

**Yggdrasill and Ymir's Skull:
The Cosmologies of Nordic Myth
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Abstract:

The several traditions of Norse myth each contain cosmologies that arise from a past understanding of the universe. Although, set like moving targets, changing through time with changes in thinking and experience as well as communications with other societies, the different cosmologies are similar in terms of how closely they relate, but may also pick up various descriptions and assemble them differently. However, it is not sure when the traditions might have brought in new stories or adapted through time. The Vanaric and the Odinic traditions are closely related and so share some similarities. For the same reason, the Tyrpic would match the Thorric to some degree. The Well of Urd, closely related to Mimir's well, would appear to include Yggdrasill and its constellations. The Baldric itself is entirely unknown, despite the significance of the story of the death of Balder in Norse myth, but if it can be traced back to the Syrian then it can be reconstructed somewhat.

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Introduction

One should expect that each mythic tradition contained within Norse mythology would have its own representations of the universe and phenomena. This does not mean that they need be entirely unique: common descent, equivalent interpretations, and sharing of ideas would lead to recognizably similar explanations. There is no doubt that both increased knowledge through exploration and interaction with other people would change their perception of the world.

With few historical anchor points and most of our information weighted towards the time of the greatest synthesis, with the Eddas, only a cursory attempt is possible, but at least leads to suggestions of what might have arisen initially in prehistory. Sometimes the best way to approach an explanation of the world is to understand more about the world in which people lived and what were their daily experiences and expectations, and not to interpret things from the standpoint of a present gazing into the past, which often leads to the view of primitive people as primitive in nature, and thus simplistic in their thinking and hopelessly quaint. Or to place too much of an emphasis upon acts of war and kingship, which must only have been of peripheral importance to the majority of people in the past, as it still remains today. So the best approach arises from the recognition that these cosmologies arise out of a basic ignorance mixed with comparison and imagination, and not out of a willful act of belief. Also there would have been no sense of rival religions as in the polytheistic society we experience today, but a polytheistic sense that gradually amassed into an amalgam of myths. These representations of the natural world were the best explanations they had and made enough sense to be plausible. It was not too long ago that most people in the Western world were still agricultural, and had it not been for the

spread of Christianity many more of these beliefs would have permeated into American and European thought and still be with us.

Cosmological Structure

Despite the variability among the Norse traditions there are some general structures that predominate, though each element or its name might only have arisen from a single tradition. The universe consists of three worlds, each one below the other: heaven was called Asgard the realm of the gods, a large part of the earth was Midgard the realm of men, and then the underworld, also known as Hel. Midgard is surrounded by a great sea, on the far side of which there is a forest Myrkwood (dark-wood).

Giantland (Jotunheim) is most often said to lie to the east but sometimes to the north, divided off by a river of ill-repute or the ocean-sea (around the edge of the world). In relation to its northern location it seems to have been confused with Niflheim, as Niflheim is itself is often equated with Hel.¹ Giantland is also sometimes equated with Utgard. Utgard (outer-world) appears to have been the region of darkness beyond the edge of the sky, where demons or trolls were supposed to live. It could only be arrived at by crossing the sea.

This vessel carried them to a sunless region, a land that knew neither stars nor the light of day but was shrouded in everlasting night. After they had sailed under this strange firmament for some time, their wood ran out, so that they had no fuel for their braziers. (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I, 268)

¹ This might have arisen from confusions between which character was considered a giant or troll, spirit or demon, as well as the mixing of different traditions. The Indian Yama or Iranian Yima was the first mortal to go to the underworld, and himself is equivalent to the giant Ymir.

In some traditions this troll-realm might have been an eternal region that existed before the world was created, although the layering of traditions makes the general picture obscure.

Giants, however, can also be separated into two classes, the first being the giants of creation who possess great knowledge, the second are the hill or mountain giants who are described in myth and folklore as being incredibly tall but rather dim, who use stone tools and flint, wear simple leather garments, sometimes possess herds, and often live in caves. Giants were typically held responsible for the formation of the land, as were sometimes ascribed to the gods. Giants turned into stones when struck with sunlight, for example, would have explained the presence of isolated boulders on the landscape. The fire giant Surt (from the south) and the frost giant Hrym (from the east) are likewise forces of the dynamic earth.

