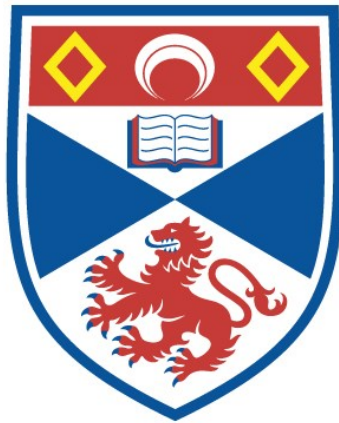


# THE ROLE OF THE GIANTS IN NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Andrew L. Hagen

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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## **ABSTRACT**

The following thesis is a survey of the roles that the giants play in Norse mythology. It involves examination, criticism and interpretation of the mythological poems of the *Elder Edda* and mythological information preserved in Snorri's *Edda*. All passages in Old Icelandic have been translated as literally as possible in footnotes. Relevant archaeological evidence is examined and evaluated. The first chapter deals with the cosmological giant Ymir, from whom the land, sea and sky were formed. Many giant-names seem to be associated with Ymir's characteristics, and the implications of these potential associations are discussed at length. Chapter 2 concerns Óðinn's involvement with the giants. In his pursuit of wisdom he encounters giants, giantesses and those who are arguably associated with giant-kind. They play the role of both obstacle and source for knowledge and wisdom. The third chapter concerns Þórr's relationship with the giants who pose a threat to the gods and man. Þórr's role is that of the heroic defender of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr. In these myths the giants seem to serve as devices to demonstrate the personality and various characteristics of Þórr. Chapter 4 deals with Gerðr and Skaði, two giantesses who marry into the circle of the Æsir. Having become involved with the Æsir in this way, they too become goddesses or the equivalent thereof. Previous studies have tended to focus more on the roles of the individual gods and goddesses, but this thesis aims to shed some light on their enemies.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

All Eddaic poems can be found in G. Neckel, and H. Kuhn, edd., *Edda* (Heidelberg: 1962), or Jón Helgason, ed., *Eddadigte I-II* (Copenhagen etc: 1962-4), and skaldic poems can be found in *Skj*.

- AEW*: Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: 1962).  
*Akv*: *Atlakviða*.  
*Alv*: *Alvissmál*.  
*ARG*: Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berlin: 1956-7).  
*Bdr*: *Baldrs draumar*.  
*Bergb*: *Bergþúa þátr*. (Íslenzk fornrit XIII)  
*DNM*: *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, R. Simek, ed. (Cambridge: 1993).  
*Eg*: *Egill Skallagrímsson* in *Skj*.  
*EGils*: *Einarr Gilsson* in *Skj*.  
*Eskál*: *Einarr Helgason skálaglamm* in *Skj*.  
*ESk*: *Einarr Skúlason* in *Skj*.  
*Fagrsk*: *Fagrskinna*. (Íslenzk fornrit XXIX)  
*Ffb*: *Flateyjarbók*. Sigurður Nordal and others, edd., I-IV (Akranes: 1944-5).  
*Fj*: *Fjölsvinnsmál*.  
*Fm*: *Fáfnismál*.  
*Gd*: *Guðmundardrápa* in *Skj*.  
*Giz*: *Gizurr Þorvaldsson* in *Skj*.  
*Grettis*: *Grettis saga*. (Íslenzk fornrit VII)  
*Grott*: *Grottasöngur*.  
*Grm*: *Grímnismál*.  
*H*: *Hauksbók*.  
*Hál*: *Háleygjatal* in *Skj*.  
*Háv*: *Hávamál*.  
*Harð*: *Harðar saga*. (Íslenzk fornrit XIII)  
*Haustl*: *Haustlög* in *Skj*.  
*HBr*: *Hálfðanar saga Brönnufóstra*. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, edd., *Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, III (Reykjavík: 1943-4).  
*Hfl*: *Egill Skallagrímsson: Hofuðlausn*, in *Skj*.  
*HHj*: *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*.  
*Hjálmp*: *Hjálmpers saga ok Ölvis*. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, edd., *Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, III (Reykjavík: 1943-4).  
*Hkm*: *Hákonarmál* in *Skj*.  
*Hyndl*: *Hyndluljóð*.  
*Hom*: *Homiliubók*, Gustav Indrebø, ed., *Gamal norsk homiliebook* (Oslo: 1931).  
*Hr*: *Heiðreks saga*, C. R. Tolkien, ed. (Edinburgh etc: 1960).

- Hrbl:* *Hárbarðsljóð.*  
*Hym:* *Hymiskviða.*  
*Ísldr:* *Íslendingadrápa in Skj.*  
*Jóms:* *Jómsvíkingadrápa in Skj.*  
*Katr:* *Katrínardrápar in Skj.*  
*Korm:* *Kormakr Ögmundarson in Skj.*  
*Lex.Poet:* *Lexicon Poeticum, Finnur Jónsson, ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (København: 1931).*  
*Ls:* *Lokasenna.*  
*Lv:* *Lausavísa.*  
*O.H.L.:* *The Legendary Óláfs saga helga (in Flb II-III).*  
*Ófs:* *Ófeigr Skiðason in Skj.*  
*Ormr:* *Ormr Steinþórsson in Skj.*  
*R:* *Codex Regius, MS GkS 2365, 4to, of the Elder Edda.*  
*R<sup>2</sup>:* *Codex Regius, MS GkS 2367, 4to, of Sn.E.*  
*Rm:* *Reginismál.*  
*Skj:* *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning, Finnur Jónsson ed. (København: 1912-1915); E. A. Kock, ed., Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen, I-II (Lund: 1946-50).*  
*Skm:* *Skírnismál.*  
*Skúli:* *Skúli Þórsteinson in Skj.*  
*Sn.E:* *Snorra Edda.*  
*Sn.E. Gylf:* *Snorri Sturluson: Edda, Prologue and Gylfaginning, A. Faulkes, ed. (Oxford: 1982).*  
*Sn.E. Sk:* *Snorri Sturluson: Edda, Skáldskaparmál, A. Faulkes, ed. (London: 1998).*  
*Stj:* *Stjórn, C. R. Unger, ed. (Christiania: 1862).*  
*Sturl:* *Sturla Þórðarson in Skj.*  
*W:* *Codex Wormianus MS AM 242, fol., of Sn.E.*  
*Vetrl:* *Vetrliði Sumarliðason in Skj.*  
*VS:* *Völsunga saga, N. F. Blake, ed. (London: 1962).*  
*Vsp:* *Völuspá.*  
*Vm:* *Vafþrúðnismál.*  
*Þdis:* *Þórbjörn díarskáld in Skj.*  
*Þdr:* *Þórsdrápa in Skj.*  
*ÞGísl:* *Þórkell Gíslason in Skj.*  
*Þorm:* *Þórmóðr kolbrúnarskáld in Skj.*  
*Þrm:* *Þrymskviða.*  
*Þul:* *Þulur in Skj.*  
*Ölv:* *Ölvir hnúfa in Skj.*  
*Örv:* *Örvar-Odds saga, Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, edd. Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda, I (Reykjavík: 1943-4).*

*Hann var illr ok allir hans  
ættmenn, þá köllum vér  
hrimpursa.<sup>1</sup>*

*(Sn.E. Gylf. 5)*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE GIANTS

The gods can be powerful and entertaining such as Þórr and Freyja, or mysterious and enigmatic such as Óðinn and Loki. One could spend a lifetime researching a single god or goddess, from interpreting and reinterpreting the roles in which they are portrayed, to seeking their parallels in other Indo-European languages, to seeking historical and archaeological evidence for their lost cults. The giants in Norse mythology are rarely the topic of books, articles or dissertations such as this. The reason is not a lack of interest, but probably because they are overshadowed by the more colourful gods and goddesses. Where the gods are cunning the giants are gullible, and where the giants are strong, the gods are ever stronger, or more clever. Yet a study of the gods can rarely be conducted without mentioning the giants, and, as with that study, a study of the giants cannot easily be carried out without an understanding of the gods.

One of our chief sources for the mythology, and central to this thesis, is the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, also popularly known as the 'Poetic Edda' (MS GkS 2365, 4to). It is an Icelandic manuscript dated to the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and contains eleven mythological lays which themselves are difficult, and often impossible to date with any kind of accuracy. A number of the Eddaic<sup>2</sup> poems found within it are suspected to have roots in antiquity, whilst others seem to be of a later origin, perhaps as late as the thirteenth century. Some of the myths these poems deal with are referred to by skaldic poets who are often datable to between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Skaldic poems are rarely about the gods, but many refer to these myths through kennings which can only be interpreted through an understanding of the mythology. Often these kennings can be used to corroborate and substantiate the myths outlined in the Eddaic poems. The allusions in these kennings are often elliptical and brief but are at times sole sources for

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<sup>1</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf. 5*: He was evil and all his kinsmen, we call them frostgiants (ed. Faulkes, p. 10).

mythological information. The Eddaic poems are central to this thesis, and I quote from Jón Helgason's scrupulously careful edition.

## 1.2 PURPOSES OF DISCUSSION

One of the many reasons for writing this thesis on the roles of the giants is that they have often been overshadowed by the roles of the gods. This is to say that academic studies often focus on the roles of the gods, their characteristics, associations and cult followings. The giants are often seen as the enemies of the gods; they appear to represent the forces of chaos and destruction. They also are associated with various aspects of Norse cosmology. In this respect the world is said to be derived from a single primordial giant, Ymir, from whom the race of giants is descended. It appears that the world was believed to be held together by the Miðgarðsormr, that the realms of the dead were ruled by Hel, and that Fenrir will swallow Óðinn at Ragnarök. These three figures are descended from Loki and the giantess Angrboða, 'grief-bidder'.

## 1.3 THE SOURCES

There are numerous sources available, most of which are textual. It should be noted that the study of mythology is in essence textual and linguistic. Archaeologists often reveal artefacts that depict scenes or characters which may be identifiable in the written sources, and conversely the finding of such objects can often help to give us an impression of when a myth was popular, where, and in what surroundings it was associated. Furthermore the identification of a god with a particular area, usually shown in place-names, can possibly offer historical evidence concerning cults that were practised in specific areas. Sometimes, as will be discussed below, the use of mythology to identify archaeological evidence can be difficult, but, moreover, it can be risky at best to use archaeological evidence to reconstruct the mythology. It can be said with some degree of certainty that the reconstruction of specific mythological narratives is not possible without texts, though archaeological remains can be taken as evidence of cult-practice.

