

# The Damaged Bone and the Lone Mushroom

## Pórr's Goats, Tyrolean Chamois, Sami Bears and Canadian Salmon

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*ABSTRACT: The article carries out a comparative exercise focusing on the Norse myth about Þórr slaughtering and then reviving his goats. It has sometimes been argued that the myth is a borrowing from a Christian legend about Saint Germanus. This is, however, problematic since similar traditions are found in Alpine, Caucasian, Sámi and even Native American contexts, in all cases with a non-Christian flavour. The article concentrates on those analogues that are closest to the Norse myth in terms of the central details and considers what might lie behind this seemingly odd distribution. The suggestion is that the central motif constitutes a shared tradition across the northern hemisphere that has its roots in the very deep layers of human history.*

*RESUME: Artiklen præsenterer en komparativ øvelse med fokus på den norrøne myte om Thor, der slagter sine geder og derpå vækker dem til live igen. Den teori er flere gange blevet fremsat, at myten er lånt fra en kristen helgenlegende om Sankt Germanus. Dette er imidlertid problematisk, idet lignende traditioner findes i Alperne, Kaukasus, Sápmi og endda indfødte canadiske kulturer, i alle tilfælde uden kristen forklædning. Artiklen fokuserer på de parallelle fortællinger, som følger den norrøne myte tættest med hensyn til de centrale detaljer, og overvejer, hvad der kan ligge til grund for denne løjerlige spredning. Forslaget er, at det centrale motiv udgør en fælles tradition på tværs af den nordlige halvkugle med rødder i den meget dybe historie.*

*KEYWORDS: Comparison; comparativism; Þórr; Saint Germanus; Laurasian mythology; Norse mythology*

We have to take into consideration the information that we get from sources that are late and those that are concerned with the neighbouring peoples and see whether these may shed light on mythical or ritual elements and structures that are otherwise inconceivable (Schjødt 2017, 78).

These words sum up Jens Peter Schjødt's stance regarding comparative mythological studies, and the present article intends to carry out just such a study, focusing on a specific Norse myth.

The myth in question stands rather alone within the Norse context; although we know of two versions, only one is detailed enough to warrant inclusion here. Looking beyond the Norse rim to neighbouring cultures, we find comparable material in Irish, Alpine and in some Sámi traditions. Further afield, comparable material is also found in the Caucasus. Comparing these different European versions of the central motif may therefore amount to what Schjødt has called 'genetic comparison'. Beyond that, the present study also involves Siberian and indigenous Canadian material – comparisons that may (or may not!) fall within Schjødt's other category of 'typological comparison' (Schjødt 2012, 275-80).

The scope of the present article may thus look outrageously ambitious at first glance, but let us not despair prematurely. The purpose of the exercise is threefold: to show what may come of insisting on as close a match as possible, to highlight the importance of obtaining the fullest possible picture before drawing any conclusions and to concede that complexities are inevitable. The material at hand does lend itself more easily to conjecture than firm conclusions, but this in itself is, I believe, a point that needs to be made.

The central narrative is a Norse myth recorded in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a work on heathen Norse mythology written down around 1220, but extant only in manuscripts from c. 1300 and later.<sup>1</sup> The value of this work in terms of genuinely heathen traditions has often, and rightfully, been questioned, because Snorri himself was a Christian who produced his work more than two centuries after Christianity was adopted in Iceland. He presents his mythical narrative within a frame that renders heathen beliefs and gods as mere illusions and, in some instances, Snorri manipulates heathen traditions to fit his own Christian world-view.<sup>2</sup> We should not, however, dismiss the potentially pre-Christian provenance of the myth in question before examining it more closely.

The Norse myth will be the starting point for the exploration: *Gylfaginning* 44 of Snorri's *Edda* tells the story of how the Norse god Þórr, while travelling in his chariot drawn by two goats and accompanied by Loki, stays a night with a farmer and his family. In the evening, Þórr slaughters both goats, the animals are skinned, and Þórr invites the farmer and his wife and children to share the meal with himself and Loki.

<sup>1</sup> The work is preserved in three medieval manuscripts: DG 11, c. 1300-1325, Gks 2367 4to, 1300-1350 and AM 242 fol., c. 1350; Snorri Sturluson 2005, xxviii-xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Hall 2007, 23-27.

Þórr then places the goatskins beside the fire and instructs the farmer and his household to throw the bones onto the skins after eating the meat. But the farmer's son, Þjálfí, takes the goat's ham-bone and splits it open to get to the marrow. The next day, just before dawn, Þórr gets up, raises his hammer and sanctifies the goatskins. Both goats now come alive again – but one is lame in its hind leg. Þórr realizes that someone from the household has failed to treat the bones with the proper respect. Angry, he clenches his hammer and sends off frightfully piercing gazes with his eyes. The farmer and his household are terrified and beg for grace. On seeing their terror, Þórr calms down and they come to a settlement whereby he accepts the farmer's two children as his servants in compensation for the broken bone.<sup>3</sup>

This story is a prelude to, but has no narrative impact on, the myth about Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki; it is an entity in its own right.<sup>4</sup> It conveys several messages about Þórr: He can bring his animals back to life even after they have been cooked and eaten; he will share the abundance that this represents with humans provided they treat the gift with the proper respect; if you fail to do so you provoke the god's anger; his anger can be abated if he takes pity and/or if you offer him compensation.<sup>5</sup>

This Norse myth has been compared to a medieval Christian legend about Saint Germanus of Auxerre in Burgundy, who lived c. 378-445. Two versions of the legend resemble the Norse myth, and it has been argued that the myth is fundamentally a loan from the Christian legend, which in turn has Celtic origins.<sup>6</sup> The argument stresses partly the fact that the Christian legends were recorded in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the Norse myth only around 1220, partly the existence of more examples of the story in Gaelic tradition against just one in Norse. I intend to argue that this view is overly text-centred and that we are probably dealing with distinct manifestations of the same underpinning oral tradition.

