



**The Retrospective Methods Network**

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*RMN Newsletter* is a medium of contact and communication for members of the Retrospective Methods Network (RMN). The RMN is an open network which can include anyone who wishes to share in its focus. It is united by an interest in the problems, approaches, strategies and limitations related to considering some aspect of culture in one period through evidence from another, later period. Such comparisons range from investigating historical relationships to the utility of analogical parallels, and from comparisons across centuries to developing working models for the more immediate traditions behind limited sources. *RMN Newsletter* sets out to provide a venue and emergent discourse space in which individual scholars can discuss and engage in vital cross-disciplinary dialogue, present reports and announcements of their own current activities, and where information about events, projects and institutions is made available.

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All articles in the Communications section of the journal have been subject to peer review.

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Editor's Note

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

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### Rounding the Turn

A curious aspect of the changing situations in the world is that the *status quo* of the past seems to simply blur into a *status quo* of the present and the transition between them gets lost in between. Change is so deeply entangled with stability that it is often easily overlooked. This is no less true for the present journal than for the social and geopolitical situations among which we live and work.

The Retrospective Methods Network (RMN) formed around 'retrospective methods', which became conceived along three dimensions:

- The synchronic dimension: gaining perspectives on a tradition or cultural phenomenon behind limited sources
- The diachronic dimension: evaluating potential connections between traditions in one period and culture in another period
- Analogical comparison: the value and limits of comparison between living or extensively documented traditions and traditions for which evidence is extremely limited

Although *RMN Newsletter* was conceived as a 'newsletter', people engaged it as a venue for articles. It became a *de facto* journal, an identity that was soon formalized with the introduction of peer-review and establishment in journal ranking systems.

Centers of activity for the journal have been daughter networks, among which the Austmarr Network remains the most active branch. The 2022 meeting of the Austmarr Network

converged with the 18<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference on the theme of "Sagas and the Circum-Baltic Arena" (Helsinki and Tallinn, 7<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> August 2022). The volume based on an Austmarr meeting, *Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries in Studies of the Viking Age*, edited by Daniel Sävborg (Brepols, 2022), has just appeared. Austmarr XI: "Blurred Boundaries and Hybridizations of Magic, Religion and Authorized Knowledge or Practice in the Baltic Sea Region" will be held 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

We have also formed ties with the annual Aarhus Mythology Conference. The most recent event was held on the theme of "Hybrids and Metamorphoses" (Prague, 24<sup>th</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> November 2022), on which a conference report appears in this volume. The conference will now return to its birthplace in Aarhus, Denmark, organized around the theme "Runes in Mythology, Ritual, Literature" (23<sup>rd</sup>–24<sup>th</sup> November 2023).

These connections and the engagements with our broader readership have structured the profile of the journal. Now, the world around us is rapidly changing and *RMN Newsletter* is changing as well. Gwendolyne Knight is taking over as Editor-in-Chief as Frog steps down. Gwendolyne will shape the journal's trajectory in the emerging era.

*Frog and Gwendolyne Knight*



Communications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

### Newsletter

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### *Völuspá* in a Holistic Reading

Henning Haglskær Kure, Copenhagen

*Abstract: In broad lines and select details, this reading of Völuspá sketches out the poem as a meaningful whole by making use of a structural story model for textual analysis. The poem is thereby seen to express the grand existential scheme of a heathen worldview, giving rise along the way to new thoughts, suggestions, and speculations on issues of translation and interpretation that have engaged commentators for ages.*

*Völuspá* is an Old Norse mythical poem about creation, destruction, and the productive interrelation between them. At a glance, the poem seems to explore destructive crises and their creative potential for change and transformation by expressing heathen religious ideas about the origin and meaning of conflict and death in the shaping of life in this world. The theme of fighting is emphasized, both as an existential condition and as a tool for the rule of wisdom, represented by the god Óðinn. The present reading aims to sketch and discuss these ideas in a holistic perspective of the poem itself, but it is not within the scope of the article to do justice to the many relevant arguments of the vast study of *Völuspá* and its details. A good albeit incomplete survey of the studies can be found in KLE (2019: 31–42).

The poem as we know it was preserved in writing, along with a selection of other mythical poems, by learned Christian Icelanders in the 13th century, probably as reference for their thoughts about heathen religion and the poetry of the past. These thoughts are most elaborately expressed in the writings of Snorri Sturluson, particularly in his seminal book, *Edda* (c. 1220). Though contemporarily recorded, the texts of *Völuspá* and *Edda* are generally thought to have been composed several or perhaps even many centuries apart. To reach back beyond the 13th-century thinking that documented the

poems, they must therefore be read in a retrospective way.

#### ***Read the Poetry First!***

When reading Old Norse mythical texts retrospectively as presumed expressions of heathen religion, I suggest that we first analyze the semantic content of the poetic corpus in its own right. Only then – with such primary analyses as a foundation – should the prose texts, and in particular Snorri's *Edda*, be taken into consideration as secondary sources. This ranking of prose and poetry may help us to deal with two grand shifts involved here: that of worldview (heathen > Christian) and that of medium (oral > written).

Over the years (centuries, actually), scholarly consensus has largely accepted Snorri's *Edda* as a primary source. However, Snorri clearly states that the relationship between the *Edda* and mythical poems such as *Völuspá* is that of a learned Christian interpretation (expressed, e.g., in his prologue) and its heathen sources (expressed, e.g., by marking citations with: “as it says in *Völuspá*”; cf. Faulkes 1983). This places Snorri's source and his interpretation on either side of the conversion watershed, between markedly different worldviews, which also becomes apparent when we compare Snorri's paraphrases with his citations of poetry.<sup>1</sup> In a study of 13th-century post-heathen thinking, the texts would be

contemporary sources. However, studies of Norse religions, worldviews, and philosophy in pre-Christian times that build a foundation on the integration of the poems with their revisionist eddic interpretation as equal sources create, in my view, a methodological problem.

Another reason for reading the poetry first is that it is poetic. When dealing with written poetic texts that – as presumed here – are collectively authored and memorized as oral texts of another worldview, this point can, in my opinion, hardly be exaggerated. Written texts do not need to be remembered – they can be looked up at any time and be copied verbatim endlessly, their content ‘frozen’ and retrievable in the form of their first writing. Oral texts only manifest in their telling, their form a matter of being ‘told well’ and therefore ever changeable (cf. Gunnell 2013). In this regard, the oral form is distinct from its content, which may be perceived as a specific, semantic structure, a field or body of elements, ideas, and meanings that constitute a ‘story identity’. This content ‘body’ is retrieved from the collective memory of a society's tradition (Sørensen 2006: 17–22) – in other words: you need to ‘be there’ to get it. When written, the content of an oral text will ‘freeze’ and merge with the current form contemporary with the writing. One recent telling may then permanently overwrite the past contents of the ‘story’.

However, poetry may offer a way back to an oral, pre-written story content. The merging of content and form may already have occurred to a great degree within the poetic oral format prior to a written recording, especially in case of traditional texts associated with ritual and religion. In contrast with prose, poetic form – rhyme, rhythm, meter – makes it easier to remember a text verbatim (Kure 2022: 27–28, and further references there). This property enables oral poetry to handle some of the same mnemonic functions as writing does. A poetic text may sometimes be orally handed down relatively verbatim over very long distances of time, and even through changes in the collective, shared worldview or through transfers from oral to written media. Poetry may thus be more likely than prose to keep ancient contents intact and retrospectively

accessible beyond the barrier of writing. Whether this is the case with any particular, authorially-undatable Old Norse mythical poem, must, however, remain an open, hypothetical question.

Reading the poems first is thus not a clear-cut, infallible method for retrieving some of their presumed heathen content, nor does it exclude the need for other methods. Still, I think there are good reasons for exploring its potentials, though at some level this may also have to be an experiment: how could *Völuspá* as a whole have been read today, if we did not have had Snorri to guide us? And where could equally valid alternative translations of the poem take us in terms of meaning?

### ***Völuspá* – which *Völuspá*?**

The wholeness of *Völuspá* considered in the present article comprises the poem proper as it is preserved in the two separate versions of the *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók* manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The existence of two complete versions is unique to *Völuspá* in the Old Norse poetic corpus. The versions vary in dramatization and perspective (cf. Larrington & Quinn 2021); these variations may not only reflect the contexts of the two manuscripts, but may also bear witness to the pre-written existence of the poem and its possibly ancient roots in oral performance (Quinn 1990; Thorvaldsen 2013, 2019). The variations between the two written texts may reflect the tradition of fluctuating forms that the poem likely would have had as an oral text. A hypothetical thought, of course, but it may help us to glimpse the ‘story identity’ or ‘content body’ of the poem, as mentioned above.

Both versions feature the same tightly interwoven composition throughout, with the setup in the first third of the poem creating a continuity that flows without interruption through the mid-section along different tracks of sequencing, and finds its concordant closure in the final third. In addition to fifty-three stanzas shared by both versions, *Konungsbók* holds ten exclusive stanzas and *Hauksbók* three; a further seven alternative or additional/omitted verse lines and a few important single words are exclusive to one of the versions.

Each version works as a coherent whole in its own right, but several of the stanzas, lines, and words exclusive to one version may register as compositional 'phantom pains' echoing in the other. Similar 'echoes' of certain elements, names, formulas, and tropes are also typical of the overall composition of *Völuspá* (cf. KLE 2019: 51–54). These components all seem to reciprocally inform and define the meaning of their 'echo'-counterparts, and serve to weave stanzas together across the entire poem – and across both manuscript versions – into a holistic fabric that may contribute to the preservation of the semantic content of both wholeness and parts. Examples will pop up below.

The exclusive stanzas and lines provide each version with a different contextual perspective: *Konungsbók* expands on the plight of warriors and the rituals aimed to secure their fame, while *Hauksbók* has the role of sacred power as its focal point (these differences allow for additional themes, which are relevant to the 13th century Christian reception of the poem but are beyond the scope of this article. For examples, see KLE 2019: 1488–1490). In spite of these differences, the perspectives of the two versions seem to reflect on the same 'body' of semantic content – a common, shared whole.

Thus, in my opinion, it is still reasonable to perceive the two versions as one poem, one 'poetic identity', to which all the known stanzas, lines, and words of both poetic versions consequently must belong (cf. Sørensen 2006: 23–24). As a practicality of writing about that poem, I shall here refer to the numbering of sixty-six individual stanzas established in 1867 by Sophus Bugge, mainly based on the stanza order of *Konungsbók*. However, my reading also respects the ordering of *Hauksbók*, as well as all other variations between the two versions. The suggested wholeness here is not intended to be yet a futile attempt to reconstruct an authoritative 'original' poem. Instead, I try to juxtapose the texts of both versions on an equal footing in conversation with each other, in order to render them as coordinates and reciprocal sources of a possible, albeit hypothetical, shared semantic content.

### *Völuspá as a Story*

Looking for the story of the poem, we may take the basic narrative structure common to the poem's two versions as a starting point:

- A *völva* (a term for 'seeress') tells of her great knowledge about the creation of the world and humankind.
- This leads her to prophetic visions of the rise of mythical conflict, fighting, death, and the destruction of the world.
- In her final visions, *ragnarök* result in the rebirth of the world in an ideal version.

A beginning, a middle, and an end: since Aristotle, that has defined a story. And, as I see it, *Völuspá* does indeed have a regular story structure, with a plot – here understood as the events resulting from the wants and needs of a protagonist – and a narrative flow that continuously moves these events forward in a chain of one thing directly leading to the next. This leads me to the idea for my present reading:

I propose that the causal chain of events described in *Völuspá* as a whole is intentionally set in motion by the gods, and moved onward by Óðinn, with the intended purpose of achieving what in the end turns out to be the actual result: the ideal or consummated world.

This contrasts with most of the past readings of *Völuspá*. Though they may encompass ideas of causality and plot (mostly dependent on *Gylfaginning*, the mythological part of Snorri's *Edda*; cf. Wellendorf 2021), their basic assumptions are: (1) that the poem as a whole constitutes a mythical world history (i.e. primarily a chronology of events not necessarily connected, rather than the plot of a story); (2) that 'Ragnarök' is an accidental destiny and The Final End, something the gods fear and try to avoid but are powerless to prevent; and (3) that the resulting ideal world is incidental and not an achievement of the gods. In order to suit these readings, the meanings of certain words throughout the poem have been adapted (and some even 'emended') from their meanings and forms attested elsewhere. To some degree this is part of any reading, but equally valid alternatives tend to be forgotten, and arguments become replaced with truisms. Thus, I shall start my reading by taking a closer look at the most



crucial of those words, the compound *ragnarøk*.

### Ragnarøk

Old Norse *ragna* is the genitive plural of nominative plural *regin* (also *rōgn*) ‘divine rulers, gods’, so whatever *røk* is, it is theirs.

Old Norse *røk* (also plural) seems to connote something as a causal element – the ‘reasons’ for, or the ‘courses’ or ‘effects’ of that something. Well attested in Old Norse texts, *røk* can also translate in other non-specific ways (‘matters’, ‘doings’, ‘business’, ‘developments’, ‘signs’, ‘sakes’) – yet always holding a connotation of causality. Going from there, *røk* compounded with *ragna* would simply denote the ‘causations’ or ‘effects’ of the being and doings of the gods (for recent philological and linguistic treatments of *røk* see Haraldur Bernharðsson 2007: 26–30 [however, cf. Frog 2011: 17], and Thiberg 2011: 137–138).

In *Völuspá*, the term *ragnarøk* occurs in the refrain repeated through the middle part of the poem, here in the words of the *Konungsbók* version:

fiqlð veit hón fræða fram sé ek lengra\*  
um *ragna røk* rōmm sigtíva. (st. 44)

Much knowledge she has, far further I see, of *ragnarøk*, the harsh ones of the victory deities.

(\* In *Hauksbók* the first line is: *fram sé ek lengra / fiqlð kann ek segia* [‘Far further I see, much I can say’] in accordance with the more limited ritual role of the *völva* that frames this version.)

If read according to the meanings suggested above, ‘the effects of the gods’ (*ragnarøk*) are here acknowledged to be ‘the harsh ones’ (*rōmm*), yet still attributed to ‘the victory-deities’ (*sigtívar*), a term suggesting that the gods succeed in what they do, or – considering that this is stated as part of a prophesy – what they intend to do.

The aspect of intentional purpose leading to success is suggested by the preceding refrain repeated through the first part of the poem:

Þá gengo *regin* oðl á *røk* stóla  
ginnheilog goð ok um þat gættoz (st. 6)

### An Additional Note on ragnarøk as Doomsday

Notions of *røk* as a specific term for The End (doom, judgment, final fate) are only evidenced in interpretational contexts of the compound *ragnarøk*, and are therefore enclosed in a circular argument about this meaning of the compound.

*Ragnarøk* as an equivalent of Doomsday is cultivated in Snorri's *Edda*. Curiously however, Snorri does not use *røk* for the compound – only, and consistently, *rōkkr*, ‘darkening’ (*ragnarōkkr* ‘twilight of the gods’, *Götterdämmerung*). Snorri's account of *ragnarōkkr* is guided by the *Book of Revelation* and is, of course, the origin of our contemporary concept of ‘Ragnarök’ as Doomsday.

The term *ragnarōkkr* may be connected to *Lokasenna* 39, a carnivalesque comedy poem that tests our mythological knowledge by intentionally twisting it in a “free play with the sacred” (Batten 2023; Frog 2011: 16–17). Otherwise, *ragnarōkkr* is not used elsewhere in the poetic sources.

The word *rōkkr* (or *rōkr*) is clearly not a mistake for *røk*,<sup>3</sup> which in Snorri's *Edda* still appears in citations with the compound *røkstólar*. In *Gylfaginning* 42, this word is paraphrased *dómstólar* ‘judgment seats’ in line with Snorri's overarching Doomsday scenario. The choice of *rōkkr* over *røk* for *ragnarōkkr* participates in the fragmentation of the compositional and semantic wholeness of *Völuspá* occurring throughout *Gylfaginning*. This fragmentation is the largest separating factor between the poem proper and Snorri's *Edda*. In contrast with this, compositional ‘echoes’ (such as *regin á røkstola – ragnarøk*) unite the two poetic versions.

Perhaps Snorri's consistent use of *ragnarōkkr* is simply due to the fact that in the Christian contexts of Snorri's *Edda* the regular meanings of *røk* would not make sense – divine causes, reasons or purposes are not the business of heathen gods.

Then the *regin* all took *røk*-office, the incredibly devoted gods, and of this was taken care

Here we also find *regin* in connection with *røk* (compounded with *stólar*). This is a prime example of the ‘echoing’ components typical

for the composition of *Völuspá*, which reciprocally inform and define each other.

The specific compound *røkstólar* is only known from this context, so the word *røk* may reasonably be expected to add further layers of meaning to the initial impression of gods going to the seats (*gengo á stóla*) of an assembly or moot. As the last word in compounds, *stóll* ('chair', 'seat') mostly denotes an office or position of authority (cf. *friðstóll*, *arfstóll*, *dómstóll*, *giafstóll*), which strongly suggests connotations of will, purpose, and intent – but also of duty and obligation, informing the meaning of the semantically productive *ganga á* as the 'taking on' of some task. The phrase *regin gengo á røkstóla* in relation to *ragnarøk* may then encompass the full spectrum of causality: The gods took 'causation office' in order to take care of something that would 'develop' matters toward 'the harsh effects of the gods'. If so, the gods may be thought to steer the entire course of mythical events. As far as I can tell, this presents us with an entirely new perspective on *Völuspá*, which consequently may, from the beginning through to the end, be a poem about the intended meanings of *ragnarøk*.

In the composition of *Völuspá*, the two *røk*-refrains of the poem are used differently. The *ragnarøk*-refrain paces the escalating drama and indicates its point of departure in the basic structure of the poem – 'much knowledge she has, far further I see': the knowledge that the former self of the *völva* had learned (*veit hón*) and now recounts from memory (*ek man*) in the first half, and the visions that the present *völva* sees (*sé ek*) in the poem's last half. This differentiation of memorized lore and prophetic visions is accentuated midway through the poem by the present *völva*'s account of a past ritual *útisetá* in which she sought aid from her 'spirit liaison' (st. 28; cf. Gísli Sigurðsson 2001; Kure 2006 [2014: 6–8]). Prior to this, her knowledge was provided by the *jötunnar* (*fædda* st. 2), while the subsequent visions are provided by Óðinn (*valði* st. 29). Though clearly indicated only in stanzas exclusive to *Konungsbók*, this distinction is present in both versions. It integrates the poetic composition with the basic oppositional tension between gods and *jötunnar* (singular *jötunn*; in modern translations

commonly called 'giants'), as I read these stanzas. Thus, the semantic content of the *ragnarøk*-refrain also refers back to the previous *røkstólar*-refrain.

The *røkstólar*-refrain is used whenever the gods deal with cosmic problems arising from their use of the matter of the *jötunnar* as raw materials for creating the world (cf. Clunies Ross 1994: 68). This suggests that creation is at the core of the business of the gods. In each case, their method of developing their creation involves the use of words: naming (st. 6), appointing (st. 9), negotiating (st. 23), and swearing-in (sts 25–26), all of which indicate speech acts as a general creative method, at least according to *Völuspá* (Kure 2010: 137–140).

Based on the above points on plot and on *røk* and *ragnarøk*, the following holistic reading of *Völuspá* as a story is structured in five acts – The Premise, The Problem, The Plan, The Breakthrough, and The Outcome – all put into The Context by the dramatic setup of the *völva* in the poem's frame.

#### ***Völuspá Act 1 – The Premise***

A premise for the story is barely hinted at in *Völuspá*. It almost seems to be taken for granted, an evident part of a common worldview. It appears that a few concise references to the well-known creation myth recounted in *Vafþrúðnismál* 20–21 and *Grímnismál* 40–41 sufficed for the original audiences. These mythical poems describe how the gods transform the giant body of Ymir into the human world, perhaps by killing and cutting up the primal *jötunn*. (It should be noted, however, that this is not made explicit and would actually destroy an otherwise apparent structural micro/macro relation between body and world; Kure 2003 [2014: 7–8], 2010: 84–86, 271.) *Völuspá* 3–4 describes the same 'mythagonists' (a term I use to avoid loading mythical actors with the conceptual baggage of pro- and antagonists) involved in the same structural course of events. All three of the aforementioned poems share some of the same poetic phrases, concepts, characters, and names, and when different, they do not contradict each other (Clunies Ross 1994: 153–154).

However, *Völuspá* presents an approach that is clearly different and perhaps more abstract and allegorical, accentuating the cultivated earth (*biðð*), and lacking hints of a cut-up *jötunn*-body. Instead, a speech act seems implied, which is in line with the creation method of the gods indicated through the rest of the poem. As I have suggested earlier, the verb *ypðo* (st. 4) can here be read in the sense of 'revealed'. Accordingly, the gods may have been thought to create the world by revealing it through articulation and discourse. While keeping the structural order of bodily elements and their qualities, they put the world into words by renaming the body parts of Ymir (Kure 2003 [2014: 10–12], 2010: 131–148).

In an Old Norse mythopoetic context, it is tempting to compare this act with the workings of a poetic kenning:

*jötunn*-body ~ base-word  
 gods ~ determinant  
 human world ~ referent

The original meanings of the words of a kenning are not suspended by their poetic and creative use. By analogy, Ymir may simultaneously be the world and the *jötunn*-body. This demonstrates how Ymir bears a tension between what he has become, and what he is – between becoming and being – the dynamics of life and death. At a philosophical level this may best be understood in terms of dialectic processes that of course would be articulated in heathen times through mythical and poetic allegories. The nature of creation may thus have been perceived as dynamic and basically unstable: the creation of the world is still going on, moving toward its consummation.

This, I think, constitutes the premise presented by the *Völuspá* story, something implied by the structure of the *ragnarök*-refrain, and informed by the general mythical opposition between *jötnar* and gods. Both groups are mutually interdependent and represent basic abstract concepts behind the cosmic forces.

The *jötnar* represent the 'base materials', characterized by the designation *jötunn*, a cognate of *etinn*, 'eating' – i.e., consumption and amassment in an endless cycle of destroying in order to grow. Thus, everything made from *jötnar* is both growing and

perishable – 'eating' itself, as it were. The *jötnar* are not described as hostile or evil in a Christian sense; rather, they are much too powerful (*miðk ámatkar*, st. 8, cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 31: *allt til atalt*). This I take to mean much too powerful for the human world to bear. Such potency is exemplified by the similar cosmic power of the sun when it unintentionally gets out of hand: the sun instigates earthly growth (st. 4), its right hand (a symbol of power) reaching the horizon. And yet, the sun does not seem to know where to go, implying that it is staying in the noon position – the potential scorching consequences of which are acknowledged in *Grimnismál* 38. This crisis prompts the gods to commence their first round of causative troubleshooting in the *røkstólar* and fix the various positions of the sun by naming/creating the periods of the day (as I read sts 5–6).

The gods thus represent the determinant processes that transform and cultivate the *jötunn*-forces – the gods cut them down to humanly digestible size, so to speak. In this, the gods play by ideal spiritual values represented by gaming rules and by gold (st. 8). In Old Norse myths (as well as in most other mythologies around the world), gold – due to its natural properties – seems to symbolize an eternal essence resistant to decay and destruction.

### ***Völuspá Act 2 – The Problem***

In the story structure of the poem, the basic problem to be dealt with is introduced by the business with the sun (sts 5–6), and is irreversibly integrated by means of the creation of humankind. In a 'poetry first' reading, this myth can be shown to encompass the joint acts of dwarfs, gods, and *jötnar* in a five-step process (Holtsmark 1950, Steinsland 1983, Mundal 2001, Kure 2010), to which I now add a new initial step:

1. Three *þursa meyjar* (*jötunn*-maids) pay a visit to the gods, who were busy with their gaming-pieces of gold (st. 8, echoed in st. 61). Their encounter is resumed later (in st. 17, if the feminine *þriar* is read as recorded in both manuscript versions), where the gods (in the masculine) are described as 'potent and loving' (*öflgir ok ástgir*), indicating a non-hostile relation. The

god guys simply seem happy to see the three (*briár*) maids again.

2. Between these two encounters, the dwarfs create hosts of human bodies (*manlíkon*) out of earth; i.e., out of the corporal material (*blóði, leggior*) of the *jötunn*-body (sts 9–16). The cyclical micro/macro relation of the *jötunn*-body becoming the world, and the world then becoming the human body, implies that humankind is inseparable from the world. Tacitly, that includes the inherent basic nature of the world: the tension of becoming between life and death (Formerly, the sequence has often been read out of context as an ‘interpolated’ myth about gods creating dwarfs – an interpretation not even found in Snorri's *Edda* and first introduced in *Völuspá*, published by Resen in 1665).
3. In connection with the return of the *jötunn*-maids, the human bodies – complementarily gendered, but devoid of life and meaning – come into the world. They are found on the ground by the gods (st. 17). Based on the skaldic kenning *emblo askr* (‘the sheath's stick’ = ‘sword’) I take *askr* and *embla* as collective *heiti* designating the polarities of the human gender spectrum, rather than being names of a single Adam & Eve-type primordial couple that otherwise leaves no trace in the Old Norse mythical corpus, in contrast with, e.g., Ymir, Dvalinn, and Buri/Burr (see further Kure 2002, 2010: 289–293).
4. The gods – among whom, notably, Óðinn is now mentioned by name – make the human bodies come alive by investing them with the gods’ own spirit and consciousness (st. 18).
5. Through the metaphor of the tree of life standing over the fount of death as a joint axis of fate, the creation of humankind is contextualized as a lasting, dynamic connection between ‘the above’ and ‘the below’ (st. 19).
6. Consequently, the *jötunn*-maids – headed by Urðr (‘death/fate’) and called norns in other sources – allot fate to human beings by assigning each one the potentials and challenges of a course of life, implicitly including certain death (st. 20).

The entire process shows how the basic problem of the perishable *jötunn* elements inherent in the world is subsequently thought to manifest in human beings as mortality. The origin of human life is also the origin of death.

In the narrative build of *Völuspá*, the story has just passed the ‘point of no return’.

### **Völuspá Act 3 – The Plan**

It is the narration of this middle act that runs along different tracks in the two manuscript versions and contains most of the stanzas exclusive to only one of them. Its sequences fluctuate between summary outlines and further elaborations, composed in both versions with a keen sense of drama and logic using flashbacks and synchronic spatial visions. Thus, within the semantic limits of the ‘story identity’, certain parts of the narrative order can be optional without breaking a shared build and meaning.

This act deals with the consequences of the basic problem that reveals itself immediately after the anthropogony myth: with life, mortality has come to stay, as the *völva* in her framing position testifies when she sees her past self (*hon*) performing skills of foretelling (st. 22). The predictability of dying ever casts her as the messenger of death – the ‘sting’ (*angan*) of ‘the public evil’ (*illrar þjóðar*) or ‘the harmful woman’ (*illrar brúðar* = Urðr?).

The gods disagree among themselves about the impure fusion of the divine and chthonic spheres – the mixing of the lofty (*lopt* ‘air’) with the lethal (*læ* ‘damage’) that apparently results in mortality – and they consider who should bear the blame and burden of it (sts 23 and 25). However, Óðinn (whom I see here, in echoing continuation of st. 18, as the personification of *óðr*, the spiritual impulse and inspiration given to humans) seems to have someone in mind for dealing with these cares:

Fleygði óðinn ok í fólk um skaut  
þat var enn fólkvíg fyrst í heimi  
brotinn var borðveggr borgar ása  
knátto vanir vigspá vollo sporna. (st. 24)

Óðinn flung and shot into the folk – that, then, was the primary folk-fight in the world. The bulwark of the *æsir*'s stronghold was broken – *vanir* could enter the fight-predicted fields.

Translators often add a spear to the text (in full accordance with the preserved lore; cf. Frog 2022: 583–585). However, the absence of an object to be flung also emphasizes that it is (part of) himself that Óðinn shoots into the ‘folk’ of humanity (still cf. st. 18). Whether an allegorical spear is involved or not, the shot represents what he is: a divine impulse. In this case, it is the impulse to fight the world’s

‘primary folk-fight’ (*fyrst fólkvíg*; more on this below). With Óðinn’s act, the divine isolation or transcendency fortified in st. 7 is broken, enabling gods (*vanir*) to enter (*sporna*, also ‘get harnessed to’) the now ‘fight-predicted’ (*vigspár*) world. (On *vanir* as one of many collective terms for gods, and the non-existence of a ‘Vanir–Æsir war’ in *Völuspá*, see Simek 2005; Frog & Roper 2011.) Óðinn’s acts may thus facilitate and possibly warrant divine immanence in the world (where the chthonic *jotnar* by nature are already immanent). Thus, humans are not left to fight the fight entirely on their own.

The world’s ‘primary folk-fight’ is already introduced more specifically by the *völva*’s recollection of her knowledge of the past in the opening stanza of this sequence:

Þat man hon fólkvíg fyrst í heimi  
er gullveig geirom studdo  
ok í holl hárs hána brendo  
þrysva brendo þrysva borna  
opt ósialdan þó hon enn lifir. (st. 21)

This she recalls: the primary folk-fight in the world, when [folk] supported Gullveig with spears, and [the gods] in Hár’s hall burnt her – thrice burnt, thrice born – over again, yet she still lives.

The verb *studdo* means ‘they supported’. Rather than interpreting this verb in terms of an attack by the gods, as nearly all former readings have done, I shall attempt to follow the lead of reading *studdo* according to its common meaning, and also of allowing the ‘and’ (*ok*) here to connect two related events, rather than merging the elliptic subjects of the verbs *studdo* and *brendo*. The stanza may then identify the primary collective human struggle or ‘folk-fight’ as the ‘war’ in which humans (the ‘folk’ in the folk-fight) took up arms/spears in support of Gullveig (‘gold-drink’), presumably an otherwise unknown goddess. Her name associates with the golden mead, *óðrerir* (cf. *Hávamál* 105, 107, 140), a symbol of numinous wisdom and poetic inspiration, as well as with gold. In line with st. 8, gold may also here stand for the essence of the ideal values of the gods – values that are supported and defended by their human worshipers. Remembering this piece of lore then brings a closely related event to the

*völva*’s mind, namely the burning of Gullveig by the gods in the hall of Óðinn (*í hárs holl*). Rather than an act of divine aggression, the reiterative cycle of burning and rebirth can be seen as a symbolic/ritual demonstration of the indestructability and enduring vitality of the gold/values/ideals of the gods (clearly echoed in st. 61) in order to inspire the ‘folk-fight’.

Gullveig may then be seen to represent imperishability and immortality, and the fight in support of her would be the fight for life and meaning. In this way she is both goddess and ‘gold-drink’, the ‘maid of poetry’ (*óðs mæð*, st. 25) as well as the ‘mead of poetry’ (*óðrerir*) – two parallel mythical allegories of the inspiration for poetry composed in praise of heroic fighters. These skaldic praise-poems actually do ensure a kind of immortality for warriors and warlords.

Humans are allotted their fates by the *jotunn*-maids, but by instigating the ‘folk-fight’, Óðinn offers a means for humans to partake in the creation of human existence and take control of their own fate by transforming it into undying fame – the ‘reality’ of the afterlife. Actions such as heroic deeds – and notably their iterations at ritual celebrations – may have been thought to be the divine/odinic idea or ‘plan’ in order to uphold the creative process of becoming beyond the immediate dead end of individual death. The development of life may thus go on – not in body, but in spirit – the fact of death transformed into a source of meaning.

In *Völuspá*, this scheme is exemplified and explained in the *Konungsbók* version by references to the myth of Baldr’s death, how it is avenged, and the funeral rite that establishes his story of fame in the collective memory (sts 31–33 and 53, stanzas clearly linked to the mythical poem *Baldrs draumar* – for a full discussion of this complex of ideas, see Kure 2019).

To gain fame, humans must become ideal warriors – if not literally, then figuratively or spiritually (*Völuspá* seems to operate equally and simultaneously on all of these levels). In order to achieve this ideal, the warriors (real as well as symbolic) are initiated into the mysteries of Óðinn (referred to as *fimbultýs rúnar*, st. 60), making them his ‘chosen ones’ (*valr*). When later falling in battle (*á sǫxom ok*

*sverðom* ‘current of weapons’, st. 36) they shall be selected by his women, the valkyries (st. 30), who will bring them to lasting celebration in various otherworldly halls of fame associated with gold and drinking (sts 33 and 37). Rather than a personal reward, I see this celebration as a mnemonic maintenance of the good reputation in itself as an exemplary role model – the fame that negates fate (this of course lends an enormous importance to the central role of cultural memory in the Old Norse worldview; cf. Hermann 2020: 48–49).

The *Hauksbók* version merely summarizes the key point of this entire sequence, seen from the point of view of the divine power:

Þá kná vála vígbönd snúa  
heldr vóro harðgögr höpt ór þörmom (st. 34)

Then he can tie the fighting-bonds of Váli;  
they were rather hard-tightened ties of  
intestines.

In the reading order of *Hauksbók*, this stanza immediately succeeds Óðinn's instigating impulse to fight (st. 24). From then on, he (Óðinn) can ‘tie the fighting-bonds of Váli’, who as the avenging brother of Baldr is the one obliged to keep fighting, and thus can be seen as a representative of the warrior class. The ‘fighting-bonds’ (*vígbönd*) are tight ‘ties of intestines’ – an allegory of the ‘inner bonds’ of the warriors; i.e., their sworn loyalty to Óðinn and their obligation to fighting and fame. (The mention of Váli in this stanza, exclusive to *Hauksbók*, along with the shared references to the Baldr myth in sts 53 and 62–63, testify to the close association between *Baldrs draumar* and *Völuspá* in both manuscript versions, and makes Váli a marker of a larger myth known to the audience, in the same way as the mention of Ymir functions in st. 3.)