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<sup>2</sup> There seems to be no agreed spelling of the English word *Eddaic*. Some writers prefer *Eddic*, and some capitalise and others do not. In this dissertation the form *Eddaic* is preferred.

The written sources for Norse mythology are limited to only a few manuscripts. The Eddaic poetry survives in the Codex Regius, R, (MS GkS 2365, 4to), which is generally believed to have been written in the second half of the thirteenth century. The manuscript is written in a single hand, but scribal features seem to suggest it preserves information from disparate sources. These differences are most apparent between the mythological poems and the heroic; thus it may be that the scribe copied these poems from two separate collections.<sup>3</sup> It seems clear that this is not the first composition or the first time these poems have been written down. The poems contain many prose sections which have much in common with the presentation of the material as it is found in our other main source, *Snorra Edda* (also known as the *Prose Edda*), composed between 1220-1241. The text is preserved most importantly in the Codex Regius, R<sup>2</sup>, (GkS 2367, 4to), Codex Wormianus, W, (AM 242, fol.), and the Uppsala manuscript (DG 11) which attributes the work to Snorri. He was a wealthy Icelandic aristocrat who was himself an accomplished skaldic poet and served at the court of Duke Skúli in Norway. Other sources include Hauksbók (AM 544, 4to – *Völuspá*); AM 748, 4to (known as A – *Vafþrúðnismál* 1-19, *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál* 1-27, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Hymiskviða* and *Baldurs draumar*, the last of which is only preserved here); Codex Wormianus (W, AM 242, fol. – mentioned for *Snorra Edda*, but also contains *Rígsþula*, not in R); Flateyjarbók (GkS. 1005, fol. – the only early MS of *Hyndluljóð*); GkS. 2367, 4to (R<sup>2</sup>, mentioned above for *Snorra Edda*, but also contains *Grottasöngur*, not in R).

*Snorra Edda* is a scholarly work apparently intended as a handbook for young poets. This thesis is concerned with two sections of *Snorra Edda*. *Gylfaginning*, ‘the Deluding of Gylfi’, is a compilation of mythological material which is intended to give students of skaldic poetry the necessary mythological background to interpret kennings. Snorri often uses the poems which were later preserved in the Elder Edda, and this connection shall be discussed at various points in this dissertation. The second section of *Snorra Edda* with which the thesis is concerned is the prose introduction to *Skáldskaparmál* ‘The Sayings / Language of Poetry’. In this section Snorri discusses poetic diction and in doing so he must recount the myths to which the diction refers. The *Þulur* are lists of *heiti*, or names

<sup>3</sup> Dronke, U., ed., *The Poetic Edda*, vol. I, II (Oxford: 1969-97), p. xii.

for things ranging from rivers to giants appended to *Sn.E.* but of unknown authorship, and these, too, are important sources for this dissertation.

It is possible that the prose links and *Snorra Edda* could both draw on the works of scholars at Oddi writing in the latter part of the twelfth century. Snorri received his education there (1181 onwards) where he was fostered by Jón Loptsson. Jón was the son of an illegitimate daughter of King Magnús berfœttr of Norway, and this relationship was acknowledged by the Norwegian kings. A poem, *Nóregs konungatal*, gives Jón's genealogy back to legends of the Ynglingar, and this is evidence for the study of royal history, legend and poetry at Oddi.<sup>4</sup> One must remember when handling these sources that the information therein derives from numerous sources, most of which were probably ultimately oral.

#### 1.4 THE RECEIVED WISDOM

The most influential works of the twentieth century have only occasionally discussed the giants, and then in the context of the gods. There is valuable understanding derived from later nineteenth century study of comparative religion linking the giants of Norse mythology with the giants and Titans of classical mythology and demons of Sanskrit mythology. Studies which either directly or indirectly concern the giants are those by the comparative mythologists Georges Dumézil, Gabriel Turville-Petre, and Jan de Vries. Divergent approaches have been pursued in the latter part of the twentieth century by Lotte Motz, Marlene Ciklamini, Margaret Clunies Ross, Riti Kroesen and Gro Steinsland.

#### 1.5 THIS SURVEY

The title, *The Role of the Giants in Norse Mythology*, is potentially too broad for a thesis of this length. Norse mythological sources are in practice largely restricted to Eddaic poetry and *Snorra Edda*, so the present discussion confines itself to giants recorded in both sources. Topics such as Þórr's encounter with Geirrøðr and his daughters, and the problem of Loki, have also received so much attention that they merit

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<sup>4</sup> For the discussion of possible saga composition at Oddi see Einar Ól Sveinsson, 'Sagnaritun Oddaverja' *Studia Islandica* I (Reykjavík: 1937).

separate discussion of considerable length. Similarly the giant-like figures who appear in sagas such as *Örvar-Odds saga*, for example, will not be discussed here, though such giants are indeed of interest. The subject of this dissertation concerns the interaction and relationships between the gods and individual gods/goddesses and giants and giant-kind.

## 1.6 METHODOLOGY

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore any pre-Norse origins of giants. Similarly I do not discuss the origins of Norse terminology for giants, such as *jötunn* and *þurs*, nor any possible distinctions between them.

I have taken the approach that it is often possible to make a distinction between myths and the poems which report them. Some poems seem to be compositions intended to perform a specific function such as to relay mythological data. Myths may lie within, but the frameworks may be younger and/or intended to perform functions other than recording myths. Myths may be told in various ways to illustrate preconceived points or ideas. For example the myth of Óðinn and Gunnlöð in *Hávamál* 12-14 is told as an exemplum against drunkenness and in *Hávamál* 106-110 as an exemplum of male infidelity. It is possible to tell only part of a myth in a text such as *Gylfaginning*, in which for example, Snorri tells part of the content of *Skírnismál*. Many poems and myths appear to function within their own space and time, and thus it is often difficult not only to sequence mythological events but also to weigh one against another. There are clear relationships between some Eddaic poems such as *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*, which appear to be composed within a similar tradition involving a wisdom game. This convention appears also to have been adopted by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* and the introduction to *Skáldskaparmál*. In light of this I have chosen to approach each poem independently to prevent applying preconceived ideas. It may be valuable, at least when considering the giants, to take this empirical approach so that we may have a better understanding of the main focus of the poem and its possible functions. This principle may be applied not only to the poems which contain the myths but to the myths themselves. The framework of an Eddaic poem may have functions irrelevant to the myths incorporated within it, which may have their own independent functions.



Ár var alda,  
 þar er Ymir byggði,  
 vara sandr né sær  
 né svalar unnir,  
 iðrð fannz æva  
 né upphiminn,  
 gap var ginnunga  
 en gras hvergi.<sup>5</sup>

(*Vsp.* 3: H)

## 2 YMIR AND NORSE COSMOLOGY

### 2.1 THE GIANT *YMIR*

*Ymir*, possibly meaning 'roarer', is one of the most frequently attested giants in Norse mythology though one of the most baffling. He plays an important role in the mythology as the cosmological giant out of whom the earth, seas and heavens were formed, and is also the sole progenitor of the giants having no parents of his own. *Ymir* is one of few giants for whom we have any sense of size. The heavens are said to have been made from *Ymir*'s skull, the mountains from his bones, and boulders and rocks made from his molars. Therefore he seems to have been as large as the world itself. How his physical size compared to that of his descendants is difficult to determine except to presume that he was far larger. According to Snorri<sup>6</sup> *Ymir*'s blood alone was enough to drown the race of *hrímbursar* 'frost-giants' save Bergelmir who escapes with his wife on his *líðr*,<sup>7</sup> a scene reminiscent of Noah's escape from the Deluge on the ark. Thus it is from *Ymir* that the *hrímbursar* descend, and through Bergelmir and his wife that the race of giants continues.

In tracing the core of the myth of *Ymir* we can turn to a number of *Ymir*-kennings found in skaldic poetry. These kennings are significant in a great number of ways. Each kenning refers to an *Ymir* myth and uses one of the myth elements. For example *Ymis hauss*, meaning 'the sky' refers to the sky being made from *Ymir*'s skull. This confirms that at least this element of the myth must be earlier than the skaldic verse in which it is

<sup>5</sup>*Vsp.* 3: Early in ages, there where *Ymir* lived, was neither sand nor sea, nor frigid waves, and the earth had not found itself, nor heaven above, the void was gaping, and growth nowhere.

<sup>6</sup>*Sn.E. Gylf.* 7 (ed. Faulkes, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup>*Ym.* 35: possibly 'cradle'. See *Vafþrúðnismál*, T. W. Machan, ed., Durham Medieval Texts 6, Durham, 1988, pp. 82-3.

found. It is logical to assume that elements of the myth found in kennings, such as this, are of considerable age because in order for the kenning to be understood by the poet's contemporaries they should have had an understanding of the myth (or at least the relevant part of the myth). The works of skaldic poets can also be dated with a certain amount of accuracy. *Ymis blóð*,<sup>8</sup> meaning 'the sea' can be found in a verse by Ormr Barreyjarskáld dated to the second half of the tenth century.<sup>9</sup> The kenning *Ymis hauss*<sup>10</sup> 'sky/heavens' is found in Arnórr Þórðarson's *Magnúsdrápa dróttkvæð* 19<sup>11</sup> which is commonly dated to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. The kenning is also found in a verse of *Friðþjófssaga*<sup>12</sup> which exists in two versions: one is dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century and a longer version dated to the early fifteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Ymir may have been well known in the Norse pagan belief systems, if only because of his crucial role in the cosmology. He has been compared with primordial beings in other Indo-European belief-systems, some as far away as India. The possibility that the myth of Ymir has roots dating back to an 'original' set of Indo-European beliefs is an attractive one, and has inspired numerous interpretative possibilities. Much remains to be learned, however, concerning how he was perceived at the time our sources were composed. As the progenitor of the giants, do they share his characteristic features and in what ways?