One of the legends about Saint Germanus was recorded by the Welsh monk Nennius in his *Historia Brittonum*, a chronicle of the history of Britain up until the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, written about 828.<sup>7</sup> In chapter 32, the following story is told: Saint Germanus is travelling in Britain when a certain king refuses him entry to his city. But one of the king's servants invites the saint to his home for the night and makes him a meal of

<sup>3</sup> Brief references to the lame goat are made in the eddic poem *Hymiskviða*, stanzas 7 and 37-38, but the poem only says that Loki was responsible and that the man who housed the goats in Þórr's absence gave his two children to Þórr as compensation. This is evidence that the myth was well-known, i.e. it is not Snorri's invention, but the poetic reference does not amount to a version that is relevant to include in the present discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Power 1985, 245 and Tolley 2012, 85; Lindow (2000, 171 *et passim*) refers to it as a prologue.

<sup>5</sup> I disregard all variants where a human is eaten or destroyed on the grounds that this seems to me involve beliefs that, although similar in their expression, are different from the ideology, which underpins the Norse myth and the analogues discussed here. Tuite 1997 discusses the Greek Pelops myth together with variants about animals; cf. von Sydow 1910, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Thus Egeler 2018, 39-40 and 2013, 42-43; Dronke 2011, 106; Chesnutt 1989a, 38-39 and 1989b, 324; von Sydow 1910, 67 and 105. However, see also Tolley 2012, 89-91.

<sup>7</sup> Little is known about Nennius. It is uncertain whether he really wrote *Historia Brittonum* (MacKillop 2004, 267), but for the present purposes, his authorship is accepted.

the only calf he owns. Before supper, Germanus orders everyone not to break any of the bones, and the next morning the calf is found alive and uninjured next to its mother in the byre.<sup>8</sup>

This is clearly similar to Snorri's myth, but there are, equally clearly, major differences. Both stories describe the god or saint's overnight visit, the meal, his command not to break any bones and the resuscitation of the dead animal in the morning. However, Snorri has Þórr provide the food, whereas in Nennius the host does this. More importantly, Snorri allows half of the story to focus on the problem that arises when a bone is, in fact, damaged; but there is no broken bone in Nennius' story, which instead presents the episode as part of Germanus' struggle to convert the king, whom he finally overcomes and replaces with the hospitable man, who has accepted baptism.<sup>9</sup>

The message thus conveyed about Saint Germanus is different from the one about Þórr: If you show the saint hospitality and share what little you have with him out of kindness, he may reward you – firstly by bringing the slaughtered animal back to life, secondly (if you accept Christianity) by making a pure-hearted humble man into a king. Thus, the pious soul, already predisposed towards Christian ideals, is awarded the prize of divine favour for his behaviour and receives in return many times over the value of the sacrifice he made. This is quite a different message from the one pertaining to Þórr.

Another version of Saint Germanus' miracle comes from the French Benedictine theologian Heiric of Auxerre, whose work *De Miraculi S Germani* dates from c. 875 (Wollasch 1959, 212-14).<sup>10</sup> In chapter 8 of Book I, Heiric recounts how Germanus is travelling in Britain and is refused shelter at a certain king's palace. But one of the king's men, impressed by the saint, welcomes Germanus into his house and prepares for him the only calf he owns. When the meal is finished, Germanus tells everyone to arrange the bones of the calf carefully on the hide and place it before its mother in the byre, and the calf is thus brought back to life. The following day, the saint overthrows the king and replaces him with the poor man who granted him hospitality.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, this is the same story as the one told by Nennius and it conveys the same moral message about piety and reward, but there are nonetheless differences. Nennius refers to the saint's instructions prior to the meal not to break any bones; Heiric notes the careful collection of the bones after the meal, as well as the placement of bones and hide next to the calf's mother. Both legends thus focus on the treatment of the bones, but in ways too different for one to be derived from the other. Nor is it possible to regard one version as extemporaneous embellishment of the other. So, Nennius cannot

<sup>8</sup> For the Latin text, see *Chronica Minora Saec* 1898, 172-74; for an English translation, see *Nennius – Historia Brittonum* 32 (<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/nennius-full.asp>).

<sup>9</sup> These events are told in *Nennius – Historia Brittonum* 33-35.

<sup>10</sup> Heiric also authored a *Vita Germani* in verse; *Acta Sanctorum* 34, 232-66. *Miraculi* apparently draws rather more on legend than on history; Bertolotti 1991, 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* 34, 283; cf. von Sydow 1910, 92 and Bertolotti 1991, 50. This version later found its way into Jacobus de Voraigne's *Legenda aurea* from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, which became very popular across Europe (Caxton 1900: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume3.asp#Germain>).

derive from Heiric, nor vice versa. At the same time, both compare equally well to Snorri in terms of the plot, although they convey a rather different message. Importantly, neither legend can explain the broken bone in Snorri's myth.

As noted, Snorri is a Christian writing in Christian times and we might therefore imagine that he invented the details about the deity's anger in order to highlight the demonic nature of heathen gods – they offer you food, but they also become angry if you accept it. But the argument does not hold. Firstly, the details relating to the broken bone are extremely well integrated into the story and do not have the appearance of an addition to an already complete narrative. Secondly, the episode ends happily when the god's anger is deflated by the offer of compensation. Were the intention to show the fickleness of an evil being, this would not be a very suitable way of doing it.