It is noted at this point in both versions that women (mothers and lovers represented by Sigyn, sts 34 and 35, and Frigg, st. 33 and later in st. 53) are not too happy about an obligation that likely may supersede family ties. However, another vision (sts 38–39) reveals an unattractive alternative: infamous conduct leads to a definitive posthumous annihilation executed by the dragon Níðhoggr (‘scorn-striker’; Kure 2013: 88–89).

The fight for fame is directed against manifestations of the destructive side of the

‘much too powerful’ forces represented by the *jötunar*. In *Völuspá* they are called Fenrir's kind (sts 40–41), born/fed by battle (*iárnviðr* ‘weapon-forest’), destined for war, and represent killing, aggression, bestiality, rape, and other benighted aspects of human conduct that may manifest even among brothers (st. 45).

The *jötunn* nature implies that needing and challenging these forces in order to fight them is a double-edged sword. In itself, fighting is also destructive. To gain fame, destruction is fought by destruction, a ‘self-eating’ process that the *völva* envisions as an accretion of ravages and killings that eventually darkens the sun and bloodies the heaven (sts 41 and 57) – and ultimately, as a self-destructive necessity, even bloodies its instigator, Óðinn himself (st. 53).

The cosmic stakes are high – the fighting is vital – and the ideals, morale, and loyalty of the warrior class are crucial for the intended ‘effects of the gods’. It seems to be this particular context of historical and societal relevance that frames the poem's broad themes of creative destruction and the human potential for transformation.

### *Völuspá's Frame – The Context*

The poem opens by the *völva* asking for the attention (*hlióðs*) of the ‘lads/sons/apprentices of Heimdallr’ (*megir heimdallar*, st. 1). She is required to tell them about the past of humanity, and also that of Váföðr (‘sire of woe’, in *Hauksbók*), or alternatively at the will of Valföðr (‘sire of the chosen’, in *Konungsbók*), the name in both readings referring to Óðinn. The *völva* may be a collaborative, living human being, or alternatively a reluctant, dead *jötunn*, like in *Baldrs draumar*. For the present reading I have chosen the former option, but both possibilities would work for the semantics of the poem as a whole. Before proceeding with her account, she validates her authority as the voice of the poem:

Ek man iotna ár um borna  
þá er forðom mik fædda höfðo  
nío man ek heima nío í viðior  
miotvið mæran fyr mold neðan. (st. 2)

I recall *jötunar*, born early on, those who in the past had fed me; nine worlds I recall – nine in

branches, the renowned measure-tree – beneath the earth.

The *vǫlva* here mentions what I read as several markers of a specific ritual acquisition of mythical or numinous knowledge:

- The ‘measure-tree’/axis of fate (*miǫtviðr*), and nine ‘in branches/withies’ (*i viðior*; cf. Frog 2010: 289–290) – perhaps equivalent to Óðinn's self-initiation, when he was attached to the windy part (the branches) of a tree with roots unknown for nine nights, on his quest for secret knowledge from below (*Hávamál* 138–139)?
- The nine worlds (*níu heimar*) below the substance of earth (*fyr mold neðan*) – perhaps where the *vǫlva* journeyed for knowledge (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 43)?
- The ancient *jǫtnar* as her past providers of nourishment (*fædda*) – perhaps the ‘feed’ of mythical knowledge required to become a *vǫlva* (cf. *Hávamál* 105–107 and 140)?

To me, all of these references sum up as being the *vǫlva*'s memories of her acquisition of numinous knowledge in the underworld. In myths, such an acquisition often constitutes the liminal phase of a rite of passage or initiation (Schjødtt 2008: 78–82), and the dramatic setup framing the poem could actually be such an imagined ritual. Combined with the theme of fighting, which is prominent throughout the poem, my guess is that ‘Heimdallr's apprentices’ (as I read *megir* here) on a narrative level are young people in the process of being initiated into the mysteries of Óðinn by the *vǫlva* in order to become fully ‘educated’ ideal warriors, as noted above. On a literary/poetic level, they may simultaneously serve as representatives of us, the broader audience of the poem, in the sense that all human beings of all times can be thought of as ‘warriors’ in the fight for ideals, life, and meaning in the world.

The framing theme recurs in st. 27, marked by the ‘attention of Heimdallr’ (*heimdallar hlióð*), both words echoing st. 1. According to *Heimdallargaldr*, and possibly *Hyndlolióð* 35, the god Heimdallr (‘world illumination’) had been born of nine mothers; i.e., he had passed through nine ‘rebirths’, which may be yet another ‘nine-step’ reference to the initiation complex (cf. Steinsland 2002: 97–98). His attention directs the *vǫlva* to see the ‘upload’

of underworld power (*ausaz aurgom forsi*, echoing st. 19: *ausinn hvíta auri*) that results from Óðinn's ‘stake’ (as I now translate *veð* ‘pledge, bet’). This is further explained (in st. 28, exclusive to *Konungsbók*) as Óðinn's eye, which he has put at stake in the fount of Mímir, thereby potentiating the fount's content. I see Mímir/Mímr (‘memory, lore’) as a representation of a ‘world-mind’ or container of all past, collective knowledge, and Óðinn's eye as a symbol of his invested insight that elevates this knowledge to a numinous state of wisdom (Kure 2006 [2014: 4–5]; KLE 2019: 251).

The framing themes culminate in st. 46 with yet a combination of Heimdallr, Mímr, Óðinn – and fate:

Leika mims sýnir en miǫtuðr kyndiz  
at íno galla giallarhorni  
hátt blæss heimdallr horn er á lopti  
mælir óðinn við mims hǫfuð. (st. 46)

Mímr's visions flicker, and the measuring is ignited by the resonance of the Gjallarhorn; Heimdall blows loudly, the horn is aloft; Óðinn talks to the Mímr's head.

Mímr's visions may dance or flicker (*leika mims sýnir* – not *synir* ‘sons’; see Fleck 1971: 397–398; Lassen 2003: 101; Schjødtt 2008: 115–116) because Óðinn talks to ‘Mímr's head’ (*mims hǫfuð*), which can be understood as the individual mind as the seat of a collective ‘world-mind’, an allegory closely corresponding with the fount of Mímir. *Mims sýnir* may thus be a term for the visions of the *vǫlva*, which she (with specific reference to the Mímir myth) requested and got from Óðinn (sts 28–29; see Kure 2006 [2014: 7–8]), and which she presumably is now about to pass on to the ‘apprentices of Heimdallr’ (including us, the audience).

The effect thought to be achieved by transmitting such numinous visions in an initiatory context may be suggested by the mythical poems *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál* (Nygaard 2019: 67–69; Kure 2022: 41–42). As odinic initiates, the warriors of *Vǫluspá* seem to be prepared for and obliged to go by a code of honor and socially acceptable conduct. The force of destruction they wield must be transformed into the force of cultivation, the creation of culture. This requires the elevation

of a pro-social consciousness or enlightenment within the warriors, described in *Grimnismál* 45 as an 'awakening' of 'desirable help/conduct' (*vaka vilbiörg*), notably brought about by mythical 'vision-flickers' (*svipir*) from Óðinn – matching the flickering visions in *Völuspá* 46. To this effect it makes sense that the visions transmit insights that likely would have been thought essential to rulers recruited from the dominant class of warriors. That is insights into the imagined setup and workings of the universe, and the grand scheme of the transformative processes of the world as it goes through the crises caused by *ragnarök*, 'the effects of the gods', all of which inform life on Earth. The trumpeting of Heimdallr, by which the negation of the ever-grinding cycles of fate ('the measuring', *miqtuðr*, echoing *miqtviðr* in st. 2) eventually will ignite, may then (I speculate) herald the accretion and breakthrough of a collective raise of consciousness through the 'world-mind' – the awakening brought about by *míms sýnir*.

If we accept the idea of Óðinn's 'plan' of transforming fate, as suggested above, sts 27(–29) and 46 constitute two decisive turning points of the *Völuspá* story.

#### ***Völuspá Act 4 – The Breakthrough***

Going through a symbolic death and rebirth – a transcendence required in order to transform and become symbolically reborn into an irreversibly 'higher'/improved status – is thought to be an integral phase of the initiation ritual (Schjødt 2008: 76–78). At a microcosmic human level, this ritual thus would mirror the macrocosmic transformative processes that may have been thought to be divinely intended for the world at large.

In *Grimnismál* and *Sigrdrífomál*, the ritual death is marked by transcending the fires of a funeral pyre (Kure 2022: 29–30). In *Völuspá* such a transcendence may be suggested by the myth of Gullveig's burning in st. 21 and seems to be applied to warrior initiation in st. 35 (exclusive to *Konungsbók*), where a similar ritual may be marked by the vision of a bound 'damage-eager figure' (*læ-giarn liki*, i.e., a warrior) in the firewood (*und hvera lundr*, 'the grove beneath kettles'), which I think refers to a pyre. The ritual makes the initand reminiscent (*áþekkr*) of Loki when bound

(contrary to the meaning of *áþekkr*, 'similar to, reminiscent of', the bound one of this stanza is often taken to be Loki himself, in line with an editorial prose text about a punishment of Loki at the end of *Lokasenna*).

The likeness between Loki and the 'damage-eager figure' of an aspiring warrior echoes the binding of the lofty to the lethal (*lopt* and *læ*, st. 25; cf. *Loptr* as a name for Loki) – a bond between the underworld and the upper world foreseen to be negated by the 'effects of the gods' when Loki comes loose from his restraints. The context of an initiation rite in *Völuspá* may thus be seen to inform both the semantics as well as the fiery imagery of *ragnarök*.

The transformative property of fire is a decisive agent in the breakthrough of *ragnarök*. Eventually, the amassing *jötunn*-forces (*lýðir*) 'of earth-destruction' (*muspellz*; cf. Kure 2010: 50–54) will come loose and be led (or tricked? It is after all Loki who steers the *jötunnar* here) into the open; i.e., into an open confrontation with the gods (sts 47 and 50–51). The fact that the gods are gathered at their divine moot – their ruling-place – seems to indicate that they are in control in the midst of the *jötunn*-turmoil (st. 48). As the *jötunnar* (the 'fool-lads', *fiðls megir*, st. 51) advances, fronted by Hrymr ('decay', st. 50), they will be met by Surtr ('the blackening one', the scorcher of earth) and suffer defeat:

Surtr ferr sunnan með sviga lævi  
skínn af sverði sól valtíva  
griótbiörg gnata enn gífr rata [...] (st. 52)

Surtr advances from the south with the branch-slayer (fire); it shines from the sword, the sun of the *val*-deities. The bedrock crashes, and the *jötunn*-folks fall [...]

Surtr comes from the south (*sunnan* – the top of the Old Norse cosmic map), from the fittingly 'high noon' position of the sun. He may even personify the cosmic force of the sun (which the gods got under control in sts 5–6) and figuratively be the brightly burning sword of the gods (st. 53). Surtr is mentioned in *Fáfnismál* 14 (*blanda hiörlegi surtr ok æsir saman*, 'together, Surtr and æsir will mix blood') and *Vafþrúðnismál* 17 (*finnaz vígi at Surtr ok in sváso goð*, 'Surtr and the friendly gods will find each other in battle'). There is



no unambiguous reading of these lines, but in the poetic sources, Surtr may actually be perceived as an ally, a blood brother of the ‘friendly’ gods, in their ultimate confrontation with the *jötnar*. In *Völuspá* 47 and 52, at least, the flames of Surtr cause the collective *jötunn*-forces to fall (*gífr rata*, echoing the earlier event of their rise, *gífr fliúgandi*, st. 45, the latter line exclusive to *Hauksbók*). And with the *jötnar*, the *jötunn*-body-world of humankind will burn to the bedrock (*gríótbljörg*), and sink into the sea (st. 57).

The vision of the world in flames sinking into the sea is remarkably reminiscent of the imagined sight of a burning ship during the sea cremation of a Viking king. This in turn associates the vision with a ritual death marked by the symbolic fires of a funeral pyre. And like in a rite of passage – echoed a final time by the nine steps (*fet nio*) of ‘the son of Earth’ (*fiörgyniar burr*, Thor) in st. 56 – the world is also envisioned as transcending the fiery destruction and being reborn (st. 59), returning from the journey below, irreversibly transformed to the status of an ideal, consummated world.

The negation of the *jötunn*-body-world does thus not mean the dead end of the world. The *ragnarøk* of mythical poetry is not *ragnarökkr*, not a *Götterdämmerung*. In *Baldrs draumar* 14, the release of *ragnarøk* is referred to as ‘the breakthrough’ (*riúfendr*), which may be read as a term for the transcendence of a transformational process.

### **Völuspá Act 5 – The Outcome**

The reborn world is not a new world, but rather an improved, ideal version modeled on the world we know – the ‘next level’, as it were. The *völva* describes the reborn world by visions that echo its former status, which accentuates the aspects of consummation.

At the cosmic, mythical level, the defeated *jötnar* are notably not mentioned: their tension may then have been released, and their process of becoming the world (mentioned above as part of the poem’s premise) would finally have reached the fulfillment of its potential.

The victorious gods shall then reunite (st. 60, echoing st. 7) in order to evaluate the fate of the human world (*mold-pinurr*, ‘earth-tree’, the axis of fate echoing *miqtviðr fyr mold*

*neðan*, st. 2) and recall the memories of mighty fame (*minnaz á megin dómar*, a line exclusive to *Hauksbók*). They shall own and inhabit the fields of victory (*sigtóptir*), peace and prosperity shall reign, and the Baldr myth reaches closure in the reconciliation of the brothers (sts 62–63, echoing sts 31–33 in *Konungsbók* and feeling like a ‘phantom pain’ in *Hauksbók*). Allotting fate shall be the business of the gods (*hlautvið kíosa*, st. 63) – possibly because the roles of the *jötunn*-born maids have now transformed into that of helpful guardian spirits (*hamingior*), as may be indicated in *Vafprúðnismál* 48–49.

The only things that remain unaffected by the transforming fires of Surtr are the wondrous gaming pieces made from the gold of the gods (*undrsamligar gullnar tǫflor*, st. 61, echoing st. 8 and the burning of Gullveig in st. 21) – a symbol of the gods’ everlasting values and ideals. This gold is also envisioned as the future ‘roof’ of the human world, outshining even the sun (*sólo fegra*, st. 64) – perhaps figuratively signifying a state of enlightenment, and compositionally situated in direct echoing contrast (*sólo fiarri*, st. 38) to the lot of the benighted infamous, the remains of whom will be swept away by the dragon Níðhöggr (st. 66, finishing its business begun in st. 39). Their stories are destined for oblivion and will not be part of the improved post-*ragnarøk* world, which is clearly associated with the gods and the hosts of people loyal to their cause (*dyggvar dróttir*, st. 64).

The cosmic visions mark the potential outcome of the transformational processes guided by the ideals and impulses of the determinant gods. And at the more immediate, microcosmic level of human affairs, the approach to this outcome may be the advent of ‘The Power’ (*inn ríki*, st. 65, exclusive to *Hauksbók*) in a movement from the gold-roofing above (*ofan*) that mirrors the dragon’s flight from below (*neðan*, st. 66) and echoes the axis of fate in st. 19 (all of which may suggest the absence of st. 65 in *Konungsbók* to be yet another ‘phantom pain’). A Christian reader may imagine a reference to Christ in this stanza, but in the context of odinic wisdom, odinic warrior initiation, and general notions in Old Norse poetry of the ideal king as the

highest degree of being human, I suggest that *inn ríki* here refers to royal power in both an institutional and a spiritual sense.

### *A New Beginning*

Eventually, the *vǫlva* will lower herself (as said in the closing half-line), presumably from her elevated state of visionary seeing granted by Óðinn. Perhaps we may imagine her to arrive at the beginning of the poem, ready now to call for attention and speak to the warriors-to-be. *Vǫluspá* in turn speaks to all of us – perhaps also in ways we are yet to discover.

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### *Notes*

1. A little less than half the stanzas of *Vǫluspá* are cited as source texts in *Gylfaginning*, the first part of Snorri's *Edda*, preserved in four independent manuscripts. Paraphrasing yet more stanzas, *Gylfaginning* is clearly built on a holistic reading of *Vǫluspá*; here, however, the poem is fragmented, re-ordered, slightly adapted and contextualized by interpretational expositions in prose, all clearly in order to suit a learned Christian understanding of heathendom. Many of the parts appear 'genuine', but the semantic content of *Gylfaginning's* prosimetric version as a whole is vastly different from that of the two poetic versions, and is therefore not taken into consideration in the present reading.
2. The two versions of *Vǫluspá* as a complete poem are found in the Arnarnagnæan Manuscript Collection, respectively in Gks 2365 4to (Codex Regius/Konungsbók) and AM 544 4to (Hauksbók). Separate critical editions can be found in Bugge (1867), Gísli Sigurðsson (1998), Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (2014), Pettit (2023), and in KLE (2019), the latter also cataloguing most of the speculations on the two versions suggested over the past centuries. Citations of source texts in the present article are based on Neckel (1927), with minor editorial choices adjusted into line with the manuscripts. All translations are mine.
3. The spelling *røk* for the simplex *rokk* initially found in late 12th-century manuscripts of the Norwegian and Icelandic Homily Books may indicate the existence of a broader learned Christian discourse at the time caused by the use of this word in the

compound *ragnarøk*, which eventually led to Snorri's *ragnarøkkr* (cf. Haraldur Bernharðsson 2007: 27–28).

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Communications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

### Newsletter

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### From Proto-Germanic *\*þur(i)saʒ* to Karelian Iku Turso: A Case of Mythology, Language and the Lived Environment I: Proto-Germanic *\*þur(i)saʒ* as Noun and Theonym

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*Abstract: This article is the first in a three-part series that explores the borrowing of Proto-Germanic *\*þur(i)saʒ* into Middle Proto-Finnic as *\*tur(i)saʒ*, which designated a water monster and in Karelian epic parallels Þórr's fishing for the World Serpent. The article series argues that framing *\*þur(i)saʒ* in terms of 'mythology' is anachronistic and obfuscates the word's background. This instalment provides foundations for comparison with a study of Proto-Germanic *\*þur(i)saʒ*.*

In research, 'mythology' becomes a category in which a vocabulary of common nouns, names, and sometimes other types of words become grouped for etymological analysis. The grouping is an organic outcome of mythology as a research category, yet it tends to be forgotten that this category is a product of modernity: the category 'mythology' does not necessarily correspond to anything in the historical world of language users where such loans occurred. Exploring etymology within the frame of 'mythology' may offer valuable insights, for instance by revealing stratified religious change or alignments and contrasts with the people of other societies. In other cases, however, it may obscure more than it reveals.

The present three-part study examines a very early loan from Germanic into Finnic of a word identified with 'mythology' in both traditions. Finnic mythology, and especially its vocabulary, has received relatively little attention in discussions of the history of Germanic religions, where it tends only to be noted in passing, if at all (e.g., de Vries 1956–1957; Simek 1993; Lindow 2001). Germanic etymologies have been a topic of interest both in Finnic linguistics and in studies of Finnic mythologies and religion. However, the turn of folklore research to synchronic traditions and

variation had a consequence that engagements with etymological discussions largely ceased. Today, the perspectives available are often quite dated. The last Finnish folklorist to systematically consider, critically evaluate, and propose etymologies was Martti Haavio (e.g., 1967), who was, however, sometimes more creative than critical. Engagements with etymology from the perspective of religious studies have had more presence through the work of Veikko Anttonen (e.g., 1996), but these have tended to focus on a narrow range of concepts, such as words related to sacrality and divinity. More recent linguistic analyses have had a good grounding in historical phonology, keeping pace with the rapid developments in the field, but can be disconnected from the vernacular categories and folklore corpora. For example, Mikko Heikkilä has proposed etymologies for names of Finnic mythic agents from Germanic, identifying both with the modern category 'giant' and treating their names as transferable like human personal names rather than as proper nouns for specific, complex images. The name of a personification of the sea is thus proposed as borrowed for the name of a Finnic 'giant' that has no particular association with water (2012: 103–109), and, not having looked at the corpus, three names are analyzed as a

group, although only two ever appear together in the primary sources, while the third is only a variation (2012: 109–111). The present study is not methodologically oriented *per se*, but it engages with a number of methodological issues, including the common problem of critically considering evidence from only one language, while evidence from the other is lifted from a dictionary or other research.

This article series takes up the case of Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz*, of which Proto-Finnic *\*tur(i)sas* is generally accepted as a loan. Phonologically, the word would have been borrowed before the final *-z* became *-R* as Proto-Germanic diversified, situating the loan at an early stage in Finnic–Germanic contacts. The etymology is generally accepted, although each instalment of this series raises critical issues in its evaluation, beginning with a study of the Germanic word, followed by a study of the Finnic word, and building up to a comparison that contextualizes the potential loan among other loanword vocabulary.

Semantically, Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz* tends to remain largely undifferentiated from other Germanic words for ‘giant’, or to be viewed through the Old Norse term. The present instalment of this series critically evaluates what can be said about the term, its history, and the background of its semantics. This study builds on my own and others’ work on the Old Norse term (Schulz 2004; Hall 2009; Frog 2013; 2014) and work on Old English *þyrs* relative to other ‘giant’ terms (Bishop 2006; Mees 2015). The survey brings to light use of the word as a theonym in both Old English and Old High German glosses that have generally remained invisible. The uses of the word for different types of agent are considered in relation to use of the word as the name of the runic letter **þ**.

The second instalment on the Finnic word engages with a variety of tangled issues. These include a recently proposed alternative etymology, the early Finnish *hapax legomenon* theonym *Turisas*, which has been a nexus of etymological speculation, and an Estonian word that is regularly included in discussions but may be a modern creation. In one Karelian epic, an alternate form *turso* appears as the personal name *iki/iku Turso* [‘ancient Turso’] in a role potentially parallel to the World

Serpent when fished from the sea by Þórr in Scandinavian mythology. A key difference between Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz* and Proto-Finnic *\*tur(i)sas* comes into focus as the latter’s characterization as an inhabitant or ruler of the sea or water, which is considered an issue that will need to be accounted for in the word’s etymology.

The third and final instalment turns to comparison. Consideration of an early Germanic loan is contextualized within a dataset of the Old Germanic loans accepted in the *Lexikon der älteren germanischen Lehnwörter in den ostseefinnischen Sprachen* (1991–2012; *LägLoS* hereafter) [‘Lexicon of older Germanic loanwords in Finnic languages’]. Of the more than 1,400 entries in that work, 517 items are considered with confidence as ‘Old Germanic’ and 6 as ‘Old Germanic or older’. This forms a dataset of 523 loanwords. Another 123 items are considered as ‘Old Germanic or younger’, which is added to give an extended dataset of 646 items. Within that data, the borrowing of Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz* is contextualized among loans connected with ‘mythology’. Reviewing those loans and the potential information they may reveal about impacts on ‘mythology’ shows that loans related to mythology as a modern category exhibit disparate connections to culture rather than cohesion around, for instance, evidence of a change in religion. Once mythology is shown to be problematic for contextualizing the loan, the Finnic word’s connection to the sea is considered as an environment forming a nexus of exchanged vocabulary. This context leads to an argument for the word’s background and distinct semantics as connected to vocabulary of sea life and maritime culture, not borrowed as a word for ‘mythology’, but as a word considered to refer to an inhabitant of the sea that could be encountered in the empirical world.

The present article begins with an introduction to the Germanic word and suggestions for its etymology. Evidence for the word is then reviewed with emphasis on its use in Old Germanic languages. The Old Norse case is introduced first, followed by Old English, Old High German, and Old Saxon. Use of the word for a letter in the runic alphabet is then treated in a devoted section.

Key features of the common noun arising from the evidence are then reviewed. The possibility of a theonym *\*Pur(i)saz* is explored and found probable. Derivatives of *\*pur(i)saz* are then considered in relation to words for other types of mythic agents, bringing forward several points that suggest marked differences between West and North Germanic mythologies. While it might seem intuitive to correlate the differences in the mythologies with the diversification of Proto-Germanic language, an early Finnic loanword opens the possibility that diversification of the mythologies may have begun earlier. The question raised by this loan will be returned to in the third instalment of the series, where it is discussed in the context of a group of early loans linked to death and ritual commemoration of the dead.

### ***The Problem of Proto-Germanic \*pur(i)saz***

Old Norse *purs*, Old English *þyrs*, Old High German *thuris/duris*, and their derivatives, as well as a possible Old Saxon example of *thuris*, are reconstructed to Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz*. This gives a distribution of the word across both North (Old Norse) and West (Old English, Old High German) Germanic. The other major Old Germanic branch, East Germanic, has died out and is centrally known through Gothic. The lack of evidence of *\*pur(i)saz* in Gothic is not inherently surprising, because it is known almost exclusively through a translation of the New Testament and the few words and proper names for non-Christian supernatural agents known from East Germanic generally appear as vernacular terms in Latin works.

*\*Pur(i)saz* and its derivatives are most often treated as “[o]ne of the Proto-Germanic words for ‘giant’” (Kroonan 2013: 552), which tends to be the limit of its semantic reconstruction. Translating different Old Germanic words as ‘giant’ is potentially misleading, or simply misrepresentative. This problem has received attention in Old Norse research, both for interpreting vernacular terms through modern cognates, like rendering Old Norse *álfar* (sg. *álf*) in English as ‘elves’ (Gunnell 2007), and in cases of convention like equating Old Norse *jötunar* (sg. *jötunn*) with ‘giant’. The latter convention stems from modern Scandinavian

derivatives of *jötunn* being used for the equivalents of the giants of legends and fairytales in English (Motz 1986: 186–187). The apparent translatability as ‘giant’ in these contexts led to the convention of using English ‘giant’ to translate *jötunn* in discussions of the cosmological actors of Old Norse mythology (Kuusela 2021).

With regard to the diversity of ‘giant’ terms, Alaric Hall (2009: 199–200) frames the problem as a question of whether *jötunn*, *purs*, and other Old Norse terms referred to mutually exclusive categories like *sheep*, *goat*, and *pig* or had overlapping semantics like *king*, *ruler*, and *monarch*. The question is complicated by words’ potential to vary in use in relation to different types of context, as well as also over time. In Old Germanic alliterative verse, for example, the meter led the semantics of words to flex so that they could be used to ‘say the same thing’ while meeting different patterns of alliteration (see Roper 2012). Thus, the linguistic register of discourse that evolved in the oral poetry could diverge in manifold ways from other forms of speech (e.g., Foley 1996; Frog 2015). For instance, Old Norse *purs* and its poetic compound *hrímþurs* [‘rime-þurs’] are used in eddic narrative poetry to refer to agents that in prose would never be called *pursar* but rather *jötunar* (Frog 2013; 2014). The context of the referent can also affect the meaning: use of *purs* for a human being is interpreted as metaphorical (see also Motz 1986: 188–189), whereas in a healing charm, *purs* seems to be an agent that causes illness (Hall 2009). Similarly, use of Old Norse *jötunn* in mythological narratives identifies cosmological actors with the capacity to compete with the gods: they are characterized by knowledge and wisdom to a degree that established formulaic epithets in the poetry. In human history, *jötunn* is often used for adversaries of human heroes and they blur with the stupid and oversized agents commonly called ‘giants’ in later folklore. Such variations are also relevant for considering diachronic changes in a word’s usage, since a break in one or several registers and contexts of usage could collapse whole dimensions of associations. Basically, if usage of *jötunn* in non-Christian mythology gradually collapsed through the Christianization process, associations of *jötunar*

with knowledge and wisdom could collapse with it, leaving only the adversaries of human heroes. If usage of *þurs* to refer to supernatural agents were to drop out, metaphorical use might be all that remains, but without any longer recognizing that use as metaphorical. Since the categories referred to by these words concern types of mythic agents that exist in social imagination without regular tethering to the empirical world, they are constructed and evolve through discourse, with potential to slide, flex, converge, and transform.

In the case of *\*þur(i)saz*, reconstructing the category and its semantic prosody lacks the benefit of being able to trace attested usage along a thread that connects back to a still-earlier origin. *\*Þur(i)saz* is best considered as without a clear etymology (de Vries 1962: 627; Kroonen 2013: 552; see also Kuusela 2017: 26–27). The word is not found outside of Germanic languages, its counterpart in Finnic languages, and the subsequent borrowing from Finnic into Samic languages. Indo-European etymologies of *\*þur(i)saz* have of course been proposed. The most commonly repeated of these today traces it from the Proto-Indo-European stem *\*tuer-/\*tur-* [‘to twist, turn, whirl’], forming words related to moving quickly (Pokorny 1959: 1100; reproduced in e.g. Orel 2003: 429–430). This etymology connects *\*þur(i)saz* with the verb *\*þurjan-* (> Old Norse *þyrja* [‘to sweep, rush’]), which is formally possible but there seems to be no semantic connection to *þurs* or to the characterization of *þursar* (de Vries 1962: 627; Kroonen 2013: 552). Some uses in Old Norse considered below can be brought into comparison with the semantics of *\*tuer-/\*tur-*, though this may be accidental. Derivation from an *r*-formation from Proto-Indo-European *teu-/tuo-/tu-* would relate *\*þur(i)saz* to Old Irish *túra-* [‘strong, powerful’] and Latin *turgere* [‘swollen’] (Pokorny 1959: 1083; de Vries 1962: 627). This is semantically more appealing but appears to be phonologically irregular. Derivation from the Indo-European stem *\*trh<sub>3</sub>-* [‘wound’] would be consistent with uses of *\*þur(i)saz*-derivatives for agents of malevolence and harm (Mees 2015: 3). Other etymologies, such as connecting the word to the ethnonym for ‘Etruscans’ (Lehmann 1986: 1; cf. de Vries 1962: 627)

have gradually dropped out of discussion. The challenge of proposed etymologies is that the arguments for one over the other tend to be guided by interpretations of *\*þru(i)saz*, spinning a thread that connects it to, for example, an Indo-European word stem.

### Old Norse þurs

The largest body of evidence of *\*þur(i)saz* comes from Old Norse. Nevertheless, in her study on ‘giants’ (2004), Katja Schulz finds that the word *þurs* only seems prominent in eddic poetry, being relatively infrequent in saga prose, with the exception of one saga, where its prominence seems to be owing to an idiosyncrasy of the writer (2004: 39, 51–52). In a survey of uses of *þurs* in poetry, I previously showed that the majority of examples in eddic verse are formulaic. The word is centrally found in contexts of cosmological mythology as an equivalent of *jötunn*, but it is never used this way in prose. The central exceptions in poetry are in charms and curses, where *þurs* is used for an agent of illness or harm. (Frog 2013.) The related term *hrímþurs* is straightforwardly a poetic equivalent for *jötunn* used for alliteration, although Snorri Sturluson handled it as a word for a distinct ethnos in his *ars poetica* called *Edda* (Frog 2014). Generally, the number of appearances of *þurs* and *hrímþurs* in poetry are attributable to the word having developed a functional use for meeting alliteration, and it thereby became embedded in formulaic phrases and alliterative collocations.

Examples of charms and curses are quite limited (Frog 2013: 59–64; additional examples in Macleod & Mees 2006: 122–123), but echoes of them are also found in later traditions. For example, a list of contents of a book of magic found in 1664 reports the eightieth item as: “Vid stuldi, sædr hrýmþurs ok grímþurs ok allra trölla fadir, med 29 stöfum” (Jón Espólin 1829: 127) [‘For a theft, summon a rime-*þurs* and a mask-*þurs* and father of all *tröl*ls, with 29 (runic) marks’]. Lotte Motz finds *tossebid* [‘*þurs*-bite’] as a name for an abscess on a finger (1986: 188), and Terry Gunnell identifies this and its Icelandic counterpart *þursabit* with “pains suggesting the involvement of spirits” (2020: 1575; see also *Gammeldansk Ordbog*, s.v.



‘thurs’), which point to *þurs* as an agent of illness or harm, a characterization that may have once been commonplace in the charm genre. The epithet *þursasprengir* [‘destroyer of *þursar*’], attributed to a man in *Landnámabók* (ch. S225/H191), is formed from *sprengir*, from the verb *springa* [‘to spring, leap; burst, split’], rather than *bani* [‘bane, slayer’], as in the epithet *berserkjabani* [‘bane of *berserkir*’] (Peterson 2015: 131). The epithet opens the question of whether the destruction of *þursar* it refers to differed from slayings in armed conflict and may instead refer to overcoming illness agents.

Reviewing *þurs* among other Old Norse ‘giant’ terms, Tommy Kuusela (2017: 26) considers it to be distinguished by connotative semantics as a negatively evaluated and pejorative term, similar to *troll*. He finds *þurs* associated with causing suffering and to be especially threatening to female sexuality; he considers its metaphorical use describing people as suggesting a dangerous and ugly appearance (2017: 27). The adjective *þursligir* [‘*þurs*-ish’], used in phrases like *mikill vexti, svartr ok þursligir* [‘grew large, black, and *þurs*-ish’] and *þar eru menn sterkir ok þursligir* [‘strong and *þurs*-ish men were there’] (*ONP*, s.v. ‘þursligir’), supports this interpretation of metaphorical uses. Examples of people bearing the epithet *þurs*, such as ‘Þorsteinn *þurs*’ (*ONP*, s.v. ‘þurs’; see Peterson 2015: 245), can be viewed in this light.