## 2.2 YMIR IN *VÖLUSPÁ*

We have limited sources for Norse cosmology. Three Eddaic poems, *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Grimnismál*, include cosmological information among other themes. Snorri's *Gylfaginning* serves as an outline of the mythology as he knew it, and although he draws on the above sources for cosmological material, it is probable that he also incorporates material from sources now lost. The above strophe from *Völuspá* is an oft-cited reference to the first giant, Ymir, though it tells us nothing about his actual role in

<sup>8</sup> See *Grm.* 40, *Vm.* 21, *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8 (ed. Faulkes, p. 12), for the element of the myth which associates Ymir's cranium with the sky.

<sup>9</sup> *Skj.* I B, 135.

<sup>10</sup> See *Grm.* 40, *Vm.* 21, *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8, for the element of the myth which associates Ymir's blood with the sea.

<sup>11</sup> E. A. Kock, ed., *Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen*, I-II (Lund: 1946-9), I, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> *Frb.* p.88, line 19.

<sup>13</sup> Pulsiano, P., ed., *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (London and New York: 1993), p. 221.

the primordial period in Norse mythology. The poem is cryptic and puzzling, shifting from subject to subject. Strophes 3 and 4 seem to show a break in the sequence of cosmological events as outlined elsewhere (as in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8 and *Vm.* 21):

Áðr Burs synir  
 biððom um ypðo,  
 þeir er miðgarð  
 mæran skópo;  
 sól skein sunnan  
 á salar steina,<sup>14</sup>  
 þá var grund gróin  
 grœnum lauki.<sup>15</sup>

(*Vsp.* 4)

The gap in the sequence of events between strophes 3 and 4 is unlikely to be due to a fault in the text of the poem itself, rather it seems to be that the poet decided not to include the events separating the murder of Ymir and the shaping of the world. In strophe 4 *áðr*, possibly meaning 'before' in this position, connects the contents of these strophes in such a way that it is possible to read them as a continuous train of thought. Some have translated *áðr* as 'until',<sup>16</sup> and this translation places more emphasis on the sons of Burr than the picture of the primordial void. This implies a cause and effect relationship between the two strophes in that there was nothing but a gaping void and the giant Ymir until the sons of Burr lifted up the land. This leaves out Ymir's role in the shaping of the land and thus he may seem to be completely extraneous to the account and he does not appear in R. If *áðr* takes the meaning 'before', the emphasis is left on the picture of the void of which Ymir is a fundamental part:

Early in ages, there where Ymir lived, was neither sand nor sea, nor frigid waves, and the earth had not yet found itself, nor heaven above, the void was gaping, and growth nowhere, before the sons of Burr lifted up lands, they who made famous Miðgarðr, from the south the sun shone on the stones of soil, then was the ground grown with (a) green leek(s).

<sup>14</sup> *Salar steina* is an unidentified place-name which may have once played an important part in the mythology. The name also appears in *Vsp.* 14 as *Salarsteini* in which it seems to be a place associated with dwarves. It may simply be a *heiti* for land.

<sup>15</sup> *Vsp.* 4: Before the sons of Burr lifted up the lands, they who made famous Miðgarðr, from the south the sun shone on the stones of soil, then was the ground grown with (a) green leek(s) (*lauki* being the dative singular for onion or leek). Nordal suggests that the word either refers to grass or it means that the world was covered in leeks. Nordal (1978), pp. 15, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Völuspá, The Sybil's Prophecy* (Edinburgh: 1996), p. 60.

Although these strophes are possibly connected in this way, *Völuspá* has an underlying thematic framework and ethical understanding,<sup>17</sup> but seen through separate windows of perception, almost like looking into a shattered mirror. It appears to function through images of various occasions or significant periods in time. In strophe 3 the prophetess offers an image of the cosmos prior to the world describing the lack of things we see around us which make up our surroundings: *vara sandr né sær* 'there was neither sand nor sea'; *né svalar unnir* 'nor frigid waves'; *né upphiminn* 'nor heaven above', *en gras hvergi* 'grass nowhere'. There was nothing but *ginnunga gap* 'a gaping void', and the primordial giant Ymir who will later provide the raw materials for all that which is absent. The sense of time is generalized *ár vas alda þar er Ymir byggði* 'early in ages, there where Ymir lived', but this need not imply any specific point early in time, such as its very beginning. The word *áðr* serves to divide and compare the image of the early cosmos with an image of its present state as described in the following strophe. The prophetess has no need to discuss Ymir, though he is included as forming a component of the picture of the primordial cosmos. John Stanley Martin states, 'The stress is on the yawning gap before any act of creation and it is hard to imagine a specific giant existing in this pre-creation void. Moreover, Ymir is extraneous to the account of creation in *Völuspá*.'<sup>18</sup> Ymir is extraneous only in the sense that the prophetess does not include (or perhaps does not need to include) the events concerning how he came to form the cosmos. It may be hard to imagine Ymir living in the pre-creation void at the dawn of ages, just as it is hard to imagine him living 'there where' as opposed to 'then when'. Therefore Ymir may not be extraneous if the prophetess is describing a period in time in which he was a fundamental component.

Pálsson suggests that a syntactical peculiarity in the use of *þar er* 'there where' in *Völuspá* 3, '[implies that] during this stage of the creation of the world, the distinction between time and place is blurred.'<sup>19</sup> In this way the sibyl describes the lack of distinction between time and place. We naturally look for a chronological ordering of

<sup>17</sup> Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Völuspá*, trans. by B. Benedikz and J. McKinnell, Durham and St Andrews Medieval Texts 1 (Durham: 1978), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> J. Martin, 'Ár vas alda. Ancient Scandinavian creation myths reconsidered' in *Speculum Norroenum: Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, U. Dronke, ed., (Odense: 1981), p. 360.

events but it seems that there is a deliberate lack of sequential logic; thus the poem may be imitating the primordial chaos. Equally cryptic is the description in strophe 4 of the ground having been grown with a green leek: *þá var grund gróin grænum lauki*. *Lauki* (masc. dat. sing.) technically refers to only one leek as opposed to several leeks or greenery in general, and the significance of the leek cannot be known for certain. It may be that we are being shown an image or snap-shot of the beginning of vegetation or grass in general. Nordal offers only two possibilities: it either refers to grass in general, or nothing but leeks grew in the golden age – they being the best of grass.<sup>20</sup> The Sibyl says nothing of a golden age in strophe 4, and is continuing the train of thought from the previous strophe. Strophe 3 and half of 4 show us an image of the primordial cosmos before the sons of Burr lifted up the land. The second half of strophe 4 shows another image of *Miðgarðr* immediately after the land was lifted, the sun shown and a leek grew. The word *lauki* (the metre would work with the plural *laukum*) as it appears in the strophe is evidence enough to state that *lauki* is a single leek, and there is little justification to give the word in its current form a new and grammatically incorrect definition. It may not even be necessary if it is accepted that the image of the brand-new leek growing on the brand-new ground in the brand-new sunlight is a visualization of vegetation just beginning to flourish in its newly formed environment.

The leek could represent the first shoot of Yggdrasil. Cleasby-Vigfusson notes<sup>21</sup> that *laukr* is occasionally used in similes and metaphors for sleek, taper-formed things; *réttr sem laukr* ‘straight as a leek’, and *blóð-laukr* ‘blood-leek, a sword’. In this definition Cleasby-Vigfusson add that a mast is called *skips-laukr*, ‘the leek of the ship’, which is also discussed in *Lex.Poet.*<sup>22</sup> In this sense the *laukr* of *Völuspá* 4 could be taken to refer to the first sprouting of the world-ash Yggdrasil, as it is at this stage that both time and place take shape and meaning. This can be compared with the description of Yggdrasil catching fire and groaning during Ragnarök at the end of the world in strophe 45. A parallel can be found in *Grm.* 40 (which relates how Ymir’s body parts came to become

<sup>19</sup> Hermann Pálsson (1996), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Sigurður Nordal (1978), pp. 15, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson (1957), s.v. *Laukr*. pp. 374, 375.

<sup>22</sup> *Lex.Poet.* s.v.

earthly features): *baðmr ór hári* '(a) tree out of (a) hair'. This is often taken to mean that trees were made of his hair, but may instead refer to the one tree, the world ash. Yggdrasill may represent the space-time continuum in Norse cosmology, and *Vsp.* 3 draws a picture of existence prior to the sprouting of this world-ash, which somehow seems to hold space and time together. The word *gróa* has several meanings derived from 'grow' (which is original but unusual) including 'to grow together' and 'to be healed of wounds'. If we assume the meaning 'to grow together',<sup>23</sup> it could be saying that as the cosmos forms Yggdrasill grows together with it, holding and binding it to the space-time continuum. The leek was also believed to have healing properties;<sup>24</sup> therefore we may have an image of the growing together, binding and healing of the new cosmos. It seems unlikely that Yggdrasill is a leek in the literal sense, but the descriptions of the Sibyl are cryptic.

It may be possible to compare the prophetess's grammatical style in *Vsp.* 3 with other syntactical peculiarities found throughout the poem in which the *völva* 'prophetess' talks about herself in the third person.<sup>25</sup> It may be that the odd use of syntax appears to be in line with the narrator's cryptic style, and may therefore be deliberate. Helga Kress<sup>26</sup> and Hermann Pálsson<sup>27</sup> have recently revived the suggestion of Björn M. Ólsen (in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30, 1914) that the poet is actually a poetess, though this remains speculative. In 1953 Gabriel Turville-Petre suggested, '...the ecstatic tone of *Völuspá* might lead to the suspicion that it was composed in an abnormal state of mind.'<sup>28</sup> The most that can be assumed with safety is that the narrator seems to be imitating the cryptic wording of a prophetess or fortune-teller. Therefore one must bear in mind when reading

<sup>23</sup> As it appears in ch. 20 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, Íslendinga sögur* Guðni Jónsson, ed., (1946), p. 349; see also Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson edd., *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, Harðar saga, Íslensk fornrit*, XIII (Reykjavík: 1991), pp. 101-172.

<sup>24</sup> *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 11, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> For example *Vsp.* 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 34, 37, 39, 56, 61 and 62 for the Sibyl referring to herself in the third person.

<sup>26</sup> H. Kress, 'The Apocalypse of a Culture: *Völuspá* and the Myth of the Sources/Sorceress in Old Icelandic Literature', in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, T. Pàroli, ed., The Seventh International Saga Conference, Atti del XII Congresso internazionale di studi sull' alto medioevo (Spoleto: 1990), pp. 279-302.

