BOOK REVIEW


Blake Middleton

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in Old Norse history, culture, and mythology. This has led to an increase in the interest of specific Old Norse deities, such as Þórr. As is often the case, such an uptick in interest often leads to an increase in related academic works. Given the increased (modern) cultural capital that the character of Þórr has gained in recent years, one might expect dozens of academic monographs to be produced about the god. Notably, this has not been the case. This is emphasised in the opening description of Taggart’s book, where it is stated that *How Thor Lost His Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God* (2018) is the first academic monograph published in English to focus on the Old Norse mythological figure Þórr via the evidence retained in the extant Old Norse source material. Prior to the release of Taggart’s monograph, the major research concerning Þórr in the last decade has been limited to Arboe Sonne’s *Thor-kult i vikingetiden* (2013) and Martin Arnold’s *Thor: Myth to Marvel* (2011).

Taggart sets out to conduct a more nuanced and reliable model of how Þórr was conceptualised by historical audiences by rigorously dissecting and investigating the variations in Þórr’s character and interactions within the relevant source material. Ultimately, this model is used to determine if the god’s most popularly associated character aspect, namely thunder, was as important as it has been perceived in modern scholarship and culture. Taggart’s research examines a number of prominent Old Norse mythological sources, including but not limited to, the following: eddic and skaldic poetry, eddic prose, and contemporary (to the eddic sources) historiographies, as well as physical objects in the forms of picture- and rune stones. Across eight engaging chapters, Taggart meticulously examines
these sources and presents insightful and well-informed opinions onto the nuances he finds. When answering the book’s primary question, Taggart argues that the main character traits of Þórr across the Old Norse diaspora are his physical strength and fighting ability, rather than his connection to and control of thunder and lightning.

At first glance, the idea that Þórr, who is routinely referred to as a ‘god of thunder’ in scholarship as well as popular culture, does not actually reflect a connection to thunder and lightning in the sources materials seems to almost by an oxymoronic statement: ‘Of course the texts depict Þórr as a thunder god’, one might say. Nevertheless, after reading Taggart’s monograph, I doubt other readers’ certainty on the subject would be anywhere near as concrete as it was beforehand. Not only is Taggart’s assertion that Þórr’s chief character trait is his association with strength rather than thunder (and lightning) an interesting one, the extensive review of the source texts used to argue such a view is, to the best of my knowledge, one which has never received major attention in modern scholarship. Furthermore, Taggart’s study is well structured, and his reasoning is both convincing and easy to follow. His argument is built on an exhaustive review of the numerous source material, combined with in-depth analyses of those sources; a combination which showcases Taggart’s extensive knowledge of the mythological sources, as well as his firm grasp on the relevant research literature.

As the name Þórr is clearly developed from the Proto-Germanic noun *þunra- ‘thunder’, a development which even Taggart himself does not deny, it is an interesting choice on his part to begin challenging the god’s connection to thunder with the scrutinization of the deity’s name, by-names (in the form of heiti and kenningar), and associated toponyms. Indeed, depending on the reader’s point of view, such an opening is either the easiest means of verifying that the Old Norse audiences and writers perceived Þórr’s primary attribute as his connection to thunder, or, if they agreed with Taggart’s assessment, it is the hardest. Throughout each of the terms investigated in the chapter, Taggart not only argues that the connection between Þórr and thunder is minimal, he also argues that Þórr’s strength is the primary attribute within the various names. For instance, Taggart notes that several heiti and kenningar which are usually used as direct evidence for identifying Þórr as a thunder god are more likely reflective of ideas which exhibit Þórr’s physical strength and his martial prowess than his association with thunder. Similarly, this same lack of connection to thunder is noted in Taggart’s inspection of the various Þórr-related toponyms. Instead of invoking thunder or lightning, the two primary types of places which Þórr’s name is often
attached to are areas of arable farmland, all of which invoke a connection for Þórr with fertility and growth, as opposed to the violent actions of the *heiti* and *kenningar*. Although Taggart is firm in his interpretation that Þórr’s name, bynames, and related toponyms reflect notions other than a connection to thunder and lightning, he does not entirely reject them. For example, Taggart argues that although the Þórr related tree grove toponyms suggest a notion of fertility, the same place-names might suggest a connection between the god and lightning, as according to Taggart, oaks are more likely to be struck by lightning than other species of tree.