There is one use in a saga that suggests a conception of *þursar* as stupid: *vit skulum ginna þá alla sem þursa* (*ONP*, s.v. ‘þurs’; Frog 2013: 56) [‘we shall deceive them all like [they are] *þursar*’]. In modern Scandinavian languages, Motz finds that use of *þurs* for a mythic agent had generally disappeared except in one network of vocabulary in Norwegian dialects, though its metaphorical use survived, but as referring to foolishness or stupidity rather than size, strength, ugliness, or threatening power (1986: 188–189). Although Motz views the earlier evidence through the same lens (1987: 232), this does not hold up well to that evidence when stupidity is not assumed (Schulz 2003: 32). In addition, use of *þurs* as an alliterative term for *jötunn* in mythological poetry may be washed out of distinctive semantics, yet the use itself has

connotations of significance. An oral-poetic register may bend and flex semantics, but equivalence vocabulary does not arise at random. Use as a poetic equivalence term points to a level of categorical identification, and it is noteworthy that neither *troll* nor *risi* were similarly used as poetic equivalents for *jötunn* in mythological contexts. That the term *jötunn* is characterized in these contexts as wise makes it extremely improbable that *þurs* would be used as an equivalent if it connoted the opposite quality of stupidity. At the time when *þurs* and *jötunn* began being used as equivalents in the poetry, *þurs* was presumably not linked to stupidity and was likely appropriate to the cosmological context in a way that *troll* and *risi* were not. *Ginna X sem þurs(a)* [‘deceive X like a *þurs* / *þursar*’] stands out in the earlier material as emphasizing stupidity, yet it aligns with later use and sounds like an idiom. A Google search for the verb with “sem þursa” or “sem þurs” reveals its use in modern Icelandic. The idiom *ginna X sem þurs(a)* does not exhibit alliteration, rhyme, or other phonic patterning that would drive the use of *þurs* over other possible words. The appearance of this idiom in *Njáls saga* may mark a shift in how the word was being used, at a time when it was dropping out of use in other contexts.

Even though the amount of Old Norse evidence is proportionately quite large, its ability to shed light on *þurs* as a category remains rather thin. As a type of agent, the charms, curses, and associated evidence point to *þurs* as belonging to a sphere of interactions with humans and as malignant, harmful, and dangerous. The narrative worlds of the sagas also place *þursar* in the human sphere, although it is much less clear what to make of their characterizations, which also sometimes link the word *þurs* to images and motifs connected to other ‘giant’ words or *þurs* simply seems used as a synonym for ‘anthropomorphic monster’. Use in eddic poetry sheds almost no light through individual examples, but the establishment of *þurs* and its compounded parallel *hrimþurs* suggest that it was not inconsistent with the category of cosmological agents characterized by wisdom. The idiom *ginna X sem þurs(a)* is linked to the word’s semantics in later use, when in almost



all language areas its connections with the supernatural had been forgotten. The use of the word seems already to have been waning in use in the sagas, which makes its prominence as a poetic equivalent in mythological poetry seem to have archaic roots. Vitality of the term and its distinction from other terms appears centrally in runic charms and curses. Maintenance of *þurs* in that context while it waned elsewhere appears directly attributable to *þurs* as a name for the runic sign **þ**, with which the conjuring or other use of *þurs* blurs in magical uses (Macleod & Mees 2006: 122–123). As genres declined or were transformed with the conversion to Christianity and *þurs* dropped out of other use, the semantic connections and connotations of *þurs* were disrupted and few seem to have survived.

### Old English þurs

Old English evidence is much thinner, with three examples in poetry, another two in charters in the place names *þurs pyt*, *þyrspyt* [*þurs*'s pit'], and it is otherwise found only in glosses. Bosworth, Toller, and others define *þurs* as “[a] giant, an enchanter, a demon” (*s.v.* ‘þurs’). Its use for a human performer of magic rests on what seem directly related glosses of Latin *marsus* (*DOEC*, AldV 1, C31.1, 3160 (3166); AldV 10, C31.10, 0183 (183); AldV 13.1, C31.13.1, 3278 (3271)), and the use should be considered metaphorical (McGowan 2009: 488).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to other Old English ‘giant’ terms, *þurs* is not used in connection with characterizations as wise or skilled in craftsmanship (Bishop 2006: 267).

The uses in Old English poetry are difficult to evaluate. In *Beowulf* 426, *þurs* refers to the monster Grendel, although the lexical choice may be driven by alliteration. Use in *Riddle 40* 63 appears in the b-line *ealdum þyrse* [*old þurs*’], characterized by the quantity it can eat. The adjective *ealdum* carries alliteration, and the more common ‘giant’-word *ent*, as well as *eoten* (~ ON *jötnunn*), would produce an additional alliteration in the final lift of the line. *Þurs* may thus be used to avoid alliteration on the b-line’s final strong position, where it would be a violation – i.e., use would be driven by alliteration. These examples could point to *þurs* as having a functional role in Old English poetry comparable to that in Old Norse, yet it

does not alternate with other ‘giant’ terms in formulaic expressions linked to positive qualities such as craftsmanship.

The third poetic usage is in *Maxims II* 42b–43a, which states: *Þurs sceal on fenne gewunian ana innan lande* [*‘A þurs shall live in a fen, alone in the land’*]. Although *þurs* carries alliteration here, it appears selected as a common noun, distinguished from another ‘giant’ term – *ent* – within the poem (Bishop 2006: 267). This usage resonates with reference to Grendel as a *þurs* in *Beowulf*, where it could also have carried an association with a wetland environment (which would not be contradicted by its use for alliteration). A number of later place names are found that include the word, some of which may trace to Old English (Smith 2014). The place name evidence seems to link *þurs* with pits, ravines, marshes, and pools, concentrating in areas of Scandinavian settlement, and they may reflect Old Norse *þurs* or its influence (Smith 2014).

*Þurs* is mostly attested in glosses for monstrous agents of Roman and Greek mythology. The glosses are almost all in the plural. *Þurs* is found for *cyclopes* (*DOEC*, ClG1 1, D8.1, 1445 (1468)), in one case specified as *anige þyrzas* (*DOEC*, ClG1 1, D8.1, 1484 (1507)) [*‘one-eyed þyrzas’*], which may suggest size and perhaps stupidity. Its uses for *colossi* (*DOEC*, AldV 1, C31.1, 1635 (1637); AldV 13.1, C31.13.1, 1640 (1637)) would also suggest size. A single use glossing *Cacus* (*DOEC*, ClG1 1, D8.1, 1365 (1388)) – i.e., the monstrous son of Vulcan slain by Hercules – suggests a terrorizing anthropomorphic monster. The ‘giant’ word *eoten* (~ Old Norse *jötnunn*) seems not to have been used in glosses at all; *gigant* (< Latin *gigas*) is found in three glosses of *cyclopes* (*DOEC*, HIG1, D16.1, 0956 (C1017); CorpG1 2, D4.2, 1613 (3.414); HIG1, D16.1, 1808 (C2255)), and *ent* in one (*DOEC*, AldÆ 1, C33.1, 0016 (16)), while *ent* is also used to translate Latin *gigas* (*DOEC*, ÆG1, B1.9.2, 0250 (302.3); PPs (prose) B8.2.1, 0243 (18.6), and cf. HyG1 3, C18.3, 0182 (39.4)), as well as used for Goliath and so on (Bosworth et al., *s.v.* ‘ent’). A second gloss of *Cacus* is found, but with the name simply given an English inflection: “Caci cacuses” (*DOEC*, ClG1 3, D8.3, 1804 (1804)).

Singular *þyrs* is twice used to gloss Latin *Orcus*. Latin *Orcus* is the name of a god of the underworld associated with punishment or torment, and the realm of death is identified as his house or hall (see also West 2007: 388). In Anglo-Saxon England, *Orcus* was also used to name the abysmal realm of the dead in Latin writing and is twice glossed as ‘death’ (Hofmann 2008: 135–136, 141–142, 268, 272–273, 302, 311 375–376 (Table IX.5)).<sup>2</sup> The word was borrowed into Old English as a noun or name *orc*, which is found in five instances glossing *orcus* (*DOEC*, AntGl 2, D1.2, 0695 (693); CorpGl 2, D4.2, 5610 (13.228); EpGl, D7, 0562 (562); ClGl 1, D8.1, 4481 (4502); ErfGl 1, D36.1, 0673 (698)). Only in one of these instances is *orc* accompanied by an additional translation, which suggests that the Old English word’s meaning was considered accessible, although it is only found in one additional passage (*DOEC*, Ch IWm, B15.1.188, 0003 (4)). In the two glosses of *Orcus* by *þyrs*, both accompany *þyrs* with an additional clarification *heldeofol* [‘*hel*-devil’], in which *hel* refers to the realm of death: “ðyrs, heldiobul” (*DOEC*, CorpGl 2, D4.2, 5613 (13.231)) [‘*þyrs*, *hel*-devil’] and “orc, þyrs oððe heldeofol”<sup>3</sup> (*DOEC*, ClGl 1, D8.1, 4481 (4502)) [‘*orc*, *þyrs*, or *hel*-devil’]. These glosses clearly identify *Orcus* as an agent. Unlike most glosses in lists, accompanying *þyrs* with *heldeofol* suggests that someone thought additional clarification was needed.

The compound *heldeofol* is not found outside of these glosses, and *þyrs* and *heldeofol* paired in the two glosses suggests the glosses are related through manuscript transmission, with *orc* most likely added by a copyist, very possibly from a separate gloss. *Heldeofol* reflects a choice in translation that prefers *deofol* to *god* [‘god’]. *Ditis*,<sup>4</sup> another Latin name for a ruler of the realm of the dead that could blur with *Orcus* in the Middle Ages, is found glossed as *helgod* (*DOEC*, ClGl 1, D8.1, 1850 (1874); ClGl 3, D8.3, 1917 (1917)), and a plural *helle god* [‘gods of *hel*’] is also found (*DOEC*, Bo, B9.3.2, 1302 (35.102.9)). Rather than a gloss in Old English, Pluto’s name is found glossed as *deus inferni* [‘god of the underworld’] (*DOEC*, ClGl 3, D8.3, 1818 (1818)). The glosses of *Orcus* that include *heldeofol* likely reflect an ideology of the

person making the gloss choosing to avoid the use of *god* for a non-Christian cosmological actor. Use first of *þyrs*, which is then clarified with *heldeofol*, seems to be a breakthrough into the vernacular motivated by that ideology.

Latin *Orcus* became used not only for the ruler of the realm of the dead but also for the realm itself, further blurring into the phenomenon ‘death’. This reflects a process I describe as ‘semantic correlation’, whereby an ideology bound up with language leads a theonym introduced into a culture to have its use extended to the phenomenon with which the agent is identified. Thus, in a culture where this principle operates for the sky or weather, the introduction of a new (name of the) sky god leads the theonym to be used as the new common noun for the phenomenon of the sky (Frog 2017; 2021b: 28–30). In this case, the theonym *Orcus* underwent semantic correlation with the realm of death and thereby enabled use of *Orcus* to express ‘death’. If correct, this implies that the name of the vernacular ruler of death was also used as a name of the location. This phenomenon is seen in Scandinavian mythology’s *Hel* as both the name of the realm of death and of the female agent that ruled it. Semantic correlation of *Orcus* with the realm of the dead might be interpreted as implying the reverse for Old English *hel* as having a counterpart ruler *Hel* as in Old Norse mythology, yet *Orcus* does not seem to be glossed as *hel* before the 15<sup>th</sup> century (“Hic orcus, -i, An<sup>ce</sup> helle”: Wright & Wülker 1884: 802, 22). Instead, *Orcus* is glossed *þyrs*, and *þyrs* is clarified as a *deofol* of the realm *hel* – i.e., that *þyrs* in this context differs from those mentioned above and is a cosmological actor located in *hel*. If this use is not dismissed as some sort of a mistake, *Orcus* appears to be glossed as referring to a cosmological actor as in Classical mythology, and, rather than *þyrs* referring to a type of monstrous being in the context of the human world, it seems to be used here in the manner of a proper name, *Þyrs*, which is clarified as possibly a, but probably the, *deofol* of the realm of death.

Use of *Þyrs* as a proper name glossing *Orcus* opens the possibility that the glossing of *Cacus* may also have been by *Þyrs* as a proper name. Use as a proper name does not seem to be matched by other ‘giant’ terms. *Ent* in

particular is used for different agents, including Goliath (*DOEC*, *ÆLS* (Book of Kings), B1.3.19, 0007 (18), 0008 (22) x2, 0009 (25); *ÆLet* 4, B1.8.4.4, 0081 (476)), Nimrod (*DOEC*, *ÆintSig*, B1.6.1, 0192 (57.379); Or 2, B9.2.3, 0083 (4.43.21)) and Hercules (*DOEC*, HomU 34, B3.4.34, 0051 (144); Or 1, B9.2.2, 0313 (10.30.12); Or 3, B9.2.4, 0226 (9.72.5); *ÆLS*, B1.3.33, 0029 (112)), but is not used in the place of their names as a name itself.

Although *þyrs* is treated as a ‘giant’ term, it does not appear in uses where the terms *ent*, *eoten*, and *gigant* alternate (Bishop 2006). Three uses of *þyrs* in poetry and its only occurrences in prose being uses in a place name would seem to suggest that *þyrs* was already an archaism in Old English. The lack of alternation with other ‘giant’ terms might thus be attributed to an accident of the data. However, *þyrs* is also found in ten glosses, some of which are interdependent, yet the number of uses in glosses exceeds that of all of the other ‘giant’ terms combined. On the one hand, the glosses suggest that *þyrs* had more current use than an obscure poetic archaism and an element fossilized in a place name. The glosses point to a recognizability presumably from discourses outside of what was commonly written down. The apparent use of a personal name *Þurs* may seem anomalous, but, even if interpreted as a common noun, it suggests a connection to death and the realm of the dead not exhibited by other ‘giant’ terms.

### Old High German *thuris*

Evidence of Old High German *thuris* is even more limited than that of Old English *þyrs*. The *Althochdeutsche Wörterbuch* [‘Old High German Dictionary’] divides examples into three categories: “Unhold, Riese, Kyklop” [‘monster, giant, cyclops’], “Pluto, der Gott der Unterwelt” [‘Pluto, god of the underworld’] and “böser Geist, Dämon, heidnischer Gott” [‘evil spirit, demon, pagan god’] (s.v. ‘thursis’).

Use of *thuris* as a word for monster corresponds to what is found in Old English, including its use to translate *cyclops*. The ‘giant’-word *riso* is also used to describe the cyclops Polyphemus, albeit in the manner of an epithet (“der riso Poliphemus”) rather than as a gloss or designation. *Riso* is used more generally in other references to giants of Classical

mythology, and also to gloss Latin *gigas* (s.vv. ‘bettiriso’, ‘riso’). The ‘giant’-word *gigant* is not as common, but used to explain *Polyphemus* (“Poliphemus id est gygande”) (s.v. ‘gigant’). Old High German does not exhibit a divide between *thuris* and other ‘giant’ words.

Several uses of *thuris* refer to the god of the underworld, variously called *Ditis* or *Orcus*. The *Althochdeutsche Wörterbuch* allows a reverse search of entries, but is not yet complete at the time of writing this article. With that caveat in mind, *Ditis* seems not to appear in any other available entry. *Orcus* and Pluto are otherwise also found in one example replaced together in the translation as *hellijovis* [‘helli-Jove (i.e., god)’]. Pluto is further identified as *fiurgot* [‘fire-god’], *helligot* [‘helli-god’], and *pehgot* [‘pitch-god’] (as an epithet: “behgote Plutoni”), linked to the idea of Hell as filled with pitch (*peh*) (*Althochdeutsche Wörterbuch*, s.vv.). In the compounds, *helli-* is cognate with Old English *hel* and Old Norse *Hel*, linked in Old High German to the underworld of the dead and Christian Hell. The use of *thuris* for gods of death matches glosses of *Orcus* with *þyrs* in Old English, but this use of *thuris* is much better attested, appearing in several independent contexts. Although *thuris* seems more or less interchangeable with other ‘giant’ words in its first field of meaning, *riso* and *gigant* are not used for rulers of death.

The third category of meanings lists only two examples. The first is *hazussa*, *thursa* (“hazzesa thuresa”) as a gloss of “deas deosque” [‘goddesses and gods’]. The *Althochdeutsche Wörterbuch* presents “Rachegöttin, Furie, heidnische Gottheit” [‘goddess of vengeance, Furie, heathen god’] as the first field of meaning of *hagazussa*, *hazussa*. However, with the exception of this example, the glosses are all for the synonymous Latin and Greek *Furies*, *Eumenides*, and *Erinys* (s.v.), collectively acting female agents of life-threatening violence. In contrast, *thuris* is used elsewhere to gloss cosmological actors that are also glossed with the word *got* [‘god’]. In this light, glossing *deos* with *thursa* appears to be an extension of a broader pattern of this word’s usage in glosses, whereas glossing *deae* with *hazussa* seems to be a solution to finding a plural term for mythic female agents that is markedly

‘pagan’. The second gloss is “dii paganorum sint demonia (tursa)” [‘the gods of the pagans are demons (*thurisa*)’], which can be considered equivalent to the first gloss, rather than reflecting any particular equivalence of *thuris* to ‘demon’ as such. Although the use of *thuris* in Christian discourse for ‘pagan gods’ is only found in two examples, the sources seem to be independent and, on the backdrop of uses of *thuris* to gloss names of gods of the realm of the dead, they seem likely to reflect a broader use of *thuris* in Christian discourse rather than being two isolated incidents.

Although *thuris* seems to be used more interchangeably with other ‘giant’ terms in Old High German than in Old Norse or Old English, it is also rather remarkably used for pagan gods, which is unparalleled by other ‘giant’ terms in any Germanic language. As in Old English, *thuris* is used both as a common noun and also for glossing a non-Christian ruler of the realm of death. Also as in Old English, *thuris* does not receive the sort of specification used with ‘devil’ or ‘god’ when glossing these cosmological actors, suggesting that *Thuris* could be used as a theonym for the agent in this role. The relative prominence of *thuris* in Old High German, comparable to *riso*, is supported by evidence of the word’s use through Middle High German (Kroonan 2013: 552).

### Old Saxon *thuris*?

Compared to Old High German, Old Saxon (also called Old Low German) offers very little evidence of the vocabulary of non-Christian supernatural agents. This can only be partly attributed to the limited sources being prominently concerned with Christian subjects. Like the prominence of Old High German *thuris*, the lack of such vocabulary may be linked to ideologies structuring language use.



Figure 1. St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 878 (*Vademecum of Walahfrid Strabo*), p. 321.<sup>5</sup>

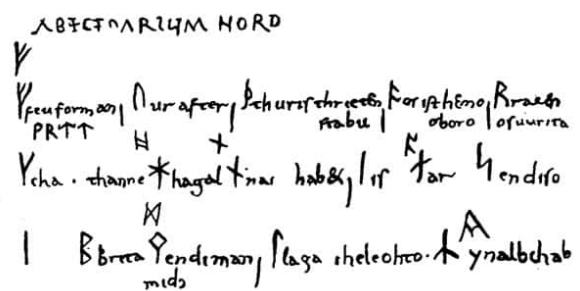


Figure 2. Wilhelm Grimm’s transcription of the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum* in St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 878, p. 321.<sup>6</sup>

A single example of Old Saxon *thuris* is preserved. The word appears in the 9<sup>th</sup>-century rune poem known as the *Abecedarium Nord[mannicum]*, where *thuris* is given as the name of the rune **þ**, although the original text was rendered unreadable in an attempt to preserve it (Figure 1). The text is now customarily read through Wilhelm Grimm’s transcription (although see also Müllenhoff 1869: 126–127), where the rune **þ** is accompanied by the text “*thuris thricten stabu*”, of which the second word is normally corrected to *thritten* [‘third’], giving a reading ‘*thuris*, the third letter’. The manuscript can be read through the damage as having the word *thuris*, which can be understood as a translation of Old Norse *purs*.

The source makes it likely that an Old Saxon word *thuris* was recognized as equivalent to Old Norse *purs*. However, there is no indication of the meaning of the word and the possibility that *thuris* is taken from Old High German cannot be excluded. It may also be observed that, in contrast to later languages deriving from Old High German, later languages stemming from Old Saxon do not exhibit forms of *thuris*, which speaks against prominence in Old Saxon.

### The Rune **þ**

A form of *\*pur(i)saz* came to designate the runic letter or sign **þ**. Although many rune names are consistent across Germanic languages, names for **þ** are not. In Old Norse, it is called *purs*, in Old English, *þorn* [‘thorn’], and in Gothic, *thyth*, while the potential Old Saxon name *thuris* should be seen as a calque of Old Norse *purs*. The Gothic rune names “may not have genuine Gothic origins” (McKinnell et al. 2003: 22n.6). Gothic *thyth* has been interpreted as a reflex of *þiup* [‘good’] since

the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Lehmann 1986: 344, *s.v.* ‘thyth’). *Thyth* could also derive from the name of the corresponding letter of the Greek alphabet, *θήτα*, pronounced /thita/ (Miller 2012: 22). It is thus relevant to consider how *purs* should be considered in the history of names for the rune.

Arguments for which of the three names of **p** is oldest tend to advance without argument from a hypothesis that ‘pagan’ names found in Old Norse are older and underwent renewal in other languages owing to Christian impacts. Accepting this hypothesis makes *purs* appear to belong to the oldest naming stratum. The rationale of seeing the innovation as motivated comes into better focus when the case is contextualized among the other names for runes. The Old English runic alphabet has a much greater number of characters and correspondingly a greater number of names. However, without counting *purs*, it includes cognates or their homonyms of all the other Old Norse names save one (McKinnell et al. 2003: 23–25).

The additional case of a change of a rune’s name is where Old English has *cen* [‘torch’] and Old Norse has *kaun* [‘sore, boil’]. These might be considered distinct letters “c” and “k”, respectively, but the signs are the same, although one appears inverted (McKinnell et al. 2003: 23–24). More significantly, Old English seems to have no cognate of Old Norse *kaun*, which seems not to have survived as a common noun outside of West Norse. Conversely, Old Norse has no cognate of Old English *cen*. In this case, renewal of one name for the rune can be attributable to the loss of the corresponding common noun. The new name for the rune seems to be linked to the older name, varying the vowel to make the name a recognizable word.

Cases of homonyms in rune names would have only involved reinterpretation, or potentially simply advancing such an interpretation in the writing of a rune poem, which became the source of our data. In the case of the runic sign **t**, Gothic *tyz*, Old Norse *týr* and Old English *tir* appear to trace etymologically to the Proto-Indo-European common noun for ‘god’. This word can be assumed to have been the common noun for ‘god’ when it became treated as the personal

name of the god known in Old Norse as *Týr*, and whose earlier significance is attested in the use of his name to translate a Roman name of the day of the week that had been named for *Mars* (> *Tuesday*). The Old English rune name *tir* is explained as ‘a certain sign’ visible in the sky; the meaning of *tir* as a theonym or common noun for ‘god’ is invisible in the Old English corpus. The interpretation of *tir* as a star or star-like sign is most easily accounted for as an *interpretatio Germanica* of *Mars* as the planet named for the god (Bosworth et al., *s.v.* ‘tīr’), and the identification of the rune name with the planet can then be considered secondary. Similarly, the Old Norse rune name *áss*, identified as a word for ‘god’, ‘demigod’, or some similar type of non-Christian supernatural being,<sup>7</sup> alongside Old English *os*, points to a potentially ideologically motivated interpretation. The Old English rune name is presented as meaning ‘mouth’ (McKinnell et al. 2003: 24), an interpretation through the Latin homonym that is not etymologically viable for the Old English word, which would then have to be a Latin loan (see Bosworth et al., *s.v.* ‘ōs’). The identification of the archaic or poetic words for ‘god’ with a planet and a Latin word for ‘mouth’ appear to be ideologically motivated interpretations.

Old Norse, Old English, and Gothic all had reflexes of Proto-Germanic *\*þurnaz* [‘thorn’] (Kroon 2013: 552–553), while Old Norse and Old English both had reflexes of *\*þur(i)saz*; Gothic may have had one as well. The difference in rune names therefore cannot be attributed to lexical loss, unless Gothic had lost an original name cognate to Old Norse *purs* or Gothic *thyth* represents an otherwise unknown word that was lost and renewed in both Old Norse and Old English.

Old Norse *purs* and Old English *þorn* are both potentially consistent with the semantics of other rune names. Modern readers might interpret *þorn* as a barb on a plant or tree, which does not fit well with other rune names, but it parallels other runes named for types of tree, like Old Norse *ýr* [‘yew’] and *bjarkan* [‘birch’]. Use of *þorn* for a type of tree (hawthorn) was also current in Old Norse. Old English *cen* may also be mentioned here, since the word historically meant ‘pine tree’ and its use for ‘torch’ is a development (Kroon

2013: 289). *Purs* parallels runes named for mythic agents, which include (using the Old Norse terms) *týr* [‘god’] or the theonym *Týr*, *áss* [‘god’ or ‘god-like agent’], and perhaps *Sól* [‘Sun’], and *maðr* [‘man, person’] was also a category of agents in the world. In Old Norse, *purs* also relates to rune names connected with ill health, like *naud* [‘need, compulsion; an illness agent in charms’] and *kaun* [‘sore, boil’]. (McKinnell et al. 2003: 23.) The Old Norse rune name *áss*, *æsir* might be interpreted as not originally a word for ‘god’ but rather its homonym *áss*, *ásar* [‘beam, pole; ridge’], but the latter’s semantics are not paralleled by other rune names. Neither *purs* nor *þorn* is betrayed as an innovation by its semantics.

Another factor for consideration is that names of runes generally appear to have been very commonplace vocabulary, although some of these had become semantically opaque, like Old Norse *pertra* and its Old English cognate *peorð*. *Tyz/týr/tir* and *áss/os* can also be considered marginalized through historical change (McKinnell et al. 2003: 22–25). The Old English cognate of Old Norse *áss*, *æsir* had largely dropped out of use: the only example found outside of the rune name is in an Old English charm, where the word is collocated with ‘elves’ as in Old Norse and a cognate can be inferred as intended, but the stem vowel is irregular (*e-* for *o-*; see Bosworth et al., *s.v.* ‘*ös*’). The irregularity of the vowel in the source may be attributable to the word being suspended in a formulaic phrase while the individual lexeme had become opaque, opening the vowel to variation, although use in the charm might also reflect impacts from Old Norse (Hall 2007: 2–3, 66–67, 108). In either case, the Old English interpretation of the rune name could reflect making sense of *os* as its earlier meaning became opaque.

The rune name *purs* must also be considered on this background. If use of *purs* is attributed to the lexical renewal of an earlier name, it is probable that it became linked to the rune at a time when the Old Norse word held a central and significant position in the vocabulary. Continued use of Old Norse *purs* is clear in its appearance as a personal name epithet, yet it was not prominent. The closer a renewal of the rune name was to the period of the evidence, the more probable that the Old English name

*þorn* was the innovation rather than an obscure Old Norse word for ‘monster’ being chosen to represent the sound /th/.

The weight of probability falls to *þyrs* as the earliest form of the rune’s name. Gothic *thyth* might be a *hapax legomenon* that reflects the earliest name of the rune, lost from both Old Norse and Old English and thereby motivating independent renewal, but this seems like the least probable scenario, especially if the Gothic rune names may not be originally Gothic at all (McKinnell et al. 2003: 22n.6). A scenario identifying Old Norse *purs* as the innovation lacks a motivation for replacing *þorn*, especially when other rune names appear stable even when they became semantically opaque. In Old English, the renewal of *þyrs* as a pagan category of agents would be in line with interpretations of *os* and *tir* as having other meanings than ‘god’ or the latter’s identification potentially as a pagan theonym *Tir*. However, this parallel is less clear than the explanation might suggest. The ideological motivation for renewing terms for venerated non-Christian agents is fairly straightforward because the non-Christian and Christian evaluations of these agents are diametrically opposed. In contrast, *þyrs* as a noun for ‘monster’ is not linked to competing evaluations, in which case it is not transparent why religious change would make the rune’s name problematic – an issue that will be returned to below. Nevertheless, the most reasonable explanation for the difference between the rune names in Old Norse and Old English is ideologically driven renewal, even if the reinterpretation of *os* may be linked to the common noun becoming obscure.

### ***Key Features of the Common Noun***

Old Germanic evidence generally points to *\*þur(i)saz* as a type of supernatural agent, although presenting it as simply a ‘giant’ term appears reductive. The indicators regarding the agent’s nature are extremely limited, but it was clearly considered hostile and threatening to living human societies and/or the gods. The dangerous and threatening potential of these agents is not offset by conventional characterizations that are ambivalent or positive. Both Old English and Old Saxon connect other ‘giant’ words with the fashioners



of heroes' weapons, and both Old English and Old High German use 'giant' words also with reference to heroes. Old English *þyrs* does not seem to be used interchangeably with other 'giant' terms, while Old High German *thuris* seems to have had distinctively pagan connotations that allowed it to be used for 'pagan god'. Old Norse *jǫtnar* are cosmological actors who host the gods at drinking feasts, have sexually desirable daughters, and so on, and those of sagas may foster heroes and kings (Schulz 2004: 211–213), whereas *þurs* seems to be linked to illness and harm.

Physically, the basic form of these beings was anthropomorphic. Exceptional size is found connected with Old English and Old High German cognates in glosses of mythic agents from Classical mythology. Old Norse *þurs* was not used in such glosses, but comparable implications are found in metaphorical uses for human beings, even though size seems to become marginal in later Scandinavian languages. A metaphorical use characterizing a *dvergr* in poetry (*Alvíssmál* 2) also seems to point to ugliness or monstrosity, although it may equally index the threatening quality of *þursar* to women and their sexuality found in other contexts (Frog 2013: 64–65). One description in poetry of a *þurs* as having three heads (*Skírnismál* 31.1–2<sup>8</sup>) is linked to an established alliterative collocation of *þrír* : *þurs* ['three : *þurs*'], and it is unclear whether the description can be considered informative about characterizations of *þursar* generally or simply draws on the collocation in a way that augments the image's monstrosity (Frog 2013: 58, 62).

Although Old English *Maxims II* identifies a *þyrs* as a lone agent, the Old English word is used to gloss groups of agents in Classical mythology. *Maxims II*'s identification of *þyrs* with marshland is of special note because Proto-Finnic *\*tur(i)sas* is strongly tied to water. This connection finds some support in Old English and later place name evidence. Edward Smith's (2014) survey of Old English and later toponymy suggests that, among Old English 'giant' terms, only *þyrs* was customarily used to form placenames. Potential links to water also appear in Scandinavian languages. Motz points out that

Icelandic *þursaskegg*<sup>9</sup> ['beard of *þursar*'] is used for "the marine plant *corallina officinalis* and the sea weed *fucus corneus*" and that Danish *tossefugl* ['*þurs*'s bird'] is used for the type of seabird known as a gannet (*sula bassanius*) (1986: 188). Although 'beard of *þursar*' may inspire the imagination, both names seem to be metaphorical extensions that may not be motivated by a connection of *þurs* to the sea. These connections with a maritime environment also only weakly align with the Old English connections to what seem to be inland watery landscape features. However, the later place name evidence is not restricted to locations with water. A connection to water may therefore be a development within Old English traditions. Alternately, if *þyrs* was more generally used in names for places outside of what was customarily domesticated for human habitation, links to marshes and such may simply be accidental.

Both Old Norse and Old English evidence connect *þurs/þyrs* to an active agent in the human world, yet the traditions seem to do so in unrelated ways. The malevolence of Old Norse *þursar* in charms and incantations is bound up with what appear to be magical uses of the rune **þ** (MacLeod & Mees 2006: 122–123), but "*þursar* are called on in Northern magic for reasons above and beyond those which are warranted by the connection with writing represented by the rune name *þurs*" (Mees 2015: 2). Hypothetically, the lack of evidence for Old English *þyrs* and Old High German *thuris* as an agent of illness and as directed in curses could be an accident of the data. However, this is doubtful for Old English, where the manuscript evidence for charms and medicine is greater than in Old Norse (cf. Hall 2009: 206), and indeed one Old Norse runic charm against *þurs* is preserved in an Old English manuscript (Cotton MS Caligula A XV). Accident is more possible for the far more limited evidence of Old High German.<sup>10</sup> The Old Norse malevolent agents of charms and curses accord with the Old English and Old High German uses of *þyrs* and *thuris* to gloss rulers of the realm of the dead, but the latter agents operate on a level of cosmological scope while those of Old Norse operate at the level of human personal encounters.

In his discussion of *þurs* as an agent of illness, Hall (2009: 205–207) finds a parallel in Old Norse *dvergr* and Old English *dweorg* [‘dwarf’] being found as an agent of illness. Hall connects this parallel to a recently proposed etymology that semantically links dwarfs to delusion, which can be connected to their identification as agents of, for instance, fever (2011: 75–76), although the word’s etymology remains debated (Kroon 2013: 112). If the latter etymology is accepted, it could potentially provide an analogy for tracing *þurs* to the Proto-Indo-European stem *\*twer-* : *\*tur-* [‘to twist, turn, whirl’], for instance if this were connected to dizziness. Tantalizing as this possibility might be, it would require that these semantics trace back to the initial formation of the noun, with the implication that the word *\*þur(i)saz* formed with reference to the agent of illness. The probability of the etymology becomes contingent on whether this role as an illness agent should be considered lost in other languages or an innovation in North Germanic.

