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# *Vǫluspá* in a Holistic Reading

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*Abstract: In broad lines and select details, this reading of* Vǫluspá *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.*

*Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá*"; 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.[1] 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 transferals 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 *Vǫluspá* 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?

### Vǫluspá – *which* Vǫluspá?

The wholeness of *Vǫluspá* considered in the present article comprises the poem proper as it is preserved in the two separate versions of the *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók* manuscripts.[2] The existence of two complete versions is unique to *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá* (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.

**Vǫluspá *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 *vǫlva* (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, *ragnarǫk* 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, *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá* 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 *Vǫluspá*. 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 *ragna-rǫk*.

## Ragnarǫk

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

Old Norse *rǫk* (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, *rǫk* can also translate in other non-specific ways (‘matters’, ‘doings’, ‘business’, ‘developments’, ‘signs’, ‘sakes’) – yet always holding a connotation of causality. Going from there, *rǫk* 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 *rǫk* see Haraldur Bernharðsson 2007: 26–30 [however, cf. Frog 2011: 17], and Thiberg 2011: 137–138).

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

> fiǫlð veit hón frœða   fram sé ek lengra*
> um *ragna rǫk*   rǫmm sigtíva. (st. 44)
>
> Much knowledge she has, far further I see, of *ragnarǫk*, the harsh ones of the victory deities.
>
> (* In *Hauksbók* the first line is: *fram sé ek lengra / fiǫlð kann ek segia* [‘Far further I see, much I can say’] in accordance with the more limited ritual role of the *vǫlva* that frames this version.)

If read according to the meanings suggested above, ‘the effects of the gods’ (*ragnarǫk*) are here acknowledged to be ‘the harsh ones’ (*rǫmm*), 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* ǫll   á *rǫk* stóla
> ginnheilog goð   ok um þat gættoz (st. 6)

***An Additional Note on* ragnarǫk *as Doomsday***

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

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

The term *ragnarøkkr* 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, *ragnarøkkr* is not used elsewhere in the poetic sources.

The word *røkkr* (or *røkr*) is clearly not a mistake for *rǫk*,[3] which in Snorri's *Edda* still appears in citations with the compound *rǫkstólar*. In *Gylfaginning* 42, this word is paraphrased *dómstólar* ‘judgment seats’ in line with Snorri's overarching Doomsday scenario. The choice of *røkkr* over *rǫk* for *ragnarøkkr* participates in the fragmentation of the compositional and semantic wholeness of *Vǫluspá* 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 rǫkstola – ragnarǫk*) unite the two poetic versions.

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

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

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

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

The specific compound *rǫkstólar* is only known from this context, so the word *rǫk* 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 rǫkstóla* in relation to *ragnarǫk* 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 *Vǫluspá*, which consequently may, from the beginning through to the end, be a poem about the intended meanings of *ragnarǫk*.

In the composition of *Vǫluspá*, the two *rǫk*-refrains of the poem are used differently. The *ragnarǫk*-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 *vǫlva* had learned (*veit hón*) and now recounts from memory (*ek man*) in the first half, and the visions that the present *vǫlva* 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 *vǫlva's* account of a past ritual *útiseta* 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 *jǫtnar* (*fœdda* 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 *jǫtnar* (singular *jǫtunn*; in modern translations commonly called 'giants'), as I read these stanzas. Thus, the semantic content of the *ragnarǫk*-refrain also refers back to the previous *rǫkstólar*-refrain.

The *rǫkstólar*-refrain is used whenever the gods deal with cosmic problems arising from their use of the matter of the *jǫtnar* 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 *Vǫluspá* (Kure 2010: 137–140).

Based on the above points on plot and on *rǫk* and *ragnarǫk*, the following holistic reading of *Vǫluspá* 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 *vǫlva* in the poem's frame.

### Vǫluspá *Act 1 – The Premise*

A premise for the story is barely hinted at in *Vǫluspá*. 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 *jǫtunn*. (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.) *Vǫluspá* 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, *Vǫluspá* presents an approach that is clearly different and perhaps more abstract and allegorical, accentuating the cultivated earth (*biǫð*), and lacking hints of a cut-up *jǫtunn*-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:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *jǫtunn*-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 *jǫtunn*-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 *Vǫluspá* story, something implied by the structure of the *ragnarǫk*-refrain, and informed by the general mythical opposition between *jǫtnar* and gods. Both groups are mutually interdependent and represent basic abstract concepts behind the cosmic forces.

The *jǫtnar* represent the 'base materials', characterized by the designation *jǫtunn*, a cognate of *etinn*, 'eating' – i.e., consumption and amassment in an endless cycle of destroying in order to grow. Thus, everything made from *jǫtnar* is both growing and perishable – 'eating' itself, as it were. The *jǫtnar* are not described as hostile or evil in a Christian sense; rather, they are much too powerful (*miǫk ámátkar*, 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 *Grímnismál* 38. This crisis prompts the gods to commence their first round of causative troubleshooting in the *rǫkstólar* 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 *jǫtunn*-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.