Nennius and Heiric's stories likely go back to a common source, which preserved all the elements about the treatment of the bones: the prohibition against breaking any, the careful gathering and the placement in a specific spot before the resurrection of the animal. Since there is no trace of the broken bone in either legend and since the story they tell does not need it, I hold it unlikely that their common source included this element.<sup>12</sup> Since both hagiographers emphasize the British setting, it is probable that Germanus' resuscitation of an animal ultimately derives from British tradition.<sup>13</sup> Some medieval legends about Celtic saints recall Heiric's version of the Germanus legend where the bones are gathered after the meal, certainly one about the Irish-Cornish Saint Gwinear from about 1300<sup>14</sup> and to some extent one about the Gaelic Saint Columba recorded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> The striking thing is that Snorri's remains the only medieval version to include the damaged bone and the details about anger and compensation; this renders it unlikely that he knew the story from Nennius or Heiric.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Grant Loomis (1948, 84-85, notes on page 194) mentions a whole list of medieval saints restoring dead animals to life (cf. Tolley 2011, 90-91), none include a broken or damaged bone.

<sup>13</sup> Heiric says that he learned of this miracle by Germanus from an English hermit named Mark (*Acta Sanctorum* 34, 283), which supports the British origins of the legend.

<sup>14</sup> The Life of Saint Gwinear (or Fingar) was written by a Breton named Anselm around 1300; Orme 2000, 136. In the story, a woman slaughters her only cow to feed the saint and his companions and, after the meal, Gwinear has the bones gathered on the hide and when he prays to God the cow is resurrected; Orme 2000, 137; cf. *Acta Sanctorum* 9, 455-56 and von Sydow 1910, 93.

<sup>15</sup> The Life of Saint Columba from the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Book of Lismore (*Betha Choluim Cille* 1055-1063, *Lives of Saints* 1890, 20-33 and 168-81; cf. Egeler 2018, 40). Here, the saint is cooking an ox for some workers, one of whom is allowed to eat his fill first and consumes the entire ox. The saint asks him to gather all the bones, blesses them and the flesh returns to them so that the other workers can eat (*Lives of Saints* 1890, 31 and 179). It is not clear that the ox returns to life; it only says that the flesh returns to the bones.

<sup>16</sup> von Sydow (1910, 105) argues that the Germanus legend was, indeed, the source of the Norse myth; cf. Egeler 2013, 42-43 and Chesnutt 1989a, 38-39. I think this unlikely. Chesnutt (1989b, 324-25) argues that the story of Orion's birth told in Ovid's *Fasti*, Book 5, 493-544 (written c. 8 AD), is the forefather of the Germanus legends. Although there are resemblances, Ovid's tale lacks the details about the bones as well as the resuscitation. It is therefore an unlikely origin for the Norse myth as we know it.

However, two late-recorded Irish legends do feature the broken bone. One concerns Saint Kieran who is in charge of building a cathedral. He has but one ox that hauls building materials during the day, and each evening the saint slaughters it to feed his team of workers. Every evening, the ox's bones are thrown into a well and each morning the animal reappears, ready for work. When only the eastern gable of the church remains to be built, one workman, McMahon, breaks a shin-bone to get to the marrow and, although all splinters are carefully gathered, the ox appears next day with a broken leg. Saint Kieran now prays that the gable may one day fall down on someone named McMahon (Dyer 1892, 14-15). The other Irish legend is similar: A saint is building a church and he slaughters his favourite cow every evening to feed the workers. No one is allowed to damage the bones, which must be gathered in the hide, and the cow then reappears the next morning. But one morning the cow comes hobbling on only three legs. The saint now calls out the workers and one of them admits to having broken a thigh-bone to get to the marrow. When the man admits his crime, the saint calms down and thanks him for stepping forward; had he not done this, he would have been killed by a stone falling from the building (von Sydow 1910, 96).<sup>17</sup>

Both these legends are much closer to Snorri's story about Þórr slaughtering his goats: The saint slaughters his own animal; others are invited to partake in the meal; no one is allowed to break any bones; the bones must be gathered and treated in a special way; and the animal returns to life the next day. When a bone is, in fact, damaged, a punishment or the threat of one is meted out. Whereas Snorri presents a direct exchange as the solution – Þórr is given the culprit and his sister as compensation<sup>18</sup> – the legend about Saint Kieran features the threat of taking the life of someone related to the culprit while the anonymous legend practices forgiveness, but indicates that the culprit would have lost his life had he not admitted to his deed. In these two legends, the story is incorporated into the Master Builder tale, but they still present close analogues to the Norse myth. However, we have no way of assessing the age or provenance of them; they are recorded around 1900, which does not necessarily mean that they are late, but it does mean that we must be careful. They share with the 12<sup>th</sup>-century legend about Saint Columba the fact that the saint is cooking for a group of workmen, and this suggests that the relationship between these Gaelic stories may be deep-rooted. In turn, this could indicate insular Celtic origins so that Snorri's myth might, indeed, stem from Gaelic tradition.<sup>19</sup>

However, equally significant late-recorded analogues are found in continental Europe, especially Tyrol, which spans the Austrian-Italian border. At least four relevant variants were recorded here in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

<sup>17</sup> I have not been able to locate von Sydow's source for this.

<sup>18</sup> Tolley (2012, 85) suggests that the image of Þórr with his two goats is directly paralleled by that of Þórr and his two human servants (the farmer's children).

<sup>19</sup> Thus Egeler 2018, 39-40 and 2013, 34-43; Chesnutt 1989a, 38-39 and 1989b, 324; von Sydow 1910, 103-5. Tolley (2012, 87) points out the complication of labelling the myth 'Celtic' since many of the Irish versions have been recorded in English, which is not a Celtic language.