Concerning the parallel of *dvergr* and *þurs* as agents, the implication seems to be that these beings directly embody the illness experienced by people. In this regard, they are comparable to a *mara* [‘nightmare’], imagined as physically riding its victim, rather than to an illness or harm caused by forms of ‘shot’, imagined as a projectile that the agent seems to use from a distance. In other contexts, however, the gap between *þursar* and *dvergar* seems considerable. Whereas *þurs* groups with ‘giant’ words, Old Norse *dvergr* does not. In Old Norse traditions, the former group includes cosmological actors in counter-roles to the gods. Both male and female *jotnar* could advance to the status of gods in the divine community.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, *dvergar* were represented as the maggots of creation, spontaneously emerging from the flesh of a primal corpse (*Völuspá*, *Gylfaginning* 15). Furthermore, *dvergar* are characterized by positive productive activity, as well as being dangerous, while *þursar* do not seem to have any positive characterizations or roles.

#### **A Theonym \*þur(i)saz?**

Old High German *thuris* is prominently used to gloss Classical mythologies’ rulers of the

realm of the dead, and a corresponding use is found for Old English *þyrs*. If only found in Old English, this might seem like an anomaly or accident of the data. The Old High German examples multiply this with what seem to be several independent examples that gloss different names in equivalent roles with *thuris*. This type of usage is restricted to rulers of death rather than glossing other major cosmological actors of these mythologies, with the possible exception of the one Old English gloss of *Cacus*, the monstrous son of Vulcan in Roman mythology. Whereas words for ‘god’ or ‘devil’ used in such glosses always appear in compounds, the glosses use *thuris* or *þyrs* directly for the name.<sup>12</sup> *Thuris* and *þyrs* thus appear used in the manner of proper nouns *Thuris* and *Þyrs*, comparable to using ‘Devil’ and ‘God’ as names in Christian discourse. When name or name-equivalent usage of *Thuris* and *Þyrs* is found for names from Classical mythology but not used for the ruler of the Christian Hell, it suggests that this usage was linked to vernacular mythology rather than a new use created through Christian discourse. *Thuris/Þyrs* therefore seems to be treated as a vernacular ‘pagan’ name. The evidence points to *Thuris/Þyrs* as the name of a hostile and threatening ruler of the realm of the dead in West Germanic.

Theonym-type usage of Old English *Þyrs* is poorly attested, but this must be viewed against the total number of examples in Old English as three uses in poetry, three in a place name, and ten in glosses. Theonymic use accounts for 20% of the uses of *þyrs* in glosses and more than 12.5% of all examples. The uses are so few and interconnected that it opens the question of influence carried through Old Saxon. Old Saxon had great influence on Old English Christian discourse, with whole Christian epics being translated from the former into the latter. However, Old Saxon did not develop *thuris* as a prominent term in Christian discourse in contrast to Old High German, leaving so little evidence that it is at least possible that the one Old Saxon example of *thuris* may be an Old High German word. Use of *Þyrs* as a proper name in Old English cannot be attributed to Old Saxon.

Although the use of such a common noun as a theonym might seem peculiar for Germanic



religion, Old Norse mythology offers a number of comparable examples, such as *Freyr* [‘Lord’], *Freyja* [‘Lady’], *Baldr* [‘Leader’], and *Týr* [‘God’]. Comparison can also be made with Tacitus’s *Mannus* [‘Man, Person’] and *Tuisto* [‘Twin’] (*Germania* 2). The production of such theonyms was likely at a time when the respective nouns were dominant commonplace terms rather than being limited to poetry, as most were when they were recorded in all but the examples from Tacitus’s work.

The same word both as a common noun for a type of malicious or hostile mythic agent in the human world and as the name of a cosmological otherworld ruler is not found in Scandinavian sources. However, it is paralleled in mythologies across the Baltic Sea region. In these other mythologies, the hostile agent is linked to a dualist structure: this name designates the adversary or antithesis of the celestial god and the common noun designates a type of agent that the celestial god strikes and potentially hunts with the lightning weapon, as for instance in the case of Lithuanian *Velnias/velnias* [‘Devil/devil’] and *Perkūnas* [‘Thunder’] (see e.g. Laurinkienė 2023). Usage of *\*Pur(i)saz* or its derivative within such a schema would suggest that the common noun *\*pur(i)saz* was the central word for malicious or hostile and dangerous mythic agents active in the human world – i.e., the adversaries regularly struck by lightning, equivalent to ‘devil’ or ‘troll’ in more recent legend traditions.

Within this dualist structure, the identity of the adversary or antithesis may be shaped by linking it to a cosmological structure, although it may evolve over time. Thus, in Finnic traditions, the adversary is linked to water, a connection with deep roots in a cosmogonic conception of sky and water as the two primary elements with which the god ‘Sky’ and his antithesis were identified (on which, see Frog 2012). In Baltic traditions, Lithuanian *Velnias*, Latvian *Velns*, is an agent of chaos identified with the Christian ‘Devil’, but his connection to death and the dead is at an etymological level (Vēlius 1987; Laurinkienė 2023). The identification of *Thuris/Pyrs* as the lord of the realm of death is consistent with this pattern.

The earliest name of the rune **þ** seems to have been *\*pur(i)saz/ \*pur(i)saR*. Although this

is generally assumed to represent a common noun, the West Germanic evidence allows that the rune was named for the theonym *\*Pur(i)saz/ \*Pur(i)saR*, comparable to naming the rune **t** as *\*tīwaz/ \*tīwaR*. Rune names appear to have been words in common usage at the time they came into use. The inherited Indo-European word for ‘god’, which became Proto-Germanic *\*tīwaz*, seems to have been superseded and marginalized by *\*guda-* [‘god’] already in or before Proto-Germanic. The rune **t** was most likely named for the god *\*Tīwaz > \*TīwaR > Týr* [‘God’], comparable to the rune **ŋ** being named for *\*Ingwaz/ \*Ingwar*, which is known exclusively as a theonym or proper name without a corresponding proper noun. The rune name *\*pur(i)saz/ \*pur(i)saR* was doubtless interpretable as a proper name where such a name was used, although this would not be exclusive of interpretation through the common noun. Indeed, the same may be said about the rune **m**, which could have been interpreted as the theonym behind Tacitus’s *Mannus*, as well as the common noun for ‘person’.

Recognizing *Pyrs* as a theonym situates the replacement of the rune name *pyrs* by *þorn* in a new light. Attributing the impacts on rune names to a religious ideology in Anglo-Saxon England is most compelling in the case of venerated agents that opened channels to supernatural agency outside of the Church’s administrative authority and thus threatened their monopoly on otherworld interactions. The motivation to renew a vernacular word for ‘giant’ or ‘monster’ is less clear since its hostile relationship to the community would remain unchanged rather than being inverted and polarized (see also the discussion in Frog 2021b).<sup>13</sup> However, if *Pyrs* was used for the non-Christian ruler of death and the dead, belonging to the system of vernacular gods even if not venerated *per se*, this would give a pronounced motivation for reinterpreting the name of the rune. In this case, renewal can be attributed to the lack of homonyms through which the rune name could be reinterpreted.<sup>14</sup>

#### **\*Pur(i)saz versus \*Haljō- as Ruler of Death**

If West Germanic *Thuris/Pyrs* was a dangerous and threatening ruler of the realm of the dead, he would seem to fill the same role as

the female agent *Hel* in Old Norse mythology. *Hel* has cognates across the Germanic languages but is not otherwise found as an agent personifying death.<sup>15</sup> The word reconstructs to Proto-Germanic *\*haljō-*, which seems to have designated the realm of death rather than being a common noun for death *per se*. *\*Haljō-* may ultimately derive from an Indo-European stem with a meaning of ‘covering’ or ‘concealing’ (Kroon 2013: 204, s.v. ‘\*haljō-’). This etymology has led to a view that *\*haljō-* originally referred to a grave and was first extended to an otherworld realm of the dead (cf. West 2007: 388), and later to the female personification of death (e.g., Lindow 2001: 172). Old Norse *Hel* was used both for the location and as the name of the female agent *Hel*, as well as with some fluidity in expressions that allowed *hel* to blur into a common noun and element in compounds referring to ‘death’ (see Abram 2003: 8–50).

The difference in genders between *Thuris/Pyrs* and *Hel* makes it clear that these refer to distinct images of the otherworld rulers rather than alternative names for the same agent or that they represent cognate images of the agent that received a new name in one language branch. In other Indo-European mythologies that identify the realm of death as the abode of an agent, that agent seems to be male, as with Greek *Hades*, Irish *Donn*, and Indic *Yama* (e.g. West 2007: 388). Bruce Lincoln (1981) reconstructs Proto-Indo-European mythology’s *\*Manu* [‘Human’] as slaying or sacrificing his counterpart *\*Yemo* [‘Twin’] as the first killing, after which *\*Yemo* rules the realm of death. *\*Yemo* appears to be the source of the Old Norse name *Ymir*, whose slaying initiates the creation event, while Tacitus appears to refer to a different tradition of ‘Twin’ (*Tuisto*) and ‘Person’ (*Mannus*) (*Germania* 2), in which the name *\*Yemo* would have been replaced by a current, semantically transparent synonym. If Lincoln’s reconstruction is accepted, the Germanic ruler of the realm of the dead may have changed from *\*Yemo*, as seems also to have occurred in Greek and Irish mythologies. Nonetheless, *Pyrs/Thuris* remains consistent with the more general pattern of this agent as male. In Baltic mythology, however, *Velnias* is a chthonic agent linked to death, but the

material does not point to the realm of death as his house. This realm is instead called in Lithuanian *Pragaras*, today used for the Christian Hell but semantically equivalent to ‘abyss’, of which the etymological sense might be described as ‘that which swallows completely’ (Vėlius 1989: 228). In Lithuanian laments and Latvian *daina* poetry, the place of the dead is commonly identified with a ‘high hill’, noting that it was taboo to use the word or name of death in laments (Stepanova 2011: 135, 139). Even in this structure, the agent of death is male. On this backdrop, *Hel* as a female ruler appears to be an innovation.

Scandinavian *Hel* may be viewed within an isogloss of female otherworld rulers. Samic mythologies on the Scandinavian Peninsula exhibit a female ruler of the dead (e.g., Karsten 1955: 89; cf. Itkonen 1946). In North Finnic kalevalaic mythology, female agents appear as dominant figures in otherworld households and as adversaries in mythological epics, while the prominence of female agents in incantations seems to correspond to the otherworld ‘mothers’ of illnesses and injuries known from shamanic traditions of North Asia (Siikala 2002: 200–201). Finnic languages lack grammatical gender, and the gender of the Proto-Finnic ruler of the realm of the dead *\*Tōni* [‘Death’] is uncertain. However, the Late Proto-Finnic name *\*Tōni* is a borrowing of a Germanic feminine noun meaning ‘death’ (< Middle Proto-Finnic *\*towēne* < Pre-Germanic / Early Proto-Germanic *\*d<sup>h</sup>ow(ey)eni-*; cf. Old Norse *dán* [‘death’], mainly preserved in genitive in compounds) (Koivolehto 1986; EVE, s.v. ‘toone’). The feminine noun could be an indicator of the adoption of a female agent, which is a topic of critical discussion in the third instalment of this article series. In any case, although a female ruler is reconstructed for a positive otherworld location in Proto-Uralic, Vladimir Napol’skikh considers the ruler of the realm of the dead more likely to have been male (1992: 11–12), in which case a female ruler would be an innovation. Innovations in adjacent Germanic- and Uralic-speaking groups form an isogloss that appears attributable to contacts and interactions of the respective populations.<sup>16</sup>

Usage of *Orcus* in Anglo-Saxon England points to a phenomenon of semantic correlation

between the name of the ruler of the realm of death and the name of the realm itself – i.e., the theonym is correlated with the placename so that the same name is used for both. As this use of *Orcus* does not appear to stem from Latin, it can be assumed to reflect a language ideology of semantic correlation in Old English, and thus that either feminine *Hel* or masculine *Pyrs* were used as both theonym and toponym. The difference in grammatical gender between the two names would exclude both as synonyms to refer to the same agent. Semantic correlation is unexpected in Old English because West Germanic only offers examples of *\*Haljō-* as a toponym and *\*Pur(i)saz* as a theonym. This situation could be accounted for through three different scenarios of varying degrees of probability.

1. Conflation of *Orcus* with a placename is not rooted in Old English language use. This possibility seems the least likely without identifying some motivating influence. Possible interference from Greek *Hades* is unlikely because *Hades* does not seem to appear as a name in the Old English corpus (cf. *DOEC*).
2. *Hel* was the name of both the realm of death and its ruling agent, and the principle of identifying these was extended to *Orcus*. This scenario would seem to contradict identification of *Pyrs* as a proper name for the ruler of the realm of the dead. *Pyrs* was then perhaps not a theonym at all. This would imply the same for Old High German *Thuris*, and the distinctive use of *thuris* for glossing rulers of death would need to be accounted for in another way.

The difficulty with this scenario is that the agents' genders are grammatically encoded, and *interpretatio Germanica* did not jump the gender boundary. *Orcus* and *Hel* would not have been viewed as referring to identities that would be directly linked by language speakers. Mapping semantic correlation from *Hel* onto *Orcus* would thus require interpreting incommensurate agents as having commensurate relations to the realm of the dead in such a way that their names could be used for the realm itself. The scenario is complex in that it requires the correlation of identities over a gender distinction, and it is more complex insofar as the realm became gendered by semantic correlation. Correlating the agent *Orcus* with the incommensurate agent *Hel* through their

roles as rulers of the realm of death requires the gender of the realm to be invisible in order to be renamed for a masculine agent.

3. *Pyrs* was the name of both the realm of death and its ruling agent, and the principle of identifying these was extended to *Orcus*. The advantage of this explanation is its simplicity: interpreting *Orcus* as translating *Pyrs* extends its use from the agent ruling the realm of death to the realm itself.

In this scenario, *Hel* would be a parallel term for the realm but not the agent, possibly rooted in euphemism or avoidance terminology (cf. taboos in lament). The difficulty is that the identification of *Pyrs* as the name of both the mythic agent and his realm would need to be strong enough to impact the use of *Orcus* without entering the written record. However, if *Pyrs* was the name of an agent of pagan mythology while *Hel* was an alternative term for the same realm, it is unsurprising that *Hel* was adopted into Christian discourse while *Pyrs* was avoided. Christians avoiding *Pyrs* and *Thuris* in referring to the otherworld realm of death in Old English and Old High German would be analogous to Christians avoiding *Hel* for the Christian otherworld in Old Norse and instead referring to it by the compound *Helviti* ['Death-Torment'].

All three of these scenarios are conjectural, and the conjectures are built on an argument for the use of *thuris* and *pyrs* in certain glosses as reflecting a theonym. However, if the theonym is accepted, then the third scenario seems the most probable to account for the evidence of semantic correlation.

Although the evidence is quite limited, *Pyrs* and *Thuris* appear to have been names for rulers of the realm of the dead in the respective West Germanic mythologies. This theonym connects with a dualist structure found across mythologies in the Circum-Baltic area in which Proto-Germanic *\*Pur(i)saz* would be comparable to the Baltic god that later becomes Latvian *Velns* and Lithuanian *Velnias*. If Proto-Germanic *\*haljō-* ultimately derives from a common noun or euphemism for 'grave', euphemistic use would, according to this model, occur alongside the theonym *\*Pur(i)saz*. If semantic correlation of *Orcus* in Old English reflects use of *\*Pur(i)saz* also for a location, the location may also have been distinguishable from *\*Haljō-*, for instance one

as a geographical space or ‘realm’ versus a walled enclosure or dwelling. Although the agent *Hel* is here identified with an isogloss of contacts, the agent cannot be assumed to be a loan. These contacts may have included creating awareness and perhaps engagement with traditions of otherworld ‘mothers’ (Siikala 2002: 200–201), and possibly also with the sort of structural contrast observed in North Finnic mythological epics of otherworlds ruled by female agents as opposed to male heroes. Rather than borrowing a female ruler of the dead *per se*, the Old Norse name *Hel* points to an operation of semantic correlation that extended the Proto-Germanic feminine placename *\*Haljō-* or its derivative to the agent ruler, which may have involved a hybridization of conceptions. Whether a borrowing or a hybridization, the transition from a male ruler of the realm of the dead to a female agent personifying the realm looks like a marked change that may have involved significant restructuring in the mythology.

The emergence of a female ruler of the dead likely co-occurs with the displacement of a male ruler, opening the question of when this occurred. John Lindow (2001: 172) states that in the earliest Old Norse poets *Hel* appears used to refer to the location but not the agent. Lindow connects this to the emergence of *Hel* as an agent from *Hel* as a realm of the dead. This would mean *Hel* as an agent emerged in the Viking Age or was a product of medieval discourse. However, the ‘first poet’ Bragi Boddason (*Rdr* 9<sup>III</sup>)<sup>17</sup> and the early poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvini (*Yt* 7<sup>I</sup>) refer to *Hel* through kennings based on her kinship relations to Loki as her parent and to her siblings; therefore, she must have been established as the ruler of the realm of the dead already in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

One innovation of Scandinavian mythology was to create a gap between theonyms and commonplace nouns. For example, Proto-Baltic *\*Perkūnas* [‘Thunder’] and Proto-Germanic *\*Pun(a)raz* [‘Thunder’] exhibit semantic correlation of the name of the thunder god with the noun for thunder: whichever name one sees as renewed, that name also became the common noun for ‘thunder’ (Frog 2017: 111). In Old Norse, however, semantic disambiguation has occurred between the Proto-Germanic name *\*Pun(a)raz* and evidence of the theonym *Þórr*:

*Þórr* is used exclusively as a proper noun, while other words or expressions are used for ‘thunder’ (2017: 112–113). Evidence of this ideology in connection with venerated gods could suggest that continuity of *\*Pur(i)saz* as a theonym would interrupt continued use of the common noun *þurs*. Consequently, continued use of *þurs* as a common noun would make this shift a potential *terminus ante quem* for the loss of a *\*Pur(i)saz*-theonym. However, *Hel* was retained in use for both the agent and the location ‘Death’, which also blurs in idioms with the phenomenon ‘death’. It is unclear whether the principle of semantic disambiguation applies to agents that were not venerated. *Hel* may also have been unaffected by the ideology because the name *Hel* was correlated with a placename ‘Death’ rather than with the phenomenon ‘death’. A Pre-Germanic common noun for ‘death’ was borrowed into Proto-Finnic and became the theonym *\*Tōni* [‘Death’]. This loan points to Proto-Germanic *\*dawīni-* as the common noun for ‘death’ (Koivulehto 1986), distinct from the place name *\*Heljō-*. The question of semantic disambiguation in the case of *\*Pur(i)saz* is clouded by the common noun *þurs* being interpretable as referring to a hypostatic array of the god’s manifestations. The hypostatic array of manifestations would be comparable to *\*þun(a)raz* [‘thunder’] in relation to *\*Punaraz* [‘Thunder’]. However, *þursar* were conceived as anthropomorphic agents rather than phenomena classed as part of nature, culture, or personal experience. Consequently, they may have been imagined as having a different relation to the god or theonym, perhaps more comparable to that of the common noun *\*tīwaz* > *týr* to *\*Tīwaz* > *Týr*.

Although it may be tempting to correlate a change found in North Germanic with language diversification, it is artificial to imagine that the farther we look into the past, the larger the geographical areas that were linguistically and culturally homogeneous. Such imaginings reflect our models becoming more abstract the farther back we reconstruct from the present, and variation becoming invisible. However, early regional variation in Germanic mythology is observable, for instance, by a theonym *\*Þingsaz* in the place of *\*Tīwaz* for the name of ‘Tuesday’ in translating Latin *dies Martis*

['day of Mars'] (Gutenbrunner 1936: 24–30; Höfler 1992 [1979]). The borrowing of Pre-Germanic *\*d<sup>h</sup>ow(ey)eni-* into Middle Proto-Finnic presents the possibility that the loan was connected with a female ruler of the dead already in the Pre-Germanic language period. In this case, *\*Dawīni-* or *\*Haljō-* was likely a theonym in at least one Proto-Germanic dialect or area (presumably across from the Gulf of Finland), and accordingly the spread of the rune name *\*þur(i)saz/\*þur(i)sAR* would have been interpreted in these areas as 'troll, giant, monster; illness agent' without reference to a corresponding theonym.

### *North versus West Germanic*

The differences in representations between derivatives of *\*þur(i)saz* form clusters that seem to reflect differences in the evolution of mythologies among North and West Germanic language groups. These differences extend through different 'giant' terms rather than being limited to derivatives of *\*þur(i)saz*, and they raise questions about the differences in conceptions of the realm of the dead.

The Old Norse term *jǫtunn* is sometimes treated as "[t]he original word for giants" (Simek 1993: 107) in Northern mythology, and the Old English cognate *eoten* is introduced alongside it as though the Old English word supports this view. Etymologically, *jǫtunn* is commonly identified as formed from the verb that in Proto-Germanic would be *\*etan-* ['to eat'], though neither *jǫtunn* nor its cognates are characterized by large-scale consumption of food, corpses, or anything else (*pace* Harris 2009: 491). The semantics of such an etymology of *eoten* ~ *jǫtunn* must have been long since divorced from the agents, if they were ever there at all (Mees 2015).<sup>18</sup> The model of *jǫtunn* ~ *eoten* as a historically primary 'giant' term is centrally based on the Old Norse material in which *jǫtunn* is the central term for 'giants' that are cosmological actors. Old English *eoten* seems more poorly attested than *þyrs*. *Ent* seems to be the most common and flexibly used Old English 'giant' word, although it is lacking clear cognates and is potentially some sort of loan (Mees 2015: 5). The only cognate of *eoten* ~ *jǫtunn* in other Germanic languages is found in a Low German appositive phrase "de olde Eteninne" ['that old

*eteninne*'] in a line of Johann Lauremberg's *Niederdeutsche Scherzgedichte* (1879 [1652]: 24, poem II, line 297), where the noun is feminine and used to describe a character, leading it to be translated as 'witch'. The example is comparable to metaphorical uses of *þurs* and *þyrs* for people. The evidence points away from *jǫtunn* as a prominent or significant word outside of North Germanic.

An absence of evidence does not necessarily equate to evidence of absence. Nevertheless, non-Christian terms for supernatural agents hostile to human society were not impacted by the transition to Christianity in the same way as theonyms. The basic relationships of these agent categories to society remained largely unchanged, although those that were in a more ambivalent relation to society like 'elves' and 'dwarfs' were likely to also become viewed as opposed to Christian society. If cognates of *jǫtunn* had been the historical terms for the cosmological adversaries of the gods in Old High German and Old Saxon non-Christian mythology, that prominence and significance would be expected to leave more traces in the lexicon, if not to become productive in later languages. And, if such cognates were the terms for cosmological actors, this word rather than *thuris* would be expected to gloss agents of Classical mythology. The same can be said of Old English *eoten*: if this were a central term in non-Christian mythology, why would *þyrs* be better represented than *eoten*, and *þyrs* rather than *eoten* be used in glosses of Classical mythology? If Old Norse *jǫtunn* reflects the dominant term of a much earlier period, the term must have been marginalized at a relatively early period in West Germanic languages, potentially having dropped out of Old High German and Old Saxon entirely.

Mythic craftsmen are also identified with different categories of beings in Old Norse and Old English. Old Norse evidence characterizes *dvergjar* as the mythic craftsmen in the time of the gods. In Old English, 'giant' words other than *þyrs* are characterized as the mythic craftsmen (Bishop 2006). This characterization was integrated into the poetic idiom in the variable formula *GIANT'S geweorc*, seen in the expressions *enta geweorc* ['the work of *entas*'] (*Beowulf*, *Andreas*) and *giganta geweorc* ['work of *gigantas*'], *Welandes geweorc*

['work of *Weland* (~ Old Norse *Vǫlundr*')] and *wundorsmiþa geweorc* ['wonder-smiths' work'] (*Beowulf* only), while the objects they created could be called *eotenisc* ['eoten-ic']. The Old Saxon expression *uurisilic giuuerc* ['*wrisi*-work'] (*Heliand* 1397a) exhibits the same concept in what appears to be a historically related formula, through with a different 'giant' term. The lack of evidence for this formula in Old High German may be related to so much less epic poetry being preserved in the language. Comparable expressions are not found in Old Norse.

The identification of large and potentially mysterious structures as the work of giant beings in ancient times is widespread in Europe, and this is augmented in Old English by attributing these types of agents with the crafting of weapons and armour. In Old Norse, the building of the fortification of the gods is the 'work' of a 'giant' and later legends of the 'master-builder' type reproduce the respective narrative pattern (e.g., Simek 1993: 108) as localized 'echoes' of the cosmogonic event (Frog 2022) adapted to a Christian milieu. However, the Scandinavian traditions are linked to a particular cosmological event rather than attributing 'giants' with acts of construction generally or characterizing them as craftsmen. One *jǫtunn*, Geirrǫðr, seems to be a smith, yet he is never said to craft anything and the connection might only be that he possesses a hammer, which is acquired by Þórr and becomes the god's attribute (Clunies Ross 1981: 388–389). The Old Norse and Old English traditions evolved on different trajectories that linked craftsmanship to *dvergjar* in the former and to the *ent~eoten~gigant* category in the latter. The Old Saxon example points to an alignment with the Old English tradition (but see also Motz 1977 on later folklore). It is unclear whether this difference between North and West Germanic only emerged following language diversification or may instead have deeper roots in regional differences perhaps already in Proto-Germanic.

West Germanic evidence of a theonym *Þyrs/Thuris* contrasts with Old Norse use of *þurs* as an agent of illness and harm manipulated through verbal charms. The theonym points also to a dualist schema in which Proto-Germanic *\*þur(i)saz* would be a primary term

for agents of chaos. In Old Norse, use of *þurs* as a poetic equivalent for cosmological actors in counter-roles to the gods contrasts with other 'giant' terms outside of *jǫtunn*. Old Norse *jǫtunn* seems to have expanded its semantic field to a broadly inclusive term for agents characterized as anthropomorphic others and their descendants. For example, in the account of the building of the walls of Ásgarðr, the master-builder seems to be one of the *jǫtnar*, with the plural noun used repeatedly to allude to his background. At the story's climax, he is identified as a *bergrisi* ['mountain-giant'] (*Gylfaginning* 42) – thus a *bergrisi* appears in such use to be a type of *jǫtunn*. The use of *jǫtunn* as the basic word for cosmological actors that are both other and capable of threat from the perspective of the divine community must be viewed in relation to the word's potential inclusiveness. The distinctive use of *þurs* and the associated compound *hrimþurs* with reference to cosmological '*jǫtnar*' appears rooted in a long-term use of *þurs* in that role, in contrast to other 'giant' words. This interpretation is supported by the Old High German usage of *thurisa* to gloss 'pagan gods', suggesting that this noun was identified with cosmological actors. This use of Old Norse *þurs* seems to have been eclipsed in a combination of the rise of *jǫtunn* to a general term and a dislocation of the reflex of the proposed theonym *\*þur(i)saz*. Use of *þurs* to refer to supernatural actors manipulated in verbal charms may be linked to the associations of death bound up with the earlier theonym. However, the continued use of *þurs* as the name of a runic sign was doubtless more significant in the long term. As uses of *þurs* outside of sorcery were eclipsed, uses in sorcery dominated the construction of the word's semantics and associations.

North and West Germanic mythologies clearly evolved in different directions. *\*þur(i)saz* designated a type of being that was distinguished as particularly malevolent and hazardous, although these connotations seem to have been maintained in Old English and Old High German through identification with the ruler of the realm of the dead and in Old Norse in connection with sorcery. The marked characterization as malevolent correlates with the contrasts between *\*þur(i)saz*-derived words and agents characterized by other 'giant'

terms. The North Germanic development of a female ruler of death seems to be an indication of abrupt and marked change,<sup>17</sup> which is among manifold developments that also marginalized *\*bur(i)saz*-derived words, such as the rise of Old Norse *jötunn* and Old English *ent* as central terms.

### Conclusion

Any model of features of mythology among Proto-Germanic speakers depends on the evaluation and interpretation of a wide range of fragmentary evidence, on which the model becomes conditional. *\*Pur(i)saz* seems to have held a more prominent position in Proto-Germanic than its derivatives in the Middle Ages, but the evidence is far more limited than for a category like *\*guda* [‘god’] or a deity like *\*Pun(a)raz* [‘Thunder’]. Consequently, the resulting model remains vague and surrounded by uncertainties, and yet a model of the referent of the Proto-Germanic word remains crucial for considering its borrowing into Proto-Finnic.

The preceding survey allows the conclusion that a *\*bur(i)saz* was characteristically anthropomorphic, noting that Germanic perspectivism projects anthropomorphicity as iconic of agents with human-like capacities for independent decision-making and directed action. The characteristic form of agents could be in tension with their external form to varying degrees, whether that form was changed through some type of shape-shifting or it was the agent’s form from birth (cf. *Völuspá*, *Reginmál*, *Völsunga saga*). If the greater centrality of *\*pur(i)saz* is construed as roughly analogous to the range of uses of Old Norse *jötunn*, then *\*pur(i)saz* did not exclude having a zoomorphic form, whether born into that form or taking it through transformation. The external form might only condition the location in which one lived, or the individual’s capacities for action and perhaps emotional profile; the individual might also completely converge with the identity of the external form, without being attributed the capacity of speech or control over their own impulses and actions.

West Germanic evidence indicates that reflexes of *\*Pur(i)saz* were used as a proper name of the ruler of the realm of the dead, in addition to use as a proper noun. Theonymic usage is considered lost in North Germanic in

relation to the contact-based innovation of *\*Heljō-* as a theonym, reflecting the establishment of a female ruler of Death. The possibility that *\*Pur(i)saz* was also used, like *\*Heljō-*, as a name for the realm of the dead remains highly conjectural and depends on an otherwise idiomatic usage of *Orcus* in Old English. However, use as a place name does not impact on the overall discussion here.

Proto-Germanic *\*Pur(i)saz* was most likely conceived within a dualist structure that opposed him to the celestial god wielding thunder, *\*Pun(a)raz* [‘Thunder’ > ‘Thor’]. Depending on how early the development occurred, the cosmological opposition could potentially have emerged in relation to Pre-Germanic *\*Teiwaz* [‘God’] > Proto-Germanic *\*Tīwaz* or his antecedent.<sup>19</sup> The theonym *\*Pur(i)saz* corresponded to a common noun for agents of chaos. These *\*bur(i)sōs* were likely characterized as dangerous to humans and as threats to divine and social order. *\*Pun(a)raz* may have actively struck and probably hunted them without being in direct opposition to the otherworld ruler *\*Pur(i)saz*. This would be analogous to Old Norse Þórr having conflicts with cosmological *jötnar* and striking supernatural trouble-makers in the human world without any connection to the realm of the dead or its ruler, in contrast to Óðinn and his wife Frigg (e.g., *Baldrs draumar*, *Gylfaginning* 49).

According to this model, *\*pur(i)sōs* would have been the central noun of contemporary Germanic legend traditions about ‘Thunder’ striking ‘devils’, which are so prominent cross-culturally in the Circum-Baltic. The common noun *\*pur(i)saz* was likely a primary word for agents of chaos also in the contemporary human world. This model is consistent with the word’s connotations of malevolence. The Old Norse poetic use of *purs* but not other ‘giant’ words as a poetic equivalent for wise and threatening cosmological actors otherwise called *jötnar* suggests that *\*pur(i)saz* was also historically used for these actors before the semantic field of *jötunn* had extended. This interpretation is consistent with Old High German use of *thurisa* and not other ‘giant’ words to gloss ‘pagan gods’. In the northern language area *\*pur(i)saz* or its derivative became used for an illness agent and as an

agent of curses. These connections seem likely to be an extension of the connection to the realm of death, although it is unclear whether than extension occurred before the proper name dropped out of use, or in the process itself. The evidence points to *\*þur(i)saz* as a primary word for malevolent anthropomorphic supernatural agents. Rather than having the inclusive scope of Old Norse *jötnn*, reflexes of *\*þur(i)saz* seem to lack connections to positive activity and productivity outside of Old Norse poetic use for cosmological actors. The word's use may thus have been centrally structured by connotations of malevolence and potential for harm. However, it is possible that this was only fundamental to actors in the human world, while *\*þur(i)sōs* as cosmological actors were more ambivalent like Old Norse cosmological *jötnar*, and their West Germanic counterparts were never referred to in writing (cf. Old High German *thursa* glossing 'pagan gods').

The evidence further supports *\*þur(i)sas/þur(i)sAR* as the earliest name of the rune **þ**. West Germanic evidence suggests that the rune was named for the theonym, comparable to the rune **t** being named for *\*Tīwaz/\*Tīwar* (> Old Norse *Týr*). The displacement of the theonym *\*þur(i)saz* in the North Germanic area would mean that the name of the rune would only be identified with the common noun.

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### Notes

1. Similar usage as a metaphorical derogatory term is also found in Middle English (Scott 1895: 36).
2. "Orco" is glossed "deaðe" (DOEC, ClG1, D8.1, 4570 (4591)) ['death-DATIVE'] and "orci, .i. mortis" ['orcus-GENITIVE, that is death-GENITIVE'], and also "muþes" (DOEC, AldV 13.1, C31.13.1, 4570 (4591); also DOEC, AldV 1, C31.1, [0900 (900)] ['mouth-GENITIVE']). Rather than "muþes" representing an imagination of death as a 'mouth' like that of Behemoth, Petra Hofmann is probably correct that "muþes" is a scribal error for *morþes* ['death-GENITIVE'] (2008: 136n.35).
3. Bosworth et al. interpret *orc* and *þyrs* in this gloss as a compound *orcþyrs* (s.v. 'orcþyrs'), which, with their interpretation of *orc* as referring to an infernal realm of the dead (s.v. 'orc'), can be considered

semantically parallel to the compound *heldeoful*. However, the number of glosses of Latin *Orcus* with *orc* as its Old English equivalent suggest instead that a copyist has simply brought together different translations of *Orcus* (noting incidentally that the transcription of the gloss seems to have a space between *orc* and *þyrs*).

