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POWER: ENVISIONING THE NORTHERN PAST

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II: 66 French Perspectives

1 Introduction

The print discussed in this case study illustrates the dominant reception of Old Norse mythology in France at the beginning of the twentieth century which associated the North as a Germanic space. The god Þórr (Thor) does not appear as a Nordic god, but he is rather conceived as a Germanic deity. Moreover, he is green and is described in the title as the essence of barbarism: *Le Dieu Thor la plus barbare d'entre les barbares divinités de la Vieille Germanie* [The god Thor, the most barbarous among the barbarian deities of Old Germany]. The stencil-coloured lithography dates from 1915 and measures 39.9 by 29.8 centimetres (see colour plate 24).

With the use of Pierre Nora's concept *lieux de mémoire*, the general social, political and cultural context of the print will be analysed in the following. Nora defines sites of memory as "any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora 1996, XVII; see also Nora 1997, 2226). They can take different forms, such as festivals, emblems, or monuments. The context of this print will help us understand the different types of discourse that lie behind this depiction of Þórr destroying important Gothic monuments.

2 Case study

Epinal prints as a site of memory

Epinal prints are colourful popular prints originating in Epinal, a commune in the Vosges department in north-eastern France. Different types of printed products were produced there, such as models, puppets, vignettes, or illustrations with captions. Through their (re)mediation and the meaning (re)invested in them, Epinal prints can be considered as sites of memory. In the nineteenth century, Epinal prints became their own genre with an international influence. The term 'Epinal' turned out to describe any prints using the same codes. The original company – that produced the Thor print – is Pellerin & Cie, a family-run business. Despite its success, the company had to cease its activity in 1914 due to the First

World War. In 1915, Pol Payonne (1851–1921), one of the directors, reopened it and started a series of prints entitled “série de guerre” [war series] that was produced between 1915 and 1918 (Cablé 2014, 239–279).

One of the reasons for the production of this series is *tradition*, a term often used by Payonne to express the role of the company: to record the great moments of French history (Cablé 2014, 249). Anne Cablé notes that it is this ‘tradition’ that justifies the printing of this series: “[...] glorifier la France, bâtir une identité nationale, unir autour de ces valeurs, est un devoir, un sacerdoce sans lequel elle perdrait sa respectabilité, sa raison d’être.” (Cablé 2014, 249) [...] to glorify France, to build a national identity, to unite around these values, is a duty, a priesthood without which it [i.e. the company] would lose its respectability, its *raison d’être* (author’s translation)]. Cablé describes this approach as an *œuvre de mémoire* (Cablé 2014, 279) [work of memory], a tradition that started with the first series about Napoleon in 1829. Payonne was also aware of the possible longevity of the series as can be seen in a letter to Pierpik dated 29 September 1914 (Cablé 2014, 279). One of the intentions of this war series was to record the then present events and the destruction of the past as can be seen in the image of Þórr.

This specific print, number 87 in the war series, was created by François Clasquin (1849–1917), a French architect. He only worked a few months for the company, from March to May 1915. Probably due to his friendship with Payonne and direct contacts with him, there is no extant written correspondence between the two men that could indicate the intentions behind this print. The detailed drawings of the monuments reflect his career as an architect. These buildings were never identified, but it is possible to determine that they correspond to several buildings that actually were destroyed in 1914, among them Ypres Cloth Hall, Arras Belfry and – presumably – Reims Cathedral. All these monuments share a common style: Gothic architecture.

Gothic architecture as a site of memory

A key element to understanding this image is to comprehend the role played by Gothic architecture in France. At that time, Gothic architecture was perceived as French art *par excellence*. This perception of a historic architectural style was promoted by several key actors, among them, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), an architect and theorist, as well as Camille Enlart (1862–1927), an archaeologist, art historian, and museum director. Through their publications and museum exhibitions, they participated in the construction of a national identity. Gothic architecture and its monuments became sites of memory. Therefore, Clasquin’s print does

not only depict the destruction of Gothic monuments: it is the French patrimony that is at stake.

This Epinal print would also have reminded the audience of a specific event: the destruction of the Cathedral of Reims by German shellfire on 19 September 1914. This event became part of the collective memory of France at that time. The institutions, artists, and journalists widely used the event to strengthen the French community against the aggressor, Wilhelm II (1888–1918). The Cathedral of Reims became a symbol of French martyrdom. As the site for the coronation of the kings of France, it was a site of memory in its right. As Jacques le Goff pointed out, “[...] les atteintes portées au monument-mémoire sont une blessure de la mémoire elle-même” (Le Goff 1997, 651) [(...) the attacks on the memory-monument are a wound to the memory itself (author’s translation)].

