THE BODY, DESPAIR, AND HERO WORSHIP – A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY IN ATTACK ON TITAN

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INTRODUCTION

The popular Japanese comic *Attack on Titan* (進撃の巨人 *Shingeki no Kyojin*), written and illustrated by Hajime Isayama (講山創), began to appear serially in the monthly comic magazine *Bessatsu Shōnen Magazine* (別冊少年マガジン) in October 2009.¹ At this time, Japan was suffering from worsening economic conditions due to the global financial crisis, which brought about a sense of political, economic, and social stagnation, as well as a shared pessimistic view on life among its people.

In a period when the Japanese people already shared a sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future, their inner and outer lives completely collapsed with the shock of the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. More than 18,000 people died in this powerful earthquake, which also brought about unprecedented catastrophe in the form of a tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It was an apocalyptic crisis on a scale the modern Japanese people had not experienced since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and they shared a feeling of loss and hopelessness due not only to the delayed reconstruction of the disaster area, but also a collective post-disaster trauma.²

Simultaneously with these disasters, *Attack on Titan* had been intensifying its view of the apocalyptic and mythological world, and became increasingly popular after an animated TV show based on it premiered in 2013. The series has sold over forty million copies in just five years³ and as of 2014 it has been translated into numerous European and Asian languages, rising to a worldwide popularity that crosses generational and national boundaries. It has found a large number of dedicated readers, especially in the United States, after partnering with the comics publisher Marvel Comics, which has released every translation of the series almost concurrently with the Japanese original.⁴

The worldview of *Attack on Titan* is closely linked to a popular contemporary genre of Japanese fiction called *sekaikei* (世界系 or セカイ系), which was a common trend in the second half of the 1990s through the early 2000s in particular. *Sekaikei* combines close social relationships with the apocalyptic and mythological imaginations of young people who embody the postmodernized

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¹ Isayama, *Attack on Titan*. References to the series are abbreviated *AT*.
³ Isayama, “First Akira Oodera Interview,” 16.
⁴ Itsuko, “Attack on Avengers.”
individual and a desolate society. It has become a social phenomenon that spans different media, including animation, comics, light novels, video games, and websites. The subculture scholar Ken Maejima points out that this phenomenon has its roots in the comic (1994–2013) and animation (1995–1996) Neon Genesis Evangelion (新世紀エヴァンゲリオン), which gained long-term popularity in Japan and inspired a great number of other works. According to scholar of modern Japanese literature Motoko Tanaka, sekaikei works are typically framed by an apocalyptic crisis, or even a threat to the entire universe. However, these large-scale conflicts are intertwined with the actions, loves, and crises of the male protagonist and heroine, without any intermediary community or social organization.

Since Attack on Titan describes the crisis of humanity’s potential imminent annihilation, this dark apocalyptic fantasy can be considered a sekaikei comic. Isayama himself has confirmed in an interview that not only did he once have a desire to see the world destroyed, but also that he was addicted to Evangelion’s view of the robotization of the modern world and unique mode of expression. However, Attack on Titan takes place not in the modern world, but in an anonymous European country in the Middle Ages, and presents a more than century long battle between the human race and the Titans, whose ruthless hunting and devouring of human beings has forced the last remnants of humanity into a fortress surrounded by three layers of enormous, high walls.

In this comic, many mythological motifs adapted from Norse mythology play very important roles in terms of literary strategy, lending a mythological and militant tone to the apocalyptic crisis, despite the Japanese word “巨人” (kyojin) being translated as the Greek term “Titan,” rather than the more appropriate “giant.” Since European mythology, novels, and movies have had a strong influence on this work, this article studies the influence of Norse mythology. Literary theorist Lubomír Doležel has studied the subject of influence as intertextuality, or the multiple, bidirectional relationships between texts that allow them to mutually illuminate one another.

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6 Maejima’s study investigates the sekaikei and post-sekaikei genres, and how the animation Evangelion has influenced fans and other works, and changed the entire business model for these genres. Cf. Maejima, Sekaikei Toha Nanika, 13.
7 Tanaka, “Apocalyptic Imagination.”
8 Tanaka, “Apocalyptic Imagination.”
9 Isayama, “Tamaki Saito Interview,” 121, 123.
10 Isayama, Outside Kou, 22f.; “Daisuke Tanaka Interview.”
In the sharing of intertextual meaning, fictional worlds enrich literary semantics in a way that transcends their chronological order. This study uses such an intertextual analytical method, based on mythological research, to examine the literary structure and components of *Attack on Titan*. It also investigates how certain Norse mythemes function in popular modern Japanese comics. Because the different ideological and cultural realms of Northern Europe and Japan are connected through this mythology, this study examines their literary synchronicity and continuity. From an analytic standpoint, it seeks to extract common phenomena from each source and to understand their common features and meanings. In this intertextual approach, the aesthetic and philosophical views of modern mythological studies are used to assist examination of *Attack on Titan*’s adaptation of Norse mythology.