4. *Ditis* is a form of what had been a rare Latin word *dis* ['divinity'] that began being used exclusively for the god of the underworld, sometimes with the epithet *pater* ['father'].
5. Image source: [www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0878/321/small\\_unifr.ch](http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0878/321/small_unifr.ch).
6. Image source: [https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:Abc\\_nord.jpg&filetimestamp=20090312090219](https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:Abc_nord.jpg&filetimestamp=20090312090219).
7. The common view that *áss, æsir* was an ethnonym for one race of gods among others is false. This view is rooted in the euhemerized history of *Ynglinga saga*, and in the Prologue of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, where the word is etymologized as referring to their origins from 'Asia'. Contrary to popular belief today, *áss, æsir* was simply a poetic synonym for *goð* ['god'] used mainly in poetry and also in some elevated forms of speech (e.g., oaths) (see further Frog 2021a and also note 11 below).
8. Eddic poems are cited according to the edition of Neckel & Kuhn 1963.
9. Motz writes and translates this: "*þursa skeggr* – 'giant's beard'" (1986: 188).
10. However, Old High German glosses as well as vernacular words appearing in charms written in Latin preserve a variety of comparanda for this type of vocabulary, such as *liodrūna* (Steinmeyer 1878: 247) ['song-sorceress'], which corresponds directly to Old English *leodruna*. The lack of evidence in this case is thus noteworthy.
11. In his mythography, Snorri Sturluson opposes the Old Norse word *vanir* to *goð* ['gods'] in both his references to the war at the beginning of the world (*Gylfaginning* 23; *Skáldskarmál* G57). It is thus clear that he did not view *vanir* as one of two races within the category *goð*. It is instead most probable that *vanir* referred to *jötnar* as the opponents of the gods in other conflicts throughout the mythology (Frog 2021a: 168n.168). In this case, the entry of the god Njǫrðr and his son Freyr as well as the goddess Freyja would constitute the incorporation of *jötnar* into the community of the gods, which is otherwise found only for goddesses (e.g., Skaði, daughter of the gods' adversary Þjazi), while Loki has been interpreted as having an ambiguous status because his mother was a goddess and his father a giant.
12. See however note 3 above on Bosworth and others' reading "orcþyrs" rather than "orc, þyrs".
13. That the use of the rune in magic connected it with manipulating *þyrsas* and renaming the rune was aimed at breaking that link is improbable, since there is no evidence of this type of manipulation of *þyrsas* in Old English as attested in Old Norse. That the ideology motivating the change concerned not paganism, but a conception that naming these agents



could summon them, would not account for *tir* and *os* being reinterpreted rather than renewed.

14. Bernard Mees (2015: 3) connects the question of renewal of the rune name with the etymology of *\*pur(i)saz* as derived from the Proto-Indo-European stem *\*trh<sub>3</sub>-* [‘wound’], from which *þorn* and its cognates are also derived with a *no*-stem, *\*trh<sub>3</sub>-no-* (see also Kroon 2013: 552–553). Accordingly, a substitution of *þorn* for *þyrs* “may well not have been due purely to chance substitution of an overly unlucky (even demonic) label for this most Germanic of letterforms” (Mees 2015: 3).
15. There is an example in Old English of the location *Hel* being attributed speech in a dialogue with Satan (*DOEC*, Nic (A) B8.5.2.1, 0210 (20.1.1)).
16. There are widespread examples of traditions in which ‘Death’ is a personified agent independent of the ruler of the realm of the dead, but this agent interacts with humans in their world and is a cause of death (Березкин & Дувакин, n.d., type h7); *Hel* only appears as a ruler of the realm of the dead; under the name Proserpina, she makes an appearance in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (III.iii.7) before the dying Balderus, but she only informs him of his coming death and is not responsible for his death *per se*; she does not take him to the realm of death herself, but says that she will receive him.
17. Citations to skaldic poetry are by sigla according to the Skaldic Project Database.
18. It may be tempting to identify this etymology with those proposed for *\*dvergaz* and *\*pur(i)saz* that would be primarily interpreted as linked to semantics of illness. However, there is a lack of evidence that *þotunn* or its cognates were used as words for illness agents, and the lack of evidence outside of Old Norse for *\*pur(i)saz* as an illness agent makes it dubious to presume that these uses of the word reflect the historical semantics on which it was coined.
19. I have discussed elsewhere (Frog 2017: 100–111) a cross-cultural religious change, in which the inherited god called ‘Sky’ was displaced by a divinity called ‘God’ in Baltic, Germanic, and an Indo-Iranian language among Indo-European languages and in Maric and probably Mordvinic among Uralic languages. This change is only visible in the lexicon while remaining otherwise obscure. A relationship to *\*Pur(i)saz* is thus purely speculative, but it has the appeal of a symmetry between the central celestial divinity being named by a common noun for divinities and the counter-role being named by a common noun for agents of chaos opposed to the divinities and their social order. The etymological connection of Lithuanian *Velnias*, Latvian *Vēlns*, to ‘death’ parallels the connection of *\*Pur(i)saz* to death and both are also in the dualist structure discussed above as well as being both a proper name and common noun for agents of chaos opposed to divine and human order. Within the broader Indo-European context, these parallels must be attributable to historical contacts. That the change from ‘Sky’ to ‘God’ is also attributable to contacts and concerns a celestial agent that could participate in the dualist structure makes it reasonable to

consider that these may all belong to the system of changes that spread across language groups.

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Communications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

### Newsletter

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## Mimir's Head as Skull Cup, the Conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir War and the Drink of Sovereignty

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*Abstract: The proposal offered here goes some way towards reconciling the main divergent accounts centred on Mimir, the one concerning his well and the other concerning his severed head (Simpson 1962–65). The missing link is the assumed preservation of the head by removing flesh from the skull rather than by mummifying it. A form of the Mimir story in the Æsir-Vanir war is posited in which Mimir's head was preserved as a skull cup and interaction with it was through drinking from it. This in turn offers fresh insights on the drink it contained both in myth and in the ritual of inauguration.*

### Skull Cups

In his entry on Mimir in *Norse Mythology*, John Lindow points to an article by A. LeRoy Andrews and says (2002: 232): '[Andrews] offered a satisfyingly romantic interpretation, making Mimir's head a drinking skull (there is, sad to report, no evidence of drinking from skulls).'

Lindow's dismissal of the idea of 'a drinking vessel fashioned from the skull of Mimir' offered by Andrews (1928: 168) may owe something to a negative response to the misconception that the vikings drank from skulls which stemmed from Ole Worm's mistaken understanding of the lines in *Krákumál* 25 (McTurk 2017: 706):

Drekkum bjór af bragði  
ór bjúgvíðum hausa.

Worm in his *Runir seu Danica Literatura Antiquissima* (1651: 203) translated them as:

Bibemus cerevisiam brevi  
Ex concavis crateribus craniorum.

We will soon drink beer  
from the hollow drinking cups of skulls (My translation).

In his commentary Worm added: "*Hausa* crania. Sperabant Heroes se in aula Othini bibituros ex craniis eorum quos occiderant."

[*'Hausa* skulls. The Heroes hoped to drink in Óðinn's hall from the skulls of those whom they had killed' (My translation)]. It is recognized today that the reference is to drinking horns not skulls, as shown in the translation by Rory McTurk (2017: 706) where the meaning of the kenning is given in capitals:

We'll soon be drinking beer  
out of the curved trees of skulls [DRINKING  
HORNS].

However, in spite of Worm's misconception, and granted that skull cups were not in everyday use by vikings living or dead, the exceptional use of skulls for drinking cannot be ruled out. Skull drinking cups feature memorably in the story of the smith Völundr, who takes his revenge on Niðuðr by killing his two sons (or two of his three sons) and sending cups made from their skulls to their father, as related in *Völundarkviða* 25 and *Þiðriks saga af Bern* (Bertelsen 1905–11, I, 119). Drinking cups were also made from the skulls of the two sons of Atli and Guðrún as related in *Atlamál in groenlenzco* 82, *Skáldskaparmál* 42 and *Völsunga saga* (Finch 1965: 72).

In a broader Germanic context, according to Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, Alboin, king of the Lombards, had a cup made from the skull of Cunimund, king of the

Gepids, after he defeated him at the battle of Asfeld in 567 CE. Paul the Deacon wrote:

In this battle Alboin killed Cunimund, and made out of his head, which he carried off, a drinking goblet. This kind of a goblet is called among them ‘scala,’ but in the Latin language ‘patera.’ (Foulke 1907: 51)

Foulke is using ‘goblet’ in its now obsolete sense of a cup without a stem and base. The Roman *patera* was a shallow dish for libations and drinking.

A case among the Celtic Boii of Cisalpine Gaul demonstrates the ritual use of a skull-cup formed from the head of the leader of their opponents. The Boii destroyed two Roman legions in an ambush at the Battle of Silva Litana in 216 CE during the Second Punic War and the Roman general Lucius Postumius Albinus was killed. Livy gives this account of what followed:

The Boii, having cut off his head, carried it and the spoils they stripped off his body, in triumph into the most sacred temple they had. Afterwards they cleansed the head according to their custom, and having covered the skull with chased gold, used it as a cup for libations in their solemn festivals, and a drinking cup for their high priests and other ministers of the temple. (Livy 23.24, Spillan & Edmonds 1849).

Herodotus, in his description of the Scythians, gives a clear account of the making of the skull cups and shows that they were made from the heads of kin as well as of outsiders:

The heads ... of their bitterest enemies, they treat this way. Each saws off all the part beneath the eyebrows, and cleans the rest. If he is a poor man, then he covers the outside with a piece of raw hide, and so makes use of it; but if he is rich, he covers the head with the raw hide, and gilds the inside of it and uses it for a drinking-cup. Such a cup a man also makes out of the head of his own kinsman with whom he has been feuding, and whom he has defeated in single combat before the king; and if guests whom he honors visit him he will serve them with these heads, and show how the dead were his kinsfolk who fought him and were beaten by him; this they call manly valor. (Herodotus 4.65, Godley 1921)

Having seen how and when skull cups were made, and what use was made of them, the

topic of Mimir’s possible connection with a skull cup can be taken up again.

### *Mimir’s Head and Mimir’s Well*

A passage from *Ynglinga saga* chapter 7 shows Óðinn employing Mimir’s head as one of the means of associating with the dead.

Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi ór ǫðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga. Fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn.

Óðinn kept Mimir’s head by him, and it told him much news from other worlds, and sometimes he awakened the dead from the earth or sat himself under hanged men. Because of this he was called *draugadróttinn* (‘lord of ghosts’) or *hangadróttinn* (‘lord of the hanged’) (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 10).

Although Mimir is called *inn vitrasti maðr* [‘a very wise man’] in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 4, it does not seem that there is any necessity to think that he had been considered wise when he was alive, since the specific knowledge that he has belongs to the world of the dead. Once he has been killed, he can communicate that knowledge to the living, as put in context by Stephen Mitchell (2017: 291). As an entire mummified head, he could be imagined as communicating in speech through his mouth. If the link with the dead man, and so with the knowledge of the dead, was through the upper part of the skull used as a dish or cup, communication would more likely be through what it contained. In this way a link would be made with the large container, the well of knowledge presided over by Mimir as described in *Völuspá* 29 and *Gylfaginning* 15.

The story of the bargain by which Óðinn gives one of his eyes in exchange for knowledge from the well is probably a fresh creation which replaced an earlier cosmic treatment of Óðinn’s eye that can be made out in the stories of Geirrøðr, Balar and Ysbaddaden Chief Giant.<sup>1</sup> However, the idea that the well is a source of knowledge is an independent one that is relevant in this discussion.

Other elements that remain of interest in the accounts of the well are that the liquid in the

well is mead and that the drinker does not drink directly from the well but from a vessel that has been filled from it. The vessel is called a horn by Snorri and this might seem to be in contradiction to the skull cup, but it can be noted that the two objects are functionally the same although differing in shape. It can be noted, too, that the horn used for drinking was part of an animal skull as a skull cup was part of a human skull, and both could be replicated in metal without any component of horn or bone. Accordingly, we have a situation where the concept of the skull cup could have been retained in the drinking horn (which differed in shape but had the same function) and in a metal bowl (which had the same shape but differed in material of composition) or, in fact, from a metal horn which differed in both respects from a cup made from a human skull.

In *Sigurdrífumál* 14, Óðinn is said to have derived thought runes from liquid that dripped

ór hausi Heiðdraupnis  
ok ór horni Hoddrofnis.

from Heiðdraupnir's skull  
and from Hoddrofnir's horn (Trans.  
Larrington 2014: 164).

These lines seem to equate skull and horn. The two names are otherwise unknown but have been thought to be names of Mimir (Bellows 1923: 393).<sup>2</sup> Larrington notes: “the liquid referred to here may be identical in some way with the mead of poetry” (2014: 304).

### ***The Conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir War***

The exchange of hostages at the conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir war in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 4 appears to be an addition to the underlying myth but it does include one suggestive feature at the point where Mimir's head is concerned:

Þá tóku þeir Mími ok hálshjoggu ok sendu  
hofuðit Ásum. Óðinn tók hofuðit ok smurði  
urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar  
yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við  
hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti.

Then they [the Vanir] took Mimir and beheaded him and sent his head to the Æsir. Óðinn took the head and smeared it with herbs that prevented it from decaying, and recited spells over it and imbued it with magic power so that it spoke to him and told

him many secret things (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 7–8).

According to this passage, it was Mimir's entire head that was sent by the Vanir to the Æsir and received by Óðinn, but if it was a skull cup that was being carried it could have been filled with mead and the movement here seems significant. When the action of conveying a cup of mead from one opposed faction to the other is related to the ending of a war, it seems as if this action may bring it about and seal the agreement. The person carrying the cup also acquires significance, and it is suggested here that the cupbearer was a woman, as was quite common in ceremonial situations (Enright 2013), and that the reconciliation between the Æsir and the Vanir included the creation of a marriage-bond, which was often the means of bringing warring parties together.

This suggestion has the virtue of giving a motivation for the fighting to stop. As the narrative stands in *Ynglinga saga*, it is not at all clear why the exchange of hostages, with bad faith on the side of the Æsir in providing the inadequate hostage Hœnir and the retaliatory murder of the hostage Mimir by the Vanir, should lead to reconciliation. If the Vanir sent out a woman with the cup of sovereignty (discussed below) to offer to one of the Æsir who would thus become king of the whole newly formed community, a reconciliation becomes intelligible. And here it is worth pausing to consider the Æsir-Vanir war together with the Roman-Sabine war to which it has been compared, mainly in relation to the work of Georges Dumézil.

Lindow noted that Dumézil first thought of his three functions of the sacred, physical force and prosperity as being tied to the social classes of nobles, warriors and farmers but later considered them to be ideological constructs.<sup>3</sup> Lindow then went on to express his appreciation of Dumézil's assessment of the Æsir-Vanir war:

[P]erhaps the major contribution of Dumézil's analysis of Old Norse mythology was to show convincingly that the war between the Æsir and Vanir was an ideological myth, not the reflection of an actual war between groups with different cult practices, as had been the prevailing view in

the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries.  
(Lindow 2021: 134)

C. Scott Littleton gave first place to the same component of Dumézil's work in his discussion of it in the Old Norse context:

Closely associated with [his] tripartite model of the Indo-European ideology are several specific themes worthy of note. One involves the concept of a war pitting representatives of the first two functions against those of the third ... . The best examples of this theme are found in the Roman account of the Sabine War – which, like most of early Roman 'history,' is but historicized myth – and the Norse myth of the conflict between the Æsir (Odin, Tyr, Thor, et al.) and the Vanir (Frey, Njord, et al.).<sup>4</sup>

Littleton adds in a note that 'the third-function group is reconciled to the rest of the system, and there is an honorable peace'.

It is worth observing what it is that brings about this peace in the Roman-Sabine case, for it may have a bearing on the present discussion. The war began when the Romans abducted Sabine women and made them their wives. Some years later, as Plutarch reports, when there was a lull during a battle, the Sabine women rushed between the two armies and called on their fathers on the one side and their husbands on the other to desist from fighting and make peace, and this was accordingly done (Plutarch, *Romulus* 19, Perrin 1914). In this rather unconventional way, a marriage alliance was formed, and I suggest that underlying the account of hostages in the Old Norse case there was the creation of a tie through marriage.

This possibility raises a fundamental question. If this had been the event that ended the war, why was it not retained? My answer is that it related to the marriage of Þórr and Freyja, and that the whole Germanic pantheistic system which had once centred on Þórr as king was realigned at some point in history when Óðinn, starting from his position as war god, acquired the role of sovereign and Þórr and Freyja, instead of being a couple, were given the lesser substitutes of Sif and Oðr as partners. This is a vast topic which I have begun to explore in the light of the theory that structuring like that picked up by Dumézil was formed in a tribal society millennia before the

Christian era,<sup>5</sup> and that, in the Old Norse case, study of the structure can give access to an earlier layer of narrative and meaning than the extant literary texts provide. In the tribal context, it would be no surprise to find both the antagonism expressed in war and its resolution through marriage, since intermarrying moieties may be opposed to each other and anthropologists report statements like "We marry those whom we fight" (Barnard & Good 1984: 139).

The princess chooses the man who is to be her husband by approaching him in the assembly and offering him drink from the cup she carries in two slightly varying accounts of the foundation of Massilia (now Marseille), in Gaul, which is a notable instance of this Indo-European custom in the Celtic context (McCone 1990: 111; Lyle 2008: 358–360). The practice ties in well with the matrilineal system of succession which is implied in the pronouncement of the mythical Irish king Eochaid Fedlech that "no son should rule Ireland after his father for ever" (O'Neill 1905, 174–175, quoted in Lyle 2016: 138). Patrilineal succession is more evident historically in Indo-European societies, but it should be noted that, in spite of the foregrounding of the female implicit in matrilineal succession, the system recognizes the patriline and that it encourages inheritance from a grandfather so that transformation from a matrilineal system to the more fully attested patrilineal one would be facilitated.

### ***The Drink of Sovereignty***

Even without the suggestion of a cup of drink offered in a marriage ceremony, it was clear that mead stood in some sort of relationship to the ending of the Æsir-Vanir war. As Lindow observes:

It is important to recall ... that the outcome of the settlement between Æsir and Vanir was not only the incorporation of the two groups, but also the creation of the mead of poetry. This substance is what made wisdom and memory possible, since both were encoded in verse (Lindow 2021: 34).

The story of Mímir's head in *Ynglinga saga* given above is told in the context of a war between humans but the Æsir and Vanir are presented as gods when the theme of the mead



of poetry is introduced in *Skáldskaparmál* G57 in response to a question about the craft of poetry:

Þat vǫru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósaett við þat fólk er Vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund at þeir gengu hvárirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum.

The origin of it was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace-conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides went up to a vat and spat their spittle into it (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 61).

The story then takes a loop, returning at a later point to Ásgarð where the liquid that had its basis in the peace-making spittle was caught in vats. This narrative composition can be brought out by a summary of the key points relevant to this discussion.

The spittle of the gods as a symbol of truce was regarded as so precious that the gods formed it into a man called Kvasir who had great knowledge and travelled about the world teaching. He was killed by two dwarfs who used his blood to make mead.

[Fjalars ok Galars] létu renna blóð hans í tvau ker ok einn ketil, ok heitir sá Óðreyrir, en kerin heita Són ok Boðn. Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjöðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr.

[Fialar and Galar] poured his blood into two vats and a pot, and the latter was called Odrerir, but the vats were called Son and Bodn. They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 62).

A giant called Suttungr got the vessels of mead from the dwarfs, and he kept them within a mountain where they were guarded by his daughter, Gunnlōð. Óðinn made his way into the mountain and lay with Gunnlōð for three nights and she allowed him to drink three draughts of the mead.

Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann al<t> ór Óðreri, en í qðrum ór Boðn, í inu<m> þriðja ór Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjöðinn.

In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, and in the second out of Bodn, in the

third out of Son, and then he had all the mead (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 63).

He escaped from the mountain pursued by Suttungr, both of them in the shape of eagles. When Óðinn arrived back at Ásgarð he spat out nearly all the drink into vats that the gods had put out ready to receive it and so made it available to the Æsir and to poets. In his fright, however, Óðinn sent some of the mead backwards and this is the drink of poetasters.

Svava Jakobsdóttir, working with the parallel story in *Hávamál*, points out that, whereas Snorri is treating the mead of poetry, the brief treatment at *Hávamál* 105 should be interpreted as applying to the drink of sovereignty:

Gunnlōð mér um gaf  
gullnum stóli á  
drykk ins dýra mjaðar[.]

Gunnlod gave me on her golden throne a drink of the precious mead (Trans. Larrington 2014: 26).

After Gunnlōð has offered the sovereignty to Óðinn in this way, she has intercourse with him as indicated at *Hávamál* 108. Svava observes (2002: 34):

As far as the mead itself is concerned, it is worth noting that nowhere in *Hávamál* is it either associated with the art of poetry or intended particularly for poets and scholars, as it is in *Snorra Edda*. In the two stanzas where it is mentioned, stanzas 105 and 140, it is not called anything other than ‘inn dýri miðr’ (the precious mead). *Hávamál*’s precious mead is able to do something other than make men into poets or scholars.

Svava defines what this “something other” is when she says in her conclusion that “*Hávamál*’s ‘precious mead’ has to do with kings”, and she compares with Irish stories where a goddess-figure called ‘Sovereignty’ gives the hero authority to reign by granting him mead and lying with him. Karen Bek-Pedersen draws on Svava’s work in her study of the norns and finds that the motif of a royal consecration ceremony “does seem to be latently present” in *Hávamál* (2011: 102). Following this, Bek-Pedersen reflects (2011: 103):

The mead, of poetry or of sovereignty, is not an exact equivalent to Urðarbrunnr [‘Weird’s well’, Faulkes 1995: 19], but there is a level of correspondence nonetheless. The mead seems to relate especially clearly to Mímisbrunnr [‘Mímir’s well’] with its connotations of wisdom and knowledge and as the object of Óðinn’s quest in *Völuspá* 46, where he seeks out Mímisbrunnr to get counsel from Mímir. Thus, Óðinn seeks out three wells with similar intentions: Mímisbrunnr in *Völuspá* 46 and *Gylfaginning* 51; Urðarbrunnr in *Hávamál* 111; and Gunnlōð’s mead in *Hávamál* 104–10. All three sources of liquid are connected to wisdom and to some kind of power, be it in the form of knowledge or sovereignty.

It is valuable to consider the attributes of the various sources in this way. The mead of poetry is equatable with the mead of wisdom and knowledge as indicated here and in the quotation from Lindow at the beginning of this section, but it seems possible to distinguish it from the mead of sovereignty and Snorri’s account suggests how this can be done through its mention of three containers and three draughts. Þórr also drinks three draughts on his visit to the court of the giant Útgarðaloki in *Gylfaginning* 46 and the original context of this motif may have been his claim to the kingship. The Indo-European king embodied all three of the functions of the sacred, physical force and prosperity (Lincoln 1986: 160–161), and so a drink taken in three draughts might symbolically secure all three capacities for him. The drink of the poets would then be only one of the three draughts and would be the one corresponding to the sacred which was most highly valued, while the drink of sovereignty would be all three together. As part of the magnification of the role of Óðinn from his basic identity as war god he became poet as well as king and so both the specific draught of poetry and wisdom and the triple drink of sovereignty were appropriated by him. There also seems to be a trace of his original connection with the warrior function in the toasts drunk at royal inauguration feasts in Scandinavia.

### ***The Inaugural Triple Toast as Genealogical Claim to the Right to Inherit***

The discussion in this section rests in part on the premise that ritual in medieval Scandinavia may have retained traces of the importance of a shallow lineage that reflected the shallow lineage of the gods, although the fictive genealogies of the Scandinavian kings actually reached back over many generations and linked them to the gods as progenitors in the pagan context and to Adam in the Christian context. This awareness of deep historical time was not available in the thought-world of the totally oral culture in which the Proto-Indo-Europeans created their cosmology. A king had to establish his authority through a link to the divine (Helms 1998: 7, 37–39, 75–76), but this could be done with a quite shallow lineage, and it seems that the Proto-Indo-Europeans had the concept of a kindred reaching back to only three generations before the present and that royal succession was matrilineal with two patrilineal royal lines descending from the ancestress (Lyle 2012a). While the matrilineal concept was still in force, these two lines supplied the king in alternate generations; when this concept was lost the result could be two separate lines with patrilineal inheritance, as is perhaps to be found in the Scandinavian context with lines stemming from Óðinn and Freyr (Steinsland 2011).

With a shallow matrilineal lineage, each new king needed only to establish a link to the two kings who immediately preceded him – his maternal uncle and his grandfather – and to his father who provided the biological link to the grandfather. In myth, these can be treated as the ‘three fathers’ of the king (Lyle 2012a: 62–66, 77–78). It is argued here that the claimant, when accepted, enters into the role played in the theogony by Þórr, who held the position of king before this was transferred to Óðinn. The claimant’s legitimacy is established by his genealogical connection to three male predecessors who correspond to three gods belonging to the generations before Þórr.

To study the divine side of the equation, it is necessary to distinguish the old gods from their successors. According to Snorri’s account in *Gylfaginning* 6, the originating female Bestla bore three sons called Óðinn, Vili and Vé, and Óðinn is clearly one of the old gods

and has adult sons in the mythological literature. Njörðr is also a father god; his name was possibly an alternative for the name Vili, and Týr was possibly an alternative name for the god called Vé. The sequence in the Scylding dynasty found in Saxo and *Beowulf* indicates that the three male predecessors were in two generations, and Týr seems the best fit for the grandfather role and Óðinn for that of the mother's brother (Lyle 2012a: 81; 2021b).

The inauguration of a king was the occasion of his marriage, as discussed above, but it was also the funeral feast commemorating his predecessor and it is possible to explore this feast in medieval Scandinavian sources (Sundqvist 2002: 239–255; 2022). One of the elements in the choice of a king was his descent and historically an extended genealogy might have been presented at inaugurations (Sundqvist 2002: 136–159). The suggestion made here is that the inaugural ritual may also have retained the 'three fathers' sequence in its rites of legitimation through the ceremonial offering of three draughts of drink. The appropriate equivalent divine recipients of the three drink-offerings made in Scandinavia, in the terms set out above, would be Óðinn, Njörðr and Týr. I suggest that the force of the drink-offerings can be understood through this interpretation, but the evidence is slight and actual practice in the medieval period is unlikely to have had all the necessary components, especially with regard to Týr, whose role appears to have been substantially taken over by Óðinn.

However, the available literature does include material of great value, including the account in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 36 of a feast held at Uppsala by the legendary King Ingjaldr to commemorate his father King Qnundr.

Þat var síðvenja í þann tíma, þar er erfi skyldi gera eptir konunga eða jarla, þá skyldi sá, er gerði ok til arfs skyldi leiða, sitja á skörinni fyrir hásetinu allt þar til, er inn væri borit full, þat er kallat var bragafull, skyldi sá þá standa upp í móti bragafulli ok strengja heit, drekka af fullit síðan, síðan skyldi hann leiða í háseti, þat sem átti faðir hans. Var hann þá kominn til arfs alls eptir hann. Nú var svá hér gort, at þá er bragafull kom inn, stóð upp Ingjaldr konungr ok tók við einu miklu dýrshorni, strengði hann þá heit, at hann

skyldi auka ríki sitt hálfu í hverja höfuðátt eða deyja ella, drakk af síðan af horninu.

It was customary at that time that when commemorative feasts were being held for kings or jarls, the one who was holding it and was about to come into his inheritance must sit on the step in front of the high seat right on until the toast that was called *bragarfull* was carried in; he was then to stand up to receive the *bragarfull* and swear an oath, then drink off the toast, and then he was to be set in the high seat that his father had had. Then he had entered fully into the inheritance after him. On this occasion it was done in such a way that when the *bragarfull* came in, Ingjaldr stood up and took a large animal's horn, then swore an oath that he would extend his kingdom to double the size in all four directions or die in the attempt, and then drank off the contents of the horn (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 37).

In this account, the heir was in position, seated on the step in front of the high seat, but the action began when the special drinking vessel "was carried in". Nothing is said of who carried it in, but in the schema offered here it was when the royal woman brought in the special drinking vessel that the ceremony proceeded. After taking the vessel, Ingjaldr swore an oath and drank off the toast.

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 35, where Snorri gives an account of Sveinn Forkbeard's funeral feast for his father Haraldr the toast and the oath are both mentioned, though in the reverse order, and there is the important additional information that three toasts were drunk – first to King Haraldr and then to Christ and St Michael.

Fyrsta dag at veizlunni, áðr Sveinn konungr stigi í háseti fōður síns, þá drakk hann minni hans ok strengði heit, áðr þrír vetr væri liðnir, at hann skyldi kominn með her sinn til Englands ok drepa Aðalráð konung eða reka hann ór landi. Þat minni skyldu allir drekka, þeir er at erfinu váru. ... En er þat minni var af drukkit, þá skyldi drekka Krists minni allir men, [...]. It þriðja var Mikjál's minni, ok drukku þat allir.

The first day at the banquet, before King Sveinn was to go up into his father's high-seat, he drank his toast and made a vow that before three winters had passed he would have come with his army to England and have killed King Aðalráðr or driven him from the

country. Everyone who was at the memorial banquet had to drink that toast. ... And when that toast had been drunk, then everyone had to drink Christ's toast, [...]. The third one was Mikjáll's toast, and everyone drank that (Trans. Finlay and Faulkes 2011–16: 170).

The Christian overlay is absent from the earlier version of King Sveinn's funeral feast in *Fagrskinna* chapter 20 where the men at the feast drank *enum rikustu fraendum sínum. eða Þór eða ǫðrum guðum sínum, þá er heiðni var* ['to their most important kinsmen, or to Þórr, or to other of their gods, in heathen times' (Trans. Finlay 2004: 97)]. This is a general statement but the names of three heathen gods are given in the more specific report in *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 14 where three toasts are mentioned as in Snorri's account of King Sveinn's feast:

[E]r gerði veizluna ok hǫfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skyldi fyrst Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar.

[T]he one who was holding the banquet and who was the chief person there, he had then to dedicate the toast and all the ritual food; first would be Óðinn's toast – that was drunk to victory and to the power of the king – and then Njǫrðr's toast and Freyr's toast for prosperity and peace (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 98).

As a young god, Freyr is not relevant in the genealogical context and is a duplicate of Njǫrðr here with both gods being called on for the same result. The pagan triple toast might once have been completed by a toast to Týr, who is regarded as the god of the sacred, and have related to the knowledge that has been found to be one of the necessary attainments of a king (Sundqvist 2002: 156; Fleck 1970).

If the idea of ancestors was present and was being loosely applied to the king, offering the toasts might have named any predecessors of note rather than his immediate relatives but the basic shape of the pagan triple toast can perhaps be expressed in the following formulation that I offer as a hypothetical example and have put in the mouth of Sveinn Forkbeard:

I drink first to the memory of my father, King Haraldr, and to Óðinn for victory. I drink

second to the memory of my [relationship and name] and to Njǫrðr for prosperity. I drink third to the memory of my [relationship and name] and to Týr for knowledge.

In a matrilineal system, the comparable series would be:

1. Toast to mother's brother and Óðinn for victory.
2. Toast to father and Njǫrðr for prosperity.
3. Toast to grandfather and Týr for knowledge.

By making three toasts of this kind, the new king would have connected himself with the past and called down blessings for his reign. If the drinking vessel at his inauguration was an actual skull cup, or a symbolic equivalent of one, a connection would also have been made through it with the world of the ancestors.

### Conclusion

The representation of Mimir in the literature can be seen as corresponding roughly on the human level to a skull cup made from the head of a sacrificed man and used for ritual purposes, including the sealing of the agreement to end the Æsir-Vanir war. The mead contained in the skull cup or an equivalent vessel can be conceived of both generally as the giver of sovereignty with its threefold power and specifically in three separate draughts as the giver of knowledge and poetry to the scholar and poet, of prowess to the warrior and of prosperity to the farmer.

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### Notes

1. See Lyle 2019 and 2021a and the references there. The identification of gaze with a missile such as a spear or ingot is suggested by episodes in the Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* and the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* where the gaze is that of the gigantic god Balar or the giant Ysbaddaden. In the parallel episode in *Skáldskaparmál* 18, the ingot that is thrown by the giant Geirrǫðr and returned by Þórr can be seen as an instantiation of Geirrǫðr's gaze which could potentially be concretized as his eye as missile. If Óðinn were the contestant with Þórr, as he is in *Hárbarðsljóð*, this episode would give a fitting cosmic setting for the loss of his eye, which could, in a hypothetical earlier form of the story, have been hurled as missile at Þórr and thrown back by Þórr to

become a star in the same way as Þórr threw the giant Þjazi's eyes up into the sky.