1) A man hunting chamois late in the evening sees a campfire. He goes to the fire and finds three 'wild women', who invite him to partake in their meal. They are cooking chamois in a copper kettle. Before the meal, the hunter is instructed not to damage any bones or the animal will suffer for it. He carefully puts all bones back into the kettle, but accidentally swallows a small one. He keeps quiet about this, spends the night in the open and returns home the next morning. On his way, he sees a scrawny chamois, lame in its left hind leg. The swallowed bone remains inside of him, causing stitches and pains that he cannot rid himself of. Three years later he shoots a fat chamois, which is lame in its left hind leg. As he skins it, he notices that it lacks exactly the bone that he swallowed and realizes that this is the very same animal as the one the 'wild women' cooked, ate and then brought back to life (Zingerle 1891, 15-16, tale no. 24; cf. von Sydow 1910, 87).

2) On his way home from the mountains, a farmer in Oeßthal is surprised to come across five women who invite him to partake in their meal consisting of roast chamois. The oldest woman emphasizes that he must not damage even the smallest bone. Although the man is very cautious, he does damage a bone from the animal's left foot, and he tells the women this. They assuage him that it will only cause the chamois to limp a little on its left hind leg. The man now eats his fill and happily returns home. A while later, he goes hunting and comes across a skinny chamois, which is lame in its left hind leg. He decides not to shoot it now, but wait until it has fattened up. Three years later, he shoots the chamois and realizes that the animal is missing exactly the bone that he damaged previously (Rochholz 1867, 225).<sup>20</sup>

3) A 'wild man' pays a visit to a hunter and shares with him a meal consisting of cooked hare. Afterwards, the 'wild man' wants to thank the hunter by showing him how to turn cheese into wax, but it requires the hunter not to tell any lies. The hunter agrees. The 'wild man' then asks him if he has kept any bit of the hare, the hunter says no and the 'wild man' tells him to put all the bones on a plate and bring the animal's skin. Then the 'wild man' covers the bones with the skin and the hare jumps up alive and runs from the table out the door, but it is limping on one foot. This makes the 'wild man' angry; he shouts at the hunter for having lied and refuses to share the secret. The hunter kept one bone to make a whistle from it (Friedel 1872, 130; cf. von Sydow 1910, 88).

4) A shepherd in the mountains above Roncegno is annoyed by the noise of the 'wild hunter' Beatrik's dogs and curses him. But the noise comes closer and Beatrik angrily enters his hut; the shepherd now begs forgiveness and is granted it. Beatrik demands food and orders the shepherd to fetch a specific black goat from the top of a hill. Beatrik skins the goat, cooks it and offers the shepherd to partake in the meal, but without damaging any bones. The shepherd does so, but happens to swallow a small bone. After the meal, Beatrik throws the hide over the bones, brings the goat back to

<sup>20</sup> The location must be Oetztal southwest of Innsbruck in Austria. Rochholz (1867, 224) notes that this folk belief in the life-force residing in the bones goes back to the Norse myth about Þórr, but that in the Alps it concerns primarily wild animals, rather than domesticated ones. This example is not included in von Sydow's survey.

life and the animal walks out the door, limping a little on one foot. Beatrik is not yet full and now wants to eat human flesh. He orders the shepherd to go and fetch a certain man. The shepherd goes, but warns the man, and together they flee to the village. In the meantime, dawn breaks and they are safe. Whenever the shepherd goes up the mountain in the future, he has to hide and make crosses of straw so that Beatrik will not come for him at night (Schneller 1867, 207-8).<sup>21</sup>

These are variants of a very similar story: A man shares a meal with one or more supernatural characters who provide the food; he is not allowed to damage the bones; after the meal the bones are gathered and the animal brought back to life, but because the man has kept or swallowed a bone, the animal is now lame in one leg. The stories involve various threats aimed at the man as a consequence of his lack of caution. Additionally, two variants specify that the resuscitated animal took three years to regain its strength.

More such legends could undoubtedly be found if a thorough investigation were carried out,<sup>22</sup> but these four examples suffice to prove that the Norse myth finds clear parallels outwith the British Isles. These, too, are of late provenance, so again we must exercise caution; but because the analogues are so close to the Norse myth we cannot simply dismiss them. Might a British legend about Saint Germanus converting Britons to Christianity in the 5<sup>th</sup> century have given rise to a flourishing 19<sup>th</sup>-century folklore about 'wild men' resuscitating animals in the Alps? That Germanus was known in the Alpine area is suggested by the existence of a locality named Sankt German near Raron in the Swiss canton of Wallis. It is thus conceivable that the legend about Germanus' British miracle could have travelled with his name to the Alpine region, but this in turn poses another problem: Why is none of the Tyrolean material associated with the saint? If the motif were Christian, is it then feasible that it would become associated in late-recorded folklore with 'wild people' who seem rather more heathen? This seems rather unlikely. The other option is that Germanus was not the 'inventor' of the miracle, but took it over from a pre-Christian supernatural figure. The argument has been made that an ancient 'Lord of the Animals' revived his animals first, so to speak,<sup>23</sup> and if this is the case, then the Christian version represents a later adaptation. What may speak in favour of this is the fact that the learned recordings of the legend omit the details concerning the damaged bone, which nonetheless continue to surface in the popular variants. It seems that, when the motif came into the hands of Saint Germanus, the broken, swallowed or damaged bone disappeared and was replaced with a reward for piety: The food is now offered by the host and the saint shows his appreciation of the

<sup>21</sup> Mannhardt (1875, 116) notes that this is a version of the same story as Þórr slaughtering his goats; cf. von Sydow 1910, 88. Roncegno is located east of Trento in northern Italy.

<sup>22</sup> Power (1985, 145-46) refers to the story as a variant of the folktale ATU 750B; cf. Uther 2004 I, 398 ('Hospitality Rewarded'; this, however, has no damaged bones); Chesnutt 1989b. As von Sydow (1910, 81-96) shows, there are numerous Tyrolean and Central European variants. In the present context, only those containing all the elements of the Norse myth are considered.