The instrumentalisation of the destruction of these sites of memory played a central role in the anti-German propaganda, and art was requisitioned in this instrumentalisation (Béliet 2016, 11). In 1915, the *Musée de Sculpture comparée* highlighted the destruction of this French patrimony. A year later, an exhibition at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Paris displayed a selection of mutilated artwork (*Exposition d’œuvres d’art mutilées*, 1916). Various publications denounced these attacks on the monuments. The monuments even gained anthropomorphic characteristics and were depicted as the incarnation of France or as a parallel to the victims from the battlefield. Illustrations of the destruction of the Cathedral of Reims can also be found on multiple postcards. They usually depict Wilhelm II with the burning Cathedral in the background. Clasquin’s work is part of this anti-German propaganda. Its peculiarity is that it represents Þórr as the main protagonist.

Þórr: barbarous and German

Þórr is the destroyer of these Gothic monuments. This choice is linked to the quotation of the German romantic poet and essayist Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) by Clasquin:

Le jour viendra, hélas ! Les vieilles divinités germaniques se lèveront de leurs tombeaux fabuleux et essuyeront de leurs yeux la poussière séculaire ; THOR se dressera avec son marteau gigantesque et détruira les cathédrales gothiques. (*Le Dieu Thor*)

[The day will come, alas! The old Germanic divinities will rise from their fabulous tombs and wipe away the secular dust from their eyes; THOR will rise with his gigantic hammer and destroy the Gothic cathedrals. (author’s translation)]

This quote comes from “De l’Allemagne depuis Luther, deuxième partie” [About Germany since Luther, second part] published in 1834 in *La Revue des Deux-Mondes* (677). Written eighty years before 1914, the text echoed perfectly the situation of France and Belgium during the First World War. It was perceived as a prophetic announcement and used in various newspapers and books at that time (e.g. *Petit Journal*, 214). Clasquin notes at the bottom of the print that Heine had predicted “ce retour à la sauvagerie ancestrale” [this return to the ancestral savagery] (*Le Dieu Thor*) depicted by Þórr.

The title introduces Þórr as “the most barbarous among the barbarian deities of Old Germany”. The term barbarous was already present in portrayals of the German Empire at the end of the nineteenth century (Beaupré 2015). It was commonly used during the propaganda to depict Germany and its *Kaiser*. At that time, the term referred to the enemy and was linked to notions of cruelty and inhumanity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Old Norse mythology was commonly associated with German culture in France through, for example, Wagner’s tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the Grimm brothers’ work, popularising depictions, and propaganda during the Franco–Prussian War (1870–1871) (Mohnike 2015; Zernack 2016). Þórr could thus be portrayed as being barbarous, i.e. German. This aspect is not specific to this print; as underlined by Julia Zernack: “The negative Þórr allegory plays on older ways of denigrating the foreign as monstrous” (Zernack 2016, 269). Such monstrous and barbaric traits are reinforced by the people hanging at the top of the spear, as well as the drawing of skulls at the bottom of the image. It is also the reason why Þórr is represented in green, the colour of monsters and demonic entities during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Mollard-Desfour 2012, XXVII). Since colours were an important part of the *image d’Epinal*, this choice reinforced the barbaric aspect of the god.

In this representation, Þórr is not just the deity of Wilhelm II: he symbolises the whole of Germany. “En 1914–1915 le Kaiser commande et l’Allemagne applaudit !” [In 1914–1915, the *Kaiser* commands and Germany applauds!] (*Le Dieu Thor*). This last sentence of Clasquin echoes his drawing. Everyone participates in the destruction: the German people saluting at the bottom right; Wilhelm II in the form of an eagle on top of a weapon in the right corner; and the army generals behind their emperor contemplating the scene. Þórr can be perceived here as an allegorical personification of the essence of German barbarism, while France is symbolised by its Gothic monuments. Clasquin’s work is part of a discourse opposing barbarism and civilisation that was common in the French anti-German propaganda. In this discourse, France is described as the emblem of civilisation. The Epinal print thus represents the opposition between the French patrimony

with its Gothic architecture as sites of memory (representing civilisation) and Wilhelm II's Germany with its old deity Þórr (representing barbarism).

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