2. For an alternative view, see von See et al. 2006: 575–576.
3. Dumézil's initial formulation, as noted by Margaret Clunies Ross (1994: I, 16n.4, quoted in Lyle 2012b: 7), was most unlikely to have applied to the society in the Indo-European homeland before dispersal, and his later formulation is rather nebulous. However, the functional triad that Dumézil identified can now be seen to rest securely on the concepts associated with age grades. In addition to the study Lyle 1997 which follows on from McCone 1987, see the article by Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Andrey V. Korotayev which was drawn upon by David Graeber (2017: 416–417). The Russian anthropologists say (2003: 122–123):

The sociopolitical organization of pastoral proto-Indo-Europeans appears to have been characterized by a developed age-class system. ... With the formation of stratified societies among the Indo-Europeans, the age-class stratification tended to transform into a social stratification system. Within this process, the age-class of initiated youngsters transformed into an estate/varna of warriors/political leaders (Indian *kshatryas* or, say, the noble estate of medieval western Europe). The age-class of elders transformed into an estate/varna of priests – Indian *brahmins* or the priestly estate of medieval western Europe. The age-class of mature married men transformed into an estate/varna of peasants – Indian *vayshyas* or the European third estate.

4. Littleton 1973: xiii. A sympathetic overview of Dumézil's work is available in Littleton 1982 but account should also be taken of negative responses such as can be found in Page 1978–79, Belier 1991, and Schlerath 1995–96. The notion of the three functions in isolation may now be being superseded by an awareness of their operation within the larger framework of a tenfold pantheon, as proposed in Lyle 2012a, 2021b, 2021–22, 2022.
5. The anthropologist Nicholas J. Allen, considering Dumézil's functional findings in the Indo-European materials known in history, commented (2000: 58): “The only reasonable explanation for these findings is that the speakers of proto-Indo-European, who were of course non-literate tribals, possessed a primitive classification.”

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Communications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

### Newsletter

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## Binding Monsters in Swedish-Speaking Finland, Scandinavia, Finland, and Karelia: A Case Study from Åland

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*Abstract: Scholars have widely debated whether mythological motifs move through inheritance within language families or through diffusion within geographic areas. This debate has been especially central to the comparison of Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian mythology and folklore. This article gives an example of a mythic motif crossing linguistic boundaries, namely through an Ålandic legend about a ritual specialist binding a sea monster through the use of magic.*

There has been much scholarly discussion about shared features of mythologies and whether mythic motifs spread through inheritance within a language family or through diffusion within neighboring geographic spaces (see e.g. Krohn 1931: 5–9). Some scholars have applied this debate to Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian mythology and folklore (e.g. Haavio 1967; Siikala 1992 [2002]; DuBois 1999; Tolley 2009; Ahola 2014; Frog 2019a). Since the languages in question belong to different language families, parallels cannot be attributed to a common linguistic heritage. This article takes up one such case, which has been little discussed, concerning the motif of a ritual specialist binding a sea monster with magic. The lack of attention received by this motif is attributable to the rather weak parallel between examples from Old Norse and Karelian mythology and the relevant post-medieval folklore having remained outside of academic discussion.

In medieval Iceland, there is a myth that recounts how Óðinn cast the Miðgarðsormr, or world serpent, into the sea, where it will stay encircling all lands with its tail in its mouth (an *ouroboros* image) until the world ends (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 26). Centuries later, a seventeenth-century Swedish folk legend tells of Kettil Runske, a sorcerer who stole magic runes from Oden. Kettil is said to have bound

a serpent to the bottom of a lake by carving runes on a stone. The serpent would stay there until it grew large enough to encircle an island and bite its own tail, then the world would come to an end (af Klintberg 2010: 315).

A poem from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Viena, Karelia, tells the tale of *Jumalan poika* [‘God’s lad’], who set out to sea in a boat accompanied by saints. Iku Turso, a sea troll, tried to capsize their boat; in retaliation, Jumalan Poika grabbed Iku Turso by the ears and threw him to the bottom of the sea, where he would remain until the end of time (*SKVR* I<sub>1</sub> 339; Kuusi 1977: 182).

At first glance, the Scandinavian and Karelian traditions seem as though they could have developed independently from one another. However, there is a folk legend from Åland that shares features with both and may bridge the divide, so to speak, between the two traditions. Recorded just several decades after the Kettil Runske legend, this Swedish-Finnish legend tells how a *runkarl* [‘sorcerer’; literally ‘rune man’] bound a troll to the bottom of a swamp by carving two rune stones; there the troll will stay until the runes fade away (Enqvist 1938: 163). This Ålandic legend could be an example that illustrates how mythic motifs travel across linguistic borders and fuse with local traditions to make something new.

This is not to say that the Karelian poem about Iku Turso came directly from the Icelandic myth about the Miðgarðsormr; rather, that Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian cultures did not exist in isolation and have a long history of contact with each other. Anna-Leena Siikala argues that, instead of direct borrowing, the similarities between Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian lore come from a shared source tradition that was once common to an expansive geographic area, but is now only preserved in the peripheries of Northern Europe (1992: 275). Thomas A. DuBois builds on this idea and contends that not only is there a shared tradition of belief, but also a shared tradition of structure and style (2003: 233; see also Stepanova 2011). Although one cannot say for certain when and how these similar narratives developed in the oral tradition, it is clear that they share fundamental features. The recordings we have of the narratives move both temporally and geographically from medieval Iceland to nineteenth-century Karelia. The Ålandic legend seems to present a link between the Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian traditions.

### **Swedish-Speaking Finland**

The Åland Islands have largely been a place of encounters between eastern and western cultures in Northern Europe for millennia. Sailing technologies and economic networks of the Bronze Age incited the mobility of Pre-Germanic-speaking cultures across the Baltic Sea. This mobility led to the establishment of trading posts and Scandinavian cultural influence in the eastern Baltic. During this period, western and southern Finland became the frontier for linguistic contacts between the cultures from either side of the Baltic Sea. These sailing routes through the Åland Islands potentially had some degree of continuity through the Viking Age and may have played an important role in the shaping of Ålandic identity (Ahola et al. 2014: 230–231).

Centuries later, in the 1680s, the Ålandic legend was recorded by the pastor of the Kökar parish, Gabriel Olai Hamnodi. The legend says that in ancient times a troll lived in a local swamp called Kalby Oppsjö. The people of Kökar were so afraid of the troll that no one dared to fish in the waters there, so eventually

they hired a *runkarl* to bind the troll. The *runkarl* came and carved two runestones, one on the south side of the swamp and one on the north. These stones kept the troll bound to the swamp floor, but the *runkarl* warned that the troll would regain its power if the runes on the stones wore away. To prevent the runes from wearing away, the local people covered the stones with birch bark.

Orsaken, varför dessa stenar äro hit lagde, säga de är denna. Deras förfäder i hedendomen skulle ha varit gruvligen rädda för ett troll, som skulle ha haft sitt tillhåll i förbemälte träsk, så att ingen dristade sig att däruti draga not, fiska etc. Därför hava de lejt en runkarl, som påstått sig med sin runskrift på dessa stenar kunna fastbinda samma troll. Han skall ock hava sagt, att så länge skriften skulle synas på dessa stenar, så länge skulle de ha ro för trollet. Men så snart runskriften blivit bortnött, skulle trollet få sin förra makt igen. Därför ha också Kökarsborna i forntiden, som nämnt är, övertäckt honom med näver, så att skriften icke skulle nötas bort och trollet återfå sin makt. (Enqvist 1938: 163)

The reason why these stones are here laid, they say, is this. Their ancestors in paganism were horribly afraid of a troll, who had his abode in the previously mentioned swamp, so that no one dared to draw a seine, fish, etc. Therefore, they hired a *runkarl*, who claimed to be able to bind the same troll with his runic writing on these stones. He is also said to have said that so long as the writing was visible on these stones, then they would have peace with the troll. But as soon as the runes were worn away, the troll would regain its former power. Therefore, the people of Kökar in ancient times, as mentioned, covered them with birch bark, so that the writing would not be worn away and the troll regain its power.<sup>1</sup>

The apparent mix of Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian mythology and folklore in Ålandic legend will be elucidated in the following sections. I will argue that it bridges the two traditions, illustrating the potential spread of this bound sea monster motif across the Nordics. The final product of this influence can be seen in the Finno-Karelian epic poem about Iku Turso, which displays similarities with Scandinavian myths. The Ålandic legend, however, is nearly identical to the Swedish legend about Kettil Runsk, mentioned above.

## Scandinavia

Most of Kettil Runske's legends were recorded in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Sweden. However, the first mention of Kettil comes from Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus* in 1555 (1555: 124). Kettil's name, 'Runske', denotes his knowledge of runes as a *runkarl*. Kettil is usually depicted as a folk hero, who helps the common people by binding monsters with the magic rune staves that he stole from the old god Oden in one of his legends (af Klintberg 2010: 272–273; Enqvist 1938: 160). When Kettil throws these rune staves, they magically return to his hand, much like Þórr's ['Thor's'] hammer, Mjöllnir, returns to his hand when he throws it (Enqvist 1938: 160; Snorri Sturluson 1998: 42).

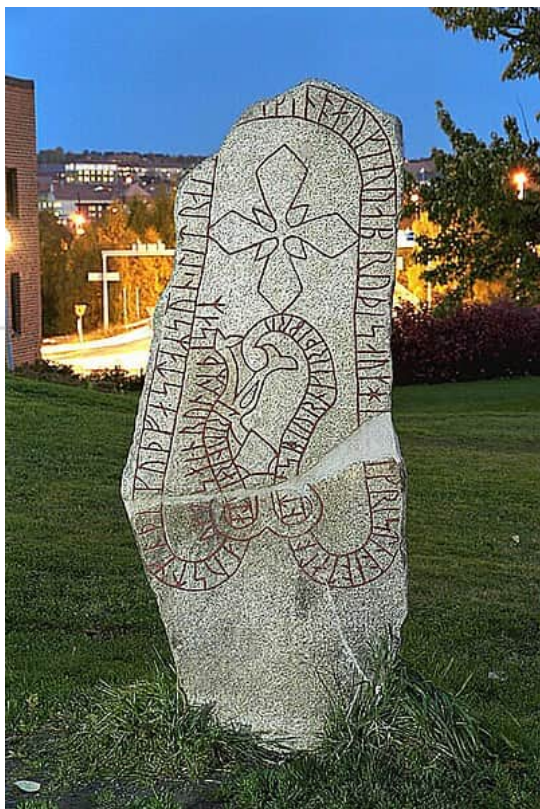


Figure 1. The Frösö runestone (photo attributed to Bengt A Lundberg, Riksantikvarieämbetet, CC BY 2.5).<sup>2</sup>

One legend that is exemplary of Kettil's role as a folk hero is the legend about binding the sea serpent. This legend was recorded in Jämtland, Sweden, in 1635 by Morten Pederson Herdal. It says that a great serpent appeared in Lake Storsjön and terrorized the local people. After the people tried in vain to deal with the serpent, they sent for the famous Kettil Runske. Kettil came and erected a great stone on the island of Frösö. He carved runes upon the stone that bound the serpent to the bottom of the lake.

There the serpent would stay so long as the rune stone remained (Enqvist 1938: 168; af Klintberg 2010: 315). Other variants of the legend say that once the sea serpent grows large enough to encircle the island and bite its own tail, the world will end (af Klintberg 2010: 315). The runestone mentioned in the legend is an actual runestone from Frösö, which in fact still exists today. The runes upon the stone say nothing of a local sea serpent, but the stone does depict a serpent biting its own tail. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, local Swedes most likely could not read the runes on the stone, which simply state who Christianized the local area and built a local bridge. Instead, they seem to have interpreted the picture of the serpent on the stone as proof of the legend.

Some features of this legend correspond to those of the Ålandic legend: (1) a local, land-bound body of water is (2) inhabited by a monster that (3) threatens the local people; (4) the local people hire a sorcerer to take care of the monster; (5) the sorcerer is called a *runkarl*, and (6) he carves runes (7) on runestones that (8) bind the monster; (9) the binding magic will only work so long as the runestones endure. This complex constellation of elements suggests that the different accounts reflect the plot of what is called a belief legend (af Klintberg 2010). The role of runes and runestones is particularly noteworthy in the Ålandic context because no runestones have been found on the Åland Islands, although they are adjacent to the region of Sweden that boasts more runestones than anywhere else in the world (Sjöstrand 2014: 84). In Finno-Karelian mythology and folklore, ritual specialists do not carve runes. It is reasonable to assume that at least these features, if not the plot type itself, spring from Scandinavian influence.

It is important to remember that Kettil Runske legends were recorded before Swedish translations of eddic poetry or Snorri's *Edda* were available, especially to rural people, among whom these legends were found. Although traditions of the *Miðgarðsormr* were most likely forgotten in Sweden by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible the folk legend about Kettil springs from some kind of variant of the *Miðgarðsormr* myth, or at least shares some connection with it (cf. Frog 2022a). The

parallel motifs of the two narratives, in conjunction with Kettil's strong association with Oden (and therefore the Old Norse god Óðinn) as the source of his runes, seem to argue for a relationship between this Kettil legend and medieval Icelandic myth, despite the massive temporal and geographic divide.

Around the year 1220 in Iceland, Snorri Sturluson wrote a work called *Edda*, which was meant to be an explanation of skaldic poetry and its composition accompanied by introductions to the mythology in prose. He continuously quotes eddic poems throughout the *Gylfaginning* section of the work to support his retelling and interpretations of the mythology (Snorri Sturluson 2005). Most or all of the eddic mythological poems themselves would only be written down after *Edda* was composed (Clunies Ross 2005: 8; Frog 2022b: 194–195, 206–207): most were preserved in a collection devoted to poetry compiled around 1270, which became the core of what is today called the *Poetic Edda* (Haukur Þorgeirsson & Njarðvík 2017: 165).

In Snorri's *Edda*, he tells of how the Miðgarðsormr first came into being. Loki had three children with the *jötunn* Angrboða: Hel, the wolf Fenrir, and the Miðgarðsormr. The gods deciphered prophecies that the children would cause great harm to the world, so Óðinn sent the gods to capture the children and bring them to him. Óðinn sent Hel to rule over one of the realms of the dead, the gods collectively bound Fenrir, and Óðinn cast the Miðgarðsormr into the sea that lies on the edge of the world. There the Miðgarðsormr grew so large that it encircled all lands, biting its own tail (2005: 26–29). The Miðgarðsormr will stay on the edge of the world until the final battle of Ragnarök and the destruction of the world (2005: 45, 50). This origin story of the Miðgarðsormr is only clearly recounted in Snorri's *Edda*, and not in eddic poetry, but there is no reason to doubt its basis in the poetic tradition. The account corresponds to the Kettil legend in a number of features: (1) a serpentine monster (2) threatens a community; (3) a sorcerer (4) binds the monster (5) in water, where (6) it (will) encircle an island or island-like land as (7) an *ouroboros* (8) until the end of the world. The *ouroboros* image seems to have been specifically connected to the

Miðgarðsormr in the medieval sources, so that its appearance in other sources, like the dragon in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, appear as referential 'echoes' of the cosmological monster (Frog 2022a: 574–575). Such 'echoes' appear to have been an integrated part of how Old Norse mythology was used in society (for a theoretical approach, see Frog 2022a). Kettil's feat is therefore consistent with an 'echo' of Óðinn's act in a cosmogony that has been reproduced in a local landscape. The monster-binding legend seems to ultimately share continuity with the mythological event.

It is not clear whether the legend type had already formed when Óðinn's feat still held a place in local conceptions of the cosmogony, or whether it was a result of a euhemerism-type displacement that adapted powerful images and motifs into something compatible with a Christian worldview. The general legend type cannot be dated through the use of runestones in the binding of the monster, as the legend's interpretation of a rune stone as the instrument of binding seems to date from a time when the stone could no longer be read. However, this may be the product of interpreting this and probably other rune stones through legend, constructing their meaning in the landscape. The emergence of a legend type from Óðinn's feat may thus have occurred earlier and only later became connected to rune stones depicting bound serpents or monsters (which is not uncommon). There is also no reason to assume that the legend type with rune stones emerged in connection with Kettil, since Kettil is otherwise connected to rune staffs rather than stones. Kettil may instead have become identified as the sorcerer in legends because of his prominent connection with runes, while both his popularity and the connection of the legend to the landscape would have contributed to the preservation of the legend in the local tradition.

The Kettil legend appears four centuries after Snorri's *Edda* and an end of the Old Norse language area far removed from Iceland. An even greater divide, however, is the linguistic difference between Scandinavian and Finnic languages, as well as the geographic distance between Iceland and Karelia. Although these divides are massive geographically, temporally, and linguistically,



the Åland legend displays the possibility of a connection between these two traditions. A bridge that leads to the amalgamation of these symbols and motifs may be found in a recording from nineteenth-century Karelia.

### ***Karelia and Finland***

In 1836, J.F. Cajan collected a poem from the famous singer Arhippa Perttunen in Viena, Karelia (*SKVR* I<sub>1</sub> 339; Kuusi 1977: 182). A second variant of the poem was collected just two years later in 1839 by M.A. Castrén from the same singer. The two versions are nearly identical (*SKVR* I<sub>1</sub> 339, 339a) and no other examples are recorded. Arhippa is arguably the most important singer from the Viena region, and was interviewed extensively by Elias Lönnrot in 1834. Arhippa is recognized in research for his extensive repertoire, although his recorded versions of epics sometimes reflect adaptations of vernacular mythology to his Christian worldview (Frog 2010: 225–229), viewed through a lens of his own understanding of Christian identity (see also Frog 2020). That the two examples of the epic are nearly identical indicates that it was firmly established in Arhippa's memory. That it was an epic he had clearly learned allows the inference that the core of the plot was part of the epic tradition rather than having been invented by Arhippa himself. Although he adapted some epic material to conform to his own vision of the mythology, sometimes creatively (Frog 2010: 225–229, 397–398), parallels to unusual material in his epic repertoire are generally found, if only scarcely attested, elsewhere in the corpus of around 150,000 variants and fragments of poetry. That Lönnrot did not collect a version from him suggests that it was peripheral to his repertoire.

In the poem, *Sampsä poika* ['lad, son'] Pellervoinen asked three oak trees if they would provide timber for a boat for the creator. The third oak tree agreed and Sampsä built the boat. Saint Peter and Saint Ann joined Sampsä in the boat and they invited Jumalan poika to come aboard and rest with pillows and blankets; Jumalan poika did so. They sailed for three days and on the third a great storm swelled the sea, so they awoke Jumalan poika for help. Iku Turso raised his head from the sea and Jumalan poika grabbed him by the ears,

pulling him onto the boat. Jumalan poika asked him three times why he had risen from the sea. On the third time, Iku Turso answered that he was trying to sink the boat. Jumalan poika threw him to the bottom of the sea and said he shall not rise again, so long as the sun and the moon last (*SKVR* I<sub>1</sub> 339, 339a; Kuusi 1977: 179–182).

This poem has received less attention from a comparative perspective because it is so poorly attested, and because it is identified mainly with Christian rather than non-Christian actors. Concerning these actors, it is worth noting that the epic tradition structured epic agents into groups that were not normally mixed with one another; nevertheless, there could still be variation in the actors of an epic narrative by exchanging one group for another (Frog 2020: 597). That the poem was only recorded from Arhippa is another difficulty here, because there is no point of reference to determine in what respects it may have varied from the broader tradition. That the epic is poorly attested does not speak against its age: the epic known in English as *The Bond*, which seems rooted in a Viking-like milieu valorizing sea-raiding, has itself been found in very few variants in the forested inland regions of Karelia, roughly as far as one could get from the sea in the language area (Ahola 2014).

This poem about Jumalan poika and Iku Turso displays a number of characteristics similar to the Old Norse myth where Óðinn casts the Miðgarðsormr into the sea: (1) a sea monster (2) with a distinct identity (3) threatens a group of divinities and (4) the main god (5) physically throws the monster (6) to the bottom of the sea (7) where it must stay (8) until the end of time and the destruction of the world. However, these two stories are separated not just by six centuries: they also come from opposite sides of the Nordics.

To an Old Norse scholar the recording of the Karelian poem may seem very late. But Karelia was, from the perspective of the Russian Empire, a remote wilderness comparable to Siberia. The rich traditions of vernacular Karelian religion and mythology that were recorded in the nineteenth century are thus comparable to the contemporary documentation of Northern Eurasian shamanic traditions further east (see also Frog 2020:

577–586 and works there cited). The Karelian oral poems recorded in Viena in the nineteenth century cannot reasonably be considered influenced in any way by written eddic poems or Snorri's *Edda*. It may be noted that the treaty establishing the border between Novgorod and Sweden was established already a century after Snorri was writing. Also, in addition to the political boundary becoming coordinated with the boundary between the eastern and western Churches, Finnic speakers of this region generally remained geographically remote from centers of religious and political administration, to which the languages also remained foreign. Like the Old Norse myth, the poem about Iku Turso most likely springs from an oral tradition that goes back centuries and was finally codified in the nineteenth century.

The epithet *iku* or *iki* means 'ancient'; the name *Turso* is a diminutive form of *tursas*, which reflects a borrowing of Proto-Germanic *\*pur(i)saz* into Middle Proto-Finnic as *\*tur(i)sas* (Frog 2023). This loan is extremely early, antedating the tremendous superstrate of North Germanic loans into Proto-Finnic customarily dated to between roughly AD 200 and 550 (Kallio 2015: 26–27), and which seem to have been concentrated within a process of intensive cultural hybridization at the beginning of that period (Frog 2019a: 273; 2019b: 20–21). Frog's survey of derivatives of *\*pur(i)saz* in Germanic languages leads him to conclude that this had previously been a more commonly used term for 'giant'-type agents of chaos, as well as being used as a name for a ruler of the otherworld realm of the dead. The Finnic loan is preserved almost exclusively in North Finnic languages, where it refers specifically to a dangerous and hostile water monster or troll that controls an area of water and the ability to catch fish there. Frog argues that these semantics are likely rooted in the original context of the loan, and that the word was borrowed to refer to a water monster alongside other very early Germanic loans connected with aquatic life on the Baltic Sea (2023). The borrowing of *\*tur(i)sas* thus appears comparable to borrowing the *Miðgarðsormr* of the later mythology but referring to it with the Old Norse word *jötunn* ['giant'], as the serpent is identified in various

sources, and then interpreting the borrowed word through the water monster. However, identifying the *Miðgarðsormr* with the image of the *ouroboros* – i.e. as a serpent biting its own tail and forming a circle – must be considered a later development. The *ouroboros* image is not found in Scandinavia until the Migration Period (Oehrl 2013), which was long after the borrowing of *\*tur(i)sas* (Frog 2023). There is no motif of a sea serpent biting its own tail in Finno-Karelian mythology and folklore, which is consistent with the respective cultural contacts and influences entering prior to the Migration Period.

In the Ålandic legend, the nature of the aquatic monster as a swamp troll seems to derive from Finno-Karelian influence. Both the Kettil legend and the Ålandic legend were recorded in Swedish. In the Kettil legend, the sea monster is called an *orm* ['serpent'], consistent with the *Miðgarðsormr* of Old Norse mythology. In the Ålandic legend, it is called a *troll* ['troll']. References to agents called a *tursas* or *turso* in Finnish and Karelian (as well as Vepsian) suggest it was imagined variously as anthropomorphic and as taumorphic – i.e., bull-like – rather than as serpentine. In the Karelian epic in focus here, the description of the physical characteristics of Iku Turso are very vague: the only thing that is clear is that it had some kind of ears, by which Jumalan poika grabs it. Iku Turso most likely was not envisioned by the Karelian audience as a serpent, but as some kind of a more anthropomorphic aquatic troll. In the Swedish legend tradition, *trolls* are commonly represented as anthropomorphic agents that have households and communities mirroring human societies: they bake bread and have cattle and have interactions with humans within that framework, while other types of supernatural agent are connected with water (af Klintberg 2010). The rune stones in the Ålandic legend point to the legend type being adapted from a tradition in Sweden, but the identification of the monster as a *troll* rather than an *orm* suggests that the Swedish serpentine image has been replaced by a Finnic image of a *tursas* that interferes with fishing.

Although the Iku Turso epic is exceptional, Frog contextualizes it in relation to Finnic and

Germanic traditions of the thunder god going on a fishing adventure, which appears to reflect a cross-culturally shared tradition that also makes a historical connection to the Iku Turso epic possible (Frog 2023). The Scandinavian tradition presents the god Þórr fishing for the Miðgarðsormr. This myth most often presents Þórr as nearly killing the monster, which escapes back to the bottom of the sea. It will not return until the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarøk, when Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr will slay one another in that final conflict. Þórr's fishing adventure is recounted in prose in Snorri's *Edda* (2005: 43–45) and in the context of another adventure in the eddic poem *Hymiskviða* (Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2014: 399–407), and is also referred to in several passages of skaldic poetry (i.e. court poetry attributed to named poets), as well as some iconographic representations on picture stones. There seems to have been some variation within the tradition regarding whether or not Þórr kills the monster during this fishing expedition. *Ragnarsdrapa*, a skaldic poem attributed to Bragi Boddason in the ninth century and which takes inspiration from a depiction of the myth on a shield, holds that the serpent got away. However, Úlfr Uggason, in the late tenth century, describes a pictorial panel in an Icelandic house depicting Þórr decapitating the Miðgarðsormr at sea. This critical moment in the text of *Hymiskviða* is defective (Turville-Petre 1964: 75–76). However, Snorri explains that some people believe that Þórr killed the serpent then and there, whereas he believes that the serpent got away (2005: 45).

Also relevant in this context is a Finno-Karelian poem about the demiurge Väinämöinen, who fished up the great pike, decapitated it, and made a kantele (a harp-type instrument) from its bones. One of the oldest variants of this epic poem was recorded by Kristfrid Ganander in 1760 from a manuscript in Ostrobothnia (Kuusi 1977: 167–169), an area in western Finland with a Swedish-speaking majority. However, a relationship between this epic and later Swedish contacts is doubtful, since the epic is well attested throughout Russian Karelian singing areas. Notably, the sea monster in this fishing adventure is a gigantic pike and not a serpent.

Nevertheless, both Þórr's and Väinämöinen's fishing adventures share similar motifs with the Iku Turso poem. In all three narratives, (1) a god (2) embarks far out to sea on a boat (3) with one or more companions and (4) confronts a massive sea monster. However, both Väinämöinen and Jumalan Poika encounter the sea monster accidentally, whereas Þórr, Kettil and the Ålandic *runkarl* all embark specifically in order to confront the sea monster. This difference could be another disparity between the Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions. However, there is also a Karelian legend about a priest confronting a sea monster, which shares this motif of embarking with the goal of confronting a sea monster.

In conjunction with the widespread fishing adventure motif, Frog also points to a Karelian legend recorded in 1936 about a *merihärkä* ['sea-bull'] that lived in the river Nokkalahti in Sortavala. The *merihärkä* was always roaring loudly and horribly, until a priest came and exorcised it into Lake Ladoga, where it has not been heard since (Frog 2023; SKS KRA Matti Moilanen 1765, recorded in Sortavala from A. Hyppönen, age 71). This Karelian legend seems to share some pointed commonalities with the Swedish legend about Kettil Runskel and the Ålandic legend. Instead of the ritual specialist binding the sea monster on the open ocean, which is what happens in the Old Norse myth and the Iku Turso epic, the monster is instead banished into a named local lake, which is also characteristic of the Kettil and the Åland legend. This *merihärkä* legend seems to be further evidence of this bound sea monster motif spreading into Karelia.

### *A Note on the Cosmological Timeline*

I use the term *cosmological timeline* to refer to the timeline of a society, religion, or culture on which events are ordered from the creation to the destruction of the world and potentially also extending to preceding or subsequent periods. Amid individuals' interpretations and attempts to place events in some kind of chronological order, the cosmological timeline can be viewed as a general framework or master narrative of the history of the universe from its origin to its destruction, although many specific events remain only vaguely or



variably placed upon it. Viewing events in the materials compared here in relation to their respective cosmological timelines adds another dimension to the analysis, because almost all of the narratives make reference to the end of the world.

The Scandinavian myths situate the binding of the *Miðgarðsormr* within the cosmogony, establishing the serpent and its form as an *ouroboros* as a cosmological periphery throughout subsequent time until the eschatological battle of Ragnarök. The Kettil legend is situated in local human history but his feat is also related to the eschatological future: the monster is bound until the end of the world. Iku Turso is also bound until the end of time – i.e., so long as the sun and the moon last, assuming that this alludes to the end of the world. This eschatological element is absent in Väinämöinen’s fishing adventure, but this is unsurprising since the monster is slain rather than bound for a period. The eschatological reference is also absent from the *merihärkä* legend, but here the priest banished or exorcised the monster (*manasi menemään pois* [literally ‘conjured [it] to go away’]) rather than binding it *per se*. Within the context of kalevalaic epic, the reference to eschatological time in the banishing of Iku Turso is striking because the epic tradition’s cosmological timeline is normally quite simple and lacks a developed eschatology (Frog 2022a: 592–593). Kalevalaic epic poetry is highly crystallized at the level of line groups and their phraseology, which enables what seem like anomalous features or even inconsistencies with the cosmologies to be found built into particular passages of the poetry (e.g. Frog 2020: 645–647). Since eschatological references are also not normally built into narrative poems on Christian subjects, although they are used in some ritual incantations, there is no reason to view this element of the Iku Turso epic as necessarily a product of Christian influence. Instead, it seems more likely to be a temporal feature that was maintained within the epic owing to structural factors, comparable to the way that spatial features are built into epics with remarkable durability in oral transmission (on which, see Frog 2020: 599–630).

Eschatology is potentially present in the Ålandic legend. However, the priest who recorded the legend notes that the birch bark that people had used to cover the stones had rotted away some time ago. He reports that, at the time of writing, the runes on one of the stones had worn away, and he states that the other stone was now under water, and no one knew where it lay (Enqvist 1938: 163). It seems that this binding could have been effective until the end of the world were it not for the lack of upkeep. Nevertheless, the binding is not tethered to the cosmological timeline in the way that Óðinn’s binding of the *Miðgarðsormr*, Kettil’s binding of the *Frösö orm*, and Jumalan poika’s binding of Iku Turso are. In this context, it is worth noting that the connection between the serpent bound by Kettil and the end of the world is not dependent on a reference to how long the binding will endure; rather, it is dependent on when the serpent will become an *ouroboros*, growing to bite its own tail. The lack of an eschatological point of reference for the Ålandic legend aligns it with the *merihärkä* legend. However, if the eschatological reference is considered a feature of the legend type as carried from Sweden to Åland, its absence may be attributable to exchanging the image of a serpent for that of a troll. The place legend also changes function when the stone referred to has no runes on it, making it a narrative about people’s beliefs in the past, rather than imagining the supernatural agent that was bound as simultaneously existing in the present and being potentially relevant to the future.

### **Conclusion**

With these comparisons in mind, the Ålandic legend seems to be the meeting point between the Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian traditions concerning the motif of a ritual specialist binding a sea monster to the bottom of a body of water. Not only is Åland positioned geographically between Scandinavia and the Finno-Karelian cultural area, but this legend was recorded after the Scandinavian variants and before the Finno-Karelian variants of the motif. In this way, the recordings of this motif move both temporally and geographically across the Nordics from Iceland to Karelia. However, the correlation of

temporal and geographical progressions of the sources cannot be assumed to correlate with the progression of the tradition through time and space.

The Ålandic example seems to reflect a legend type or subtype that linked the binding of the water monster to rune stones. It thus presumably reflects a medieval – if not later – form of the tradition linked to changing interpretations of the significance of rune stones. The motif of binding with a rune stone is improbable for the booming period of rune stone production in the early Christian period or the Viking Age before it, let alone the period of Scandinavian cultural spread to Åland in the sixth century. The limited evidence of the Iku Turso epic makes any dating conjectural.

Relating the spread of the Ålandic legend to the kalevalaic epic in Viena, Karelia, carries with it multiple caveats. There was immigration to Viena from Ostrobothnia as well as from Savo to the south in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which impacted the Viena traditions (Frog 2010: 73 and works cited therein). This allows a hypothetically possible situation where Finnish–Swedish contacts around the Gulf of Finland could have produced an adaptation bridging the language barrier, and then carried this to Viena. The more significant difficulty is that it is improbable that a place legend linked to a lake or other fishing venue would be elevated to a seafaring adventure of cosmological actors in mythic time with no connection to the geography of people telling it (cf. Frog 2022a). An additional caveat is that the eschatological connection is lacking from the Ålandic legend, which has lost the *ouroboros* motif through the change of the monster from a serpent to a troll or *tursas*. And yet, the eschatological reference is found in the kalevalaic epic, where it is generally exceptional, and its use corresponds to Óðinn’s deed rather than Kettil’s. It might be tempting to therefore assign a great age to the kalevalaic epic’s background and consider whether its identification with Christian agents is an innovation, but this returns to the problem of the limited evidence. When these factors are considered, it becomes much less clear how to regard the quite brief account of the *merihärkä* legend, and whether it, with its strange, bellowing monster, should be viewed as

related to the Swedish and Ålandic place legends in a region that was for a time part of Sweden (when Finland was its eastern territory). This legend might instead have shifted independently from kalevalaic mythology and adapted to a local place in a region where kalevalaic mythology had broken down and had been shifting into tale traditions.

When considering these materials, it is crucial to recognize that the few documentations we have of this motif are only glimpses of oral traditions, told and retold, presumably, across centuries. These recorded myths and legends are simply an indicator of a much deeper oral tradition, which would have spanned across centuries, thousands of kilometers, and across cultures.

