

ON ARTISTS AND ARCHITECTS

HAMMER IN THE NORTH: MJOLLNIR IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

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In the archaeological record of tenth century Scandinavia, there is evidence for the proliferation of small metal amulets representing Mjollnir, the magical hammer of the god Thór. Thór's hammer is recognised as one of the most distinctive religious symbols of the heathen Norse, and for a time was the chief rival of the Christian cross among the peoples of Medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. It was celebrated in Scandinavian mythology as the primary defence of gods and men against destruction at the hands of the fearsome frost-giants. Art, archaeology and folklore attest to the remarkable endurance of the hammer symbol, from the Bronze Age to the present day, not only as a significant religious motif, but also as a powerful ritual device, closely associated with the cult of Thór.

The vast majority of the more than forty Thór's hammer amulets known date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and were found primarily in Denmark, south-eastern Sweden and southern Norway, in those areas particularly subject to strong Christian influence.¹ It seems quite likely that the popularity of these amulets came about as a heathen response to the crucifixes worn by increasing numbers of Christians in Scandinavia. Indeed, some of the early crucifixes are quite similar in design to the hammer, and in one example from Foss in southern Iceland, features of both are incorporated into the overall design. Graves have been found with hammers and crosses side by side and from Jutland, Denmark, there is a stone mould from which both hammers and crosses could be cast, indicating a certain level of acceptance of both religious symbols, perhaps in the interest of spiritual pragmatism.

There are examples in literature of this blending of traditions, like that of Helgi the Lean, from *Landnámabók*, who had been raised a Christian, but who 'called upon Thór for seafaring and difficult decisions, and matters he considered of greatest importance'.² Also from *Landnámabók* is the case of Einar Thorgeirsson, who with a group of other settlers, claimed land in north-eastern Iceland by setting up at three points an axe (counterpart of the hammer) for Thór, an eagle for Óðinn, and a cross for Christ.³ Sometimes there even appears to be some confusion of Christian and heathen practice, as in the case of King Hakon the Good of Norway, who had been obliged to drink from a bowl of sacrificial ale: 'The king took it and made the sign of the cross over it. Then said Kar of Gryting, "Wherefore does the king so? Will he even now not sacrifice?"

Sigurd the Jarl answered, "The king does as all do, who trust in their skill and strength; he blesses the bowl in the name of Thor, and makes the sign of the hammer over it before he drinks".⁴ However, despite the strong Christian influence on the development of the hammer as a religious symbol, it is evident that the imagery, meaning and function of the hammer were entirely heathen.

Thór's hammers of many different styles are known, from simple shapes in iron or bronze to elaborately crafted works of silver with staring eyes and bearded faces, sometimes suspended on rings and twisted chains. The rings are miniature versions of those kept in the temples of Thór, upon which oaths were sworn and contracts were sealed, so that the wrath of Thór would fall upon those who broke their agreements.⁵ The chains, made of twisted wire and sometimes ending in monstrous heads, recall Jormangand, the Miðgard Serpent, the monstrous offspring of Loki, whose coils encircle the world, and with whom Thór does battle in a famous episode from *Hymiskviða*, a scene which is found carved on a memorial stone from Altuna, Sweden, and another stone found under Gosforth Church, Cumberland. Many other memorial stones incorporate hammer designs, such as one example from Stenkvista, Sweden, which shows a hammer hanging from a thong-like serpent design. Often the stones bear runic inscriptions containing the formula 'pur uiki...' (from ON *pór vigja*) or 'May Thór hallow...', found in such compositions as 'May Thór hallow this memorial', or 'May Thór hallow these runes', or even 'May Thór, the Almighty God, take to himself the body which lies under this stone'.⁶