The sentiment that Þórr’s central narrative characteristic is strength, rather than his control of thunder and lightning, is likewise argued by Taggart during his survey of the extant eddic texts. It is here that Taggart once again presents evidence which might otherwise be used to vindicate the connection between Þórr and thunder, but instead, is used by Taggart to highlight the overreliance on a small number of examples. For Taggart, the most prominent of these examples, which he sees as the crux of the scholastic argument in favour of Þórr being regarded as a thunder god, is found in the *Skáldskaparmál* 17 statement that before Þórr arrived, the jǫtunn Hrungnir first ‘sá [...] eldingar ok heyrði þrumur stórar’ ('saw lightning and heard great thunder'). While this might suggest an innate connection between the character and the paired weather phenomena to most readers, Taggart is quick to argue that this passage is not used to emphasise such a connection but is instead used to embellish the prose narrative it is a part of. Taggart’s reasoning here relies on the absence of further references to thunder accompanying Þórr in *Snorra Edda*. For Taggart, this suggests that the prose passage and its use of the Þórr and thunder motif is entirely reliant on, and included because of, another source – namely the Norwegian skaldic poem *Haustlǫng*. Similarly, the same lack of a distinct connection to thunder can also be interpreted in the *Poetic Edda*, wherein the only reference of a clear connection between a supernatural being and thunder, is in the heroic poems *Helgakviða Hundingbana* I (stanza 15) and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II (stanza 18 prose), and is made with the *valkyrjur* (valkyries), not Þórr. Once again, Taggart highlights that it is Þórr’s strength and his role as a protector of both the Æsir and mankind, that is at the very centre of his eddic character. As with the discussion of Þórr’s name, Taggart here presents *kenningar*, *heiti*, and eddic passages to make his point. And while the motif of Þórr as a strong, divine protector is readily agreed upon in the relevant scholarship, Taggart’s review of the sources demonstrates just how reliant the narratives are on that motif. For example, Taggart notes that entire narratives hinge on the concept of Þórr as a protector and
warrior, such as in *Prymskviða* where the loss of Þórr’s hammer potentially diminishes his ability to protect his kin, but this initial loss drives the entire plot of the poem.

Taggart continues to question the generally agreed intrinsic link between Þórr and thunder by examining some key non-eddic sources which present Þórr narratives from the wider Old Norse diaspora; specifically, Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, and a skaldic *lausavísa* (an independent stanza composition) by the Norwegian skald Þjóðólfr Arnórsson. With regards to the initial two non-eddic texts, Taggart highlights that there is a more pronounced connection between Þórr and thunder and lightning. However, he emphasises that in both cases the development and presentation of the character of Þórr is expressly tied to an *interpretatio romana*, in which the Roman deity Jove is overtly regarded as controlling lightning, as opposed to any Old Norse understanding of Þórr. As with the previous eddic text examples, Taggart interestingly uses evidence which should cement the notion of Þórr as a thunder god, but turns this on its head and subtly reminds the reader to be cautious in making quick assumptions, to question what the sources’ intentions were, and to take a moment to think of its intended audience. Taggart likewise makes this same point when examining the likes of Þjórolfr Arnórsson’s *lausavísa* (verse 5) which uses the mythologic battle between Þórr and the jötunn Geirrøðr as a metaphor for the argument between the verse’s actual dramatis personae, a blacksmith and a tanner. For instance, Taggart is able to show that the metaphorical use of terms which might invoke the idea of thunder or lightning when used in association with Þórr, such as the word *eldingr* (usually translated as ‘lightning’) in the *kenning* ‘hvapteldingar’ (‘jaw-lightning’, that is, ‘insults’), were not necessarily meant to invoke that same meaning. Instead, they were more likely to be interpreted as something more directly associated with the forge, such as ‘smelting metals’ or ‘fuel’, given the verse’s blacksmith protagonist.

Aside from examining the connection between thunder and the character of Þórr, Taggart also inspects the interaction of that same motif via Þórr’s weapons. Due to their association with Þórr, the weapons might invoke the same connection to thunder on their own; the most prominent of which being Þórr’s hammer Mjöllnir. As before, this discussion is produced through a thorough examination of as many extant examples as possible, including amongst others the skaldic poems *Þórsdrápa* and *Húsdrápa*. Here Taggart notes that while numerous researchers have concluded that Mjöllnir signifies the lightning and thunder at Þórr’s command, serving as the delivery system of those natural phenomena for the god when attacking jötnar, in these cases he cannot find convincing evidence to accept this image.
Once again Taggart argues that the source texts only rarely show this connection. Instead, like Þórr himself, the narratives exhibit an ever-present image of Mjöllnir’s association with strength via its use as a blunt weapon.

Having examined the extant mythological texts interpretations of Þórr’s hammer, in the final chapter of his monograph Taggart examines this same object’s use in the milieu of popular culture of the Viking Age. As with the name Þórr earlier, here Taggart examines the etymology of Mjöllnir, which again is generally associated with the deity’s strength and martial prowess via the assumed derivation from the verb mala ‘to grind’. Though Taggart regards this derivation as the most likely source, as it causes the fewest possible problems, he still highlights the potential that the weapon’s name is derived from non-Germanic roots which do relate to lightning, in an effort to leave no piece of potential evidence un-turned.

Throughout his book Taggart presents solid evidence and arguments which show that while Þórr may have held the position of thunder god in Scandinavia, the eddic and skaldic sources produced (mainly) in Iceland do not reveal an overt connection to thunder, but rather show a clear connection between Þórr and strength. If there is any issue with either Taggart’s argument, evidence, or his conclusions, it is in what Taggart would readily note as a lack of extant sources for comparison. That is to say, after spending a copious amount of time arguing why any one of the eddic or skaldic sources do not link Þórr with thunder and lightning, Taggart will, on occasion, conclude that there is still some potential that those sources could have meant both. Yet, even with this occasional undercutting of his own argument, Taggart’s examination of the nuances of the source material and his conclusions are solid and convincing, resulting in a reluctance to disagree with his views.