience is telling once more – when he created his red-bearded, drunken and loutish Thor (*Sandman: Season of Mists*), he got outraged letters “from comics fans who felt I was creating cruel parodies of the Marvel Comics characters Thor, Loki and Odin”.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ 2017, xiii-xiv.

⁸⁹ Murray 2005, 55-56.

⁹⁰ Bender 2000, 105.

4. The reader might get the impression that the point of the paper was to criticize and rebuke the comics and their mythology. This could not be further than the truth, since I am an avid reader of all sorts of comics, especially enamored by the works of Kirby. The point was to explore some elements in the creation of a new mythology, specifically the Marvel comics, and the influence it can have on the perception of the readers. Without getting into a theoretical discussion whether the superheroes represent a kind of a modern mythology or not,⁹¹ I believe we can discern a number of common elements between the two. In that context, it is my belief that the study of the comics and the modalities of creating their own particular sort of mythology can in certain respects be useful for the study and understanding of the development of the myths and legends of yore. Particularly interesting are not only the deviations from the source material, but especially the conflicting stories within the Marvel universe itself – a condition that should not surprise us, considering the collective authorship and the long timespan during which they are being created. An illuminating example is Simonson's answer concerning the creation of a new storyline for Thor: "I came up with the idea for a big Thor story. I combined Norse mythology with Marvel Norse mythology with Walter mythology and put together a storyline".⁹² Hence, each new character and each new story is a testament not only of the author's personal opinions and ideals, but of the current social and political circumstances as well. Kirby's explanation of the decision to depict Thor with a blond beard is an interesting one: "I don't feel he ought to have a red beard. I like to do my own version of Thor. The Norse legends are free domain. A traditionalist will leave them as they are. As a creative person I must treat them in the context of now. Today blondes have more fun".⁹³

Bottom line, as one of our respondents correctly pointed out, "the primary function of the comics is to entertain". Herein lies at least a part of the explanation why Marvel strives to tell fresh and novel stories. However, at the same time this opens another question regarding the nature of the available primary sources. Because of our insatiable thirst for information and knowledge, we often tend to forget that the primary function of our sources was not only to leave a record for the posterity, but also, and perhaps even more so, to entertain and captivate its audience. Which brings us to the main point of the question – as forms of art, to what extent do the *Eddur*

⁹¹ v. Reynolds 1994; Nevins 1996, 24-30.

⁹² Nolen-Weathington & Ash 2006, 45.

⁹³ Murray 2005, 56.

convey the authentic myths, and to what extent they reflect the individual and religious attitudes, and the social and political climate of the times when they were written? After all, if I may use a better known instance, the Homeric Zeus is not quite identical with the one we find in Hesiod, and is certainly something very different from the one in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Similar conclusion can be drawn from the evolution of the Hell in Dante's work. Of course, this is well established and obvious fact to anyone engaged in source criticism, and yet precisely because of its obviousness, there is a tendency to take it for granted and sometimes even completely overlook it.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Lead mask from Ribe, probably representing Óðinn. Jensen (1990, p. 178) interprets the ornaments on the helmet as Huginn and Muninn.



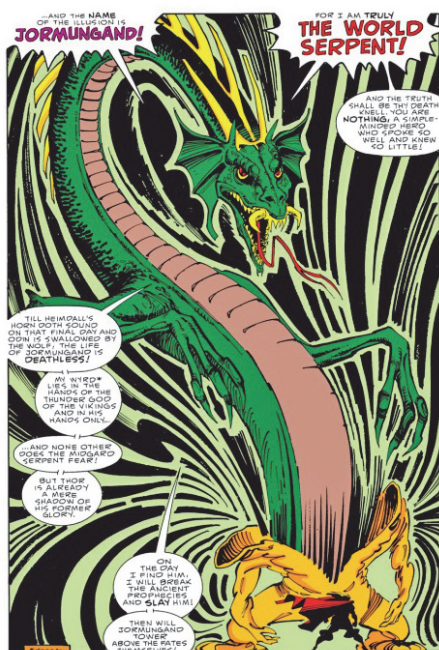
2. Odin with a horned helmet and a bird, Marvel Fanfare vol. 1 issue 20.



3. Archeological find from Northern Norfolk (6th - 7th century), probably depicting Wōdan with horns formed by two ravens.



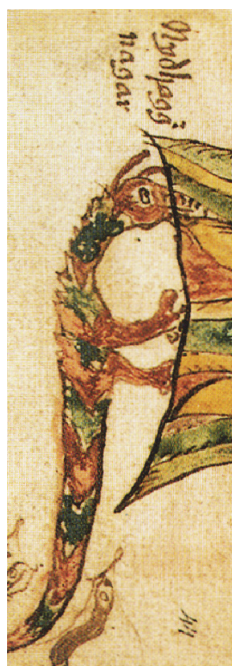
4. Jörmungandr, Icelandic manuscript, 17th century.



Jormungand, *Thor* vol. 1, issue 380.



The Serpent, *Fear Itself* vol. 1, issue 7.



7. Níðhoggur, Icelandic manuscript 17th century.

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МЕТАМОРФОЗАТА НА БУРИ И ОДИН ВО СТРИПОВИТЕ НА MARVEL

(резиме)

Во оваа статија, од широката продукција на Marvel беа тангирани само неколку стрипови кои нам ни се чинеа интересни зашто претставуваат своевиден амалгам од нордиските митови, онака како што ги среќаваме во Едите, и личните митологии на авторите кои настојуваат да раскажат свежи и уникатни приказни. Во таа смисла, секој нов лик и секоја приказна се сведоштва не само за личните ставови и сфаќања на еден автор, туку и за актуелните верувања, вкусови и собитија. Тука лежи и суштината на нашето прашање – во колкава мера Едите како уметнички облици го пренесуваат автентичниот мит, а во колкава мера ги отсликуваат личните и религиските сфаќања на политичката и општествената клима во која се пишуваат. Впрочем, како што сите добро знаеме, Хомеровиот Севс не е идентичен со оној на Хесиод, а уште помалку со оној на Ајсхил од Окованиот Прометеј. Аналогно, настанувањето на Buri според Lee и Kirby, не соодветствува нити со наративот пренесен во стрипот на Thomas, нити со оној на Ellis. Истото важи и за одредени постари аспекти од биографиите во стриповите, кои не се доследни на некои подоцнежни информации. На пример, приказната во *Journey into Mystery* #97 се држи до изворната тријада зашто дејствието се случува 48 години пред воведувањето на четвртиот брат Cul од страна на Fraction и Immonen. Воедно, од него отсутствуваат и двајцата браќа на Bor – Mimir и Njord кои се претставени во 1975, односно 1978 година. Што се однесува пак до идентитетот на Cul, иако врз основа на расположливите извори во нордиската митологија не постои директен пандан, антагонизмот кон Asagrim, хранењето со крвта на убиените и неговата титула 'The Serpent', нè наведува да претпоставиме дека станува збор за Níðhoggr – змијолико суштество кое ги нагризува корените на Космичкото дрво, особено што и двата ликови коегзистираат во истиот универзум, но никогаш не се споменуваат заедно. Сепак, вметнат во еден митолошки амбиент, Cul кај испитаниците од кратката анкета, остави впечаток на автентично божество поради, како што велат, неговите моќи и способности, па дури и слабости.