Earlier Thór's hammer amulets are known, primarily from Anglo-Saxon graves in Kent which date to the sixth or seventh centuries, although these would still correspond to a similar period of growing Christian influence amongst the largely heathen Anglo-Saxons. The evidence for the great antiquity of the hammer as a religious device lies in its close relationship with the axe. Many Viking Age graves contain axes deposited alongside hammers or crosses, and axe amulets, many of which are virtually indistinguishable from hammers, have been found throughout the Baltic area dating from the Viking Age back to much earlier periods.⁷ Bronze Age (c1600-450 BCE) rock carvings abound with axe and hammer wielding figures, mirrored by a number of bronze figurines with axes and horned helmets found at Grevens Vænge, Denmark, most of which are now lost and only known from drawings made in 1778. These examples attest to the importance of the axe, the prototype of the hammer, as a cultural and religious symbol long before the advent of iron metallurgy, as does a richly decorated bronze axe-head from Vasteras, Sweden, which is far too massive for ordinary use.⁸

The swastika is also closely connected to Thór's hammer and it is found as a prominent motif in Scandinavian art from Bronze Age rock carvings to Iron Age brooches, from Migration period swords and scabbards to Anglo-Saxon cremation urns, and so on to the Viking Age and beyond. In Iceland a form of swastika called a *pórshammar* was used until recent times as a magical device to detect thieves.⁹ It is noteworthy that the majority of Thór's hammer amulets were found in hoards and house-sites rather than graves, perhaps as a dedication to Thór, but more likely as a measure of protection from thieves.

The etymology of the name Mjöllnir is uncertain, but it is probably related to ON *mala* 'grind', or *mөлva* 'crush', with possible cognates in the Russian *molnija* or Welsh *mellt*, which both refer to 'lightning'.¹⁰ Both concepts, crushing and lightning, are entirely consistent with what we know of Thór and his use of this mighty weapon. Scandinavian mythology is replete with the exploits of Thór with his hammer, and these myths provide the foundation of what we know of both the properties and functions of Mjöllnir, especially in conjunction with those of Thór himself. From the thirteenth century text of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, there is an account of the magical forging of Mjöllnir by dwarves at Loki's instigation:

Loki Laufeyjason had done this for love of mischief: he had cut off all Sif's hair. And when Thór found out, he caught Loki and was going to break every one of his bones until he swore that he would get black-elves to make Sif a head of hair out of gold that would grow like any other hair. After this Loki went to some dwarfs called Ívaldi's sons, and they made the head of hair and Skíðblaðnir and the spear belonging to Óðinn called Gungnir. Then Loki wagered his head with a dwarf called Brokk on whether his brother Eitri would succeed in making three precious things as good as these were. And when they got to the workshop, Eitri put a pig's hide in the forge and told Brokk to blow and not stop until he took out of the forge what he had put in. And as soon as he left the workshop and the other was blowing, a fly settled on the latter's arm and nibbled, but he went on blowing as before until the smith took his work out of the forge, and it was a boar and its bristles were of gold. Next he put gold in the forge and told Brokk to blow and not stop the blowing before he came back; he went out. And then the fly came and settled on his neck and nibbled twice as hard, but he went on blowing until the smith took from the forge a gold ring called Draupnir. Then he put iron in the forge and told him to blow and said it would turn out no good if there was any pause in the blowing. Then the fly settled between his eyes and nibbled his eyelids, and when the blood dripped in his eyes so that he could not see, he snatched at it with his hand as quick as he could while the bellows was on its way down and swept the fly away. And then the smith came back, saying it had come close to everything in the forge being ruined. Then he took from the forge a hammer, then handed over all the precious things to his brother Brokk and told him to take them to Ásgarð and fulfil the wager. And when he and Loki produced the precious things, the Æsir took their places on their judgement seats and the decision uttered by Óðinn, Thór and Freyr was to be final. Then Loki gave the spear Gungnir to Óðinn, the head of hair that was to be Sif's to Thór, and Skíðblaðnir to Freyr, and announced the features of the precious things, that the spear never stopped in its thrust, the hair was rooted in the flesh as soon as it came on to Sif's head, and Skíðblaðnir had a fair wind as soon as its sail was hoisted, wherever it was intended to go, and could be folded up like a cloth and put in one's pocket if desired. Then Brokk brought out his precious things. He gave the ring to Óðinn and said that every ninth night there would