### Notes

1. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.
2. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Conference Announcement

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

*RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 65*

### **Conference Announcement: Austmarr XI Blurred Boundaries and Hybridizations of Magic, Religion and Authorized Knowledge or Practice in the Baltic Sea Region: From Etic Theories to Emic Materialities**

*8–9 December 2023, Stockholm, Sweden*

Austmarr XI is devoted to the theme of ‘Blurred Boundaries and Hybridizations of Magic, Religion and Authorized Knowledge or Practice in the Baltic Sea Region’. Magic and religion are central concepts both in a wide range of research disciplines and in popular culture. Although these concepts play a fundamental role in our construction of cultures and practices of the past, they are sometimes used heuristically with vague and intuited meanings, sometimes analytically, with various and potentially incompatible definitions, and sometimes correlated with the terms and categories of a vernacular or render relevant distinctions invisible. These issues concern each term individually and also their relationships to one another. The variety of usages both within and across disciplines can lead to confusion, misunderstandings, misrepresentations and misinterpretations. Austmarr XI brings these issues into focus by considering both the etic (i.e., of the researcher) and emic (i.e., of the culture concerned) concepts and how we engage with these and relate them to what we study.

The programme includes papers addressing a wide range of topics relating to religion, folklore, magic, and witchcraft, with emphases that are theoretical, empirical, or some combination thereof. Geographically, the conference papers travel widely around the

Baltic Sea Region, including Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden. The conference also promotes reflexive consideration on how our own positions as researchers and the positionality of our sources and key literature in the history of research can impact on our own investigations. Our aim is to make the event a nexus for the discussion of these topics that we can explore together through texts, language, physical objects, landscapes and other media.

The Austmarr meetings have been a venue to present and discuss ideas and research in progress and to test and evaluate findings in a multidisciplinary environment where these may be illuminated by complementary perspectives. We therefore feel that the eleventh Austmarr symposium will be an ideal setting to respond to the recently resurgent interest in premodern magic and the current concern is that such interests easily to become ensconced within particular disciplinary or regional/national boundaries, which creates confusion and a lack of clarity when advancing into multidisciplinary international discussions.

The conference will be hybrid; if you would like to participate digitally, please contact Gwendolyn Knight: [gwendolyn.knight\[at\]historia.su.se](mailto:gwendolyn.knight@historia.su.se).



Conferences and Events

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

*RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 66–69*

### Hybrids and Metamorphoses: Aarhus Old Norse Mythology Conference

*26<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> November 2022, Prague, Czech Republic*

Adèle Kreager, University of Cambridge

The Aarhus Old Norse Mythology conference is the largest international conference dedicated to the study of Old Norse myth and religion. This year, it was held in Emmaus Monastery in Prague, Czech Republic, from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2022. It was organized by the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University, with generous support from the University Centre of Excellence (UNCE), the Embassy of Denmark and the Embassy of Norway. The conference focused on hybridisation and metamorphosis, both as motifs that permeate textual and iconographic source material, and as twinned concepts that inform and challenge theoretical approaches to Old Norse mythology (past and present). A central concern addressed was the validity of binary constructs (e.g., human vs non-human, male vs female) as a lens through which to engage with Old Norse worldviews, with speakers offering a variety of frameworks for examining the construction and transgression of categorical borders in mythological narrative, from structuralist analyses to queer theory and affective ecocriticism.

The conference programme brought together established scholars, early career researchers and PhD students from a variety of disciplines and institutions. This confluence generated a great range and depth in presented source material: from the macro-level of recurrent image complexes and phonological evidence spanning wide geographies, to the micro-level of variation between manuscript versions of texts (both primary and secondary). The papers

also traversed a broad temporal spectrum, from pre-Viking Age evidence through to the later medieval transmission and adaptation of mythological motifs, signs and figures. The crossing of borders was therefore just as much a thematic focus within the speakers' papers as it was a defining feature of the intellectual discourse across the conference at large.

Following the welcome address by Vice-Dean Daniel Berounský and the conference organisers, the first session explored motifs of shapeshifting and hybridity through the prisms of embodied emotion and occult space. Carolyne Larrington (University of Oxford) opened the session with a discussion of the intersection between emotionality and hybridity in mythic narrative, an intersection that proves helpful in thinking through concepts of Old Norse divinity. Shared emotionality can produce a partial kinship between humans and gods, though divine emotions tend to be magnified in force and more limited in range. At the same time, divine transformations into animal-forms are accompanied by the actor's abandonment of human ethics, suggesting an intimate relationship between embodiment, emotional life and social transgression. Next, Louise Milne (University of Edinburgh) discussed shapeshifting and dream-cultures in the wider Norse world, unpacking hybrid representations of the occult: visual distortions and an elasticity in scale (e.g., beards so large they span fjords and trees that expand across the whole of Norway) act as markers of the occult in dream-experiences, as do animal

doubles. Timothy Bourns (University College London) then revisited concerns of emotional interiority first broached by Larrington, this time in the context of human-tree hybridity. Analysing *trémenn* ('tree-people') across mythological and legendary narrative, Bourns demonstrated how emotionality is not presented as an exclusively human phenomenon in Old Norse textual worlds and considered how such literary images might inform ideas of selfhood.

The second session foregrounded borders in the divine world: spatio-temporal borders, symbolic borders and taxonomic borders. Sigmund Oehrl (Stockholm University) examined recurring eschatological motifs found on Type B Gotlandic picture stones as evidence for the metamorphic character of the valkyrie figure in early tradition. The iconographic motifs include ships and horses (perhaps reflecting consecutive phases within the afterlife journey), as well as long-necked aquatic birds who accompany (or escort) deceased warriors, thereby supporting the role of valkyries. Oehrl not only addressed metamorphosis in the context of human-bird transformations, but identified potential cultural hybridity in these images of waterfowl: he suggested that late Antique, early Christian iconography associating birds with the afterlife may have influenced the work of Gotlandic artists. The discussion then shifted from image patterns to symbolic systems underpinning narrative, with Jens Peter Schjødt (Aarhus University) vouching for the continued utility of structuralism as a tool for Old Norse mythological analysis. Schjødt provided an overview of the history of structuralism within an Old Norse context, highlighting how an increased interest in diversity eclipsed structuralist analyses from the mid-1990s onwards. He argued that liminality (of which hybridity and metamorphoses are both characteristic) is of central importance in Norse myth, and cannot be properly addressed without structural analyses of a binary kind. Taking a different tack, Judy Quinn (University of Cambridge) drew attention to the surface tensions across mythological texts, exploring the contradictions in mythographic classifications of *jötunn* and *áss*, particularly along the lines

of gendered and divine identity. Quinn highlighted the peculiar position of female giantesses, who are not categorised under a comparable gender-grouping as the *ásynjur* and who can move freely between Jötunheimr and Ásgarðr (their spatial mobility paralleling their classificatory mobility). By contrast, the hybrid genealogy of the *Æsir* is downplayed, with the patriline continually privileged over the matriline: where the category of *áss* becomes thus overdetermined in its binary opposition to *jötunn*, *ásynja* becomes underdetermined through the absence of its own classificatory binary.

Thursday's final session explored Loki as a figure who embodies, produces and performs hybridity. Ela Sefcikova (Humboldt University of Berlin) drew attention to the utility of queer theory in interrogating some of the binaries encountered in Norse mythology. Like the opposition of *jötunn* and *áss* discussed by Quinn, the binary between heteronormative gender and queerness is constructed, with one pole critically depending on the other for its meaning: thus, heteronormativity is defined through its exclusion of queerness. Analysing the role played by Loki in *Lokasenna*, Sefcikova showed how the poem posits gender norms as unattainable, with all the gods (even the paradigmatic Þórr and Sif) continually deviating from the norms (and therefore revealing themselves as queer hybrids). Henning Kure (independent researcher) then examined the portrait of Loki in *Hyndluljóð*, offering a new reading of stanzas 40–41, which describe Loki's production of monstrous progeny and his consumption of a half-singed woman's heart. Kure suggested that Loki's consumption of the heart should be read within the wider Norse context of the ingestion of bodily matter to alter a consumer's capabilities (e.g., Sigurðr's consumption of Fáfnir's heart) and argued that a qualitative transfer of female capabilities occurs through Loki's act of ingestion. Eating the heart is therefore not the direct cause of Loki's progeny, but rather the process by which Loki acquires the female ability to become pregnant; as such, Kure suggested that Loki is the mother, rather than the father, of Hel.

The second day of the conference opened with a session on ritual and performance,

which explored the cultural functions of two sets of hybrids: human-bird hybrids and human-god hybrids. Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen (Uppsala University) discussed the Óðinn-raven complex as an instance of a wider circum-polar motif, approaching these iconographies through totemism. He suggested that the images are closely related to masking rituals, which serve to exteriorize one's inner corvid and which result in multi-layered, blended identities. Rasmussen further advocated for the continued relevance of such hybrid self-imagery in contemporary contexts, adapting the circum-polar human-bird complex as an eco-totemic symbol for environmental activism. Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland) then considered how human-god hybridity may have been developed as a conscious strategy for consolidating power in the Nordic countries from c. 500 AD onwards, a period of warfare in which tribes gradually transformed into nations. He suggested that the elision of human leader and deity continued across the conversion (though taking different forms), implemented through masking rituals, the construction of sacred genealogies and narrative motifs of kingly rebirth (e.g., Óláfr helgi as Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr).

The fourth session grappled with approaches to source material, focusing particularly on the language that scholars use to discuss Old Norse cultural concepts and processes. Gwendolyn Knight (Stockholm University) addressed the problem of magic as an analytical category when treating medieval sources, underscoring how the term has a shifting, catch-all quality, is invented by outsiders and is defined in exclusion to other terms (such as science and religion). Having outlined the methodological complexities in detecting magic in Old Norse source material, Knight described how she plans to proceed with this research: using a process of textual excavation of a limited corpus, she will engage more with the context-dependent meanings of magic than magic as a stable, cultural concept. Jiří Dynda (Czech Academy of Sciences) then inspected the legitimacy of the concepts of 'pagan survivals' and 'double beliefs' in an Old Norse and Old Russian context, exploring the history of syncretism and anti-syncretism in modern scholarship. He argued that every religion is

syncretic to some degree (and every culture is thereby hybrid), and found that pagan survivals are better understood as neutral lay culture framed in pagan terms than evidence of double beliefs. Adèle Kreager (University of Cambridge) closed the session by foregrounding Old Norse terminologies of transformation. She argued that an examination of lexical choices made by narrators and poets may allow for a more emic perspective on Old Norse conceptions of shapeshifting, as well as affording us insight into generic conventions and narratorial concerns. She found that the Old Norse lexicon of transformation is far richer and more varied than previously acknowledged (with prior scholarship focusing overwhelmingly on the term *hamr*), and examined the overlapping modes of change (and non-change) envisaged in this varied lexicon: metamorphosis, hybridisation and illusion. After this half-day of papers, the speakers were treated to a visit to the National Library at the Clementinum to peruse illuminated and printed manuscripts, followed by a reception at the residence of the Danish Ambassador.

The final day of the conference opened with a poster session, in which Bob van Strijen (University of Oslo) presented his work on Jan de Vries' *Die geistige Welt der Germanen*. His poster and the ensuing discussion explored both textual metamorphosis and political hybridity: he compared passages in different versions of *Die geistige* to evaluate the text's ideological evolution, investigating the potential erasure of National-Socialist traces in the revised text. Session 6 turned on ideas of cosmos and time, treating mythology both as a conceptual world and as a sign system, with papers addressing hybridity at the levels of body and text. John Lindow (University of California, Berkeley) tackled the topic of hybridity through its biological definition, where hybrid refers to the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents. He tracked the expression of genetic hybridity from the figures of Ymir to Loki, and considered how the excessive, multiple and self-proliferating bodies of giants reflect a potential recessive *jötunn* gene. He returned to the suppression of the Æsir's hybridity through patrimonial strategies, touched on earlier in the conference by Quinn, noting that this suppression



ultimately cannot be achieved within the mythic schema. In his paper, Leszek Słupecki (University of Rzeszów) called back to ideas of human-god hybridity broached by Larrington and Gunnell, focusing on concerns of mythic vulnerability and omnipotence through a discussion of the various disabilities of the gods, from Óðinn's eye to Týr's hand and Heimdallr's hearing. Frog (University of Helsinki) then implemented the framework of fractal recursivity to the sign system of Old Norse mythology, exploring how mythic patterns manifest at different orders of scope, transposed into human worlds. Fractal recursivity is particularly helpful for engaging with temporal ideologies, and can be used in conjunction with Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* to identify how echoes of events in one temporality are produced in later temporalities, resulting in *chronotope interference*: for instance, the riddle-contest in *Heiðreks saga* parallels the wisdom contest in *Vafþrúðnismál*, both of which close with the same impossible question (what did Óðinn whisper to Baldr on his funeral pyre). This fractal recursivity further transposes other mythic motifs from cosmogonic time into mytho-heroic time: here, for example, the presence of bird-transformation and the framing of an event as aetiologically significant.

The seventh session focused on the hybridisation and metamorphosis of Old Norse mythological ideas through ritual behaviours and later textual traditions. Eldar Heide (Western Norway University of Applied Science) drew on phonological evidence and customs and beliefs across eastern Scandinavia and German-speaking areas to address the late traditions of Óðinn, arguing for the value of this source material in understanding the origins of the god. Heide outlined two late traditions of Óðinn, which he views as closely related: Óðinn as the leader of a raging host (particularly associated with stormy nights and Christmas time) and Óðinn as the recipient of the last sheaf at harvest time. Rather than rejecting these post-medieval traditions, Heide views them as formative in the development of the Old Norse reflex of Óðinn. Rudolf Simek (University of Bonn) delivered the final paper of the conference, exploring the hybridity of

*fornaldarsaga*-characters, such as Bárðr in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (who the saga dubs an *áss* despite his hybrid giant-human genealogy, and who is presented both as a human settler of Iceland and later as a protective spirit) and Ögmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, who exhibits clear demonic features and in whom literary allusions from Scandinavian, Arthurian and Classical traditions coalesce. Simek argued that such character hybridity should not be viewed as reflecting strictly religious aims, but rather as a narrative technique of literary integration.

The closing discussion of the conference addressed both practical and theoretical concerns: first, an enthusiasm for the publication of the conference papers was registered, and possible formats and venues were suggested. Then conversation turned to the conference's key terms, metamorphosis and hybridisation, to consider their variety of interpretations and applications across papers: while the definition of metamorphosis appeared to be fairly consistent, hybridity emerged as a more contentious concept, viewed by some speakers as a *synthesis* of elements, and others as a layering of distinct identities (an entity of separate halves). This pertains both to literal motifs of shapeshifting and masking, and to theoretical positions on the nature of binaries. A further through-thread was the coexistence of tripartite systems in the mythology alongside binary ones, which have tended to be pursued less frequently by scholars. Despite the complexities in squaring these simultaneous interpretations and valuations of the 'hybrid', the conference itself demonstrated the heuristic value of the term, revealing transformation, hybridisation and adaptation to be central concepts to think with when examining mythological motifs, ritual practices, Old Norse textuality and narratology, cultural behaviours and worldviews. The conference was very successful in initiating dialogue between methodological approaches and intellectual discourses, as well as bringing varied source material into conversation. The questions raised and themes broached by speakers and attendees will continue to inform scholarly discussion well beyond the conference.



Conferences and Events

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

*RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 70–72*

### 18<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Circum-Baltic Arena

*7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022, Helsinki, Finland, and Tallinn, Estonia*

Clare Mulley, University of Oxford, and Gwendolyne Knight, Stockholm University

After the postponement made necessary by a certain other international event, the 18th International Saga Conference finally took place from the 7<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> August 2022, with the theme of Sagas and the Circum-Baltic Arena. It was a much-anticipated event, not only due to its absence from our social calendars the previous year, but also because, for the first time in its history, the conference would be hosted by two countries: Finland and Estonia. The conference was organised thanks to the joint efforts of Folklore Studies, the Department of Cultures and the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Helsinki, the Centre for History, Archaeology and Art History at the University of Tallinn, and the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Tartu.

Another first was the conference's hybrid format, giving participants the option of virtual participation. The anticipated advantages and potential pitfalls of the arrangement were a subject of much discussion (especially considering online participation was not free of charge); however, such innovations can only truly be evaluated by putting them into practice, and treating the event as a positive experiment – an encouraging sign of new possibilities for making conferences more accessible. As shall be discussed, it was certainly an experiment that paid off.

A long-standing tradition of Saga Conferences has been the publication of a Pre-Print. Rather than organizing the publication of

proceedings following an event, the working papers to be presented and discussed at the conference were published in advance. This enabled access papers that were missed among parallel sessions or by those unable to attend and making the works immediately citable, as well as becoming the first publication of many young scholars. The practice was discontinued because the growth of the conference made the volumes unwieldy and burdensome to edit, but has been revived with flexibility of participation, published open-access at: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/346783>.

Upon reaching Helsinki on the 7<sup>th</sup>, in-person participants were first greeted with a champagne reception at Hotel Arthur in the city centre, hosted by the Embassy of Iceland in Helsinki and the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia in Finland. Ambassador of Estonia to Finland Sven Sakkov and Dean Pirjo Hiidenmaa from the University of Helsinki opened the event with speeches of welcome that provided key background information on the conference sites, as well as some history about the university itself. The reception provided a welcome opportunity for attendees to get reacquainted with long-missed colleagues, and to mingle, network and make new acquaintances among their peers. A great time was had by all, and, as the feeling of community resolidified, anticipation for the event became even keener.

The first day of the conference dawned promisingly clear and warm; the participants gathered at Porthania for the conference

introduction, given by Kendra Wilson (University of Turku), and keynote lecture. The latter was given by Neil Price (Uppsala University), who, through exploring what is (and has been) meant by the word ‘viking’, spoke on the variety of approaches and opinions within the field of Old Norse Studies, segueing into a wish for continued respect and open-mindedness within the multidisciplinary and broadly international academic community, as well as an acknowledgement of the complexity inherent in the field’s objects of study. These remarks were made in the light of more recent difficulties experienced by emerging career researchers in today’s challenging job market: far from sermonising or having the intention of shaming senior leaders in the field, this talk was clearly designed to make newcomers feel welcomed and empathised with, as well as to encourage more senior scholars to keep the difficulties facing their junior colleagues in mind. The importance of such reflections cannot be understated in the midst of an event of this scale, which, though a highly exciting and valuable opportunity, has the potential to make especially younger researchers feel at best under pressure, or at worst intellectually inferior and out of their depth. The day continued with plenary sessions at both Porthania and Metsätalo, encompassing a broad variety of topics ranging from magic, otherness, and ritual sacrifice, gender, Samic and Finnic studies, to language, text style, and reception. In-person participants concluded the day with a reception at the Banqueting Rooms at Unioninkatu for a reception from the University of Helsinki, and early career researchers were invited to convene afterwards at an informal reception held by NECRON (the Network for Early Career Researchers in Old Norse) nearby at the Thirsty Scholar.

Parallel sessions continued on Tuesday, with a similarly varied set of themes. Mythic and sacred discourse, agents, and objects were important themes in multiple sessions, as were interactions across the Baltic Sea region; the Old Norse Emotions Network also held a session and a roundtable speaking to intersections of emotion, body, and language. On this day, participants could also explore a poster presentation, as well as an exhibition

sponsored by the Kalevala Society and curated by Frog (University of Helsinki), exploring Finnic traditions and how they can be of interest for scholars of Old Norse.

A day of rest followed, during which in-person participants had the opportunity to go on excursions in either of the host countries. In Finland, this meant a half-day trip to the fortress island of Suomenlinna, a UNESCO World heritage site, and to the colourful medieval centre of Porvoo, which still boasts a row of authentic wooden house fronts by the river. Participants who went on this trip were first treated to a tour of the national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg’s house, complete with writing samples and enough paintings to fill a small gallery, and then some time in town, stopping to take in the beautiful Lutheran cathedral, which has parts dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and boasts an intricate array of murals, including a unicorn – apparently rare in Finland. In Estonia, participants explored ancient and medieval Tallinn, beginning at Proosa Cemetery, in use from the Bronze Age up to the beginning of the thirteenth century, continuing on to the Iru Iron Age hillfort and the Convent of St Birgitta, before exploring the history of Tallinn itself, beginning in the Old Town and continuing at the Kiek in de Kök Museum.

On the morning of Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup>, participants made their way to the impressive Astra building at the University of Tallin. Its state-of-the-art lighting and screens made the opening of this half of the conference by Marika Mägi (Tallinn University), Tallinn University’s Vice-Rector for Research Katrin Niglas, Daniel Sävborg (University of Tartu), and the Ambassador of Norway to Estonia Else Berit Eikeland, particularly impressive. Their joint remarks were a much-needed reminder that, in studying the Old Norse world, we cannot fall into the trap of letting our thoughts remain centred too firmly in the North and West: our thinking, and our horizons, must expand. This day’s keynote lecture was given by Haraldur Bernharðsson (University of Iceland), who spoke on the transmission of texts and the visible contrasts between scribes who are transmitting as part of living language use versus those who are copying ‘relic texts’, where much more importance rests on the

faithful maintenance of the source text. Haraldur reminded his audience that there is agency in transmission, and the choices that scribes make in the course of their work can reveal important aspects of language and reception at various points in time.

The final day of the conference began with a keynote lecture from Stephen Mitchell (Harvard University), who reflected on “Folkminnesforskning och filologi” (‘Folklore Research and Philology’), referring to Dag Strömbäck’s influential work of that title. Mitchell offered an overview of how deeply integrated philology and folklore research had been from the outset, tracing the transformations of their relationship across the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the new turn in interest of the 21<sup>st</sup>. On both Thursday and Friday parallel sessions continued, maintaining the themes of cosmology and mythology but also including papers on law, archaeological methods, manuscripts, human-animal relationships, and circum-Baltic networks. The official conference concluded with a business meeting, followed by a dinner at Seaplane Harbour. Those who went on the post-conference excursion spent the weekend travelling first to Noarootsi/Nuckö and other

archaeological sites in Western Estonia, and then to various sites in Saaremaa, including to Salme, where two Scandinavian boat burials from the eighth century were excavated (and which Neil Price had mentioned in his Monday keynote).

A constant theme during the conference was using new tools to not only learn more about the past, but also to communicate it to new and ever-varying audiences. It was gratifying to see that a new, hybrid format and all the challenges presented by it only served, for the most part, to increase camaraderie and strengthen participants’ efforts to support and accommodate one another to their best abilities. Occasionally, as ever, there would be a temporary glitch in proceedings due to signal or other issues, but these were rare, which is testament to the tireless work and careful preparation of the technical teams from both host countries. As we move forward as a scholarly community, it may be hoped that conference organizers continue to show sensitivity to the various challenges that may prevent scholars from attending conferences, and embrace the possibilities that hybrid conferences can offer.



Recent Publications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 73–74

### Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions

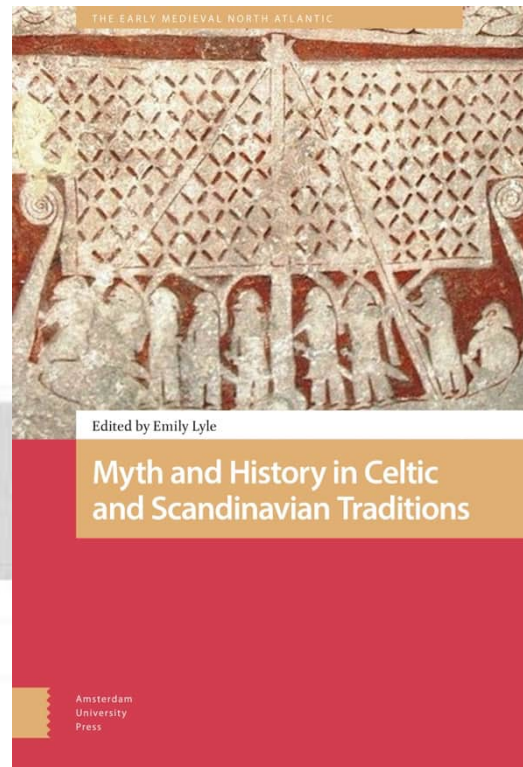
Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh

Published by Amsterdam University Press in 2021 in the series *The Early Medieval North Atlantic*. Hback ISBN 9789463729055 €128.99; eBook ISBN 9789048554065.

*Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions* explores the traditions of two fascinating and contiguous cultures in north-western Europe. History regularly brought these two peoples into contact, most prominently with the Viking invasion of Ireland. In the famous *Second Battle of Moytura*, gods such as Lug, Balor, and the Dagda participated in the conflict that distinguished this invasion. Pseudohistory, which consists of both secular and ecclesiastical fictions, arose in this nexus of peoples and myth and spilled over into other contexts such as chronological annals. Scandinavian gods such as Odin, Balder, Thor, and Loki feature in the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and the *History of the Danes* by Saxo Grammaticus. This volume explores such written works alongside archaeological evidence from earlier periods through fresh approaches that challenge entrenched views.

The volume opens with an introduction by Emily Lyle. The first group of chapters is on Celtic tradition, the second group is on Scandinavian tradition.

John Carey opens the section on Celtic tradition with the article “The Nature of the Fomoiri: The Dark Other in the Medieval Irish Imagination”. Elizabeth A. Gray discusses “Tuatha Dé and Fomoiri in *Cath Maige Tuired*”. The third chapter is Ina Tuomala’s “Exploring *Cath Maige Tuired* through the Concept of Hybridity”. Joseph Falaky Nagy then carries this theme further in “How Time



Flies in the *Cath Maige Tuired*”. Alexandra Bergholm discusses “The Idols of the Pagan Irish in the Medieval Literary Imagination”. Kevin Murray considers “Myth as a Historical Resource: The Case of *Orgain Denna Ríg* (The Destruction of Dinn Ríg)”. Ksenia Kudenko brings this section to a close with an exploration of “Hagiography as Political Documentation: The Case of *Betha Beraigh* (The Life of St Berach)”.

Karen Bek-Pedersen turns attention to Scandinavian tradition with “Baldr’s Achilles’ Heel? About the Scandinavian Three-God B-

Bracteates”. Joshua Rood then explores “The Cult of Óðinn in the Early Scandinavian Warrior Aristocracy”. Morten Warmind examines “Myth to History in Saxo”. Emily Lyle discusses “The Scylding Dynasty in Saxo and Beowulf as Disguised Theogony”. James Parkhouse then turns to Icelandic sources in “Loki the Slandered God? Selective Omission of Skaldic Citations in Snorri Sturluson’s

*Edda*”. Jonas Wellendorf concludes the section with a chapter on “Ymir, Baldr, and the Grand Narrative Arc of Mythological History”.

For more information, please visit the publisher’s website at:

<https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789048554065/myth-and-history-in-celtic-and-scandinavian-traditions>.

RMIN





Recent Publications

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

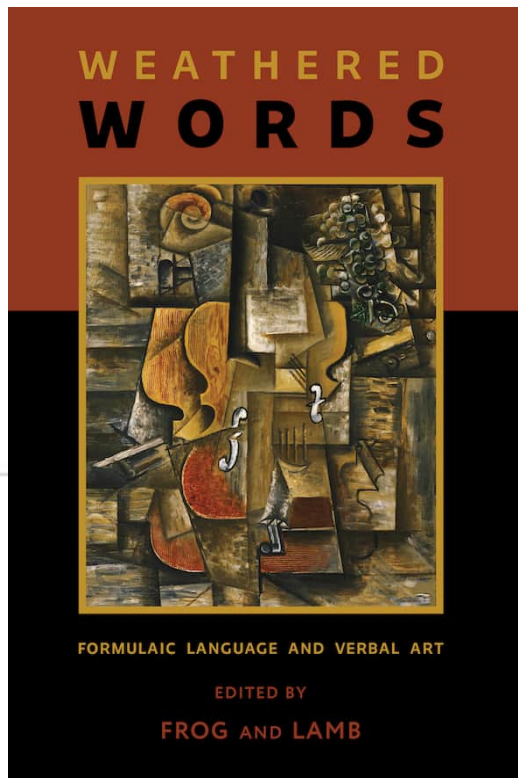
## Newsletter

*RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 75–79*

### **Weathered Words: Formulaic Language and Verbal Art**

Frog (University of Helsinki) and Lamb (University of Edinburgh) (eds.)

*Edited volume in the series Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 6 (Cambridge, MA: Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University, published by Harvard University Press); the open-access digital edition is available at: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog\\_LambW\\_eds.Weathered\\_Words.2022](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog_LambW_eds.Weathered_Words.2022).*



Formulaic phraseology presents the epitome of words worn and weathered by trial and the tests of time.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on weathered words is exceptionally diverse and interdisciplinary. This brand-new volume focuses on verbal art, which makes Oral-Formulaic Theory (OFT) a major point of reference. Yet weathered words are but a part of OFT, and OFT is only a part of scholarship on weathered words. The chapters in this book are wide-ranging, and the introduction offers an orientation to both the different primary branches of discussions of

formulaic language, centering on the lexicon, on language situated in discourse, and on OFT and language in verbal art, respectively, and to the chapters that the book contains.

Each of the book's eighteen chapters brings particular aspects of formulaic language into focus. No volume on such a diverse topic can be all-encompassing, but these essays highlight aspects of the phenomenon that may be eclipsed elsewhere: they diverge not only in style, but sometimes even in how they choose to define 'formula'. As such, they offer overlapping frames that complement one another both in their convergences and their contrasts. While they view formulaicity from multifarious angles, they unite in a web of intersecting perspectives on which the reader can reflect and from which they can draw insight.

#### ***Oral-Formulaic Theory and Beyond***

In "Formulas in Oral Epics: The Dynamics of Meter, Memory, and Meaning", Karl Reichl opens Part I of the volume with perspectives on formulaic language going back to Parry's seminal work on the topic, and explores its dimensions through more recent understandings. He then grapples with several issues that run through the book; namely, the relationship of formulae to meter, the role of memory in performance, the significance of formulaic language in practice, and the possibility for long stretches of text to be more or less fixed even in an otherwise highly variable form of



verbal art. Reichl provides valuable insights into these topics by considering poetry and song in the Kirghiz epic tradition.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholarship on Old English alliterative poetry has discussed formulaic language and has been an important nexus for advancing formula research. OFT's foundations are situated upon studies of Homeric and South Slavic epic poetry. Both poetic traditions are organized by similar metrical systems based on counting syllables or syllables and their quantities. In contrast, Old English verse uses a stress-based system where the number of syllables can vary. Furthermore, the meter requires alliteration, which drives variation in word choice. Parry's definition of formula was not transferrable to this poetry without adaptation, which produced rich discussions about how to define and distinguish concepts like formula and how different concepts of OFT relate to it. In "Of *Scopas* and Scribes: Reshaping Oral-Formulaic Theory in Old English Literary Studies", Steven C.E. Hopkins elucidates the history of this rich vein of research, which exemplifies how OFT was adapted to one poetic tradition after the next. Hopkins introduces the reader to a vital arena of OFT research, one that also provided an abundance of valuable perspectives on oral-written interaction – some of the most significant insights produced to date.

Although OFT research was built especially upon South Slavic epic as a living oral tradition, this has not been the only approach to that poetry. The turn from detailing the formal operation of language units to how their meanings and associations are constructed is also not exclusive to OFT. In "*Vlach Paupers*: Formula and Layers of Meaning", Sonja Petrović pursues these issues across several genres of South Slavic traditions. She offers a fresh and innovative perspective that complements Classic OFT research. Conducting a case study of one particular formula, she traces both its connections to historical social environments and its uses in different genres.

Anatoly Liberman brings the discussions of this section to a close by looking at formulaicity as a broad and fundamental phenomenon. In "Humans as Formulaic Beings", Liberman offers a wide, comparative context for the emergence of OFT, and he reminds us that

formulae can be explored in diverse forms, rather than exclusively as a linguistic phenomenon. His learned discussion provides nuanced perspectives on how and why people engage with formulaic language, and significant observations about how patterns in idiom may change over the course of history.

### *Methodological Approaches*

Methodology is another key focus of formula research. Relevant scholarship has encompassed not only the theories that underpin analyses and interpretations, but also the strategies and procedures that form methods proper. Both concerns are advanced in Part II, "Methodological Approaches". Discussion is launched by Frog, who takes up *multiform theory*, which was initially formulated by Anneli and Lauri Honko (1998) as part of an alternative to OFT. The Honkos felt that their theory of linguistic multiforms could better account for certain phenomena of variation and flexibility in verbal art. In "Multiform Theory", Frog introduces this theory and its history, proposing that it reflects a basic linguistic phenomenon – one not limited to poetry. He distinguishes the multiform from the formula in its complexity and polysemic capability, arguing that it is a complementary type of unit, and also compatible with OFT.

In a similar strand, Raymond F. Person, Jr. considers the theory of *category triggering* presented by Gail Jefferson (1996). Category triggering concerns how the production of language in discourse activates networks of association in vocabulary. Jefferson's theory accounts for patterns and variation in conversational language, such as using a wrong word that is linked by sound or sense to the one intended. In "Formulas and Scribal Memory: A Case Study of Text-Critical Variants as Examples of Category-Triggering", Person combines this theory with OFT and its expansions through John Miles Foley's work (e.g. 1995; 2002), offering valuable insights into variations made by scribes in copying ancient biblical texts and Greek epics. This chapter illustrates the importance of balancing approaches to flexibility in language use with the sources for particular traditions, as well as relevant questions that the sources are equipped to answer.