According to archaeologist Lotte Hedeager, material evidence suggests that Norse mythology can be traced at least back to the fourth century, and that it prospered until the thirteenth century.\(^\text{12}\) This mythology not only held religious and literary dominance across Scandinavia, but also had a profound influence on the vast geographic and cultural arena of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon people after the Viking expansion.\(^\text{13}\) These Old Norse tales left us with much, including a grand imagery of nature, majestic and attractive characters, events beyond our imagination, and abundant poetic topoi or narrative models. As is well known, these fascinating cultural topoi can be seen in many famous literary works, operas, and works of art up to the present day. Norse mythology also contains a cosmic worldview and addresses the mystical theme of the origin and end of the world; *Attack on Titan* transplants the grand worldview of these noble old tales into its narrative background, in order to adopt a grand, many-layered, and universal perspective on the apocalypse. This results in a setting beyond time and space, and a global poetic or artistic quality. By importing this ancient and fertile fantasy, the mythological elements of the twenty-first-century comic and those of the old tales become unified. Thus, we can investigate how the contemplative experience of *Attack on Titan* brings the mythological violence of the modern era to light.

First, this paper will attempt to analyze the intertextual relation between *Attack on Titan* and the Norse stories about giants, in order to clarify the adaptation and modification of the ancient tales for the present day. It will investigate similar hierarchical structures between the Titans and giants, which take on a special significance in the natural order depicted by the comic. Focusing on the motif of the wall, this article demonstrates the striking disparity between the original and

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\(^\text{12}\) Hedeager, Iron Age Myth and Materiality, 1–3.

\(^\text{13}\) Davidson, Scandinavian Mythology, 8–26. Mai Elisabeth Berg ("Myth or Poetry," 35) suggests that mythological poems, as literature, could be written products of the eleventh century. Cf. Clunies Ross, "Old Norse Mythology."
modern wall, and considers how the protagonist, Eren, who is representative of a contemporary mindset and has the cursed ability to transform into a Titan, is aware of society’s despair and hopelessness. Finally, the warrior cult of old tales and the militant worldviews of the comic will be taken into full account in order to highlight the differences between the texts. Because the violent and unforgiving world of Norse mythology has had a remarkable impact on Attack on Titan, it is important to investigate how the comic series strengthens its storytelling framework through different components such as hero worship and images of the dismembered body.

THE GIANT LEGEND: HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Focused on a more than century long battle between human beings and Titans, Attack on Titan depicts a minimized community of humans, the last in the world, living in a city surrounded by high walls. The city is structured according to a view of primitive society as consisting of three basic populations: rulers who govern the city; warriors who fight the Titans; and citizens who produce food or machinery. During its intense and violent war with the Titans, the human population has already been reduced and is on the verge of being annihilated. The origin of the Titans and the reason for their existence, including why they eat people, remains a mystery to the humans. However, according to an ancient document handed down by humans as historical memory, the existence of Titans who ate human beings was already confirmed in ancient times.\(^14\)

Based on this characterization of Titans, the tale displays a supernatural and mythological worldview from the beginning. Attack on Titan features the common mythological trope of a violent world in which chaos, disorder, and horror are dominant, set against the backdrop of humanity’s struggle to exist. This crisis is brought on by the bloodthirsty Titans, who are swayed by their primitive emotions.

Attack on Titan’s mythological imagination can be connected to Norse mythology. According to Poetic Edda and Prosa Edda, the world was created and is supported by the huge world tree “Yggdrasil,” whose roots unify all of the nine worlds. These worlds are further divided into a three-layer structure: there is the world of gods, the Aesir, or fairies; the world of giants and human beings; and the underground world, inhabited by monsters and dwarves.\(^15\) In the second world, according to both Eddas and the Norse Sagas, not only do gods and giants continuously carry on their grand battle for world domination on a cosmic scale, but human beings join the

\(^14\) AT, vol. 1, 55.

\(^15\) Holander, The Poetic Edda, 2–13; Sturlason, Prose Edda, 11–16.
battle on the invitation of the father of gods, Odin. In Old Norse tales, human beings repeatedly attack the huge creatures as they struggle to exist and, in some cases, to find honorable deaths in battle. In this sense, Norse mythology and Attack on Titan share a dynamic structure that creates a constant state of war between two different creatures.

In addition to the similar figures of giants and Titans, Attack on Titan also features characters that correspond to specific characters in the Eddas. The most significant of them is a Titan called Ymir. At first, she appears as a young female human soldier who battles Titans, as does the hero, Eren, and others. Ymir is a mysterious person of unknown background who adores her young female friend, a descendant of a noble human family named Christa. Ymir always accompanies Christa as if they were one flesh, and keeps her out of harm’s way. Ymir is depicted as almost gender-neutral and featureless. However, the tenth volume shows that she has adopted a human appearance and hidden her identity, until she transforms into a Titan and reveals her true self. With this power of transformation, Ymir belongs to those who are supernatural or mythological in nature and can change into immortal Titans, like Eren and several others. Ymir’s Titan identity is ambiguous, as shown when she protects humans from other Titans, who are defined by their cruelty.