drip from it eight rings equal to it in weight. To Freyr he gave the boar and said that it could run across sky and sea by night and day faster than any horse, and it never got so dark from night or in worlds of darkness that it was not bright enough wherever it went, there was so much light shed from its bristles. Then he gave Thór the hammer and said he would be able to strike as heavily as he liked, whatever the target, and the hammer would not fail, and if he threw it at something, it would never miss, and never fly so far that it would not find its way back to his hand, and if he liked, it was so small that it could be kept inside his shirt. But there was this defect in it that the end of the handle was rather short. Their decision was that the hammer was the best out of all the precious things and provided the greatest defence against frost-giants, and they decreed that the dwarf had won the stake.¹¹

This story provides the basic properties of Mjöllnir, namely that it would never break, it would never miss its target, and it would always return to Thór's hand, much like a boomerang. However, this is by no means the limit of Mjöllnir's capabilities. The crushing power of Thór's hammer is demonstrated in the tale of Útgardar-Loki, also from the *Snorra Edda*, wherein Thór meets a cunning giant named Skrymir and three times lands mighty blows on Skrymir's head while he is sleeping. Each time, the giant wakes up and asks if a leaf, an acorn or a twig has fallen on his head, but later the giant reveals himself as Útgardar-Loki and explains that he had used magic to deceive Thór, and that those hammer blows had been directed onto a nearby hill, which now had three new square-shaped valleys.¹²

The association with lightning is found in a number of episodes. It is mentioned explicitly in Thór's encounter with Hrungnir, who had challenged Thór to a duel and arranged to meet him in Giantland. As Hrungnir stood ready, he all at once saw lightning and heard great claps of thunder, then Thór appeared in his Ás-rage, and threw his hammer from a great distance. Hrungnir threw his own whetstone club in return, but when it collided with Mjöllnir, it broke into many pieces, and the hammer hit Hrungnir in the head and shattered his skull, which was also made of stone.¹³ Lightning is implied by a similar encounter with a giant called Geirroð, who threw a lump of molten iron at Thór. This time, by Loki's connivance, Thór did not have Mjöllnir with him, but all the same he caught the molten iron with a pair of iron gauntlets and threw it back, and it crashed through an iron pillar, through Geirroð, through the wall behind him, and deep into the earth.¹⁴

The relationship between Thór and his hammer draws obvious parallels with other Indo-European sky-gods, most notably Indra, Zeus and Jupiter, who all had the thunderbolt as their primary weapon. It is important to note that this similarity was not lost on medieval writers, either, many of whom identified Thór with Jupiter, as well as Thór's hammer with Jupiter's sceptre.¹⁵ Thór was the son of Óðinn and Jorð, symbolically heaven and earth, as were those other

sky gods, and he ruled over all the features of the atmosphere, not just storms, thunder and lightning, but also the life-giving rains and the winds that carried ships across the seas. However, it is Thór's use of Mjollnir that rids the world of monsters and giants, and protects the homes of both gods and men, and this is his primary function.¹⁶

There is another side to Thór's use of Mjollnir, though, and that is as a device of consecration and magical power. When Thór was on his way to Útgardar-Loki, he stopped at a farmhouse and made a meal for his hosts of the two goats, Tanngníost and Tanngristnir, who drew his chariot. In the morning, he gathered the bones and skins of the goats, raised his hammer and blessed the skins, whereupon the goats were restored to life.¹⁷ Also, as part of the funeral ceremony for the slain Baldr, Thór hallows the funeral pyre with Mjollnir.¹⁸ The implication of this, especially in relation to the runic inscriptions from memorial stones, is that Thór's protection continued beyond death.