<sup>27</sup> Hermann Pálsson (1996), p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: 1953), p. 59.

and translating *Völuspá* that the material may be deliberately puzzling, and a literal translation should reflect the cryptic nature of the Old Norse original.

### 2.3 COSMOLOGICAL MYTHS IN ORAL TRADITION INVOLVING *Ymir*

In *Vafþrúðnismál* Óðinn asks the wise giant Vafþrúðnir *hvaðan iörð um kom*<sup>29</sup> to which he replies:

Vafþrúðnir [kvað:]  
 Ór Ymis holdi  
 var iörð um sköpuð,  
 en ór beinom biörg,  
 himinn ór hausi  
 ins hrímkalda iötuns,  
 en ór sveita siór.<sup>30</sup>

(*Vm.* 21)

In *Grímnismál* there is a nearly identical strophe:

Ór Ymis holdi  
 var iörð um sköpuð,  
 en ór sveita sær,  
 biörg ór beinom,  
 baðmr ór hári,  
 en ór hausi himinn.<sup>31</sup>

(*Grm.* 40)

In these two strophes are a number of opposing alliterating word groups: *biörg / beinom*; *sveita / sær*; *hausi / himinn*. Both begin with *ór Ymis holdi / var iörð um sköpuð*, and another structural similarity can be found in the beginnings of lines 3 and 6 of each strophe with *en ór* 'and out of'. The similarity between these two strophes could suggest either that they were copied from one poem to the another with slight alterations, or that they both originally belonged to the same oral tradition.

<sup>29</sup>*Vm.* 20: Whence did the earth come about?

<sup>30</sup>*Vm.* 21: Vafþrúðnir said: Out of the flesh of Ymir, the frost cold giant, was the earth shaped, and mountains out of [the] bones, the heavens out of his skull, and the sea from his sweat (=blood).

<sup>31</sup>*Grm.* 40. The earth was formed out of the flesh of Ymir: the sea out of his blood, the boulders out of his bones, a tree out of a hair, and the heavens out of his skull.

Turville-Petre points to a possible connection between Ymir and the creation of the dwarves.<sup>32</sup> This concerns a passage in *Vsp.* 9 in which the dwarves were made from the bloody surf of *Brimir* and 'limbs' of *Bláinn*:

Þá gengo regin öll  
 á røkstóla,  
 ginnheilög goð,  
 ok um þat gættuz,  
 hvern skyldi dverga  
 dróttir skepia  
 ór Brimis blóði  
 ok ór Bláins leggjum.<sup>33</sup>  
 (*Vsp.* 9)

This also appears in the fourteenth century *Hauksbók* version of *Völuspá*:

ór brimi blóðgu  
 ok ór Bláins leggjum.<sup>34</sup>  
 (*H.*)

*Brim* means 'surf' and if so *Brimir* may be an Ymir-name, given that it is in the context of blood and the sea is (according to *Vm.* 21 and *Grm.* 40) made out of the blood of Ymir.<sup>35</sup> *Bláinn* 'blue' may also be an Ymir-name, seeing that Snorri interprets the *Bláinn* in *Völuspá* in terms of Ymir's rotting flesh. He quotes *Vsp.* 9 and he relays a story of how the dwarves were maggots in the rotting flesh of his body:

<sup>32</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: 1964), p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> *Vsp.* 9: Then all the ruling powers, most holy gods, went to their judgement-seats, and discussed about it, who should create hosts of dwarves out of Brimir's blood and out of Bláinn's (blue) leg bones.

<sup>34</sup> Turville-Petre translates this as follows: from the bloody surf and the limbs of Bláinn. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> If it is the form is *Brimir* it could be derived from *brimi* 'fire'.



Þar næst settuz guðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sína ok minntuz hvaðan dvergar höfðu kviknat í moldunni ok niðri í iörðunni, svá sem maðkar í holdi. Dvergarnir höfðu skipaz fyrst ok tekit kviknon í holdi Ymis, ok vóro þá maðkar, en af atkvæði guðanna urðu þeir vitandi manvitz ok höfðu mannz líki ok búa þó í iörðu ok í steinum.<sup>36</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf.* 14)

*Blár*- means 'blue, blue-black' and can refer to the colour of bruised flesh such as in the phrase *blár ok blóðugr* 'blue and bloody'. It is also the colour a corpse turns after a number of weeks. If Snorri's account is drawing on more sources than *Völuspá*, the myth may have been independent of it and could be part of another oral tradition. It seems unlikely that Snorri would have fabricated the dwarves' development from maggots, but it is always a possibility that this is one of Snorri's rationalisations. The fact that Ymir has, or seems to have, the names *Bláinn* (also found listed as a dwarf heiti in *Skj. Pul.* IV, ii. *Dverga heiti*)<sup>37</sup> and *Brimir* seems to suggest widespread knowledge, not only of Ymir, but also of his part in the cosmology.

Snorri adds further information which might stem from such an oral tradition concerning Ymir:

Þeir tóku Ymi ok flutti í mitt Ginnungagap ok gerðu af honum iörðina, af blóðe hans sæinn ok vötnin; iörðin var gör af holdinu, en biörgin af beinum; griót ok urðir gerðu þeir af tönnum ok iöxlum ok af þeim beinum er brotin vóro.<sup>38</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf.* 8)

*Gylfaginning* post-dates *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Völuspá* and *Grimnismál*<sup>39</sup> so it is fairly safe to assume that some of the information comes directly from these earlier sources. Yet

<sup>36</sup> *Gylf.* 14: Next the gods sat up in their seats and made their counsel, and noticed for themselves how the dwarves had quickened in the soil and below the earth, like maggots in flesh. The dwarves were formed first and had taken life in the flesh of Ymir, and were then maggots, but from the decree of the gods they came to know human consciousness and had human form and yet live in earth and stones. (ed. Faulkes, p. 15).

<sup>37</sup> E. A. Kock, ed., *Den norsk-islandske skaldediktningen*, I-II (Lund: 1946-50), I, pp. 336, 337.

<sup>38</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8. They took Ymir and moved him to the middle of the yawning gap, and made out of him the earth: the sea and lakes out of his blood; the earth was made of his flesh, and boulders out of his bones; they made gravel and stones out of his teeth and molars and those bones which were broken.

<sup>39</sup> For example *Grm.* strophes 40 and 41, and *Vsp.* 5 being quoted in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8, and *Vm.* 29 and 31 being quoted in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 5.

Snorri does add details which are not found in other extant sources such as: *griót ok urðir gerðu þeir af tönnum ok iöxlum* and *af þeim þeimur er brotin vóro*.<sup>40</sup> One can only wonder why Snorri does not name his other sources, but one possibility may be that these details derive from various scattered oral traditions which survived into his own day. It may be that *Vm.* 21 and *Grm.* 40 derived separately from such a tradition or another possibility could be that Snorri was aware of Ymir-kennings now lost which refer to stones as Ymir's broken molars.

The myth concerning the giantess Jörð 'earth' (Þórr's mother) seems to conflict with the Ymir myth regarding the origin of land: we are told that the land, *jörð*, was made out of Ymir's flesh. There are numerous kennings which refer to a giantess *Jörð*,<sup>41</sup> which clearly connect her with the earth; in fact *jörð* also means 'land'. It would seem plausible to conclude that the *jörð* (mentioned in passages such as *Grm.* 40 and *Vm.* 21) is interchangeable with the giantess *Jörð*. Further, another name for the figure of *Jörð* is *Fjörgyn*.<sup>42</sup> The word *fjörgyn* is of great antiquity: it has two plausible etymologies, one of which relates it to Old English *fyrgen* and Gothic *fairguni*, 'mountain' and further to various words for tree including modern English 'fir', cognate with Latin *quercus*, so the word may have had an overall sense of 'wooded mountain / forested mountain'. The second etymology relates both *Fjörgyn* and the masculine god-name *Fjörgynn* to the Lithuanian weather-god *Perkunas* whose function seems to be very similar to that of Þórr.<sup>43</sup> Both etymologies may be correct for Norse, giving a deity associated with thunder but also with wooded mountainous land. Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld (late tenth century) echoes such a correlation of wooded mountain with giantess [1,5] when he describes Earl Hákon's acquisition of Norway as his marriage to [Jörð] 'the only daughter of Ónarr, tree-grown' [*einga dóttur Ónars, viði gróna*].<sup>44</sup>

Numerous studies have been undertaken concerning Ymir and variant forms in other Indo-European myths. In Iranian mythology the primordial being, Zurvan, conceived

<sup>40</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8. (ed. Faulkes p. 11).

<sup>41</sup> See R. Meissner (1921), pp. 87-89.

<sup>42</sup> *Lex.Poet.* s.v.

<sup>43</sup> Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk Orðsifjabók*, s.v. *fjörgyn*; ARG. §513, §560.

twins, one 'light and fragrant' and the other 'dark and stinking'. The light twin created the heavens and earth and the dark one created everything evil. This is comparable to Ymir in that he sprouts a man and a woman under his left arm (possibly armpit) as he sweats in his sleep. Óðinn is not the son of Ymir, but the son of Bestla, one of Ymir's direct descendants. It is possible that he can therefore be seen as the counterpart or variant of the light twin in Iranian mythology in that he creates the heavens and earth along with his two brothers (or possibly two Óðinn by-forms). The dark twin has no direct parallel in Norse mythology, but may, perhaps, be seen as the race of the giants in general. Ymir shares another striking parallel with Zurvan as the earth and heavens were made from his body: the sky was his head, plants were his hair and the earth was his feet.<sup>45</sup> It seems likely that a primordial being, other than a god or spirit, was once an important component in the early Indo-European belief systems, and therefore it seems plausible that the myths surrounding him survived in oral tradition from an early age. The name *Ymir* has frequently been compared to *Yima* (Sanskrit *Yama*) 'twin'. De Vries points out that according to Tacitus the name *Tuisto* 'twin' or perhaps 'hermaphrodite' belonged to the mythical first ancestor of the Germans (*Germania* II), from whom all the Germanic tribes are believed to have descended.<sup>46</sup>

Turville-Petre suggests, 'The Norse creation myths must be influenced by the Eastern ones, but it is not yet possible to say when and how this influence was exerted.'<sup>47</sup> He suggests, among other possibilities, that the myths must have reached Europe at an early time when Indo-European language and culture were adopted, and in this case the myths must have been adapted, formulated and fossilised in the North.<sup>48</sup> It is illogical to say that, because the Norse creation myths share striking resemblances with Eastern models, the Norse forms must have been influenced by them. According to the principle of diffusion, the Eastern and Northern variants probably developed independently from a single, central source. They would develop differently as they drifted apart and with the passing of time whilst certain features and themes remain fossilised in both cultures. It is

<sup>44</sup> *Hákonardrápa* 5, *Skj.* I B, p. 148.