The rise of meanings in formula research on verbal art has given little attention to how formulaic language may be used to structure relationships between the performer and what is referred to, reflecting the performer's stance toward it – i.e., stance-taking. Koenraad Kuiper and David Leaper investigate stance-taking in sports commentators' formulaic epithets, referring to players and the feats of local and foreign teams. In “*We Don't Support; We Observe: Epithets and Modifiers in a Vernacular Formulaic Genre*”, they offer a sophisticated quantitative analysis of formulaic language in sports commentary, situating their discussion in relation to OFT research on epic. This chapter introduces the valuable concept of *formulaic genre*. Whereas Classic OFT's methodology was built on statistical surveys of formulae and used formulaic density as a litmus test for orality, formulaic genre is a descriptive term for a verbal genre characterized by a high density of formulaic language, irrespective of whether it is oral or written (see also Kuiper 2009). Kuiper and Leaper illustrate how quantitative methods can be used to determine whether structures of social relations are built into formula usage.

Statistical methods are also at the forefront of William Lamb's “From Motif to Multiword Expression: The Development of Formulaic Language in Gaelic Traditional Narrative”. An issue widely debated in Classic OFT research was the relationship between formulaic language and so-called themes; that is, units of narrative content. Lamb takes up a corresponding question in prose narration. Using a corpus of traditional tales featuring motif annotation by Stith Thompson (MacKay 1940), Lamb explores how formulaic language links to international tale motifs and how these relations vary by genre. In this way, he attempts to provide an empirical basis for two proposed factors underlying the development of formulae: recurrence and semantic distinctiveness.

### ***Language and Form***

Part III focuses on relationships between formulaic language and the organizing principles of poetic discourse. The organizing principles of many traditions of oral poetry diverge from Homeric and South Slavic epics far more than Old English verse does. James J.

Fox begins the section with “Form and Formulae in Rotenese Oral Poetry”, in which he introduces formula constructions in a tradition of canonical parallelism that lacks periodic meter. In canonical parallelism, lexical pairs regularly recur in parallel lines. Fox elucidates how this type of lexical pair functions as a unified formula and reveals how sets of such formulaic pairings can develop complex patterning across a series of lines. Fox connects with the preceding section on methodology by presenting his system for mapping pairs through stretches of poetry. He then situates the operation of these formulaic pairings in relation to Roman Jakobson's approaches to poetics.

Naming formulae were central to Milman Parry's (1928) early theorizations, in which he coined the definition of ‘formula’ later propagated by Albert Bates Lord in his formalization of what is now distinguished as Classic OFT (1960: 4). Parry explored naming formulae in terms of their fixity and variation, semantics, and patterns in their metrical structures. In “Formula and Structure: Ways of Expressing Names in the Northern Runosong Tradition”, Jukka Saarinen takes up this classic topic in his study of how naming formulae are structured in so-called Kalevala-meter poetry. This poetry's short epic form led poems to be remembered and performed as ‘texts’ rather than as compositions improvised in performance. It has a regular syllabic rhythm with often only two to four words per line, which stabilizes its phraseology. Saarinen shows that naming follows formal patterns in this poetry and outlines a typology of syntactic-metrical types, each of which he describes as a *formula system*, thus adapting a concept initially outlined by Parry (1928; 1930; cf. Lord 1960: 35, 47–48; see also *syntactic formula* in Russo 1963). Saarinen considers how the dominance of particular metrical-structural formulae led to new formulations on the same pattern – i.e., they were generated within the framework of an established syntactic type.

To understand the relationship between formulae and poetic structure, it is valuable to examine what happens to them when they move between poetic systems. Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir examines this phenomenon in

“Formulae across the North Atlantic (from Continental Scandinavia to Iceland)”. She traces the movement of formulaic language across genres and closely related languages, which may sometimes allow etymological translation and other times require alternative phrasing. Her study offers valuable insights into how language interacts with the organizing principles of a poetic form. She describes how the loss of a poetic feature like alliteration or rhyme in the movement of a formula to a new poetic system may be “compensated” by another poetic feature, revealing that such compensation may occur even when it is not necessarily required by the new metrical environment.

### ***Explorations at the Boundaries***

Part IV, “Explorations at the Boundaries,” carries discussions of weathered words to the peripheries of formulaic language. Ian Brodie leads the section by investigating formulaic language in stand-up comedy. He focuses on the ways in which language crystallizes in stand-up performance routines and how situationally motivated variation for such language works in the genre. In “*I Am a Fan of Hilarity: Possible Directions for Oral-Formulaic Theory and the Study of Stand-Up Comedy*,” Brodie illuminates the process of choosing between competing phrases as strategic choices for humorous effect. Bringing choice and variation into focus leads formulae to be framed as units in the lexicon that are used like non-formula units. This highlights the fuzzy boundary between whether particular units are or are not formulae.

Classic OFT was built on an idea that poets use phraseology pre-fitted to metrical positions in order to produce metrically well-formed lines at the rate of performance. Hans Nollet reveals that such recycling of weathered words can also occur in quite different traditions. In “Formulas in Neo-Latin Poetry as a Means to Language Enrichment and Self-Representation: Language Tips and Sociolinguistics in Justus Lipsius’ Poems”, Nollet shows that a corresponding motivation of ensuring the metricality of lines is found among Neo-Latin literary poets. Such practices were directed both towards displaying erudition and obviating metrical mistakes. Neo-Latin poets composed

in Classical Latin meters, which included rules related to syllabic quantities that were no longer distinguished in spoken Latin; this made the reuse of tried and tested turns of phrase from earlier poets the surest means to avoid an acoustically – but not analytically – unperceivable metrical error. These weathered words operate as formulae, but are not the formulae of an *oral* poetic idiom. This chapter situates some of the most basic perspectives on recurrent phraseology in oral poetry in relation to a formally identical phenomenon in literate compositions, which Nollet situates in contradistinction to contemporary ideas of plagiarism.

While most approaches to formulaic language stress the expression as forming a unit of meaning, Sergei Klimenko’s contribution brings *rhythmic fillers* into focus. These have functional roles in regulating the flow of language in performance, but, because they do not communicate propositional meaning, they were sometimes omitted from early transcriptions of oral poetry. In “Rhythmic Fillers in Ifugao *hudhuds*”, Klimenko applies a sophisticated linguistic approach to the operation of language in sung performance and reveals the importance of these fillers for realizing verse form. A filler of this type does not correspond to an “integer of traditional meaning” (Foley and Ramey 2012: 80) or to a “morpheme-equivalent unit” (Wray 2008: 11–12) or their equivalents in other prominent approaches for formulaic phraseology current today, yet Milman Parry (1928) argued that the epithet ‘swift-footed’ could equally be used as a formulaic metrical filler, accompanying the name ‘Achilles’ to complete required line positions without contextual meaning. Like the preceding chapters in this section, Klimenko’s study explores weathered words at the boundaries of what is commonly addressed as formulaic language in verbal art.

### ***Constructing Worlds of Discourse***

The final section of the volume, Part V, considers what formulae do and how they operate, both formally and at the level of texture. In “Formulaic Expression in Olonets Karelian Laments: Textual and Musical Structures in the Composition of Non-Metric Oral Poetry”, Viliina Silvonen explores how linguistic and musical units are combined

during composition in the performance of a regional form of Karelian laments. These laments are a form of sung, non-metrical poetry. Formulae may be structured through alliteration, but their length is flexible: such flexibility operates in tandem with the different durations of melodic units. Silvonen's investigation leads to the valuable observation that formulaic density and verbal regularity vary considerably between expressions that are personal to the performer and those that are ritually required in every lament of a particular type.

Formulaic language in genres of prose storytelling has been widely acknowledged but rarely received concentrated attention as a broad phenomenon. The density and use of weathered words in such genres vary, but they are particularly prominent in the Russian tradition. Tatiana Bogrdanova explores how translators have engaged with the highly formulaic quality of these folktales by comparing multiple translations of a particular collection. In "Folklore Formulas in Arthur Ransome's *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (1916)", Bogrdanova reveals how different renderings of formulaic language can manipulate a reader's experience of the text, and she considers how translators encode cultural differences in narration.

Although weathered words in folktales may be less researched, some – such as *Once upon a time* – have vast resonance for the genre. This section, and the book, ends with Jonathan Roper's investigation of key formulae in English fairytales. In "Opening and Closing Formulas in Tales Told in England", Roper reveals the functional differences of common formulae in structuring narration, as well as their potential to evolve along the oral-written continuum. He shows that a single complex formula may travel between very different cultural environments, and maintain features belonging to one, but not the other. In addition to variation through elaboration and simplification, Roper makes the important observation that, even when formulae originate in prose, they may exhibit poetic structuring at a phrasal level, a point of note that underscores the false division between 'poetry' and 'prose'.

### **Warp and Weft**

The five sections of *Weathered Words* move through general overviews, theoretical discussions, and case studies to explore the limits of what might be considered formulae and the broader discourses constructed through them. Some of the threads of the individual chapters may be self-evident, yet others may escape view in the course of reading, especially when a particular chapter is read in isolation. In each chapter, the object of weathered words is taken up in different materials, bringing a particular aspect of a phenomenon, theory or method into focus, making a valuable contribution to the topic of formulaic language. Together, these diverse and juxtaposed representations form a portrait of *Weathered Words*.

*Weathered Words* is available for purchase from Harvard University Press at: <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674278394>. The open-access digital edition is available at: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog\\_LambW\\_ed.Weathered\\_Words.2022](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog_LambW_ed.Weathered_Words.2022).

### **Notes**

1. This text is reproduced with minor adaptations from the introduction to *Weathered Words*, "A Picasso of Perspectives on Formulaic Language" (pp. 1–21), with kind permission from the publisher.

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Research Projects

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

*RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 80–87*

### **Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge, and the Lived Environment – Aineellisuus, suullinen runous, myyttinen tieto ja eletty ympäristö (ASME)**

Frog, Joonas Ahola, Jesse Barber, Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, Tuukka Karlsson, Siria Kohonen & Karina Lukin, University of Helsinki

*The ASME project (2021–2025) is funded by the Kone Foundation.*

The Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge, and the Lived Environment project (ASME), funded by the Kone Foundation (2021–2025), explores materialities linked to verbal art and mythic knowledge in premodern Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions. Such materialities are considered from a variety of angles in contexts ranging from their historical environments through to their modern reinventions and reuses today.

The ASME project breaks from current paradigms of thinking. Materialities have been widely overlooked and neglected in the rich and extensive research on Finno-Karelian kalevalaic poetics and magic, their transformations through publications such as Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (1835; reorganized and radically expanded 1849), and the embodied performances of contemporary *runo*-singers today. Research on Scandinavian traditions has given materialities more attention. On the one hand, runic writing is preserved on stones, swords, and so on and Viking and medieval poetry and prose are linked to the physicality of manuscripts. On the other hand, the turn of interest to performance and living practice requires, in the case of medieval and Iron Age Scandinavia, the reconstruction of situations and consideration of connections to spaces and rituals that are reflected in the archaeological record.

Attention to such connections and materialities in Scandinavian research nevertheless remains limited in scope. Materialities are a rapidly-rising topic of interest, yet the materialities of oral verbal art and orally-transmitted knowledge and beliefs have remained invisible to research, owing to established paradigms of thinking. The ASME project brings this phenomenon into focus, filling a significant gap that both meets current interests and opens onto new knowledge.

We began by reconsidering empiricism as a point of departure for considering materialities. Materialities are commonly conceived from an etic perspective of scientific thinking: they are approached as things in the world, both natural and cultural, that can be *empirically* known through touch, taste, sound, smell and sight, from trees in a forest or the sound of thunder to the smell of baked bread or glow of a smartphone at night. Current interests in Finnish folklore studies have led to a pioneering reconceptualization of materialities from emic perspectives – i.e., perceived and imagined materialities. This approach includes the physicality of a written page but also non-empirical materialities, such as the materialities of unseen agents and forces, oral poems as objects that people can own, sell, or even lose and find, and so forth. Transferring power, knowledge, or memory to

drink or food is found in both Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions, but how this relates to verbal art or poems as texts has been left unexplored. Earlier approaches to materialities excluded the possibility that people may conceive of knowledge as no less material than the sound of thunder or the smell of bread. Rethinking non-empirical materialities reciprocally requires rethinking materialities that may be taken for granted in our own society, which is pervaded by digital media and virtual encounters.

Since its emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, folklore studies has focused on traditions as intangible texts and beliefs – i.e., verbal art and what is now discussed as mythic knowledge. This focus has reciprocally shaped research, leaving several dimensions of the traditions under study invisible. Our turn to emic materialities breaks from this paradigm: we aim to tear down the walls of the box inside which researchers are accustomed to think by demonstrating, exploring, and explicating the importance of materialities with which verbal art and mythic knowledge are bound, both in how they are perceived and how metaphysical beliefs are concretely tethered to the lived environment of material culture and natural surroundings.

As the emic materialities of vernacular traditions are brought into focus, it becomes necessary to interrogate what happens to them as they are transformed into heritage in contemporary milieux. People continue to engage with texts of verbal art and traditional knowledge as things to which some people but not others might have rights, or for understanding the experienced world, or for creating relationships not with supernatural agents but with nations. The ASME project examines materialities in both Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian cultures alongside one another, following traditions of verbal art and mythic knowledge normally considered intangible, and we thoroughly explore their changing relations to emic materialities in the lived environments of different times and places. Our comparative dimension augments the empirical studies by shedding light on types of sameness and difference between the two cultures and also between premodern and modern cultures as traditions of the former are

selectively taken up and reinvented as heritage in the latter. Through this research, we set out to develop ground-breaking new knowledge of international and multidisciplinary relevance by theorizing how the dynamics of the three components' interaction form a system, and how that system participates in reciprocally constructing the significance of each component.

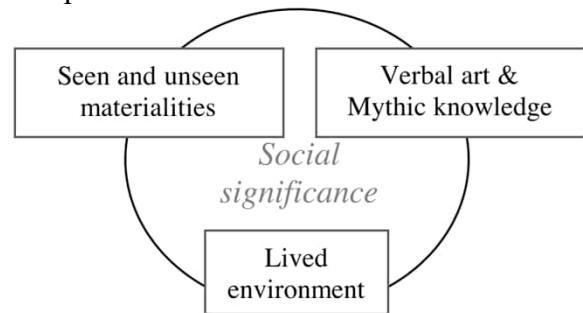


Figure 1. Diagram of materialities, verbal art and knowledge, and the lived environment as forming a three-part system in which the social significance of each is shaped through that system.

The ASME project recognizes unseen materialities of premodern oral traditions and places these in relation to the materialities of heritage production, their embodiment by people, objects, the environment, or by print and digital media. The insights, new understandings and theoretical perspectives produced by the project will change the way people understand these traditions.

### **Organization and Aims**

The ASME project is organized around six anchor studies that follow the arc of history, from premodern traditions through the present day. The six anchor studies are organized complementarily, with two pairs of studies each focused on Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions, respectively, as well as one study that focuses on the life of each originally oral tradition in writing and one study that focuses on heritagized performance and practices. The project is centered in folklore studies, but the seven researchers each bring different approaches and expertise that also connect with other fields, including linguistic anthropology, religious studies, musicology, philology, and cultural semiotics.

The ASME project advances beyond simply exploring materialities of verbal art by proposing and testing three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The materialities of verbal art and associated knowledge are bound up with the lived environment and people's interactions with it.

Testing this hypothesis requires the anchor studies to consider how changes in the lived environment, including those effected by technologies like electricity, book printing, and social media, affect materialities. This connects the anchor studies to the second hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 2: Heritagization strips oral verbal art and knowledge from the materialities of their premodern lived environments and reconstructs them in relation to the materialities of new media on the one hand, and enables them to produce new meanings by linking them to the materialities of the contemporary society's environment on the other.

The roles of selection and reinterpretation in relation to meanings leads to our third hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 3: The dynamic interaction between materialities, verbal art or knowledge, and the lived environment reciprocally relate to the social significance of the three parts as a system.

By empirically testing these hypotheses through the anchor studies and comparisons across them, the ASME project aims to develop theoretical perspectives that can be applied and further developed by scholars working with the same and other traditions.

### ***Anchor Study 1: Finno-Karelian Kalevalaic Poems as 'Things' in the World***

Anchor study 1, led by Tuukka Karlsson, examines three genres of Kalevala-metric poetry: incantations, epic, and lyric. The study is interested in emic conceptions of the materialities of these text types. Theoretically, the investigation engages with linguistic anthropologic discussions on semiotic ideologies, registers, and affordances residing in material and immaterial signs. In addition, methods developed in folklore studies are applied to the large corpora of texts the study makes use of.

The study uses the digitized corpora of published Kalevala-metric poetry (skvr.fi), which comprises approximately 89,000 texts

and fragments of various genres. Additionally, approximately 60,000 unpublished archived texts and fragments are used as a complementary research corpus. The poetic material constitutes the data that will be investigated for implicit and explicit evaluations and (re)valorizations of the material aspects residing in the tradition. Collectors' correspondence and field notes, such as those of Iivo Marttini, are also examined to explore differences between performers' and collectors' conceptions of text and text-type valorizations.

This anchor study is interested in the material affordances of various genres and the potential differences in how texts of various genres are connected with different materialities in vernacular metadiscourse.

From vernacular considerations of oral texts and genres, this anchor study advances to the reception, utilization, and vernacular conceptions of Lönnrot's *Kalevala* in Viena Karelia during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This stage situates vernacular conceptions of texts and their evaluation in relation to those of researchers. Especially toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the research and archival paradigms guiding the collection of Kalevala-metric poetry conceived some performances as 'inauthentic', such as poems thought to be learned from Lönnrot's epic. A category "Learned from *The Kalevala*" was even used to separate poems seen as less valuable than the so-called authentic texts in the publication of an edition of the corpus, placing them in a separate section rather than with other poems of the same genre, subject, or formal type. This part of the study examines the material and immaterial aspects of language ideologies and registers (those of the collectors and those of the community members). It investigates both sides of the oral tradition's reception in material form outside its domain of everyday use. On the one hand, it examines how vernacular mythic and ritual poetry was treated and discussed in circles outside of its traditional use, as in newspapers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, it analyzes the re-introduction of this poetry to the oral poets or original authors.



Finally, this anchor study looks into diachronic enregisterment processes and changes in how the poems have been interpreted, becoming bundled together with materialities during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This study will offer new perspectives on how the poetry's affordances have changed from pre-modern times to the early years of modernization.

### ***Anchor Study 2: Finno-Karelian Mythic Knowledge, Incantations, and Power in Material Objects***

Anchor study 2, led by Siria Kohonen, focuses on emic perspectives and materialities connected to incantations and rituals in early modern Finno-Karelian contexts. It attends especially to combinations of ritual materialities, verbal incantations, practical manifestations of mythic knowledge in ritual contexts, and the mythic/ritual conceptions of *luonto* [literally 'nature'] and *väki* [literally 'force'] and their material and embodied aspects. The primary sources of the study are the corpus of ritual reports and belief narratives, as well as recollections about and instructions for incantations and rituals deposited in the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. The corpus of Kalevala-metric incantations is used as an additional source. Close reading and techniques of comparative folklore research are combined for analysis, as are theory-based content analyses stemming from performance and ritual theories and theories of the cognitive science of religion. The study focuses on five themes.

First is the dynamic force called *väki*, which was ritually acquired and manipulated. In ritual practices, manipulating *väki* forces was usually connected to material objects that were considered to possess *väki* or represent it; for instance, iron tools represented the *väki* of iron in rituals. *Väki* was also considered to be contagious: it could transfer to a human or an animal and infect them – i.e., make them ill.

Second is the dynamic force called *luonto*, which is linked to the body of a performer and conceived of as essential for the efficacy of incantations. Comparable to *väki*, the *luonto* force could also infuse a human, resulting in an ecstatic state of consciousness. However, this

was not considered as illness but as something essential for the ritual's efficacy.

Third is material objects to which a verbal charm was somehow transferred. In healing rituals, incantations were often used together with material objects like salt, ashes, animal excrement, or nails made of alder wood, that were considered to aid in the process.

Fourth is the use of drink, food, ointment, or a physical object in connection with the transfer of ritual knowledge from one person to another or for an incantation's efficacy. In healing rituals, incantations were usually recited while making an ointment, and this was considered to boost the ointment's efficacy. In a sense, incantations were considered to be one of the ointment's ingredients. Similarly, some belief narratives describe how the ritual and mythic knowledge of a *tietäjä* (a type of ritual specialist) could be mixed with a drink and served to a pupil.

Fifth is imaginations of pain as somehow a concrete object in healing incantations. In a mythic sense, pain could be grabbed, stored in vessels, drowned in a river, or minced. Pain was also characterized as someone's property that had escaped from its owner and found a place to hide in the patient.

These five nexuses of materiality in this tradition have not previously been investigated alongside one another. Exploring their parallels and differences will yield a new understanding of how materiality operates within the tradition, and perhaps also how vernacular materialities of different phenomena may be related by common operations according to common principles.

### ***Anchor Study 3: Medieval Icelandic Discourses and Social Realities***

Anchor study 3, led by Joonas Ahola, utilizes the concept of materiality as a means to scrutinize different formally bound types of expression in medieval Icelandic literature and the society or culture that this literature reflects. Medieval Iceland was predominantly an oral culture, and this orality may be seen also in the written sources. It seems that certain oral texts, like traditional poems, were considered to be individual *units* and distinct from the general flow of speech or other traditional poems. For example, there are

accounts in the saga literature describing how a poem could be delivered as a gift – and even though the poem was delivered (as well as composed) orally, it seems that the text itself was considered to be the gift – and not, for instance, the act of reciting the text. So, such a poem was considered to be a distinct sequence of speech, and it was also considered to be deliverable. This may indicate a conception of an oral text as a kind of a material unit.

Certain oral texts, such as legal formulas or romantic poems, were also utilized in medieval Iceland as performatives to achieve certain impacts. In other words, they functioned as *instruments*. As instruments or tools, these texts were considered to have a certain power of their own (even though this power often depended upon different aspects of the context in which they were used). Can the concrete impact of an utterance be considered a sign of concreteness, or materiality, in the utterance? This leads to an interesting question of where the performativity of such utterances, or texts, gained their driving force. It may be assumed that these sources of force were not the same in the cases of, for example, legal and magical formulas – but people’s ability to influence their immediate surroundings seems to have been considered equally concrete through both human law and some kind of a metaphysical law (or the invisible agents that represent it). Can the source of performative force be considered an aspect of materiality in medieval Icelandic conceptions – and does this require reassessing the concept of materiality regarding immaterial, oral texts?

Another intriguing question is to what degree the *form* in which the uses of such formulas are represented had an impact on *how* these uses are represented. For example, in saga literature, where the use of magical formulas or prophecies is described, these utterances are often used by the narrator for foreshadowing subsequent events, and such narration-based purposeful representation of the use of such formulas may obscure the way they may have been used in real life.

Another fascinating question is connected to the hypothesis that recognizability was crucial for performatives: what aspects made such performatives *recognizable* as performatives? To what degree were the texts,

for instance, considered or required to be fixed or invariable, or formulaic in certain text segments, in order to be recognized as valid and functional performatives, and what kind of recognizability do they represent? Within this anchor study, the fixedness and formulaicness of these texts is also examined in the transmission of medieval manuscripts in which they appear: their written transmission may be a relevant indicator of the degree to which they were established within the culture, at least in the environment of the writers.

In summary, anchor study 3 discusses the relationship between materiality and performativity in an oral culture through the (seemingly paradoxically) literary sources of medieval Iceland. First, it asks what exactly the relationship between instrumentality and materiality in an oral culture is, exploring the degree to which instrumentality may be interpreted as materiality, and vice versa. Second, it asks what the relationship between an oral text’s fixedness and its instrumentality / materiality is, investigating the extent to which a text’s fixedness may be interpreted as a metaphor of its materiality.

#### ***Anchor Study 4: Scandinavian Mythic Knowledge, Incantations and Power in Material Objects***

Anchor study 4, led by Jesse Barber, examines worldviews conveyed by Scandinavian medieval sources on pre-Christian religions, and compares them with later Scandinavian sources about folk beliefs. The study uses textual sources as well as objects from the archaeological record to consider the materiality of these beliefs. Incantations are especially important in illustrating how supernatural power existed for believers, not only in the mythic world, but also in empirical reality. This study does not consider the medieval and later sources as isolated traditions; rather, it places both on a long-term spectrum of continuity of beliefs, while also considering the fusion of these traditions with Christian cosmology.

The connection between Old Norse mythology and later Scandinavian folklore can be illustrated through legends about Kettil Runske. Kettil Runske is a *trollkarl* or *runkarl* [‘sorcerer’] and his nickname *Runske*

emphasizes his use and knowledge of runes. He is surrounded by a cycle of legends, most of which depict him saving the common people and fighting sorcerers, trolls and giant serpents by binding them with his rune-staves and his runecraft. In one legend about the origins of his powers, Kettil steals these rune-staves from Oden, which in some ways designates Kettil as the Christian successor to the old god as the wielder of the runes. These legends come mostly from southern Sweden but can also be found in the North. Most legends about him were collected around the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the earliest known mention of Kettil comes from Olaus Magnus in 1555.



Figure 2. The runestone at Frösö, said to be from a sorcerer binding a serpent in the lake.<sup>1</sup>

One episode from Kettil's legendary cycle depicts him binding a sea serpent to the bottom of lake Storsjön in Jämtland, Sweden, which was collected there in 1635. The legend tells of a sea serpent that was harming the local people. The people lacked the means to destroy it, so they sent for the help of the renowned Kettil Runsk. Kettil came and erected a great stone on the island of Frösö and carved runes upon it, which bound the serpent to the bottom of the lake. The legend reports that there the serpent will stay, so long as the runes remain. Other variants of the legend say that once the sea serpent grows large enough to encircle the island and bite its own tail, the world will end. The runestone mentioned in the legend is an actual runestone from the archaeological record of Frösö. The runes upon the stone say nothing of a local sea serpent, but the stone does depict a serpent biting its tail.

This legend has many parallels with myths about the world serpent that, in the medieval material, encircles all land, biting its own tail, and that will break forth at Ragnarök. It is also important to remember that, when these legends were documented, they were most likely isolated from published versions of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and medieval eddic poetry. Traditions of the world serpent were most probably forgotten by the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Sweden. However, it is possible that these legends have their roots in older traditions about the world serpent. This is especially enticing when considering that Kettil stole his runestaves from Oden, linking him to the Old Norse Óðinn, who bound the world serpent just as Kettil does the sea serpent.

The study is organized in four parts. The first focuses on textual sources that convey cosmological beliefs. The second concentrates on material from the archaeological record connected to mythic knowledge, and the third on incantations that demonstrate the use of mythic powers. The last combines the above sources to illustrate the long-term continuity of beliefs in Scandinavia

Sources include medieval eddic and skaldic poetry, saga literature, published corpora of later charms and runic inscriptions, as well as published and unpublished narrative folklore, such as legends and beliefs. Unpublished materials used are mainly in the archives of Uppsala's Institute for Language and Folklore and Stockholm's Nordiska Museet.

#### ***Anchor Study 5: Capturing, Transforming and Commodifying Oral-Traditional Poetry through Writing***

Anchor study 5, led by Frog, examines the adaptation of verbal art and mythic knowledge to written text and its continued circulation and transformations in written media. These processes are traced through the parallel cases of Old Norse eddic poetry and Finno-Karelian kalevalaic poetry, with emphasis on poetic *texts*. Particular attention is given to how the products of these processes were understood, the potential gaps between poetic texts as 'things' and their manifestations as or in physical artefacts, and how these understandings and associated evaluations changed over time in relation to different

historical situations. The study has four symmetrically arranged branches of inquiry, with two branches each for eddic and kalevalaic poetry, and two branches each for early and recent collection and editing.

The first branch explores eddic poems as things that were transformed into material artefacts, as well as their circulation as handwritten manuscripts. These poems were first written down in medieval Iceland, where they were used and copied in that society. The medieval evidence is thin, but detailed philological analysis of text variation reveals dimensions of how people understood and engaged with the poems. The manuscripts themselves also present relevant indicators of how the texts were evaluated and the material artefacts in which they are preserved, with additional indicators in the few descriptions of manuscript use. This branch of inquiry then jumps ahead to the ‘discovery’ of eddic poems in the heritage construction projects of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The boom in copying that followed reconceived the eddic poems as a work called *Edda*, specifically Sæmundr’s *Edda* after its imagined compiler. A multitude of copies are available from this period and several of the central manuscripts exhibit significant investment in the form of illuminations (i.e., illustrations). Alongside attempts to produce rigorously accurate copies, people also expanded poems, such as the version of *Baldrs draumar* that was increased by between one third and half of the medieval length; truncated them, such as a version of *Vafbrúðnismál* that had been shortened by almost 20%; reorganized them, like versions of *Hávamál* and *Völuspá*; as well as created new compositions that became adopted as parts of Sæmundr’s *Edda*.

The second branch turns to the collection and editing of the poems in publications, which began already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continues through the present. This branch is developed in dialogue with the first, including how people engage with the published artefacts, the texts that they contain, and also the medieval texts and artefacts in which they are preserved. Even today, for example, scholars discuss the *Poetic Edda*, often treated as a distinct work, although the 13<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript GKS 2365 4to is merely a core that continues to be edited,

expanded, and sometimes reorganized in ways surprisingly similar to 17<sup>th</sup>-century copies.

The third branch concerns the collection, editing, and publishing of kalevalaic poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, although it had been documented on a limited basis already earlier. This study attends to how collectors viewed what was performed as variations of socially circulating ‘texts’. Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* and the reception of *Kalevala* ‘as’ folklore holds a central position. Collectors in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century used it as a frame of reference, treating oral poems as variants of the *Kalevala*’s text, and thus they might only document lines or passages they considered missing from its pages. This branch parallels the first on the manuscript circulation of eddic poetry; it differs by including the publication as well as the compilation and editing of poems in Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* and other works.

The fourth branch turns to the modern editing of kalevalaic poetry mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up through the present. The *Kalevala* holds a central position in especially the early phases of these practices, having historically played a central role in the organization of materials in the archives. The quantity of the corpus itself becomes a factor impacting these processes: at around 150,000 variants and fragments, the early phases of editing and publishing the corpus established structures that have been difficult to supersede even as research interests have changed. For example, individual performers are commonly brought into focus in current research, yet the corpus remains organized by region and text type, and there is still no way to search by performer in the digitized edition of over 87,000 variants and fragments.

The materialities of both eddic and kalevalaic poetries are examined across their respective histories. Current editorial activity is considered part of these histories, reflecting recent changes in how material artefacts are approached and understood in relation to texts that they present. The respective histories reveal both continuities and changes in understandings that can often be linked to broader changes in society or intellectual culture more generally. When the histories of writing down and reproducing eddic and kalevalaic poetries are compared, they reveal

patterns that offer a frame of reference for considering cases in other cultures as well.

### ***Anchor Study 6: Materially Situating, Embodying, and Reinventing Knowledge and Traditions***

Anchor study 6, led by Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, examines adaptations of kalevalaic poetry and mythic knowledge in contemporary society outside of written text editing and reproduction. This anchor study is interested in the intersections between the ‘ancient past’, materiality, nature (often characterized in the materials of the study as something that is separated from ‘human’ and ‘culture’), and contemporary social and political environments. The project suggests that materiality plays a significant role in the reproduction of the ‘kalevalaic’ traditions and interpretations: the multi-layered and multitemporal interpretations of premodern mythic knowledge are commonly narrated in relation to or through things such as natural landscapes and/or natural materials such as wood. The study asserts that these narratives and interminglings of intangibilities and tangibilities are becoming more and more significant in contemporary society, as ‘traditional knowledge’ has become one of the sources from which people seek answers for complex crises such as climate change or having lost connection with nature. These processes seem to re-circulate romantic views of the past, the ‘ancient’ and of ‘nature’. Yet, the premodern nature-related mythic knowledge in the Finnic areas can be described as anthropocentric and even exploitative, as it represents societies that were dependent on, for example, slash-and-burn agriculture, farming, and small-scale hunting.

This anchor study critically investigates such relations and interpretations by analysing, for instance, the ‘Vienan reitti’ hiking route in Eastern Finland near the Russian border (also travelled by Lönnrot), the prehistory exhibition

of the Finnish National Museum, and the Finnish forest yoga phenomenon. The anchor study will develop a methodological approach in which (visual) discourse analysis, ethnographic field work, and autoethnographic experiences are put into dialogue. The study discusses the material, spatial, embodied, and discursive dimensions of re-interpreting kalevalaic poetry and mythology in today’s society. By focusing on fairly banally nationalistic and culturally accepted contemporary interpretations of kalevalaic mythology, the study provides a much-needed insight into the materials, spaces, places, and bodies that become chosen to reproduce and re-interpret the ‘furthest past’ of Finnishness.

### ***Synthesis***

The six anchor studies are tightly linked by their topics and the phenomena that they address, and they are being developed in dialogue with one another. Coordination and collaboration across the anchor studies is organized through workshopping and research collaborations. We are currently planning a larger multidisciplinary seminar-workshop on the theme of the project. In addition to publications by individual researchers in diverse venues, the project team is planning a collaborative book that will offer a synthesis of research findings.

### ***Notes***

1. Photo attributed to Bengt A Lundberg, Riksantikvarieämbetet, CC BY 2.5, accessed via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J%C3%A441\\_Fr%C3%B6s%C3%B6stenen\\_-\\_KMB\\_-\\_16000300013546.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J%C3%A441_Fr%C3%B6s%C3%B6stenen_-_KMB_-_16000300013546.jpg).

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