<sup>23</sup> Bertolotti (1991, 51-54 *et passim*) argues that the motif goes back to a pre-Christian deity who was 'Lord of the Animals'; von Sydow 1910, 101-2 apparently presents the same idea with specific reference to the Celtic Cernunnos.



generosity by reviving the animal, no damage is incurred and thus no anger or admission of wrongdoing is necessary for the story to come together. These parts nonetheless continue to feature in popular variants. Could we, then, be dealing with a truly ancient motif, which has survived for centuries on the submerged continent of popular tradition?

But not without surfacing in between, because the story turns up in northern Italy in the Middle Ages and into the 16<sup>th</sup> century in connection with the witch hunts that swept across Europe during that century.<sup>24</sup> In 1519, a woman in Modena confesses to attending a witches' Sabbath where an ox was eaten whose bones were subsequently gathered into the animal's hide and, once the hide was beaten with a stick, the ox seemed to come to life again (Bertolotti 1991, 42-44). This account displays most of the relevant features: There is a supernatural host; an animal is cooked and eaten; the meal is shared; the bones are gathered and treated in a special way; the animal is brought to life again. But there is no damaged bone. This recalls Heiric's version of Saint Germanus, now with a witch, ally of the Devil, as the miracle-worker.<sup>25</sup>

The Dominican priest who presides over the case in Modena, Bartolomeo Spina, reacts with surprise since he has never heard of the Devil being able to perform such miraculous feats. Perhaps the popular version of the motif was not widely known in learned circles.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the priest rationalizes that the Devil must have sought to imitate Saint Germanus' miracle of resuscitating a calf, and Germanus seems to be Spina's only point of reference for the motif (Spina 1576, 3-4 and 77-78).<sup>27</sup> The important thing is that the alleged witch herself has apparently not heard of Germanus' miracle; she knows the motif from elsewhere. If we entertain for a moment the thought that the woman in Modena did, in fact, know about Saint Germanus and his miracle, then she would be partaking in a kind of inverted, ungodly worship of a saint, whose name she does not mention at the trial, even under penalty of death; indeed, Spina is surprised to hear the woman's account, as if he did not expect her to know the Christian legend. If she had the faintest idea that a Christian saint were involved, would she not have said so? It seems more likely that she did not associate it with Germanus and that the tradition must have come from elsewhere – likely indigenous beliefs and folk traditions (Bertolotti 1991, 47-49). That such a tradition existed is supported by the fact that, already in 1390, another woman on trial in Milan told a very similar story to the Inquisition, but with the added detail that if any bones were missing these were to be replaced with wooden objects made of elder wood (Bertolotti 1991, 59). The Milanese

<sup>24</sup> See Hutton 2017, 180-211 (in particular 196-98) for Early Modern material on witchcraft.

<sup>25</sup> In the Modenese case, a striking difference is that those who partake in the meal apparently feel just as hungry afterwards, as if they had eaten nothing at all. This indicates a conceptual distinction between resuscitations effected by witches and those performed by individuals sanctioned by God, because only God can work true miracles whereas the Devil and his worshippers create mere illusions; Bertolotti 1991, 44-45.

<sup>26</sup> It cannot be taken for granted that ecclesiastical and popular culture were similar in attitude, contextual frame or concrete narratives; cf. Le Goff 1980, 153-58; see DuBois 2014 for a discussion of learned versus folk tradition in the Norse context.

<sup>27</sup> Spina's work was originally published in 1523.

trial, then, presents a close analogue to the Norse myth – including the broken, here missing, bone as well as a solution for how to deal with that problem. This enables us to trace the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Tyrolean legends back about half a millennium, to 1390.<sup>28</sup>

Given this, it is no longer possible to dismiss the late-recorded material. Nor is it feasible to explain the Norse myth as a simple borrowing by Þórr from Saint Germanus. More likely, we are dealing with shared roots in the deep layers of pre-Christian European history.<sup>29</sup>

But there is more.

The Norse myth finds another analogue in one branch of Sámi hunting tradition. This tradition concerns primarily the bear, which held a special status in some Sámi cultures (Pentikäinen 2015, 124-29; Zachrisson 1973, 28-30; Högström 1747, 209).<sup>30</sup> The ritual in question has, however, been reported also to pertain to reindeer (Fritzner 1877, 207-8; Propp 1975, 19; Zachrisson 1973, 30). In general terms, the bear allows itself to be killed provided the humans treat it in such a way that it may be reborn. This agreement between humans and bear has mythical origins: Three brothers treat their sister so badly that she runs away and seeks refuge in a bear's den. She becomes the bear's wife and they have a son. When the bear grows old, he lets his wife's brothers kill him. Leaving his tracks in the snow, he allows them to find him, circle him and take his life, but he ensures that his own son will recognize him and refrain from killing him, and he only allows the youngest of his wife's brothers, who was less nasty to her, to be his killer.<sup>31</sup>

The myth is very different from the Norse one, but the beliefs associated with this Sámi bear hunt reveal that there is nonetheless a remarkable overlap. Many rituals with strict gender rules surround the hunt itself and its aftermath (Edsman 1994, 50-64, Schefferus 1673, 231-44; Högström 1747, 209-11; Fjellström 1755; Pentikäinen 2015), but the main interest in the present context is with the bones. The bear may have been regarded as a god whose special relationship with humans is expressed in the myth; at least, the bear was considered a sacred animal (Pentikäinen 2015, 128 and 131). If treated with the proper respect, the bear will allow itself to be slain – an act regarded

<sup>28</sup> Witch trials such as these must, in turn, have influenced the popular traditions that surfaced during the undoubtedly forced 'confessions' by alleged witches. That people were tried and sentenced for admitting to holding these beliefs must have pushed the beliefs in the direction of demonization. The starting point may well have been the ability of a kindly disposed supernatural being to bring animals back to life, but once officialdom began to label this the work of the Devil that surely influenced common people's perceptions of the being to whom such abilities were ascribed. Le Goff (1980, 157) hints at such a reaction.