<sup>45</sup> See E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), ff. 278.

<sup>46</sup> *ARG.* p. 573.

<sup>47</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 278.

also conceivable that some myths originated independently, but were similar because they had similar functions for similar peoples in similar circumstances. There are also a few myths which can be found around the world that seem to be based on human universals. Examples of such universal myths may be the dying god and the earth rising out of the sea. Therefore caution must be exercised when consulting Eastern myths in search for understanding of the Norse material. The Eastern myths seem to be related to the Norse creation myth, and if this is so, they are all likely to share a common older source, which in turn provides some idea of the age of the Norse creation myth. The longer the myths have been in circulation, the more the likelihood of there being variant names and sub-myths, such as the variant names *Brimir* and *Bláinn* and Snorri's account of the dwarves' origins in Ymir's rotting flesh. Furthermore it means that there is more likelihood of there having been ancient oral traditions involving Ymir and the myth of creation, which would explain various versions of what may once have been the same strophe in *Vm.* 21 and *Grm.* 40.

Robert Kellogg once suggested that the Eddaic poems never had a fixed text in oral tradition but were improvised on the basis of formulas like the Yugoslav epics studied by Parry and Lord.<sup>49</sup> Lars Lönnroth argued that although Kellogg's position is untenable, '[this has] done Old Norse studies a very important service by insisting that we look at the Eddaic poems as *oral* texts and not as completely fixed literary compositions... It also appears quite likely that Eddaic texts were improvised, or were at least quite fluid and changeable, at an early stage in their transmission, before the Icelanders started to concern themselves so much with rigid metrical rules and the preservation of "correct" poetic diction... Recurrent formulas and oral variants in our present *Edda* texts may in some cases be explained as left-overs from such an earlier, more fluid stage in oral tradition.'<sup>50</sup> It may be that the myths involving Ymir were preserved as such 'oral texts' through a relatively fluid stage of development. It seems possible that *Völuspá* was one such oral text that was affected by fluidity of oral transmission given the fact that certain

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>49</sup> R. Kellogg, 'The Oral Heritage of Written Narrative,' in R. Kellogg & R. Scholes, edd., *The Nature of Narrative* (1966). (See A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge, MA: 2000).

strophes have similar variants in other Eddaic poems, and that the subject matter shifts from theme to theme, including possible Christian themes introduced in later stages of development. Numerous variations between the *R* and *H* versions of *Völuspá* cannot be put down to simple scribal error,<sup>51</sup> and this may suggest that they may have reached their present form partly as a result of oral transmission. This may also imply that there may not be a single *Völuspá*-poet or poetess, and that the poem in its present state may have had numerous contributors.

#### 2.4 YMIR AND CHRISTIAN THEMES WITHIN VÖLUSPÁ

Snorri tells us that the sons of Burr *tóku Ymi ok flutti í mitt Ginnungagap*.<sup>52</sup> This differs from *Völuspá* in that the earth is said to have been lifted up by the sons of Burr, giving the impression that it existed independently of Ymir. In fact, Snorri does not quote *Vsp.* 4, perhaps dismissing it in favour of another, now lost, source. Furthermore Snorri quotes *Vsp.* 3, but his second line is *þat er ekki var* 'then when nothing was' as opposed to *þar er Ymir byggði* 'there where Ymir lived' as it is found in both *R* and *H*. Furthermore Snorri's account has many striking parallels in Iranian mythology. He describes the hot world of Muspell on the one side and the frozen world of Niflheimr on the other with *Ginnungagap* in the middle. The Iranian cosmogony myths also concern the fusion of light and heat with cold and darkness, and the space between. There is a difference between the Norse and Iranian myths in that the light side is described as sweet-smelling and moist, and the dark side being dark, heavy, dry and stinking.<sup>53</sup> This implies that the light side was (or had probably become) connected in some way with pleasantness and the dark side with unpleasantness. Snorri's description of Muspell and Niflheimr presents both worlds in an 'unpleasant' context. Furthermore Muspell is considered hot and dry, whereas Niflheimr, although frozen, was far from dry. Snorri reports that Surtr stands on the edge of Muspell guarding it, and it is he who will destroy

<sup>50</sup> L. Lönnroth, 'Iðrö fannz æva né upphiminn. A formula analysis,' in *Speculum Norroenum: Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, Ursula Dronke et al. edd. (Odense: 1981), pp. 311, 322.

<sup>51</sup> An example of such oral recomposition can be seen in *Finaz æsir aiþa velli oc vm mold þinvr matkan dōma oc a fimbvl tys fornar rvnar*, (*R* 57) and *Hittaz æser iða uelli ok um molla þinur matkan dæma ok minnaz þar a megin doma ok a fimbultys fornar runar* (*H* 53). The differences here do not interrupt the metre and the meaning is retained.

<sup>52</sup> Took Ymir and moved (him) into the middle [of the] gaping void (ed. Faulkes, p. 11).

<sup>53</sup> Zaehner, R., *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: 1961), pp. 248-50.

the world with fire at Ragnarök (also found in *Vsp.* 52). There are definitely similarities between the two mythological accounts, but the differences are equally considerable.

Further, *Völuspá* stands alone<sup>54</sup> in describing the earth having been lifted up, sinking beneath the waves, and rising anew from the sea after Ragnarök:



The Gosforth cross (after Collingwood).  
Height 4.42 m

Sól tér sortna  
sigr fold í mar,  
hverfa af himni  
heiðar stiörnor;  
geisar eimi  
við aldrnara,  
leikr hár hiti við  
himin síálfan.<sup>55</sup>

(*Vsp.* 57)

In *Vm.* 47 & 48 we learn that Fenrir will swallow the sun, and this could be depicted on the Gosforth cross (fig. 1) and is possibly depicted on the Ovingham stone;<sup>56</sup> thus two versions may have been concurrently in circulation. Furthermore this strophe can be compared with a similar strophe in *Þórfínnsdrápa* by the Christian skald Arnórr Þórðarson (c. 1064):

<sup>54</sup> P. & U. Dronke, 'Growth of Literature: the Sea and the God of the Sea', *Chadwick Lecture* 8 (1997), pp. 28-31.

<sup>55</sup> The sun turns dark, land sinks into the sea, the glorious stars vanish out of the sky, smoke rages against fire, high heat plays against heaven itself.

<sup>56</sup> Bailey, R., *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London: 1980), pp. 134, 135.

Björt verður sól at svartri:  
 sökkr fold í mar dökkvan,  
 brestr erfiði Austra,  
 allr glymr sær á fjöllum,  
 áðr at eyjum fríðri –  
 inndröttar – Þórfinni,  
 þeim hjalpi goð geymi –  
 gæðingr myni fœðask.<sup>57</sup>  
 (*Þórfinnsdrápa* 24)

It appears Arnórr was aware of the contents and wording of *Vsp.* 57, and he freely uses this material in a Christian context.

The image of the new purified world rising from the water is reminiscent of baptism, in this case the baptism of the world after the fate of paganism. A convincing argument has yet to come forward proving that strophe 65 is pagan in origin<sup>58</sup>:

Þá kœmr hinn ríki  
 at regindómi  
 öflugr ofan,  
 sá er öllu ræðr.<sup>59</sup>  
 (*Vsp.* 65)

The possibility of Christian influences becomes evident when compared with Mark 13:24-6: 'But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken, and then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory'. These motifs and the wording of *Vsp.* 65 are echoed in *Hyndl.* 44, showing that they were widely known. Other stanzas also seem to echo Mark 13: *Vsp.* 45 cf. Mark 13.12 and 7; and *Vsp.* 57, cf. Mark 24-5. If it is the case that *hinn ríki* is Christ coming down to rule over all, after the baptism of the world, we might have a clue as to why Ymir's role in the creation of the world is appears to be limited. It may be that

<sup>57</sup> The bright sun becomes black; the land sinks into the dark sea, Austri's labour (= sky) shatters; all the sea crashes on to the mountains – before a lovelier lord than Þórfinnr will be born in the isles (Orkney): may God keep that keeper of the court (Kock, I, p. 162-3).

<sup>58</sup> For the view that this strophe is not original to the poem see Dronke (1997), pp. 192-3, and references to von See there.

<sup>59</sup> Then the mighty one comes down from above (at divine judgement?), the one who rules all.

the poet knew Ymir's role in Norse cosmogony, but prefers to present the world as land originally lifted from the depths of Ginnungagap, only to sink again under the sea after Ragnarök and then to be lifted again after its baptism. Ymir's role in the cosmogony as described in *Völuspá*, probably stems from the same oral tradition as *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, though his role, as it appears in *Völuspá*, has possibly been abbreviated. In an orally composed poem, indebtedness to Christian sources does not necessarily imply a Christian poet.

## 2.5 THE FORMATION OF YMIR AND HIS DESCENDANTS

The sources for Ymir are reasonably close in agreement concerning his role and characteristics. By the time of the composition of the Eddaic poems, Ymir seems to have been recognised as the first living being. It may be that Surtr lived before Ymir as Snorri describes him guarding the first world *Muspell*:

Þá mælti Þriði: 'Fyrst var þó sá heimr í suðrhálfu er Muspell heitir; hann er líóss ok heitr, sú átt er logandi ok brennandi, er hann ok ófærr þeim er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar óðul. Sá er Surtr nefndr er þar sitr á landzenda til landvarnar; hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda veralldar mun hann fara ok heria ok sigra öll goðin ok brenna allan heim með eldi.<sup>60</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf. 4*)

Snorri relates that *Muspell*<sup>61</sup> existed before any other world, but he does not specifically tell us that Surtr guarded it from its beginnings. He uses the present tense to describe Surtr and the future tense to describe what he will do, but we know nothing about his origins:

<sup>60</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf. 4*: Then Third spoke: 'But first was that world in the southern half which is called Muspell; it is bright and hot, that direction is flaming and burning [and it is impassable for those that are foreigners there and are not native to it] (trans. Faulkes, p. 9). He is named Surtr who sits there on the edge of the land guarding it, holding a flaming sword, and at the end of the world he will go and harry and be victorious against all the gods and burn all the world with fire' (ed. Faulkes p. 9).

