

Is Valhøll a paradise?

Adaptations of Norse myths in modern Japanese fiction

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Despite the differences in time and place, a substantial amount of fiction based on Norse myths or legends has been produced in Japan. Examining the features of these adaptations can reveal the characteristics of Japanese culture and expand our understanding of Norse culture. By surveying approximately 50 comic (manga) titles, this study revealed that images of Valhøll, where the supreme god Óðinn gathers dead warriors from the human world, were frequently used. Thus, this study selects two outstanding titles and examines how they reuse the myths.

The first case is the *Valkyrie Profile* series, a role-playing video game series. Its notable message is that the gods are undesirable for the human world. In medieval sources such as in *Gesta Danorum*, Christian hostility was the primary reason for the unfavorable descriptions of Norse gods. Compared to this, religion does not play as large a role in the *Valkyrie Profile* series; instead, the focus is on human independence and freedom.

The second case is *Vinland Saga*, a manga by Makoto Yukimura published in 2005. Inspired by medieval Vinland sagas, this historical fiction narrates the growth of an Icelandic boy in eleventh-century Northern Europe. The title demonstrates two contrasting images of Valhøll: one is a heavenly paradise for warriors and the other is a bloody, underground world of the dead. These positive and negative images represent the characters' attitudes toward violence. The protagonist Thorfinn decides to ban himself from using violence and no longer perceives Valhøll as a paradise. *Vinland Saga* depicts the conflict between Christianity and Norse beliefs as a historical background, but it was not Christianity that made Thorfinn opt for nonviolence.

The results indicate that one of the characteristics of Japanese fiction is to maintain a distance from Christianity or from religion itself. This distance from religion is also supported by the research of the reception of Arthurian legends in *Dragon Quest XI*, which highlights that the religious aspects are removed in the depiction of chivalry (Komiya, 2019). Furthermore, many Japanese fiction works tend to use myths from Norse, Greek, Celtic, or Indian religions all together when they create their fictional world, as manga works such as *Saint Young Men* (Hikaru Nakamura, 2006–present), *Area 51* (Masato Hira, 2011–2017), and *Record of Ragnarok* (Shinya Umemura, Takumi Fukui and Ajichika, 2017–present) demonstrate. This distance from a specific religion may not only reflect the reality of the Japanese society, but also follow the tradition of manga creation from 1960s.