<sup>29</sup> "The records of Christianity preserve a storehouse of traditions and motives which are infinitely older than the religion itself. The manifold details of this more ancient inheritance were particularly adapted and applied to strengthen and to advance the propagation of the Christian faith"; Grant Loomis 1948, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Paulson (1959, 278-83) includes the entire North-Eurasian area, because the belief in preserving the bones for the purpose of resurrecting the animal exists across this area, although it is expressed in different ways.

<sup>31</sup> The myth is recounted by Fjellström in 1755, 13-15 (page numbers refer to Fjellström's own text, not the Swedish translation); cf. Pentikäinen 2015, 132.

as a great honour for both bear and hunters. Once the bear is killed, the bones must remain intact and be buried together with the skull (Pentikäinen 2015, 127-29 and 138-39; Zachrisson 1973, 28-30; Högström 1747, 210; Fjellström 1755, 22 and 28-29; cf. Edsman 1994, 71-72).<sup>32</sup> It is specified that all bones must be preserved intact.<sup>33</sup> However, if it happens that a dog steals a bone and chews it up, then the dog has to give its own bone instead, as a replacement (Högström 1747, 210).<sup>34</sup> Another special instance notes that if Swedish settlers have taken part in the hunt, the Sámi then bury only the bones from their own share (Fjellström 1755, 29). The idea seems to be that each person must answer to the bear directly.

This material presents an obviously different tradition involving ritualized behaviour and cultic ceremony with a mythical background, but the notable similarities to the Norse myth have been pointed out by several scholars.<sup>35</sup> According to Norse tradition, the deity kills his animals to share a meal with a human family whom he is visiting; in the Sámi tradition, the sacred animal allows itself to be killed in order to feed and maintain a special relationship with humans. In the Norse myth, there are rules against breaking the bones, which are all gathered into the animals' hides after the meal; in the Sámi tradition, there are similar rules, and all bones are carefully preserved and buried in the ground after the animal is skinned and cooked. In the Norse myth, failure to observe the proper behaviour provokes the deity's anger and compensation must be offered; in the Sámi tradition, if a bone is mangled by a dog, the dog can be killed and the corresponding bone taken from it to be buried with the bear skeleton, which is also a form of compensation.<sup>36</sup>

These similarities between a Norse myth and a Sámi tradition are striking and urges us to consider what the relationship here might be. Has one tradition borrowed from the other? Or is there another explanation? In this instance, too, we encounter the issue of late recordings; the earliest written descriptions of the Sámi bear hunting rituals date from the 1670s. Christianity reached the Sámi peoples rather late – the 16<sup>th</sup> century in areas with Russian political influence and the 17<sup>th</sup> century in those with Scandinavian. Anything near a complete Christianization had not occurred until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It can therefore be assumed that the tradition in question has not only pre-Christian origins, but is also devoid of influence from medieval learned Christian traditions, such as the Germanus legend. At least, it must be conceded that the motif exists outwith the Christian context and could have entered Norse tradition from the Sámi rather than the Christian direction. That this is not just one local tradition in

<sup>32</sup> Leem says that the bones of a slain bear were buried (1766, 503) and that certain supernatural beings were able to return flesh to the bones of an animal given to them (1767, 419).

<sup>33</sup> Thus Rheen in 1671 (Edsman 1994, 64-66); cf. Schefferus 1673, 240, Fjellström 1755, 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> This is also mentioned in an anonymous account from 1755 (Edsman 1994, 79) cf. Pentikäinen 2015, 139 and Propp 1975, 19. Zachrisson (1973, 29-30) mentions that special care was taken to prevent especially dogs from snatching the bones of a slain bear; cf. Paulson 1959, 275.

<sup>35</sup> See especially Tolley 2012, 86-87 *et passim*; cf. Zachrisson 1973, 30; Edsman 1994, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Pentikäinen (2015, 127) notes that if the bear behaved improperly, for example by killing humans, then it did not receive the proper burial. Instead, its right paw was cut off and thrown away to ensure that the skeleton was not intact and the animal could therefore not be reborn.

Sápmi and thus potentially a sometime loan from continental Europe is suggested by the fact that the tradition exists throughout the circumpolar area (Price 2020, 201-2; Paulson 1959, 278-83), even with close analogues in North America, as we shall see.

One suggestion is that the myth about the resuscitated animal with a damaged bone originated in Caucasus, entered Europe during the Age of Migrations, took hold and developed into the variants discussed above (Tolley 2012, 95-100 and 107-108). The case could certainly be made if we focus exclusively on European areas, including Russia and the Caucasus, but this does not account for the North American variants.<sup>37</sup> In the Caucasus, Abkhazian tradition knows a god of wild animals called Azepsa or Adagwa who is very old, blind and deaf and is helped by his three daughters. He is said to kill, cook and eat animals and then wrap all the bones up in the hide to bring them back to life, and if a bone is missing, he replaces it with a piece of wood (Dirr 1925, 140; cf. Schmidt 1952, 525, Tuite 1997 and Tolley 2012, 95). In an Armenian legend, a hunter is invited by supernatural forest-beings to partake in a meal consisting of an ox; he keeps a rib when the beings gather all the bones into the animal's hide and they replace the missing bone with one made of walnut wood. The ox is then brought back to life and when it is later slaughtered again, it is found to have one wooden rib (Schmidt 1952, 526; cf. Tuite 1997 and Tolley 2012, 95). Especially the Armenian narrative recalls the Alpine versions closely, but I am not convinced that this forces us to argue in favour of borrowing – in one direction or the other. I do not see that anything speaks against shared roots and, given the distribution of the motif, I find the explanation involving common roots easier to accept.

