

Norse mythology - cheap icons for nationalism

In 1995 Norway experienced a wave of violence from nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. The names and symbols used by these groups are often taken from Norse mythology.

by Henrik Lunde

In the period from 800 to 1050 AD, the Nordic peoples made their dramatic entrance onto the European arena. The chronicles of this period include many alarming accounts of Vikings attacking the coasts of Europe, and the violent nature of the Viking society is also shown by the fact that all known male graves include weapons. Norse mythology is part of a heathen religion with a multitude of gods and goddesses, each controlling his or her own domain. These gods have human traits, and enjoy to fight, eat and drink. Mortals who fell in battle were believed to go straight to the table at Valhalla, where they feasted with the gods. Burial finds clearly tell us of a need for the same personal belongings in the life after death as here on earth. Traces of Norse mythology can be found in many parts of Norwegian culture today. The 1994 Winter Olympics at Lillehammer is the most successful example of present day use. Designers used the old symbols and adapted them for a modern setting, giving the Olympics its highly praised design. Unfortunately, in our time less positive elements have found a way to use Norse mythology.

Before and during the Second World War, the Norwegian puppet regime, led by Vidkun Quisling's party Nasjonal Samling, frequently used symbols, titles and words from Norse mythology. In the 1970s, Nazi groups reappeared, but were destroyed after a series of terror and murders. A second Nazi wave started in the eighties with organisations spreading racist propaganda against immigrants and refugees applying for political asylum. However, the youth did not take part until the third wave in the nineties, when a network of militant extreme nationalist and neo-Nazi groups emerged.

The nationalist and Nazi youth culture is not solely a Norwegian phenomenon, but a part of a European tradition where music is being used as a recruitment tool. Sweden is today the largest market for, as well as the major producer of, 'white power rock'n roll,' hard rock music with racist and nationalist lyrics. The Swedes have made their own version of this music called Viking rock, where open racism is disguised with elements from Norse mythology.

Norse mythology is famous far beyond the Nordic borders. Neo-Nazi and nationalist forces use symbols, names and words taken from Norse mythology to picture Norway as a pure and white country. Neo-Nazis see themselves as different from common citizens. The image of the fighting, frightening Viking is very similar to the picture that the Nazis create of themselves as the saviours of the nation. By linking their struggle for a white Norway to Norse mythology, the right wing forces also try to achieve legitimacy by portraying themselves as part of an ongoing Nordic tradition, starting with the Vikings and continuing with militant neo-Nazis.

A picture says more than thousand words, and a swastika painted on an immigrant's shop is more than paint on a wall. Both the perpetrator

and the victim know the meaning of the symbol, and thereby the message is delivered. Symbols have a crucial meaning in extreme right wing groups world-wide. The Odalrune is one of the most frequently used symbols, and was first used in post-war Norway by Nazi organisations operating in the seventies. The Norwegian nationalists interpret this sign as a symbol of Norwegians' right to keep their own country free from foreigners.

The Norwegian far right scene has used mythology to a great extent, choosing organisation names like Viking and calling the women's group Valkyria. Valkyria is the name of the women Odin sent to collect the dead warriors, and also the ones who served drinks at Odin's residence Valhalla. The fascination for this period can also be easily recognised in their magazines and companies. The name Bifrost Video is taken from the rainbow bridge that moves around in the world, guarded by the Norse god Heimdall. He uses his horn to alert the other gods in times of trouble, and the horn's name, Gjallarhorn, is the name of the magazine for Norway's hard-core Hitlerites, ZORN 88. Another magazine is called Ragnarokk, which refers to the Viking version of Armageddon. The names indicate that the militant nationalists picture themselves as the new Vikings who are going to save our country.

On the first Norwegian Nazi-rock CD ever, the final song is called 'Hell Odin'. This is a common phrase in nationalist vocabulary. Odin, the father of Thor, is the god of war and death who gives parties in Valhalla, the hall which houses all Vikings who have died in battle. 'See you in Valhalla' is a slogan being used on enemies meaning 'wish you were dead', but it is also used with reference to comrades in arms who have died in the heroic battle for the white race. The use of names and elements taken from Norse mythology has a double impact. The strategy is to link today's extreme nationalists and Nazis with Norse mythology in order to gain acceptance. It also represents a dream and a way of seeing life as a fight between good and evil, where a warrior is the only thing to be.

