



#217: NORWEGIAN FOLKLORE

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INTRODUCTION

In the days before modern science, Norwegians told stories that filled the forest, fjords and mountains with an array of supernatural creatures. These fantastic stories of trolls, monsters, fairies and gnomes were told to help explain natural phenomena that people could not understand, or served as warnings against dangerous or bad behavior. Underlying the purpose of all these stories was a means of entertainment. While Norwegian folklore may no longer be widely believed as true, it has a long history as an influence on Norwegian and non-Norwegian writers and artists.

ASBJØRNSEN AND MOE



Peder Christen Asbjørnsen



Jørgen Moe

Born in 1812 and 1813, Peder Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe would become the first to record Norwegian folktales, or *folkeeventyr*. While folktales were originally kept alive by the strong oral traditions in Norway, during the 19th century Asbjørnsen and Moe decided to travel throughout Norway and collect these stories as important influences of their culture. The resulting book, *Norwegian Folktales*, would entrench the writing pair in the foundation of Norway's developing national identity through the collection of beloved stories and the decision to publish the stories in Norwegian instead of the then official language of Norway: Danish.

FOLKLORE ILLUSTRATIONS



This second illustrated edition of Asbjørnsen and Moe's tales is known as the "Huldrerbindet," after the picture of the Huldra on the front page, 1896.

Norway's folklore came further to life with illustrations and other artistic depictions of these iconic stories, creatures and characters. Two artists well known for their depictions of Norwegian folklore were Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914) and Erik Werenskiöld (1855-1938). Both worked to illustrate the iconic collection of Norwegian folktales by Asbjørnsen and Moe, the distinctly Norwegian flavor to their art strongly influencing the ideas about the characters and creatures as a part of the Norwegian identity.

CHARACTERS AND CREATURES



Askeladden illustration by Theodor Kittelsen for Asbjørnsen and Moe's Norwegian Folk Tales.

Askeladden

Askeladden is the primary protagonist of many Norwegian folktales. Representing native Norwegian virtues, Askeladden is plucky, unassuming and kind to the less fortunate. His name means "ash lad," which comes from his childhood habit of sitting by the fireplace while stirring the ashes. Despite typically being thought to be up to no good, Askeladden often starts out the story being the unfortunate youngest of three brothers but always manages to go on an adventure and win the heart of a princess.

De Underjordiske

De Underjordiske, or the ones living underground, constitute a large group of supernatural beings appearing in Norwegian folklore, often also called haugfolk (hill people), huldre-folk (as in the huldre), and/or småfolk (little people).



A huldre talks with a charcoal burner. She looks like a young farmer woman, but her tail is peeking out under her skirt. From Svenska folksåger (1882).

Huldre

Often appearing as a beautiful girl, a huldre is given away by her long cow-tail. While neither depicted as consistently good nor evil, they appear in many stories from Norwegian folklore. The Norwegian huldre is known to seduce men, steal human children to be replaced with their own, and influence the luck of a hunter. The etymological root of huldre means "to hide" or "covered," referencing the origin story of the huldre who was a human daughter of Eve until God came to visit and turned all the children who

hid from their bath into De Underjordiske, the ones living underground.



Pen and wash drawing by malacologist Pierre Dénys de Montfort, 1801.

Krake (The Kraken)

One of the more well-known creatures from Norwegian folklore, the krake was usually imagined as a giant fish the size of an island and was the most menacing of the many water creatures in Norwegian folklore. Later on, however, it was depicted as a giant squid and it is this creature that has achieved the international fame in such varied media as Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. While in Norwegian "kraken" already means

"the krake," English commonly uses "the kraken" to reference a single krake due to an error by English poet Alfred Tennyson whose poem by that name has cemented the unnecessary double-indicative in English.



Postcard featuring celebrities and politicians depicted as nisse in 1895 by Andreas Ollestad. National Library of Norway. www.nb.no

Nisse

Though known by various names (tomte, gardvord) and their red hats, the nisse is usually understood to be a house or farm gnome that secretly oversees the household. Typically he must be appeased with gifts of food or he may cause things to go awry. Stories of this type serve as a folk explanation for any number of mishaps that might take place on a farm. One type of nisse, the julenissen, is the Norwegian equivalent of Santa Claus.



Illustration by John Bauer from Among Pixies and Trolls, 1912.

Trolls

Trolls are the classic antagonists of Norwegian folklore. Huge, hulking creatures with supernatural strength, they sometimes symbolize the terrible power of nature. In other stories, the troll's greed, malevolence and stupidity seem instead to echo the worst traits of human nature. They are never defeated by physical strength alone. Instead, the protagonist (usually Askeladden) must rely on superior smarts to outwit the troll.

READING LIST

Here is a short list of a few suggested works of Norwegian Fairytales, Folklore and Mythology available in English. References to particular editions and recommended translations are included in some cases. Many of these books can be found at your local library, through specialty retailers like www.ingebretsens.com and <http://store.vesterheim.org/> or through mainstream booksellers.

- *Folktales of Norway*. Reidar Christiansen, ed. Trans. Pat Shaw Iversen.
- *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. HR Ellis Davidson.
- *Norwegian Folk Tales*. Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe. Trans. Pat Iversen Shaw.
 - *Norwegian Folk Tales 2*.
- *The Troll With No Heart in His Body*. Lisa Luge-Larsen.
- *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*. Reimund Kvideland, and Hennig K. Sehmsdorf, eds.

LEARNING MORE

Keep track of your reading through Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program. To learn more, check out www.sonsofnorway.com.