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer describes a belief in the resurrection of animals that have been killed and eaten, provided that the bones are treated properly and not broken or gnawed. His examples include the Sámi (whom he calls 'Lapps') and Inuit ('Esquimaux'), but also the Hidatsa of the North American plains ('Minnetaree') (Frazer 1894, 122-25 and 1922, 529). Similarly, this belief has been evidenced across Siberia, including the Evenki (called 'Tungusic'), Nenets ('Samoyed-Yuraks') and Kets ('Yenisei Ostyaks') (Paulson 1959, 278-83), but also into North Asian areas, including the Nivkh ('Gilyaks') and Ainu who inhabit the island of Sakhalin north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido (Paulson 1959, 283-87). The belief has sometimes been labelled circumpolar, but since it has been recorded not only among Sami, Inuit and Siberian peoples, but also among the Hidatsa and Ainu, as well as in the Caucasus and Tyrol, circumpolar may be too narrow a description.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps this is a circumpolar tradition that has spread southwards on three continents – Europe, Asia and North America – or perhaps it is a shared Palaeolithic remnant across the northern hemisphere;<sup>39</sup> both could be possible.

<sup>37</sup> I find Tolley's attention to historical context impressive; his analysis of the Age of Migrations and its impact on European narrative traditions (2012, 96-101) is relevant and exemplary. But it omits the North Asian and North American material, which I believe should be included.

<sup>38</sup> Price (2019, 2002) describes it as a circumpolar belief. That this tradition is shared across Eurasia and North America is also noted by Tuite 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Tolley (2012, 96) mentions this possibility, but finds it hard to argue in favour of it.

Regarding the North Asian beliefs, I have not been able to locate any information about what happened if a bone did go missing, although the prohibition against damaging them appears to exist. Yet some North American examples do contain this detail: The Squamish of south-western British Columbia have a relevant myth about the salmon. It tells of four brothers who seek to bring the salmon to Squamish waters and so they visit the salmon people whose chief is Spring Salmon. The salmon people are able to change back and forth between human and salmon form. In connection with the brothers' arrival, Spring Salmon asks two boys and two girls of his people to go into the water and swim up the creek into the salmon trap. When the brothers arrive, Spring Salmon has the four fish in the trap cleaned, cooked and served for the visitors, and he tells the brothers not to throw away or destroy even a small bone but lay them all aside carefully. The brothers do so and after they have eaten, the piles of bones are taken away, thrown into the water and then the four young people appear again. The same care is taken at every meal, but one time one of the brothers keeps back some bones to see what will happen. When the four young people reappear, one boy is missing his nose and cheeks. Spring Salmon becomes angry and asks the brothers whether all the bones were returned. Alarmed by what he has done, the guilty brother returns the remaining bones. The four brothers now present their request that the salmon come to Squamish waters. Spring Salmon promises this, but on the condition that the Squamish return all bones undamaged to the water. Unless they do so, the salmon cannot return.<sup>40</sup> Somewhat similar legends are found among other North American nations, even quite far south.<sup>41</sup>

This brings us far away from Old Norse mythology, geographically, culturally and historically, yet the motif seems to be recognizably the same. How can we explain this? Can we simply dismiss the striking overlaps as mere coincidence? Comparing the Squamish myth to the Norse one, these similarities show: In both cases the meal is provided by the supernatural being(s), although this is the host in the Squamish myth, but the visitor in the Norse. In the Squamish myth, Spring Salmon is able to bring the fish back to life (and in human form), just like Þórr is able to do with his goats. In both cases, all the bones of the animals must remain undamaged and be returned in the proper way. When one or more bones are damaged or not returned, the animals suffer. This incurs the anger of the supernatural being(s). The person who has committed the crime is frightened and must compensate. Spring Salmon is happy to share the abundant supply of food that his people represent with human beings as long as they treat the animals with the required respect; the same may be said about Þórr.

<sup>40</sup> CBC Indigenous (<https://www.facebook.com/CBC.caIndigenous/videos/the-legend-of-the-salmon-people/1633964673297619/>) and Native Languages (<http://www.native-languages.org/squamish-legends.htm>).

<sup>41</sup> Boas (1970 [1916], 773-74) records similar traditions among the Tsimshian of coastal British Columbia and southern Alaska. The motif of reviving an animal from its bones after it has been cooked and eaten is widespread in North America, but I have found only few versions that feature damaged bones and none outwith the north-west Pacific area that feature anger, fear and compensation; Boas 1970 (1916), 694-98, 773-74; Owen Dorsey 1888, 213-14.

There are obvious differences, too – in the Squamish myth the salmon boy's damaged face can be restored by returning the bones, whereas Þórr's goat seems to remain lame; the Squamish myth has a very direct correspondence between human and animal form, whereas this is only indirect in Norse where a human child can compensate for the lame animal; the Squamish myth is part of a longer narrative about how the salmon came to be a staple food, while the Norse myth is preserved as a short narrative in its own right.

Still, the similarities are close enough to consider the Squamish myth a relevant analogue. The salmon story features not only the resurrection of a slain, cooked and eaten animal together with the preservation of the bones, but also the problem of the damaged bone, its consequences for the animal, the supernatural character's anger, the fear and compensation. This strikes me as a surprisingly close match.

The question is how to account for this apparent link. Are we dealing with a belief and a way of behaving towards desired hunting animals that became so deeply rooted in the human psyche in the remote past, prior to the migration into North America, that they survived in new and old guises long after the transition into Neolithic times and farming cultures? This would explain the existence of that belief in hunting cultures and environments, such as in Sápmi and Tyrol<sup>42</sup> as well as among the Squamish, and those variants would then have to be regarded as reflections of the oldest form; but it would also explain the farming context with a domesticated animal in the Norse myth and the Irish legends, which could be seen to preserve the same ancient belief in a slightly updated guise. If this is, indeed, the explanation, then we are looking at truly immense stretches of time. I hesitate to argue in favour of this hypothesis, but I am rather at a loss for other explanations.