It can be helpful with regard to Ymir’s supernatural and binary presence to consider psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s analysis of mythological motifs, according to which the archetype of the young hero and savior who obtains mythological transcendence should be recognized as a hybrid of god and human. Ymir is also portrayed not only as a transcendent, heterogeneous being, with powers bestowed by human and Titan genes, but also as a middle person who transcends the boundary between life and death. However, thanks to her biological ambiguity, she is more impersonal and monstrous than Eren and becomes a key plot figure, because she seems to know the Titan’s mysterious origin.

Ymir the Titan can be directly connected to an important creature in Norse mythology: the giant Ymir. According to a description of the origin of the world in Völuspá in the Poetic Edda and in

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16 See, for example Grettis saga, chapter 66, which depicts the fighting prowess of the great hero Grettir, who defeated a giant in a cave (Jónsson, “Grettis Saga Åsmundarsonar,” 267f.) and Kormåks saga, chapter 27, which depicts the hero Kormák, who fell in furious battle against a giant in Scotland (Sveinsson, “Kormáks Saga,” 99).
17 Of course, Greek mythology also has a well-known giant-episode known as Gigantomakhia, wherein gods and Titans, both supernatural beings, fight a grand battle, but this is not a battle between human beings and Titans or giants. Attack on Titan is therefore closer to the view of Norse mythology.
18 AT, vol. 10, 90f.
19 AT, vol. 3, 152.
“Gylfaginning” in the *Prose Edda*, the earth was created from chaos and emptiness, before the giant Ymir was born as a result of a meeting between “icy rime and warm wind”. “Gylfaginning,” stanza 5, reads as follows: “The likeness of a man appeared and he was named Ymir. The frost giants call him Aurgelmir, and from him come the clans of the frost-giants.” The Germanist Rudolf Simek and scholar of medieval Scandinavia John Lindow regard Ymir as a proto-giant and progenitor of the race of giants. This archetypical giant is recognized as having an indeterminate gender, being both male and female, and it is to Ymir, from whom they were born, that all giants trace their origin. However, Ymir is murdered by the first gods, who create the world, including the ground, sky, mountains, and clouds, from his corpse.

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21 Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 13f. Snorri also quotes the Shorter *Völuspá*, which says: “All the seeresses are / from Vidolf, / all the wizards / from Vilmeid, / but the sorcerers are / from Svarthöflí / and all the giants / come from Ymir” (p. 14).


23 Etymologically, his name closely corresponds to the Old Norse words for “mixed” and “hermaphrodite being,” which share an origin with the Sanskrit word “yama,” or Vedic “yima,” which mean something like “doubled,” and with the Latin word “geminus,” or Middle Irish “gemuin,” which mean “twin,” from the Indo-Germanic root “-ıemo,” meaning “twin” or “hermaphrodite.” Cf. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 377; Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 325; Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology*, 236.

24 Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 16f.
Fig. 1. Isayama, Hajime, *Attack on Titan* 5, 13. © Hajime Isayama and Kodansha 2011.
The structure of *Attack on Titan* is based on a similar hierarchical and generational structure as that of the race of giants in Norse mythology, of which the original, androgynous Titan, Ymir, is at the top. In the comic’s fifth volume, a female soldier accidentally encounters a Titan, who mistakes her for Ymir and says “I’m…Ymir’s…people…,” as if she were his ruler (fig. 1). The Titan kneels down before her and shows his dutiful respect, “You are… miss Ymir…” He then expresses his appreciation to her for coming to him. Here, it is revealed that not only do Titans have the ability to communicate, but also, through the obedience of this confused giant who worships her, that Ymir is regarded as an authoritative and sacred being who holds power over other Titans. Based on religious historian Catharina Raudvere’s analysis of how rituals frame specific social and ritualistic positions in *Völuspá*, we can here see a mythological and primitive hierarchy of supernatural beings, according to which the world is governed by a violent order. In *Attack on Titan*, excluded from this invisible, natural order of the Titans, human beings are seized by a sense of incompetence and inability to deal with their tragic situation.

Like those of giants and humans in Norse mythology, the habitats of Titans and humans in *Attack on Titan* are separated, in order to create the structure for dynamic racial confrontations between them and to recall the mythological cycle of violence. However, in Norse mythology, the identities of main figures like Ymir, Odin, or Thor do not change, because these personages are defined as archetypes and embodiments of universal consciousness, with the exception of Loki, who has the ability to change shape and identity. The Icelandic scholar Kirsten Hastrup calls them “cultural heroes” in the cosmological view of the Old Norse world. In comparison, in *Attack on Titan*, modern figures such as Eren and Ymir, who have the power to cross-racially transform into Titans, suffer from a distorted identity that is somewhere between human and monstrous creature. This is demonstrated in the scene wherein Eren is bewildered and cannot reply when a commander asks: “What is your true identity? Human or Titan?”

