

## Foreword

This two-volume special issue of *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, titled *The Wild Hunt for Numinous Knowledge: Perspectives on and from the Study of Pre-Christian Nordic Religion in honour of Jens Peter Schjødt*, is a festschrift for Jens Peter Schjødt. Edited by Karen Bek-Pedersen, Sophie Bønding, Luke John Murphy, Simon Nygaard, and Morten Warmind, it was published on the occasion of his 70th birthday, 24th March 2022, and officially presented to him at his retirement seminar at Aarhus University on 25th March 2022.

Jens Peter received his *magister artium* degree in the History of Religion from Aarhus University in 1980. After a number of years as External Lecturer, he was employed at Aarhus University's *Institut for Religionshistorie* as Assistant Professor (*adjunkt*) in 1988, then as Associate Professor (*lektor*) at the then newly renamed *Institut for Religionsvidenskab* in 1990. In the following years, he established himself as one of the leading figures in the study of pre-Christian Nordic religion. In May 2004, he successfully defended his habilitation (*doktordisputats*) "Initiation, liminalitet og tilegnelse af numinøs viden: En undersøgelse af struktur og symbolik i før-kristen nordisk religion"<sup>1</sup> at Aarhus University, for which he received his *dr.phil.* degree. In 2017, Jens Peter was appointed Professor of Pre-Christian Nordic Religion, a position he held until his retirement in 2020.

During the past three decades, Jens Peter has been a seminal figure in the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions. One chief reason for this is that he has always insisted on the importance and relevance of perspectives from the Study of Religion on the Old Norse world, and its literary and material sources, as well as on the importance of pre-Christian Nordic religions as a sub-discipline within the Study of Religion in general. He has been among the foremost scholars working within the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions to promote a more theoretically-founded and methodologically-aware approach to our diverse sources. Through the application of concepts from the wider Study of Religion (as well as the humanities and social sciences in general) such as *typological* and *genetic comparisons*, *discursive spaces*, the notion of the *semantic centre*, *model*, and not least his innovative research of *ritual structures* in the Nordic myths with a focus on *initiation*, Jens Peter has contributed to moving the field forward throughout his career. Many of these themes and concepts have inspired both students and colleagues within the field, something which is evident from the present collection of

<sup>1</sup> Later published in English as *Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*. The Viking Collection 17. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008.

articles. The 37 articles in this festschrift thus represent an opportunity to both take stock of where we are today, and reflect on the future of this increase in methodological and theoretical diversity in the study of pre-Christian Nordic religion, as well as this field's contribution to the Study of Religion in general which is in part indebted to Jens Peter's pioneering work.

Friends, colleagues, and students alike have come to know Jens Peter as a very approachable man with a passion for his research, ready to listen and always eager for a discussion over a beer – two things that often go together in Jens Peter's world. His willingness to socialise with anyone who has something worthwhile to say has made him a popular figure in all sorts of contexts where Old Norse scholars meet to exchange and discuss ideas (and drink beer). For many students at Aarhus University – including two of our editorial team – their first meeting with Jens Peter as a teacher was on the very first history of religion course (for many years called *Religionshistorie med religionsfænomenologi*), where he played a large role in forming students' idea of the discipline – and shifting their mindset from that of school pupil to university student. During this course Jens Peter demonstrated his passion for and vast knowledge of the wider history of religion, particularly comparative perspectives thereon, and he was always ready for discussion during breaks, which often took place outside: Jens Peter with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. As a supervisor Jens Peter has always been ready to guide, give feedback, and allow for new approaches and perspectives – what Luke has described on more than one occasion as “giving us enough rope to hang ourselves” – always with critical but constructive questions at the ready. During supervisions, coffee was also a vital component. Jens Peter moreover recognised students' potential and had faith in their abilities. When Sophie and Simon were students, Jens Peter one day asked whether they would be interested in teaching a course on translating and analysing Old Norse texts as sources for pre-Christian Nordic religions (a course called *Originalsprogsopgave, norrønt*) because neither he nor the former teacher were available. After much thought (and full of awe), they agreed and taught the course under Jens Peter's supervision for a number of years. Jens Peter has also been more than willing to supervise shorter research stays from other junior scholars, some of whom have contributed to this volume, and his role in bringing our widely-spread international field – pursued across Europe and North America – together cannot be understated. Two achievements in the latter sphere bear recognition here: his co-founding of the *Aarhus Old Norse Mythology* conference with Pernille Hermann in 2005, still the preeminent forum for the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions and now an annual event rotating between leading universities around the world; and his efforts on the long-standing *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* project, which culminated in the 2020 publication of the “new de Vries” – a four-volume study titled “Histories and Structures”, co-written and co-edited with John Lindow and Anders Andrén. Jens Peter's legacy is already, and will clearly continue to be, deep and far reaching.

Traditionally the religions, mythologies, and belief systems of Late Iron Age Nordic peoples were examined through the philological (and later literary) study of

medieval accounts of their mythology, preserved in a small corpus of prose and poetic texts mostly composed in medieval Iceland. During the twentieth century, the amount of disciplines used to study these sources (and especially the ever-growing archaeological sources) increased and particularly during the twenty-first century the conscious employment of method and theory flourished to the point that even within any of the disciplines whose adherents study pre-Christian Nordic religions – philology, history, the study of religion, archaeology, folkloristics, and more – there are almost as many approaches as there are scholars. Such approaches each have their own strengths, enabling different methodologies to compensate for each other's shortcomings, be that via entirely new data or the reassessment of previously abandoned lines of enquiry. This great methodological and theoretical awareness and diversity within the interdisciplinary study of pre-Christian Nordic religions, means that this research field is often swift to adopt and employ new theoretical currents.

This special issue of *RvT* therefore presents both studies of pre-Christian Nordic religions that explicitly experiment with and reflect on their theoretical framework and methods, and studies that are based more broadly in the Study of Religion, but which relate to the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions in different ways. It thus seeks to honour the full breadth of Jens Peter's research and to evoke a productive dialogue between researchers who use different approaches to the same material and the same approaches to different materials, by grouping thematically similar studies in a number of sections. Volume I contains sections on "Ritual Structures and Performances", "Constructing History and Mythology", and "Mythological Collectives". Volume II contains sections exploring "The Archaeology of Óðinn", "Poetry and the Power of Words", "Comparative and Conceptual Perspectives", and "Myth-Making After the Middle Ages". As such, this collection offers not only a wide range of ground-breaking studies of many aspects of pre-Christian Nordic religions, but also demonstrates the benefits of methodically-conscious study of the early medieval Nordic countries more generally, as well as the relevance of this field to the Study of Religion in general.

It is our hope that these articles in honour of Jens Peter Schjødt will both interest, challenge, and ultimately aid him and all readers in our continued wild hunt for numinous knowledge.

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