Eddic Creation

The most common story of Norse creation, and the one conveyed as the “orthodox” story, is that contained in the Eddas. Although attempts might be made to reconcile the variant discrepancies, it is safe to say that there was never an “orthodox” version from which the variants arose, rather the variants were the norm, through place but also from a transmission standpoint, and so similar explanations with different details and sequences should be expected. The Eddic creation myth in Snorri speaks first of Ymir the giant born out of the ice from Niflheim and heat from Muspell. Then the sacred cow Audhumla, arising and licking Buri free, who begets Bor and from whom arise Odin and his brothers, who then kill Ymir and make the world out of his carcass. This

itself seems to be an amalgam of different episodes of creation wound into a single narrative.² The earth was the body of this cosmic giant, the vault of the sky was his skull, the oceans his blood, while the stars were sparks out of Muspell. The Sun and the Moon in the Eddas are two deities who ride chariots in the sky pursued by twin wolves.³

The creation myth within “Voluspa” mentions Ymir only in passing. The earth itself is said to be raised up by Bor’s sons (here unnamed) and it is Brimir and Blain who are mentioned as giving rise to the dwarfs. Although it is supposed that Brimir is the same as Ymir, the poem likewise is an amalgam of different episodes that have been assembled, often without any attempt to resolve irregularities. The redactor of the poems has also added, as he thought relevant, other mythological information such as the preface to “Voluspa”. Other myths within the *Poetic Edda*, notably “Griminir’s Sayings” and “Vafthrudnir’s Sayings”, add to the sum total of information and here specifically uphold the notion that the earth and everything was made out of Ymir, although there is no mention within them of Odin’s role.

World Tree

Elements of a prehistoric cosmology appear to be those that relate back to some fundamental images, including the World Tree (the night sky) along with its associated constellations of deer, a squirrel, an eagle, and a serpent. It also includes a giant who sits in the otherworld under the tree drinking, variously as Mimir from a well of mead, Brimir in his beer hall, and also Gymir whose daughter possessed the mead. The tree is variously called Yggdrasill, Hoddmimir’s

² Certainly the generation of only frost giants out of Ymir might have arisen so as not to contradict the generation of mankind out of driftwood.

³ This matches in concept the Sun chariot excavated from Trundholm in Denmark.

wood, or Mimameid but these latter two are only specifically associated with Mimir.⁴ The giant is also related to the idea of the well (the Moon) as Mimir's well or Urd's well. There is also the implication that the axis of the World Tree is located in the north and perhaps also down below the earth. The top of the tree (the North Star) is not directly overhead at European latitudes so the tree appears to be partly underground. The road to hell in the story of Balder's death is described as running downwards and northwards, which would lead one right to the North Pole.

The unexplained aspect of this picture of the world is that it appears to lack any form in prehistoric art or other physical evidence, and surely it is unknown exactly when these ideas first arose and where they might be found. It is possible that even if the World Tree idea is from the Neolithic this does not mean every aspect and association also dates from this time.

Loki and Skadi

The Norse Loki, who arose as a god of fire and even earlier the sun, is a widespread European god. While in Norse tradition he is said to be bound in the underworld, it might only have been later the question arose, "why is Loki bound in the underworld?" and certainly the early descriptions are eventually woven into explanations which we refer to as myths. The two variants within the Eddas attribute it differently: in Snorri the explanation is that he was bound directly in retribution for causing Baldr's death, while in the *Poetic Edda* it is after he insults each god in turn that he is found and bound, as Skadi threatens will occur if he persists.⁵ The

⁴ It is possible that the Ragnarok episode of Líf and Lífthrasir might refer back to an ancient mythical idea: that originally humans were thought to have emerged from the World Tree. This also relates back to the idea that humans were associated with wood, as in the case of the driftwood origins of mankind.

⁵ The first part of this myth is, of course, much later than the idea of Loki's binding.

latter holds no clue as to the specific reason, but the episode is associated with Loki's invention of the fishing net, which otherwise holds no relevance, except it is associated with the story about how the salmon received its tail shape. The characters are also interesting, since Kvasir is mentioned as being able to divine the purpose of Loki's net and the binding episode brings Skadi to the fore.