Eren faces personal disintegration due to his transformation into a Titan, through which he becomes unified with an enormous being. In fact, volume three reveals that Eren’s human body

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25 *AT*, vol. 5, 12–14. All *Attack on Titan* translations in this article are the author’s.
26 As of volume fifteen, there have been no further revelations about Ymir, her background, her double identity, or her position as a high-ranking Titan. However, it has been disclosed that there is a country of Titans somewhere in the world, to which she is heading with her two companions, who are also hybrid beings.*AT*, vol. 12, 186–189.
28 According to Davidson (*Gods and Myths*, 176–178), Loki has an ambiguous character and is connected with the darker elements in the Norse mythical world.
29 Hastrup, “Den Ordnordiske Verden.”
30 *AT*, vol. 3, 48.
remains intact inside of his Titan body when he transforms. This unification is similar to the central characters in Evangelion, who must synchronize with gigantic robots in order to operate them. Eren’s identification with such huge robot-like but living creatures and his possession of a cursed body indicates his temporary death as a human, or the seeming death of his mind, which creates his ambivalent consciousness. In this crossing of racial boundaries, we can recognize both the demolition of a human-Titan dualism and the literary deconstruction of the giants in Norse mythology. However, this comes at the cost of Eren’s individuality, ordinariness, and mortality. We can thus say that Attack on Titan’s dark apocalyptic fantasy is profoundly constituted by individual tragedy and a modern mythological violence that has cursed the protagonist Eren.

THE MOTIF OF THE WALL: EREN’S SKEPTICISM TOWARDS HIS SECURE WORLD

We can also examine Attack on Titan’s references to Norse mythology in the motif of the wall. In the comics, the firm walls surrounding the humans’ city were erected to protect it against a Titan invasion. The method of the walls’ construction is shrouded in mystery for the population, as is the identity of its builders. According to modern German literature scholar Stefanie Stockhorst’s interpretation, the wall in European literature symbolizes secure defense against a foreign enemy through its function of separation. However, the meanings of the enormous walls in Attack on Titan are multiple and contradictory.

Certainly, the defensive fortress ensures human safety from the Titans by separating them from the outside world of death, where humans are fully exposed to danger. At the same time, it puts them in a difficult situation as 家畜 (kachiku), the Japanese word for livestock. This is a key concept for the comic’s description of the hopelessness and despair of the human race, which, as livestock for the Titans, they experience in confronting the possibility of being slaughtered in their cramped, walled-in city. Eren, in particular, experiences this depression. When asked by a friend why he volunteers for the army, he pessimistically answers that “we can make a living, if we only eat and sleep, but we cannot escape the wall during our lives…. So….then…aren’t we just like livestock…?” But Eren dreams of leaving the walls and seeing the outer world. According to

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32 Stockhorst, “Mauer.”
33 AT, vol. 1, 24.
“The Book of the Outside World,” secretly possessed by Eren’s friend Armin, fantastic scenery, including a boundless ocean, fire water, lands of ice, and sand-covered snowfields, are spread throughout the outer world.\(^{35}\) It seems that these landscapes are transplanted from the imaginative and mysterious descriptions in \textit{Gylfaginning} stanza 5, in the \textit{Prose Edda}. Here, a king describes the archaic landscape existing before mankind, where such contradictory elements as “icy rime and warm wind” exist as components for creating life.\(^{36}\)

In \textit{Attack on Titan}, to talk about the walls in everyday life or to investigate their secrets is a serious taboo, since freedom of speech has been taken away by the government in order to keep the walls’ origins a complete mystery. If anyone violates the taboo, they are quietly erased. Moreover, there is a religious group that worships the walls and believes they are three divine goddesses, as if the walls have a supernatural power.\(^{37}\) This fanatic group objects to both strengthening the walls and constructing an underground passage beneath them. This religious faith in the wall is reminiscent of fetishism in mythology or in ancient societies.\(^{38}\) Moreover, this type of fetishism can be seen also in the modern era, as for example the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is seen as a religious object in Judaism. In such holy things, people have found eternal life and what is believed to be a transcendental power. Consequently, we can claim that the walls in \textit{Attack on Titan} are similarly fetishized, in that they are treated as sacred and significant architecture, and used as both emotional and practical tools by the people dependent on them. They have isolated humans, who as a result are desperately hanging in a balance between life and death. In this regard, the wall resembles a graveyard, with the traditional connotation of separation between this world and the beyond.\(^{39}\)

\(^{34}\) There is a personal dimension to this characterization. In the context of Eren’s desire to escape, the motif of the wall, the author Isayama has said, reflects his childhood longing to escape the countryside for the city. Isayama, “Onsen Shukahaku Shisetsu ‘Hibiki No Sato.’”

\(^{35}\) \textit{AT}, vol. 1, 85f.; vol. 4, 12.

\(^{36}\) \textit{Prose Edda}, 13–14.

\(^{37}\) \textit{AT}, vol. 8, 100f.