<sup>61</sup> Cognates of *Muspell* appear as *muspille* in Old High German *Muspille* (l. 57) and *mudspelli / mutspelli* Old Saxon *Heliland* lines 2592, 4360. Its meaning here is '(the Christian) doomsday', perhaps literally 'the mighty news/event'. Its origin and early sense are debatable, (see de Vries, *ARG.*, II, p. 394 and fn. 2) and given this meaning it could be borrowed from German Christianity, in which case it would have to be a recent arrival in Norse mythology.



Surtr ok Stórverkr,  
 Sækarlsmúli,  
 Skærir, Skrýmir,  
 Skerkir, Salfangr.  
 (*Sn.E. Skj. Pul. Jötna heiti I*)

If this is the same *Surtr*, and he is a giant, then he would (following *Vafþrúðnismál*) be descended from Ymir as we are told in *Hyndhuljóð*:

Eru vödur allar  
 frá Viðólfi,  
 vitkar Vilmeiði,  
 <en> seiðberendr  
 frá Svarthöfða,  
 iötnar allir  
 frá Ymi komnir.<sup>62</sup>  
 (*Hyndl. 33*)

And again in *Vafþrúðnismál*:

Vafþrúðnir [kvað:]  
 Ór Élivágom  
 stukko eitrdropar,  
 svá óx, unz varð ór iötunn;  
 <þar órar ættir  
 kómu allar saman,  
 því er þat æ allt til atalt>.<sup>63</sup>  
 (*Vm. 31*)

Surtr may be a demonic figure who is associated with the giants,<sup>64</sup> but as Faulkes points out, 'The name is used for a giant in general in skaldic verse.'<sup>65</sup> What this tells us is that not all giants are confined to parameters set in other poems.

<sup>62</sup> *Hyndl. 33*: All prophetesses come from Viðólfr, all wizards from Vilmeiðr, and sorcerers from Svarthöfði, all giants have come from Ymir.

<sup>63</sup> *Vm. 31*: Vafþrúðnir said: From storm-bays sprang poison-drops so it grew until out of it a giant came to exist. There all our genealogies came all together, therefore all of it is always (possibly referring to *ættir*) so terrible (*atalt* possibly meaning 'fierce' or 'loathsome' see Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. *atalt* p. 29). The second half of *Vm. 31* is preserved only in *Snorra Edda*.

<sup>64</sup> A. Faulkes, trans., *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (London: 1987), p. 174.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

As far as we know Ymir is the progenitor of all the giants. It seems to be possible, if not to translate, then to interpret the second half of *Vm.* 31 as follows: 'There all our genealogies came all together, therefore all of it is always so terrible.' What the strophe appears to be relaying is that the giants are indeed terrible (fearsome/loathsome), because their lineage descends from Ymir who was formed from poison-droplets. In appendices A and B numerous giant names are listed which can be associated with ferocity, loathsomeness and malevolence. This may indicate that the circumstances surrounding Ymir's formation are central to why so many giants are so named. It may be that giants had already been seen as terrible when the details of the myth of Ymir's creation developed (possibly as explanations). Some names that would be transparent to a medieval Icelander could be of relatively recent coinage, whereas obscure names which could only have been formed in a proto-language must be of great age. It is noteworthy that the word *Ymir* seems to be transparent insofar as it could be derived as an agent noun from *ymja* 'to whine, cry', but this could be a reinterpretation of a much older form.<sup>66</sup>

Many giant and giantess names seem to be related to earthly features, and according to Norse cosmogony as we know it, earthly features such as sand, mountains and water were made of Ymir's flesh, bones (molars), and blood respectively. Most of these names appear in the *þulur* in an appendix to *Skáldskaparmál*. The tables in appendices A and B are of giant- and giantess-names with earth/water/bone associations which may be associated with Ymir in this way. The fact that there are so many names that can be classified (to a certain degree) in terms of Ymir-characteristics, seems to suggest that as the mythical progenitor of the giants, Ymir's role in Norse cosmogony lends itself to his giant descendants. What cannot be known for certain is if Ymir's specific role in cosmogony developed earlier, concurrently, or later than these associations.

The sources for the formation (or birth) of Ymir are in *Vm.* 30, 31 and *Sn.E. Gylf.*<sup>67</sup> (in which Snorri cites *Vm.* 30-31).<sup>68</sup> In *Vm.* 30 Óðinn asks, *hvaðan Aurgelmir kom*<sup>69</sup> to which Vafþrúðnir replies:

<sup>66</sup> See de Vries, *AEW.*, s.v.

<sup>67</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 5 (ed. Faulkes, pp. 10-11).

<sup>68</sup> *Grm.* 40 and 41 are directly quoted later in *Gylf.* 8 (ed. Faulkes, p. 12).

Ór Élivágom  
 stukko eitrdropar,  
 svá óx, unz varð ór iötunn;<sup>70</sup>  
 (Vm. 31)

Snorri elaborates telling us that in the centre of the dark frozen world of Niflheimr is the spring *Hvergelmir* from which twelve poisonous rivers flowed. These rivers *Élivágar* ‘storm bays’ flowed so far from their source they froze and ran no more, and became rime filling the northern part of Ginnungagap. *Élivágar* is also often used as the name of the river dividing the world of men and gods from Jötunheimar (Vm. 31; Hym. 5; Sn.E. Sk. ch 17.) The rime met with burning sparks from Muspell and began to melt the ice, and the droplets of poison quickened into the likeness of a man, Ymir. As mentioned above many giant- and giantess-names are associated with coldness, wetness and frost, and the term *hrímpursar*<sup>71</sup> means ‘rime-giants’. To an extent it is a ‘chicken-and-egg’ question to ask if the myth concerning the creation of Ymir from the rime predates the giants’ associations with frost. It may, however, be the case that as the myth of Ymir developed, people may have begun to perceive the giants in terms of their mythical forefather – the sons and daughters of Ymir would naturally share some of his characteristics.

Snorri presents Ymir as *illr*, perhaps meaning ‘hostile’: *Hann var illr ok allir hans ættmenn, þá köllum vér hrímpursa*.<sup>72</sup> Evil does not seem to have been conceptualised in the Norse belief-system until contact with Christianity, and Snorri for that matter is writing approximately two and a half centuries after the conversion of Iceland, though this need not imply that Snorri is the first to treat the giants in this way. It may also be that the survival of such mythical creatures in later folklore (in the form of trolls for example) may have had an impact on the way Snorri perceives them, in a way not unlike the many Christian influences shown in the presentation of Grendel in *Beowulf*.

<sup>69</sup> From what did Aurgelmir come?

<sup>70</sup> Vm. 31: Vafþrúðnir said: From storm-bays sprang poison-drops; so it grew until out of it a giant came to exist.

<sup>71</sup> As it is found in Vm. 33, Hym. 109, Grm. 31, Skm. 34; Sn.E. Gylf: (ed. Faulkes ch. 3, p. 9, ch. 5, p. 10).

<sup>72</sup> Sn.E. Gylf. 5: He was evil and all his kinsmen, we call them frostgiants (ed. Faulkes p. 10).

## 2.6 YMIR THE HERMAPHRODITE?

Snorri relates the way in which Ymir reproduced:

...Svá er sagt [at] þá er hann svaf, fekk hann sveita; þá óx undir vinstri hönd honum maðr ok kona, ok annarr fótr hans gat son við öðrum. En þaðan af kómu ættir.<sup>73</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf. 5*)

The reason why it is assumed that Ymir is a hermaphrodite is because his *fótr* 'leg' begets a son with the other; thus Ymir belongs to both sexes. Perhaps Ymir can be classified as *hermaphrodite* according to the terminology of our time, but is this how 'he' was once perceived? There is no Old Icelandic word for *hermaphrodite*, and in all the sources *Ymir* takes the masculine gender, and never feminine, or, more importantly, never neuter. It is generally believed that as a primordial mythical figure, as already mentioned, it appears that Ymir is related to the Iranian *Zurvan*, who is a hermaphrodite in the sense that he gives birth to twins. The name *Ymir* has been related to *Yima* 'twin'<sup>74</sup> and in the Iranian mythology *Yima* is the first man.<sup>75</sup> The similarities are striking and seem to suggest the existence of an early Indo-European primordial hermaphrodite.

It may be possible to interpret Ymir's bisexuality as a form of *ergi*. This derogatory term frequently refers to passive homosexuality, but is also applicable concerning transgenderism. An ideal example of this is in *Ls. 23*:

[Óðinn kvað:]  
 ...vartu fyr iörð neðan  
 kýr mólkandi ok kona,  
 ok hefir þú þar <börn of> borit,  
 ok hugða ek þat args aðal.<sup>76</sup>

(*Ls. 23*)

<sup>73</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf. 5*: So it is said that when he slept, he sweated. Then under his left arm grew a man and woman, and one foot begot a son with the other. Thence came kindreds (ed. Faulkes, p. 10).

<sup>74</sup> R. Much, *Die Germania des Tacitus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1959), 22.

<sup>75</sup> R. Zaehner (1961), p. 248-50.

<sup>76</sup> Óðinn said: you were beneath the earth, milking cows and a woman, and you have borne children there, and I thought that (was) the inheritance of a pervert.

The consistent theme throughout *Lokasenna* is the shameful deeds of which the gods are guilty. It may be that potentially shameful sexual attributes might have led to later perception of Ymir as evil, as seems also to have happened in part with Loki.