In the comic poem *Thrymskviða*, Thór is obliged to disguise himself as Freyja in bridal veil, with Loki as bridesmaid, to be married to the giant Thrym, in order to retrieve his hammer, which had been stolen by the giant. When, as was custom, the hammer is laid in the bride's lap to consecrate the marriage, Thór takes up his hammer and kills Thrym and all the giants in his house.¹⁹ Hallowing the bride appears to be an ancient practice indeed, if the interpretation of a particular Bronze Age rock carving, depicting a large figure holding a raised hammer or axe over two smaller figures, is correct.²⁰ Even long after the conversion to Christianity, in certain parts of Norway and Sweden it continued to be the custom for a groom to carry an axe at the wedding, to give him mastery and to ensure a fruitful union; and in Germany it was thought lucky for the bride if there was a thunder-storm during the wedding ceremony.²¹

Even up to the turn of this century, prehistoric stone axes and fossils were called 'thunder-stones' or 'thunder-weapons' in Denmark and kept as charms against disaster, hidden in cupboards, walls or floors. They were expected to keep away not only fire and lightning, but also trolls, witches and rats, and they could be used to ward off disease and make medicines, to keep milk from going sour, to guard horses from harm in their stables, and to protect unchristened children in their cradles - as in heathen times the hammer had been used to accept a new-born child into the community. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, German soldiers could buy these 'thunder-stones' from the chemist, to give themselves protection from bullets.²²

In the nineteenth century in Argyllshire, there was a custom called the 'Thun'er Spell', in which a piece of wood tied to a cord was whirled through the

air, much like a bull-roarer, and this would secure immunity from lightning. The Saami (Lappish) people of the far north of Scandinavia remembered Thór as *Horagalles*, from ON *pór Karl*, or 'Old Man Thór', depicted him with hammer and swastika, and used hammers of carved reindeer antler to beat drums to help the Saami shamans induce their ecstatic trances.²³ Saxo Grammaticus, writing in the twelfth century, tells of Magnus Nilsson, who in his Christian zeal took from a temple of Thór in Sweden many large bronze hammers which had been used to imitate the crashing of thunder. Thór was also known as *Oku-Pór*, or 'Driving-Thór', for his chariot, pulled by his goats, also made thunder as it travelled across the sky; and it is said there was an image of Thór in his chariot at Thrandheim which would make the noise of thunder as it was pulled along.²⁴

The cult of Thór had gained in popularity through the Viking Age, so that by the tenth century, he was venerated above all other gods in most parts of Scandinavia. Unlike the grim and aristocratic Óðinn, Thór was a god of the people, and a friend of landowner and peasant alike. Thór was patron of justice, his oath-ring could seal any contract, the Althing assembly of Iceland was opened on Thór's day (Thursday), and the judge's gavel or auctioneer's hammer undoubtedly owes its origin to the hammer symbol of Thór's might and authority. Thór was seen as a protector, defending the old order of the heathen landowners and petty nobles from the predations of the land-grabbing, power-hungry and zealously Christian Kings of Norway.²⁵ Wearing the sign of the hammer, then, was not just a symbol of one's trust in Thór, it was also an instrument of his protection.

In conclusion, it must be recognised that Thór's hammer Mjollnir was far more than just a symbol to the heathen Norse. It carried the power of Thór with it, moreover, it represented the focus of Thór's power, the thunderbolt before which nothing could stand. As a ritual device, it offered Thor's power as a force for the protection of everything a good heathen held dear; hallowing births, marriages, and deaths; binding oaths, securing property, and consecrating land. As a weapon, Mjollnir defended the world of men and the community from the forces of darkness and chaos which ever threatened to overwhelm them. As a tool, the hammer gave Thór's power to tame the elements. When Christianity came to Scandinavia, Thór stood for the maintenance of the old ways in the face of Christian oppression, and as Steinunn, a tenth century Icelandic poetess described it, he challenged the upstart Christ to a duel. Mjollnir was ranged against the cross, and as much as the cross influenced the development of the hammer, so the hammer left its mark on the symbolism and use of the cross in

medieval Scandinavia, and the mighty thunderclap of that duel still echoes through the ages.

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