\(^{39}\) Stockhorst, “Mauer.”
However, the large eye of a Titan can be seen inside one of the huge walls (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{40} Because this enormous creature inside the wall is still alive and can only move when exposed to sunlight, the people have to cover the eye with a curtain. This discovery has a large impact on the reader, since the Titan buried inside suggests that the walls might have been built from Titans’ live bodies.

Moreover, volume sixteen suggests that an unknown Titan with a special power might have built the three, huge, concentric walls a hundred years before the start of the story, in order to protect humans from other Titans, and then manipulated the collective memory of humanity to forget.\textsuperscript{41}

The following quotation presents the words of a man descended from a royal human family who alone knows a closely guarded secret about the Titans:

This cave was built by a certain Titan’s power a hundred years ago. The three-layered wall was also built by that powerful creature. By building the huge wall, that Titan protected human beings from other Titans. This was not the only benefit of the Titan. He wished that

\textsuperscript{40} AT, vol. 8, 149–156.

\textsuperscript{41} AT, vol. 16, 86f.
the human survivors should live peacefully and so he affected people’s hearts and manipulated their memory.\textsuperscript{42}

As this scene shows, humanity is both secretly controlled and forbidden from knowing the history of the Titans or of the world prior to the past century. There is a similar motif of constructing enormous walls in the \textit{Poetic Edda} and \textit{Prose Edda}.\textsuperscript{43} According to \textit{Völuspá}, stanza 4, and \textit{Grimnmismal}, stanza 42, Búrr, ancestor of the gods, made a huge wall to defend human beings from the giants. This wall consisted of the eyelashes of Ymir, the first living creature.\textsuperscript{44} The humans lived inside this firm wall, Miðgarðr, which they also used as a fortress.

Moreover, a grand war for survival such as that between humans and Titans, a battle over living space and hegemony over the new world, symbolizes confrontation between nature and civilization. This decisive mythological structure involving a wall in both \textit{Eddas} is shared with \textit{Attack on Titan}. However, we here see a paradoxical phenomenon: although human beings are constantly menaced by Titans or giants and try to defend against this threat, they live in an area surrounded by high walls, whose building materials were taken from the body of antagonistic nature itself. We can interpret this primitive use of nature by humanity, especially in Norse mythology, as the establishment of the first kind of economic and technological system, and as a shift from barbaric to civilized thought. On this point, in both \textit{Eddas}, the human beings benefited significantly from the wall, Miðgarðr. Thanks to their defensive barrier, humanity was able to possess “protected land”\textsuperscript{45} and managed to change a barren land into a “green land.”\textsuperscript{46}

In comparison to the wall in Norse mythology, the city walls of \textit{Attack on Titan} have a similar function as a sanctuary, but they also symbolize a cage or prison, as shown by Eren’s sense of being unfree “livestock.” We can interpret this impression as the result of a skeptical philosophical attitude towards “being protected,” which directly connects to the humans’ state of hopelessness and despair. In contrast to the ancient Norse tales in which there is no inconsistency in the connotation of the wall, \textit{Attack on Titan} reflects Eren’s refined critical and independent thinking, which leads him to develop a skeptical attitude towards his immediate environment — going beyond the limited self-consciousness of a typical sekaikei protagonist — that comes to be mixed into the definition of the wall.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{AT}, vol. 16, 96f.


\textsuperscript{44} Holander, \textit{The Poetic Edda}, 2.

\textsuperscript{45} Page, \textit{Norse Myths}, 58.

\textsuperscript{46} Pálsson, \textit{Odinism and Eddas}, 144.
The motif of the wall in Attack on Titan’s dark fantasy, then, is connected not only to Norse mythology but also to the reality of the twenty-first century. We can consider this second connection to be based on the postmodern individual’s experience of emptiness in the face of such large-scale threats as war, nuclear disaster, terrorism, or natural catastrophe. Rather than face the imaginative and total apocalypse predicted by Norse mythology, we share a fragile, dystopian, everyday global reality, in which regions can be suddenly seized through military force or violently destroyed; we live in an uncertain reality with dimming prospects. Moreover, Isayama himself possesses such a dystopian, apocalyptic vision: “There is a common thinking, in which people feel the world is secure, but suddenly one day, they notice that it is not safe.”

This modern cultural pessimism and epistemological skepticism towards the security of the world is adopted by Attack on Titan, as Eren is suspicious of both the walls, one of the most important pieces of Norse mythology, and of the universe of human beings. The introduction of critical thinking into the violent mythical structure of Attack on Titan is a countermeasure against the logic of primitive violence, inherent in most mythology. Surely, this skepticism towards the wall is a deconstruction of mythology.

THE MILITANT WORLDVIEW AND SELF-SACRIFICIAL SOLDIERS

The story in Attack on Titan involves an archaic view of society as consisting of such professions as ruler, warrior, and citizen. Thanks to this well-known grouping pattern, it is easy for readers of Attack on Titan to understand the classic function of the characters and to place themselves in the story. The most active citizens are the warriors that play a central role in the battles with Titans. However, in most cases, the soldiers become innocent victims preyed on by the huge creatures. The comic devotes many pages to cruel and miserable battle scenes that give the reader an impression of extreme barbarism. According to author Isayama, his interest in martial arts is especially reflected in battle scenes against the Titans.