The fascination with Norse mythology and the ancient Nordic society has influenced the far right scene world-wide. The use of Norse mythology by such organisations has created a problem for common Norwegians. If the far right manages to transform the symbols into depicting only racist meaning in today's society, it makes the symbols, names and rhetoric difficult to use for others who do not want to be associated with Nazism. It is therefore a challenge for Norwegians in general, and the young in particular, to retrieve both their history and mythology cleansed of extreme right wing meanings.

A related article:

Should the Symbols be Reclaimed?

By Asgeir Enersen

Should the Symbols be Reclaimed?

For how long should we let the aggressive neo-Nazis and other nationalist groups maintain their iron-fisted grip on the traditional Norse symbols that they so effectively appropriated during WW II? A new debate is on.

by Asgeir Enersen

Recently, the use and reclaiming of traditional Norse symbols has been extensively debated. Many say it is time to rid them of their National Socialist stigma. After all, why should neo-Nazis be allowed to monopolise this part of our national inheritance? However, removing the stigma may prove to be a difficult task.

During the decade or so before World War II, nationalist movements grew up, not just in Germany but in many other European countries as well. One of the features common to all these movements, apart from their love of everything "national" and their hatred toward foreigners and other races, was their adoption of pre-Christian symbols. In Norway, the Norse symbols were used by the nationalist party Nasjonal Samling (NS). Under the leadership of Vidkun Quisling NS openly supported the German occupational forces, and for a while formed a puppet government. Its main symbol was the sun cross, or the wheel cross. This was originally a symbol of the sun, but after the Christianisation of Norway in the early 11th century it was adopted as a special version of the Christian cross.

After the war this and other Norse symbols were too strongly associated with the evils of Nazism to be used in any positive way. A whole set of traditional symbols had effectively been appropriated by the nationalist ideologues. Today it is practically impossible to use these symbols without being associated with the neo-Nazis or other nationalist groups. But many people think it a shame that this part of our national heritage should forever be lost, and want to reclaim the Old Norse symbols. Others still strongly oppose any attempt at using them, even in "legitimate" contexts. They fear that people might see this as a legitimising of aggressive nationalist ideology; a blurring of the hitherto obvious distinction between good and bad. This attitude is probably shared by a majority of the Norwegian people, who worry less about the symbols per se than what they represent in everyday life. They are more than happy to leave such symbolic worries to historians and other intellectuals. Most likely, the crusade will go little further than the current exchange of views through newspaper articles. The few examples we have seen of people using the rich tradition of Norse symbols in a positive way are based more on historical and spiritual interest than on a desire to wrestle the Nazis for their symbols.

The last decade has seen a strong growth of interest in Germanic/Norse mythology. There are several active groups of people practicing Asatru, the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia. Perhaps the most important exponent of Asatru is the band YM-Stammen, whose music is heavily inspired by Norse mythology and folk music. But their interest in the old lore must not be confused with that of the nationalist groups. Theirs is more a spiritual search for a genuine religious and cultural experience, rooted in a mythological past - a positive search for the historical roots of, among other things, the symbols which for so long have represented an evil that has little to do with their original meaning. These seekers of a spiritual origin often use runes and symbols of Norse mythology, but they still shun the symbols carrying the heaviest stigma. The risk of misunderstanding is too great because, however good their intentions, it takes a mighty movement to provide the sun cross with a new set of positive associations.

Another reason for leaving the disputed symbols to the Nazis may be to keep the memory of the atrocities of WW II alive, and especially those of the genocide against the Jews. Many who suffered during the

war are worried by what they see as an increasing indifference to this gloomy lesson of history. If society was to reclaim these symbols, it could be seen as a dramatic step towards forgetting what they once meant, and a diminution of the importance of that experience.

It has been suggested that the Church may play a role in reclaiming symbols like the sun cross by using them in church buildings. After all, the sun cross was considered a normal christian symbol for a long time after Norway's christianisation. This question is especially pertinent now, as the last few years have seen several churches burnt to the ground by satanists. But few members of the clergy are particularly eager to use that opportunity to reclaim the sun cross. After all, this was originally a heathen symbol, and to the church symbols are a serious matter indeed.

For all this talk about creating a new awareness of the original meaning of these symbols, for the foreseeable future most people will still see them as the gloomy symbols of the Nazis and the various nationalist movements. The horrors of their history are just too great.

A related article:
Norse Mythology: Cheap Icons for Nationalism?
By Henrik Lunde.