Loki's relation to Skadi arises in the episode of Idunn's theft by the giant Thiassi. Here Loki is spared by the giant on the promise that he brings Idunn and her apples of immortality to Thiassi's home. Loki does, but also must retrieve her and in so doing the Aesir are able to kill Thiassi. This brings the giant's daughter Skadi to Asgard demanding retribution. Although it ends amicably enough, in "Lokasenna" Loki specifically mentions having had sex with Skadi, and thus the original cause for binding might have arisen out of this early myth, as it is she who affixes the snake above his head. Perhaps since Sigyn is said to be Loki's wife, that it arose because he had deceived Skadi, not revealing that he was married and thus earns Skadi's spite and she takes this act of revenge. They might have well known that no fury unleashed is greater than that arising from the deceptions of "breach of promise" and adultery⁶, but here it is Sygn's loyalty to her husband that is the explanation as to why earthquakes are only intermittent, when she has to dump the bowl that collects the dripping poison.

If there are deeper meanings to this myth they have been lost or misplaced, but it is clear that the pairing of Loki with Skadi matches that of the Celtic gods Lugh and Skatha. Lugh himself is a god of the Sun and Skatha might be a goddess of the North.⁷ Their aspects and purpose might

⁶ This is also similar to the apparent original cause of Gunnlod's weeping in the story of the Mead.

⁷ Skatha's realm was called the "Land of Shadows" and she was a master of arms (Rolleston 2004: 157). Certainly as one grows further north all shadows grow and in the Arctic long shadows are extraordinary. Loki might originally have been a god of the southern realm and heat, a combination similar to Niflheim and Muspell.

too have been joined or confused within the Finnish hag of the north Louhi, who herself shares some similarities with Loki beyond the name.

Heimdallic

There is little known about the Heimdallic tradition directly, except the gods who comprised its pantheon and the myth about the theft of Freyia's necklace. Initially the gods were of the Sun, Moon and Fire, who are Bertha, Heimdall, and Lodur. These same three were known in Saxo as Grytha, Humbli, and Lothar, while in Caesar they were Sol, Luna, and Vulcan. Heimdall himself was associated with the bridge Bifrost, which would have been Bertha's necklace, while the sky is revealed in descriptions of Bertha's blue dress. Likewise, based upon the story of Grendel in *Beowulf*, Grendel was equivalent to Erentel, the Morning Star, viewed as a bear claw. In the story relating to Aurvendil it was a toe that became a star, which is clearly the same as the Morning Star.

It is only the testimony of Caesar that indicates that apart from their three gods the Germans recognized no other gods, however there is reason to suggest that the Sun goddess was a dual character and was also ruler of the Underworld, wherein she resided at night. There is an absence of any specific explanation about the night sky, unless the World Tree with its constellations arose out of this tradition. The introduction of "Voluspa", clearly appended to the original poem its redactor, speaks of the "wide measuring tree" and "nine giant women", who might relate back to an origin myth within the Heimdallic tradition, wherein Heimdall is the father of mankind, and would have been related to "Rigsthula":

*Long ago, within cold caverns deep
In a boundless cave, where water seeped
It dripped into a froth-filled cauldron
This is how it was in the beginning
Where nine sisters were gathered
Around the wide Measuring Tree
Seeking the elusive form of light
The first Holy One came in this way
They passed his form between them
Each of the nine carrying him for nine more
Until, coming forth, he shone white
So they sprinkled him with water,
Giving him the name of Heimdall
The nine have made this known, and know yet more*

Odinic

Although Odin figures most highly within the Eddic stories of creation, there must have been a cosmology arising separate from these, within which the blue of the sky and clouds are his cloak, and the Sun and the Moon are Odin's left and right eye (the latter sacrificed to the well of Mimir). Odin is linked to Yggdrasill whereupon he hung to obtain the runes, although this tree is only known as the 'windy tree' in "Havamal", but is often identified with the World Tree. He is also associated with the Well of Mimir, and Mimir has his own mythic tree Mimameid. To presume that this tree is the World Tree Yggdrasill would provide a dual explanation for the

night sky. This and other indications are persuasive that the Odinic tradition had a few variants that must have existed within different regions. Like the Sun goddess Berchta, Odin was also god of the Underworld and ruled over the dead, and likewise a god of the Wild Hunt, which is the fury of a passing thunderstorm or sudden strong wind, also associated with death.