Below, the following components of Attack on Titan’s militant worldview will be investigated: soldiers’ hero worship; self-sacrifice; and strong loyalty. These are also important components in

48 This structure and aspect of society could also be seen as reflecting Plato’s views of the ideal city in Plato, Republic, 44ff.
49 Due to these depictions of bloody, shocking violence, the animated adaptation of the comic book was broadcast in the late evening.
50 Isayama, Outside Kou, 29.
Norse mythology, and create complex narrative content, which promotes the militant imagination of readers. In *Attack on Titan*, young soldiers join the army in childhood in order to prepare for the battle against the Titans and receive strict training as warriors. Meanwhile, they show absolute loyalty to the organization and learn a military salute in which they put their right hand on their heart. This gesture is a statement about oneself: “I publicly devote my heart.” This expression, “devote my heart,” is a powerful metaphor for human sacrifice in battle. It means that one’s life will be given up for the organization. For example, when a senior officer appeals for complete obedience from his troops, he shouts as follows: “Gentlemen, sacrifice your life and fight against the threat of Titans! Devote your heart!”

This powerful salute and oath is repeated many times when soldiers are compelled to express their loyalty. Here, we can clearly recognize a militant political ideology related to the enthusiastic worship of death and a strong awareness that soldiers are predestined to become victims of war. Such a vehement depiction of soldier’s loyalty, daring to risk their “hearts,” their own lives, refers to mythological ritual. In archaic societies, the idea of a murderous human sacrifice in the context of “devoting the heart” was carried out, above all, with prisoners, and in ritualistic fashion.

On this point, we must examine the similar ritual in which a heart is offered as sacrifice to a mystical being or victor in Norse mythology. In *Eiríks Saga rauða*, for example, Thorkell was the chief of wealthy farmlands, to which he invited the prophetess Thorbjorg so she could divine his destiny and the future of his lands. At the ritualistic dinner for her on that day, Thorkell had his servant cook the hearts of all manner of living creatures.

We can here see the ritualistic experience of offering hearts to a transcendent being.

According to mythologist H.R. Ellis Davidson, in the Norse heroic poetry and sagas, not only are animals, but also human victims, sacrificed after victory in battle in a ritual associated with the

51 *AT*, vol. 4, 61.
52 *AT*, vol. 1, 92.
53 In another case, when people begin to realize that Eren is a Titan, they fear him, and so the army tries to kill him. The weakest soldier, Armin, gives a salute and takes a striking oath in military fashion. He shouts that Eren is not an enemy of humans and that he does not attack them, and says: “I, as a soldier, took an oath to devote my heart to the reconstruction of human life!! If I follow my belief, I am satisfied with ending my life for it!!” (*AT*, vol. 3, 107).
54 As Georges Bataille’s famous study *La Part maudite* shows, for example, in ancient Aztec society, people performed a religious ritual in which prisoners’ hearts were extracted and devoted to the sun god. See Bataille, “La Limite de L’utile (Fragments D’une Version Abandonnée de ‘La Part Maudite’),” 193f.
55 Sveinsson, “Eiríks Saga Rauða,” 175.
cult of Odin.\textsuperscript{56} Especially in the \textit{Völsunga Saga}, there are many depictions of a hero's sacrifice or the glorious dead in war being offered to Odin, the patron of warriors, as well as depictions of enemies and prisoners having their hearts extracted, all of which belong to a militant conception of the world. Take, as an example, the hero Sigurd who slew the dragon Fáfnir, his most powerful supernatural enemy, and ate his heart, and in this way received mystical power.\textsuperscript{57} Davidson emphasizes that, from the view of mythological typology, the hero Sigurd entered into the supernatural world of ravens and Valkyries, where defeat and victory are predestined.\textsuperscript{58} We can consider this brutal action, “heart extraction,” to be his initiation into great skill. As this event indicates, the hearts of losers in battle are thought of as holy spoils for the winner.

It is significant that an episode similar to this ritual occurs in \textit{Attack on Titan}’s backstory for the heroine Mikasa, Eren’s friend, who was once an ordinary girl and citizen. However, one day, when her family was murdered before her eyes by a band of criminals, she suddenly heard her heart beating and her inner voice tell her to “Fight!” She was driven to stab one of her assailants through the heart from behind with a knife, killing him.\textsuperscript{59} At this moment, Mikasa awoke to her fighter’s consciousness and obtained a new identity as a warrior of great skill. The cruel action in this scene is staged as a brutal ceremony, her initiation as a fighter. As in various mythologies, the severed heart of the enemy here symbolizes the side of the executioner: conquest, triumph, and rebirth.