What, then, may be concluded from this wide-ranging comparative exercise? Are these 'genetic comparisons' between neighbouring peoples of neighbouring peoples, so that all these versions are, in fact, linked? Or have I wandered into 'typological comparisons' that express more generally human ideas? Things are a little more complex than just a straight yes or no. The Norse myth was taken as the starting point against which to measure others, and the idea was to locate the closest matches; these were found in Ireland, Tyrol, Milan, Armenia, Sápmi and British Columbia. The motif at the heart of the exploration: the damaged bone, appears to have been known in insular as well as continental Celtic tradition in pre-Christian times. But it also attained a Christian guise, which in the legend of Saint Germanus occurs in reduced form without the damaged bone and this version became part of learned Church tradition across Europe. In European folk tradition, however, the ancient motif seems to have lived on without Christian appropriation until it emerged as a form of alleged Devil worship in medieval Italy and as popular hunting legends about more or less kindly disposed supernatural beings in the Alps in modern times. But it also existed in the Caucasus. Alongside this

<sup>42</sup> Alpine culture is predominantly pastoral, but the folk-legends explicitly refer to hunting.

European-Caucasian strand, the motif moreover surfaces in circumpolar hunting traditions, spanning at least Sámi and north-western Native American cultures. This is an odd and distinctly northern distribution.<sup>43</sup> The argument has been put that, indeed, the mythologies of Eurasia and the Americas have very deep, common roots, which show in the numerous mythical motifs and narratives that are shared by cultures within this region (Witzel 2012, 15-20 *et passim* and Berezkin 2003).<sup>44</sup> This idea stretches the imagination, but my conviction nonetheless leans in that direction.

The Norse myth stands out because no other versions, early or late, are recorded within the Scandinavian cultural area. This does invite the notion that it might have been borrowed from elsewhere, but the picture that emerges from this investigation seems too diffuse to establish any probable 'original source'. Having considered all the analogues and their respective provenances, I am inclined now to believe that no borrowing into Norse has taken place – from Celtic, Christian, Sámi or Caucasian traditions – but that our myth is, in fact, an independent expression of a belief that was, in the deep layers of history, probably shared by all the Northern cultures considered here. I can only concede that this is a matter of conviction.

The completeness of the Norse variant surprises, because it emerges as one single Scandinavian example, but a perfect one. Explaining how this can happen is not easy on the basis of the material such as it is, but the world of biology may offer an explanation to the seemingly haphazard occurrences of the motif. For this, we need to consider mushrooms. A cluster of mushrooms growing in a field or forest is:

only the most visible signs of something much larger taking place out of sight. For unseen by our eyes, yet existing virtually everywhere in temperate climates, is the truly active, vegetative part of the fungus, the so-called mycelium, made up of fine filaments, the hyphae, running through the soil (...). It is this part of the organism which under various conditions will form a so-called 'fruiting body' and push up as a cluster of mushrooms (Mitchell 2014, 51; *cf.* Mitchell 1991, 179-81).

The analogy is that folk tradition compares to the mycelium that exists unseen below the ground, while the individual and seemingly randomly recorded expressions of that tradition compare to the mushrooms that emerge on the surface. The myth of Þórr slaughtering his goats is one such mushroom – a lone Norse specimen. The beliefs and narratives attached to our motif run unrecorded through vast expanses of history and we can only access the few versions that happened to be put into writing. I believe that enough such expressions have been mentioned here to reveal to us something about the dynamics of continuity and the tenacity of popular tradition while also showing

<sup>43</sup> I am not convinced by Tolley's suggestion that the motif originates in the Caucasus, wandered from there into continental Europe and on to the North (2012, 98-101), since this does not account for the Sámi and Canadian variants. Moreover, Tolley regards the Germanus legend as a fully-fledged variant, which I do not.

<sup>44</sup> In Berezkin's folklore database of shared Laurasian narrative motifs (<http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/berezkin/>), this motif is listed as: "J51: One piece is missing. Person or animal is eaten up or destroyed otherwise. His bones are put together and he or it is revived. Because one bone was broken, swallowed or lost (or a drop of blood lost), the person or animal cannot be revived or being revived misses some part of his or its body."

that it is worthwhile pursuing a motif with the rigour and thoroughness that the material deserves – even requires – of us as scholars. I have insisted on seeking out those variants that contain the damaged bone together with the other elements known from the Norse myth; there are myriad other variants with no broken bones – such as the Germanus legend – but the narrower focus (apart from making a shorter essay) is ultimately what allows me to search for the roots of the myth in the hunter-gatherer history of the northern hemisphere. The myth appears to be shared across chronological and geographical boundaries in a pattern that I find hard to explain in other ways.

It remains true that Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* constitutes a source for Old Norse pre-Christian myths and beliefs that must be treated with caution (e.g. Gunnell 2015, 55-56). But in this particular case, I do not think we can accuse Snorri of manipulating his pre-Christian material; indeed, he seems to preserve the myth in a form that remains true to ancient tradition. When to accept and when to reject Snorri's version of a given myth or motif is, of course, impossible to say without digging deep in each individual case. I have done my best to dig as deeply and as widely as seemed necessary in order to get as good an overview as possible of how this myth is placed within a much broader tradition than what the Norse-Celtic-Christian versions are able to show.

In conclusion, we are probably better off not looking for 'origins' or any 'original' version; what we seem to have are distinct manifestations of the same underlying motif, whose pattern of distribution is Laurasian. As regards Þórr and Germanus, the Christian legend apparently appropriates the motif – leaving out the damaged bone altogether and changing the message from being an expression of respectful treatment of a divine gift of abundance into one about rewards for the pious charity of a humble man. Yet the Norse and the Christian versions (including the Irish folk legends) share aspects because these are the only ones to feature domesticated animals instead of wild animals.

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