Thorric and Tyrlic

The Thorric also builds upon the deities Bertha and Lodur, who become Grid (Iarnsaxa) and Utgardaloki (Loki). There is no specific god of the Moon associated with Thor, although it might still have been Heimdall. The tale of Aurvendil's toe also includes Thor, explaining that it was he who threw it into the sky. The specific cosmology of the Thorric tradition is difficult to attain, though the Midgard Serpent attests to the notion that there was an ocean surrounding this world, and that somewhere beyond this sea to the east lay Giantland. Beneath the earth in the underworld would have been where Utgardaloki lived, an alternative form of Loki who in Saxo's version was there bound.

Beyond this there is reason to believe that the world that men inhabited was thought of as Thor's realm:

His realm is a place called Thrudvangar [power field], and his hall is called Bilskirnir [bright lightning]. In that hall there are five hundred and forty apartments. It is the biggest building that has ever been built. (Sturluson 1987: 22)

Although this hall is often associated with a realm in the heavens, it might rather relate to a vast building that encompassed the universe. The evidence for this arises only from a reference in which the world is described as Thor's boundless new cabin and fields in the *Kalevala*:

Bee, my little bird
fly that other way
right over nine seas
to an island on the main
a honeyed mainland
to Thor's new cabin
the Worshipful's boundless one!
(Lonnrot 1989: 179-180)

The spark of fire flared
the red ball fell from the halls
the Creator created
And the sky's Old Man beat out—
fell through level heaven
cleaving that clear sky
Piercing the mucky smoke-hole
past the dry roof beam
to Thor's new cabin
The Worshipful's boundless one.
Then, when it got there
to Thor's new cabin

it set about evil work

it started on dirty work

(Lonnrot 1989: 619)

Steady old Väinämöinen

has hastened to ask:

‘Where did the fires go from there

where did the sparks dash

after Thor’s field edge–

to the forest or to sea?

(Lonnrot 1989: 620)

This could indicate that the world was believed to be Thor’s cabin and beyond this was Thor’s field.⁸ This is a scarce idea and the reference is enigmatic. In “Alvissmal” the elves are known to call the sky “splendid roof”. However, because the dwarf’s word for sky “dripping hall” is clearly a cave ceiling the elves’ roof may not apply to the sky vault, but possibly to the height of a mountain top.

Conclusion

It is not sure when the traditions contained within Norse myth might have brought in new stories or adapted through time. The Vanaric is descended from the same source as the Odinic, so there

⁸ Why the world is “Thor’s new cabin” could arise because after a cabin was first built a certain amount of sap would seep out of the logs, and the fire would thus cause the wood to twinkle like stars, while after a time soot and dirt would mask this effect.

is at least some reason to believe that the cosmologies were largely matched. For the same reason, the Tyrpic would match the Thorric to some degree. The Well of Urd, closely related to Mimir's well, would appear to include Yggdrasill and its constellations. That it is Frey who has a contest at Ragnarok with Surt implies that the notion of Niflheim and Muspell arise from this tradition, but it seems not this simple. The Baldric itself is entirely unknown, despite the significance of the story of the death of Baldr in Norse myth. If the Baldric can be traced back to the Syrian, then ultimately this can be reconstructed somewhat from that source.