Aside from such sacrifices of prisoners or enemies, the idea of ceremonial self-sacrifice, “devoting the heart,” is notable in \textit{Attack on Titan}. This ritualistic experience functions to express a militant view of the world, and a remarkable enthusiasm for fighting and those killed in war. In the comic, the strong loyalty of the soldier who salutes makes his troop sacred, a holy group, in which soldiers are free of the fear of death. This is like the slain fighters, “einherjar,” selected for Valhalla in both \textit{Eddas}, where they continue to battle each day, and are restored to life in the evening to fight anew the next morning.\textsuperscript{60} This is described in a scene in \textit{Valþrúðnir}, stanza 41, in which the giant Valþrúðnir says: “All the einherjar in Othin’s garth slay each other with swords: fighting they fall, then fare from battle and drain goblets together.”\textsuperscript{61} Or we can consider the Scandinavian “berserks” of many Sagas, like \textit{Hrafnsmál} or \textit{Ynglinga Saga}. The berserks are the fearless warriors

\textsuperscript{56} Davidson, \textit{Myths and Symbols}, 45–68.
\textsuperscript{57} Finch, \textit{Volsunga Saga}, 33f.
\textsuperscript{58} Davidson, \textit{Myths and Symbols}, 86.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{AT}, vol. 2, 62f.
\textsuperscript{60} Davidson, \textit{Gods and Myths}, 149–153.
\textsuperscript{61} Holander, \textit{The Poetic Edda}, 49.
of Odin, who entered states of hyper ecstasy that made them forget about the possibility of death and injury in battle. In Simek’s investigation of the “dedication to Odin” in Old Norse literature, it is almost a stereotypical feature of heroic poetry that Odin protects his warriors in battle and gives them victory, and that they are then finally dedicated to him.\textsuperscript{62} Also, Davidson points out that these dedicated warriors spent their lives in the service of Odin.\textsuperscript{63} Keeping in mind such warriors devoting their lives to the war god and overcoming fear of death, we can understand the militant political system of heroic self-sacrifice that drives soldiers to battle Titans. Such a metaphor, based on the religious and militant rituals of the age of myth, is certainly an emotional and ideological instrument with which the soldiers resist the mythological violence brought about by the supernatural existence of Titans.

However, in the face of this extraordinary situation, in which many anonymous soldiers appear one after another and soon fall victim to hordes of bloodthirsty Titans, the reconnaissance troop captain, Levi, speaks to his companions pessimistically: “What do you think you will be doing tomorrow? Do you think that you will eat a meal tomorrow also? [...] Will the fellows... who are next to you live tomorrow too? I don’t think so.”\textsuperscript{64} Enough has been said about the soldiers’ involvement in this violent cycle, wherein humans are constantly faced with barbarous and impersonal annihilation. Through this figuration, the comic thematizes the uncontrollable cycle of death, in which the excessive physical violence of human bodies being consumed by Titans is considered normal and natural.

The circular structure of mythological violence developed in \textit{Attack on Titan} involves another motif: the dismemberment of the body. First of all, the maimed body is used in this comic as a tragic metonymy suggestive of both human sacrifice and the misery of war. In the first chapter, this phenomenon can already be recognized in the appearance of an arm belonging to a soldier who has fallen in battle.\textsuperscript{65} In this small dead object, a compressed metonymy for the human body, which the soldier’s commander has brought to the soldier’s mother, she finds both an identification of her son and a sense of loss. We can here see \textit{Attack on Titan’s} somber atmosphere, which is partly built on such representations of the maimed and imperfect body, through which the reader experiences a sense of death and despair.

\textsuperscript{62} Simek, Dictionary of Northern Mythology, 59.

\textsuperscript{63} Davidson, Myths and Symbols, 80.

\textsuperscript{64} AT, vol. 14, 70f.

\textsuperscript{65} AT, vol. 1, 30f.
Regarding this symbolic language of the dismembered body, it is worth noting that in *Attack on Titan*, the leader of the reconnaissance troop and military strategist, Erwin, has his right arm bitten off in battle against a Titan. This severe injury to a hero means not only the loss of his combat abilities, but also a shock to his identity, his *raison d’être*. This is revealed in the conversation between him and the captain Levi, in which Levi expresses his regret over the event, and Erwin answers: “Can you imagine how many hundreds of people I have allowed to be eaten by Titans up until now? I blame myself, and it is completely insufficient that I lost only one arm. In the hell to which I go one day, I could justly pay a great price for my guilt.” This can also be seen when Erwin meets his old friend Nile, a military policeman, who ironically talks about the loss of his arm: “I thought you would surely die early... you must have thrust only your right arm into the beyond.” These conversations show how the story treats this leader as a half-dead person. However, even after losing a body part, Erwin remains a charismatic individual, respected and adored by many of his subordinates and companions. Because he is a great leader, still capable of directing military action, he retains his command.

According to archaeologist Paul Treherne, in Bronze Age Europe, there was a “beautification of death” in battle. The warriors achieved immortality by attaining excellence or glory in life and especially in death. Erwin’s injury on the battlefield, and his half-dead state, as a result of his bravery in battle, means that he has acquired this honorable state. Therefore, his disabled upper body gives him a mythic and graceful aura (fig. 3), and suggests to us the fine sculpture of a torso, which is given a great value in traditional, occidental aesthetics. Besides, such an imperfect thing, according to the aesthetician Winfried Menninghaus, is appreciated in romantic aesthetics. In *Attack on Titan*, in spite of such remarkable damage to Erwin’s body and its imperfect physical appearance, injury affirms a romantic and enthusiastic view of the hero, and symbolizes the strong fighter who possesses a spirit of self-sacrifice.