### Vǫluspá *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 *jǫtnar* 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 meyiar* (*jǫtunn*-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 *þriár* is read as recorded in both manuscript versions), where the gods (in the masculine) are described as 'potent and loving' (*ǫflgir ok ástgir*), indicating a non-hostile relation. The

god guys simply seem happy to see the three (*þriár*) 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 *jǫtunn*-body (sts 9–16). The cyclical micro/macro relation of the *jǫtunn*-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 *WøluSpá*, published by Resen in 1665).
3. In connection with the return of the *jǫtunn*-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 *jǫtunn*-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 *jǫtunn* 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 *Vǫluspá*, the story has just passed the 'point of no return'.

### **Vǫluspá *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 *vǫlva* 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 þióðar*) 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    vǫllo 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 *Vǫluspá*, see Simek 2005; Frog & Roper 2011.) Óðinn's acts may thus facilitate and possibly warrant divine immanence in the world (where the chthonic *jǫtnar* 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 *vǫlva*'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 hǫll hárs hána brendo
> þrysvar brendo þrysvar 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 *vǫlva's* mind, namely the burning of Gullveig by the gods in the hall of Óðinn (*í hárs hǫll*). 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 mær*, 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 *jǫtunn*-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 *Vǫluspá*, 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 (*Vǫluspá* 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 vígbǫnd snúa
> heldr vóro harðgǫr hǫpt ór þǫrmom (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' (*vigbǫnd*) 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 *Vǫluspá* 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 Níðhǫggr ('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 *jǫtnar*. In *Vǫluspá* 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 *jǫtunn* 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 *vǫlva* 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.

### Vǫluspá*'s Frame – The Context*

The poem opens by the *vǫlva* 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 Váfǫðr ('sire of woe', in *Hauksbók*), or alternatively at the will of Valfǫðr ('sire of the chosen', in *Konungsbók*), the name in both readings referring to Óðinn. The *vǫlva* may be a collaborative, living human being, or alternatively a reluctant, dead *jǫtunn*, 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 iǫtna ár um borna
> þá er forðom mik fœdda hǫfðo
> nío man ek heima nío í viðior
> miǫtvið mæran fyr mold neðan. (st. 2)
>
> I recall *jǫtnar*, 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' (*í 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 (*nío 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 (Schjødt 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 míms sýnir* – not *synir* 'sons'; see Fleck 1971: 397–398; Lassen 2003: 101; Schjødt 2008: 115–116) because Óðinn talks to 'Mímr's head' (*míms 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. *Míms 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

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of a pro-social consciousness or enlightenment within the warriors, described in *Grímnismál* 45 as an 'awakening' of 'desirable help/conduct' (*vaka vilbiǫrg*), notably brought about by mythical 'vision-flickers' (*svipir*) from Óðinn – matching the flickering visions in *Vǫluspá* 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 *ragnarǫk*, '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', *miǫtuðr*, echoing *miǫtviðr* 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 *Vǫluspá* story.

**Vǫluspá *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 *Grímnismál* and *Sigrdrífomál*, the ritual death is marked by transcending the fires of a funeral pyre (Kure 2022: 29–30). In *Vǫluspá* 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 líki*, 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 *Vǫluspá* may thus be seen to inform both the semantics as well as the fiery imagery of *ragnarǫk*.

The transformative property of fire is a decisive agent in the breakthrough of *ragnarǫk*. Eventually, the amassing *jǫtunn*-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 *jǫtnar* 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 *jǫtunn*-turmoil (st. 48). As the *jǫtnar* (the 'fool-lads', *fífls megir*, st. 51) advances, fronted by Hrýmr ('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
> griótbiǫrg 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 *jǫtunn*-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 hiǫrlegi 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 *jǫtnar*. In *Vǫluspá* 47 and 52, at least, the flames of Surtr cause the collective *jǫtunn*-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 *jǫtnar*, the *jǫtunn*-body-world of humankind will burn to the bedrock (*griótbiǫrg*), 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' (*fiǫrgyniar 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 *jǫtunn*-body-world does thus not mean the dead end of the world. The *ragnarǫk* of mythical poetry is not *ragnarøkkr*, not a *Götterdämmerung*. In *Baldrs draumar* 14, the release of *ragnarǫk* is referred to as 'the breakthrough' (*riúfendr*), which may be read as a term for the transcendence of a transformational process.

**Vǫluspá** ***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 *vǫlva* describes the reborn world by visions that echo its former status, which accentuates the aspects of consummation.

At the cosmic, mythical level, the defeated *jǫtnar* 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-þinurr*, 'earth-tree', the axis of fate echoing *miǫtviðr 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 kiósa*, st. 63) – possibly because the roles of the *jǫtunn*-born maids have now transformed into that of helpful guardian spirits (*hamingior*), as may be indicated in *Vafþrúðnismál* 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 Níðhǫggr (st. 66, finishing its business begun in st. 39). Their stories are destined for oblivion and will not be part of the improved post-*ragnarǫk* 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

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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 fragmentized, 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 Arnamagnæan 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 *rǫk* 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 *ragnarǫk*, which eventually led to Snorri's *ragnarøkkr* (cf. Haraldur Bernharðsson 2007: 27–28).

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