Given that the basic Norse mythology arises out of naturalistic explanations, these can be summarized to reveal the basic myths of the Germanic people and are shown in the table in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1.
Naturalistic & Cosmological Myths

Myth	Tradition	Naturalistic Source
Theft of Idunn's Apples	Loki	Summer and Winter
Loki's Quarrel/Binding of Loki	Loki	Earthquakes
List of Rig	Heimdall	Origin
Freyia's Necklace	Heimdall	Thunderstorm
Hymir/Midgard Serpent	Thor	confrontation Thunderstorm and Sea
Utgarda-Loki	Thor	Journey to the Underworld
Geirrod	Thor	Journey to the Underworld
Duel with Hrungnir	Thor	confrontation Thunderstorm and Morning Star
Binding of Fenrir	Tyr	Sun and Moon
Hymir and the Chalice	Tyr	Journey to the Underworld (?)
Hymir and the Cauldron	Tyr	Journey to the Underworld (?)
Mead of Poetry	Odin	Sun and Moon
Mimir the Giant/Vafthrudnir	Odin	Sun and Moon
Balder's Dreams/Death	Balder	Summer and Winter
Skirnir's Journey	Vanir	Summer and Winter

There are also myths that reveal an aspect about the cosmology, like origin myths and the common mythical story of a journey into the underworld. One would imagine that the naturalistic myths would be transmitted in some form, even if they had been seriously revised,

especially when the original naturalistic references had been forgotten. Other myths that lack naturalistic purpose such as “Building of Asgard’s Wall” and “Theft of Sif’s Hair” provide new explanations for origins of Sleipnir and the treasures of the gods, while others such as “Marriage of Niord and Skadi” and “Theft of Thor’s Hammer” present tales for amusement only. Each of these must have been fairly late of origin.

While the various aspects of the cosmologies arising out of Norse mythic traditions are sometimes difficult, far-reaching, and uncertain, available aspects and possibilities are detailed in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2.
Cosmological Summary Table

	WORLD TREE	THORRIC⁹	TYRRIC	VANIRIC	ODINIC/MIMIR	ODINIC/YMIR
Primal Giant		Hymir (?)	Hymir (?)	Surt or Gyimir (?)	Mimir/Mim	Ymir/Brimir
Sun		Ull's shield (?) & Berchta	Tyr's shield (?)	Freyia (Berchta)	Odin's eye or shield	Sol (shield)
path					Sleipnir/wolf	Sol's chariot/ wolf Skoll
Moon	Urd's well		island Lyngvi (?)	Heimdall	Odin's eye in well	Mani
phases	Urd's well			horn, smile, ears	Mimir's well	
mares	swans		Fenrir/Garm	Heimdall's face	Mimir face & horn	Bil & Hiuki
path						Mani's chariot/ wolf Hati
Night Sky	Yggdrasill	Thor's cabin (?)	lake Amsvartnir (?)		Mimameid	Ymir's skull
stars	fruit, animals					sparks of Muspell
Milky Way	root			path to underworld	path to underworld	
Earth		lord	Gefion (?)	Gerd (?)	Fiorgynn (?)	Ymir
dew	Yggdrasill's loam			Freyia's tears	Frigg's tears	foam from Hrimfaxi
Sky		ocean-sky (?)		Frey (Berchta)	Odin's blue cloak	Ymir's skull
clouds					Odin's mottled cloak	Ymir's brains
Underworld		Berchta & Utgarda-Loki		Hyndla (Holda) & Loki	Hel (Holle) & Odin	(Brimir)
Fire		Utgarda-Loki		Loki	Lodur	Muspell
Ocean/water		Midgard serpent		Heimdall	Haenir	Ymir's blood
Storms		Thor	Tyr	Frey	Odin	
rain		Thor	Tyr	Frey	Odin	
wind		Thor	Tyr	Frey	Odin	eagle Hraesvelg
rainbow		Ull's bow (?)		Freyia's necklace		bridge Bifrost
Eclipse			Fenrir/Garm (?)		wolf Fenrir (?)	Moongarm (?)
Earthquake		Utgarda-Loki		Loki	Lodur (?)	
End of the World	Nidhogg gnaws through the tree's root		wolf freed & fights Tyr	Loki freed & fights Heimdall, Surt fights with Frey	wolf freed & fights Odin	fire of Muspell & Fimbul winter

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⁹ It is interesting how closely the gaps in the Thorric are matched by the World Tree cosmology. This could imply that they are within the same tradition, however there is no specific link between them within the mythology. The missing information about the Moon might relate to the absent myth about the Morning Star, related to the duel with Hrungnir myth.

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