The word *Ymir* has a confusing and possibly ancient etymology. The closest word in Norse<sup>77</sup> is the verb *ymja* meaning 'to roar, groan, whine, cry': *hann grét sárlig ok umði*;<sup>78</sup> *svá bar hann þrúðliga sóttina at engi maðr heyrði hann ymja*;<sup>79</sup> *þá umðu þeir er á heyrðu ok hlógu at*.<sup>80</sup> *Ymja* can also mean to resound or groan: *ymja mun í báðum eyrum þeim er á heyrir*;<sup>81</sup> *ymr it aldna tré*;<sup>82</sup> *umðu ölskálir*;<sup>83</sup> and *umðu oddlár*.<sup>84</sup> Another meaning is howl: *ymðu Úlfhéðnar*;<sup>85</sup> *ymr þjóðar-böl*.<sup>86</sup> Appendices 1 and 2 list the names of giants and giantesses which have associations with roaring or noise-making in general. This may suggest that 'roaring' is a substantial characteristic or trait of Ymir the progenitor of the giants. If the figure of *Ymir* originally derived from the same source as the Iranian *Yima*, then it appears at least that the name *Ymir* has taken on some new meanings. Whatever the name for any ancient Indo-European hermaphrodite once was, its earlier meaning (perhaps 'twin') may have been lost, and it may have been thereafter associated with *ymja* 'to roar'.

Interestingly, the description Snorri gives of Ymir's reproductive capabilities is reminiscent of the way in which Ymir was himself formed. It could be that his sweat drips and forms a man and woman in the same way that Ymir was formed of the poisonous droplets of melting rime. If this is the case, it seems to have little to do with sex or sexuality at all. Snorri's description of Ymir's legs having a son with each other, on the other hand, seems to imply that they were of opposite sexes capable of producing offspring. Snorri is our only source for this particular information concerning his legs,

<sup>77</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 726.

<sup>78</sup> *Hom.* 116 (Gustav Indrebø, ed.).

<sup>79</sup> *O.H.L.* 39

<sup>80</sup> *O.H.L.* 75

<sup>81</sup> *Stj.* 433

<sup>82</sup> *Vsp.* 45

<sup>83</sup> *Akv.* 34

<sup>84</sup> *Hkm.* 8

<sup>85</sup> *Fagrsk.* 8

<sup>86</sup> *Anon.* XIII B7 *Skj.* B.2. p.148.

and thus we cannot determine its age and it could possibly be a late development. The information concerning Ymir's sweat is similarly confined to Snorri, but the fact that it shares similarities with Ymir's own formation may suggest an earlier date, though this could not be proven without datable kennings which make use of giant names such as 'Ymir's sweat'.

## 2.7 THE EXTENT OF YMIR'S COSMOLOGICAL ROLE

Ymir shares many characteristics with his Eastern counterparts, but he also appears to have developed considerably both in the North and possibly in the East since his possible Indo-European origin. As a result one must bear in mind that the myth of Ymir seems to be comprised of countless components, some possibly Indo-European, some Germanic, and some Norse. His role in Norse cosmogony appears to have become intermixed with giants bearing names associated with both his characteristics and the components of the world which are said to have been made of him.

Ymir's role is a passive one in that he does not create the world but it is composed of him. The sons of Burr: Óðinn, Vili and Vé<sup>87</sup> and/or Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr<sup>88</sup> killed Ymir and made the world from his flesh. The gods charge themselves with the ordering of the cosmos, and in this organizing the giants never seem to take a willing part, particularly Ymir. The gods take four dwarves<sup>89</sup> and set them under the four corners of Ymir's skull thereby ordering the four directions.<sup>90</sup> They organize the body and blood of Ymir in concentric circles.<sup>91</sup> The land of the outermost circle is *Jötunheimr* 'giant worlds' and the innermost is *Ásgarðr* 'enclosure of the Æsir'. Separating them is the *djúpi sjár* 'deep sea' and *Miðgarðr* 'middle-enclosure', which serves as a defensive works protecting *Ásgarðr* and also serves as the home for mankind. Therefore Ymir is a part of the cosmos, but involuntarily so.

<sup>87</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 6., (ed. Faulkes, p. 11).

<sup>88</sup> *Vsp.* 18.

<sup>89</sup> *Austri, Vestri, Norðri and Suðri. Sn.E. Gylf.* ch. 8. (ed. Faulkes, p. 12).

<sup>90</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 8 (ed. Faulkes, p. 12).

<sup>91</sup> Snorri may be rationalizing at this point, as nowhere else do we find any such precise description.

*Gunnlöð mér um gaf  
gullnom stóli á  
drykk ins dýra miaðar;  
ill iðgiöld  
lét ek hana eptir hafa  
sins ins heila hugar,  
sins ins svára sefa.<sup>92</sup>*  
(Háv. 105)

### 3 ÓÐINN AND THE GIANTS

#### 3.1 ÓÐINN'S SEARCH FOR WISDOM

The relationship between Óðinn and the race of giants is perplexing, being full of contradiction and duality. He presides over the slain in Valhöll, and is also the god of hanged or sacrificial victims. Óðinn is versed in magic and in *Hávamál* we have a list of his spells which he learned from the giant Bölþorn, his maternal grandfather, one of which concerns his powers over hanged men:

Þat kann ek it tólpta:  
ef ek sé á tré uppi  
váfa virgílná,  
svá ek rist  
ok í rúnum fák  
at sá gengr gumi  
ok mælir við mik.<sup>93</sup>  
(Háv. 157)

It appears that spells such as those listed in the 'Ljóðatal'<sup>94</sup> are a form of useful wisdom, and the runes a form of arcane and other-worldly wisdom. In search of this arcane wisdom Óðinn sacrifices himself to himself on the ash *Yggdrasill* 'Óðinn's horse', and in doing so he takes up the runes:

<sup>92</sup> *Háv.* 105: On the golden chair Gunnlöð gave me a drink of the dear mead; after I gave her an ill payment, for her sincerity, for her heavy mind.

<sup>93</sup> *Háv.* 157: I know it, the twelfth: if I see up on a tree a hanged corpse swaying, I cut runes and paint runes, in such a way that the man walks and talks with me.

<sup>94</sup> The term 'Ljóðatal' for this section of *Hávamál* was first coined by K. Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde* V (Berlin: 1891).

Við hleifi mik seldo  
né við hornigi,  
nýsta ek níðr,  
nam ek upp rúnar,  
æpandi nam,  
fell ek aptr þaðan.<sup>95</sup>  
(Háv. 139)

In this strophe *nam* is the verb 'to pick up'. The word *nam* has other meanings which often imply the use of force, thus it is a temptation to see Óðinn not only finding the runes, but taking, or claiming them for himself.

In many respects wisdom is regarded to be a valuable source of power or advantage. In Norse mythology we often find that 'wisdom' is expressed in terms of tangible objects, particularly a drink, often intoxicating, or more specifically, a mead such as the mead of Mímir's well, comparable with the mead of poetry. The acquisition of wisdom is often Óðinn's primary motivation, and he goes to any length to obtain it: sacrificing an eye, sacrificing himself and putting his safety in jeopardy.

### 3.2 THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ÓÐINN AND VAFPRÚÐNIR

In many myths in which Óðinn plays a primary role, he encounters or engages giants, who, for the sake of the theme, provide obstacles to his acquisition of sources of wisdom. Yet the case of Vafprúðnir is exceptional in that what Óðinn gains from the encounter is evidence that he is the wisest. Vafprúðnir is the wisest among giants, and there is the implication that his reputation threatens that of Óðinn:

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<sup>95</sup> Háv. 139: No one comforted me with bread, nor with the (drinking) horn, I searched below, I seized the runes, I cried out I seized them, I fell back from there.



[Óðinn kvað:]  
 Ráð þú mér nú, Frigg,  
 allz mik fara tíðir  
 at vitia Vafþrúðnis;  
 forvitni mikla  
 kveð ek mér á fornom stöfom  
 við þann inn alsvinna iötun.<sup>96</sup>  
 (Vm. 1)

Frigg pleads with Óðinn not to face the giant who is believed to be the wisest of his kind. Many have questioned why Frigg should bother asking this, as we learn in *Lokasenna* that she knows all fates:

[Freyja kvað:]  
 Ærr ertu, Loki,  
 er þú yðra telr  
 lióta leiðstafi;  
 ørlög Frigg  
 hygg ek at öll viti,  
 þótt hón síalfgi segi.<sup>97</sup>  
 (Ls. 29)

Why should she concern herself with Óðinn's safety if she knows that his fate lies not with Vafþrúðnir, but the wolf Fenrir? Perhaps the description of Frigg in *Lokasenna* is generous or not universal, or the *Vafþrúðnismál*-poet's knowledge of Frigg differed from that of the *Lokasenna*-poet. It may be that the *Vafþrúðnismál*-poet had to intensify the reputation of this wise giant, who is referred to nowhere other than in *Vafþrúðnismál* and the *Pulur* (*Sn.E. Sk.* IV b. *Jötna heiti* I, 5).<sup>98</sup> The question is to what extent is this an Óðinn poem, and to what extent is it a Vafþrúðnir poem? Is Vafþrúðnir a significant character in the mythology, or is the poem devised to illustrate the greatness of Óðinn?

The name *Vafþrúðnir* breaks down as *vefia* 'to fold' (or possibly 'to weave') and the second element *þrúðr* roughly meaning 'strength'.<sup>99</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson translate the

<sup>96</sup> Vm. 1: Óðinn said: Advise me now, Frigg, since I desire to visit Vafþrúðnir; I say [that] I have great curiosity on old staves (possibly meaning 'old things') against him, the all-wise giant.

<sup>97</sup> Ls. 29: Freyja said: Mad you are, Loki, when you tell your loathsome tales, I consider that Frigg knows all fates, though she may not tell (them) herself.

<sup>98</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.*, (ed. Faulkes I, p. 111).

<sup>99</sup> See T. Machan (1988), p. 32.

name as 'doughty-riddler, riddle-master'.<sup>100</sup> This translation fits the theme but may be imprecise in meaning. It is likely that Cleasby-Vigfusson's translation may have been influenced by the poem itself. Its literal translation might approximate to 'mighty-weaver', which metaphorically might be interpreted as 'doughty-riddler'.

*Vafprúðnismál* seems to serve several purposes; the most apparent is the transmission of Norse themes of cosmology, cosmogony and eschatology. Secondly, and less recognizably, it identifies Óðinn, providing an example of his characteristics, determination, and cunning, including a description of his own part in the mythology. The myth is the classic Óðinn wisdom-contest in that Óðinn and Vafprúðnir wager their heads on the depth of their knowledge.