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66 AT, vol. 12, 115.
68 AT, vol. 13, 123.
69 AT, vol. 14: 5-24, 97–117, shows Erwin preparing for a military campaign and exerting his strong presence.
70 Treherne, “Warrior’s Beauty,” 123f.
72 Menninghaus, Ekel, 189–224.
In relation to the image of the injured body, we can also look to Norse mythology, which presents heroic ideas of the damaged body. Many gods and heroes were injured or lost body parts. In the Icelandic Sagas especially, there are many cruel scenes of the dismembered body. In Egils saga, chapter 30, Thorgils Yeller wields his sword against Thorgeir and cuts off his hand; or, in Eyrbyggja saga, chapter 62, the strider Thrand is almost attacked by a bandit with a spear but Thrand, the strongest of men, uses his axe to cut off his enemy’s hand. The Poetic Edda provides us with an influential example of the injured body in Týr, one of the Aesir, losing his hand to the monstrous wolf Fenrir. When Týr bound Fenrir, he inserted his right arm into its mouth in order to reassure it that the god’s would not trick him, and would release him soon. However, Fenrir bites off Týr’s right hand after its sees through the gods’ trick. Although Týr loses his hand, his bravery is nonetheless still admired by the gods.

In the sense that this old tale praises the disabled body in a militant context, Attack on Titan’s great one-armed human leader Erwin can also be regarded as based in the cult of war in mythology. Erwin is the only main human character in the comic who survives being violently amputated during battle. Erwin, the sacred human whose body is romanticized, is in a state of “living death,” in the spirit of myth. Therefore, he can still control military troops and deploy them against Titans. In contrast, when Eren’s arms are severed by a Titan, Eren temporarily loses

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75 Holander, The Poetic Edda, 98.
his abilities until they are regenerated by his supernatural power. The illustration depicts this episode ingloriously (fig. 4). 76

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76 AT, vol. 11, 142f.
It can be said that the power of Erwin’s half-dead body, granted by his disability, is to express his heroic nature and charismatic leader qualities, just as Týr, the one-handed deity, was adored by other gods in old Nordic tales. We can interpret this mythologization of the human body as the hero worship of a militant worldview. However, we must understand this consumption of bodies as the result of the barbarism and victimization of the war against the Titans. This is the mythological violence and brutality that Attack on Titan implies in the following words, “only the winner is allowed to live. It is a severe world.”

CONCLUSION

In Norse mythology, actions and events develop within a circular time and space, or l’éternel retour, as investigated by philosopher Mircea Eliade. Mythological time progresses from chaos to the twilight of the Gods, and from this apocalyptic end comes a new world. In the endless passage of time, human beings and giants carry out never-ending battles for survival and world domination. The dynamic confrontation between supernatural beings and fragile human creatures was structured according to this circulation of time. In this timeless world, the endless conquest and the attempt to secure victory over the enemy can lead to neither hope nor despair, because this noble mythology represents a universality that is generalized from actual material phenomena.

Adopting both the apocalyptic, militant worldview and circular structure of Norse mythology, Attack on Titan reproduces this violent mythological viewpoint. However, this dark, modern fantasy does not present an eternal time, because, as Isayama says, he has looked ahead, and has already conceived of the series’ ending. This narrative limitation of time and space in Attack on Titan means that the fantasy develops according to a modern conception of linear historical time that moves forward towards an endpoint. Although the confrontation between human beings and Titans, like that between humans and giants in Norse mythology, repeats continuously throughout the comic, there is an ambiguous boundary between them that is profoundly contextualized by the destabilization of characters’ identities and their skeptical attitudes towards the mythological violence inherent throughout the story.

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77 AT, vol. 2, 70.
78 Eliade, Eternal Return, 73–92. Also, Davidson (Gods and Myths, 212) points out the idea of continual reenactment in the picture of gods and monsters in Norse mythology.
79 Isayama, “Second Akira Oodera Interview.”
Therefore, *Attack on Titan* does not depend on the simplistic structure of militant confrontation between two different creatures, as in Norse mythology. In fact, since volume thirteen, the series has attempted to bring a human civil war to the fore. It is said that this work represents a confrontation between “hope” and “despair.” Eren is repeatedly called “everyone’s hope”\textsuperscript{80} because of his supernatural powers, and, thus, this modern fiction depicts humanity’s struggle to realize its final “hope.” More precisely, in the demythologized temporal structure of Isayama’ dark fantasy, *Attack on Titan’s* dynamic concepts move from despair to hope, and point towards the future.

**REFERENCES**


\textsuperscript{80} E.g. *AT*, vol. 3, 37; vol. 5, 35.


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