[Vafprúðnir kvað:]  
 Hví þú þá, Gagnráðr,  
 mæliz af gólfi fyrir?  
 Farðu í sess í sal!  
 þá skal freista,  
 hvárr fleira viti,  
 gestr eða inn gamli þulr.<sup>101</sup>  
 (Vm. 9)

The key to the contest is Óðinn's disguise and alias *Gagnráðr*, literally 'contrary-advisor', which may also be interpreted as 'counter-explainer'. *Gagn-* is defined by Cleasby-Vigfusson as an adverbial prefix meaning 'counter-'<sup>102</sup> and a secondary meaning of *ráða* is 'to explain or read'<sup>103</sup> (for example *ráða gátu* – to interpret a riddle and *ráða draum* – to interpret a dream). Therefore one possible interpretation of *Gagnráðr* is 'counter-interpreter'. There may be word-play involved in that *gagn* is also a noun meaning 'gain, advantage, use' and *gagna* is a verb meaning 'to help'.<sup>104</sup> The primary

<sup>100</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 747.

<sup>101</sup> Vm. 9: Vafprúðnir said: Why do you then Gagnráðr, speak off (from?) the floor? Go to a seat in the hall! Then it must be tested to see who knows the more, the guest or the aged sage. There is no certain technical meaning for the word *þulr*, but in this case it probably takes the meaning 'wise-one' or 'sage'. s.v. Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 749.

<sup>102</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 186, 187.

<sup>103</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 485, 486.

<sup>104</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 186, 187.

meaning of the noun *ráð* is 'counsel, advice' and the verb *ráða* 'to advise, to counsel'.<sup>105</sup> Therefore the interpretation 'useful advisor' seems equally as possible as 'counter-interpreter' and 'contrary-advisor'. A likely interpretation of this would be 'disputant'.<sup>106</sup> It is also plausible that all senses would have been recognized.

Vafþrúðnir knows that Óðinn's fate lies at Ragnarök:

Vafþrúðnir kvað:  
Úlfr gleypa  
mun Aldaföðr,  
þess mun Víðarr <v>reka;  
kalda klapta  
hann klyfia mun  
vitnis vígi at.<sup>107</sup>  
(*Vm.* 53)

Óðinn assumes Vafþrúðnir is aware of this; thus he challenges Vafþrúðnir in disguise. Given that the audience also knows Óðinn's fate, one can suggest that the drive of the poem is not whether Óðinn will win the contest, but how. Narrative tension is developed in observing how he manipulates the situation. In his victory we develop an appreciation of Óðinn's character, which thereby assumes definition. Vafþrúðnir himself praises Óðinn's wisdom in the last strophe:

<sup>105</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 485.

<sup>106</sup> See T. Machan (1988), p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> *Vm.* 53: Vafþrúðnir said: The wolf will swallow the Father of Men. That Víðarr will avenge; he will cleave [the] cold jaws at the slaying of [the] wolf (or '...of the wolf in fight').

Vafþrúðnir kvað:  
Ey manne þat veit,  
hvat þú í árdaga  
sagðir í eyra syni;  
feigom munni  
mæltu ek mína forna stafi  
ok um ragna røk;  
nú ek við Óðin deildak  
mína orðspeki;  
þú ert æ vísastr vera!<sup>108</sup>  
(Vm. 55)

It may be as McKinnell suggests, that a distinction between wisdom and knowledge can be seen in the questions asked by both contestants.<sup>109</sup> Vafþrúðnir's questions concern the naming of various objects or cosmological features:

Hvé sá hestr heitir  
er hverian dregr  
dag of dróttmögo?<sup>110</sup>  
(Vm. 11)

Hvé sá iór heitir  
er austan dregr  
nótt of nýt regin?<sup>111</sup>  
(Vm. 13)

Hvé sú á heitir  
er deilir með iötna sonom  
grund ok með goðom?<sup>112</sup>  
(Vm. 15)

Hvé sá völlr heitir  
er finnaz vígi at  
Surtr ok in sváso goð?<sup>113</sup>  
(Vm. 17)

<sup>108</sup> Vm. 55: Vafþrúðnir said: No man knows what you in days of old said into the ear of your son; I talked with a fey mouth about my ancient staves (old things) and Ragnarök; now I dealt [out] my word-wisdom against Óðinn, you are always the wisest of beings!

<sup>109</sup> J. McKinnell (1994), p. 94.

<sup>110</sup> Vm. 11: What is the horse called, who drags each day over men?

<sup>111</sup> Vm. 13: What is the stallion called, who from the east drags night over the gracious gods?

<sup>112</sup> Vm. 15: What is the river called, which separates the land of the giants' sons, from the gods?

<sup>113</sup> Vm. 17: What is the field called, where they will encounter each other in battle, Surtr and the dear gods?

Óðinn's questions concern origins and endings, questions which require both a greater amount of knowledge and ability to answer. This can be taken further in that Óðinn's final question, *hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi, sjálfir í eyra syni?*<sup>114</sup> is the same type of question that Vafþrúðnir asks. So not only is there a distinction between wisdom and knowledge, but Óðinn betters Vafþrúðnir in both lines of questioning. Óðinn's final question may resemble those of Vafþrúðnir (doubtless an aspect of the skill of an individual poet), but in origin it seems less to belong to the collection of esoteric knowledge, than to the framework-narrative of the wisdom-contest as in *Heiðreks saga* 73, which ends the wisdom-contest between Gestumblindi (Óðinn again in disguise) and King Heiðrekr:

Hvat mælti Óðinn  
í eyra Baldri,  
áðr hann væri á bál hafðr?<sup>115</sup>  
(*Hr.* 73)

Perhaps the kind of wisdom involved in this contest is not to be found in the answers, but in the questions asked. Ciklamini sees Óðinn's question as a lucky escape, and stresses, 'Óðinn's cunning is to be emphasized, not his knowledge which equals but does not surpass the information given by the giant.'<sup>116</sup> That Óðinn spoke something into the ear of Baldr as he lay on the pyre may have been an early component of the myth of the death of Baldr. This myth survives primarily in *Sn.E. Gylf.* ch. 49, and may be based to some extent upon the *Húsdrápa* which is attributed to the Icelandic poet Úlfr Uggason.<sup>117</sup> The myth is referred to in *Völuspá* (*Vsp.* 31-5, 62), which may have been composed in the late tenth century. Lastly it appears in a semi-euhemerised account by Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Danorum*, III i-iv),<sup>118</sup> which differs considerably from Snorri's version.

<sup>114</sup> *Vm.* 54: What did Óðinn himself say in his son's ear before stepping upon the pyre?

<sup>115</sup> *Hr.* strophe 73: What did Óðinn say into the ear of Baldr before he was raised on to the pyre?

<sup>116</sup> M. Ciklamini, 'Óðinn and the Giants', in *Neophilologus* 46 (1962), p. 152.

<sup>117</sup> This poem is associated with events of 983.

<sup>118</sup> J. Olrik and H. Ræder, edd., *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (Havnæ: 1931-7), pp. 63-73.

The fact that the myth of the death of Baldr appears in two tenth-century sources and a non-Icelandic source, coupled with fact that Snorri appears to offer the myth special attention, seems to imply a general importance to the mythology as a whole. The myth is of structural importance within the quasi-historical framework of the mythology: in *Gylfaginning* the death of Baldr leads to Ragnarök, and this structure is implied in *Völuspá*. If this myth is of great importance to the mythological framework, then perhaps it was originally more elaborate than the version presented by Snorri. There seems little reason to doubt that at some point during Baldr's funeral, Óðinn whispered a secret into the ear of his dead son. Thus the question 'What did Óðinn himself say in his son's ear before stepping upon the pyre?' may be as substantial, insofar as the mythology is concerned, in the same way as Vafþrúðnir's questions, such as: *hvé sá hestr heitir er hverian dag dregr, dag of dróttmögo*.<sup>119</sup> It is certainly the same sort of question outlined by McKinnell,<sup>120</sup> and perhaps we can see Óðinn adding insult to injury by turning Vafþrúðnir's categorical line of questioning against him. Thus Ciklamini's comment, 'Again Óðinn's cunning is emphasized, not his knowledge which equals but does not surpass the information given by the giant,'<sup>121</sup> is not necessarily the only possible interpretation. It is possible to interpret Óðinn's final question in terms of cunning and an unsurpassable knowledge of the mythological-historical events. Furthermore Vafþrúðnir boasts that he can speak the truth concerning the secrets of the giants and all the gods: *Frá iötna rúnom ok allra goða ek kann segja satt*.<sup>122</sup> Óðinn's final question may resemble those of Vafþrúðnir, but in origin it seems to belong to the framework narrative of the wisdom-contest, since it also appears at the end of a very different list of questions in *Heiðreks saga*. Whatever Óðinn spoke into his son's ear is one such secret which, among the living, only Óðinn knows; thus he will always be the wisest of beings as Vafþrúðnir himself is forced to admit: *þú ert æ vísastr vera!*<sup>123</sup>

Whilst transmitting mythological information, *Vafþrúðnismál* highlights Óðinn's cunning and knowledge, and Vafþrúðnir acts as an instrument of the poet to demonstrate

<sup>119</sup> *Vm.* 11.

<sup>120</sup> J. McKinnell (1994), p. 94.

<sup>121</sup> M. Ciklamini (1962), p. 152.

<sup>122</sup> *Vm.* 43.

it. One of many questions is whether or not Vafþrúðnir is a giant invented by the poet to suit the purposes of his poem, or was Vafþrúðnir an important part of a pantheon of the giants? His name appears in the *Þulur*,<sup>124</sup> mnemonic lists of heiti, and another question is how old are the *Þulur* and does his listing there predate *Vafþrúðnismál*? If so, was 'Vafþrúðnir' merely an obscure giant-name picked from the *Þulur* to create *Vafþrúðnismál*?

A number of *þulur* may have been in circulation at the time the poem was composed, and the obscurity of the name 'Vafþrúðnir' seems to suggest an early origin, though it could possibly be the creation of the poet. There are two interesting possibilities: one that Vafþrúðnir is a relic of a forgotten poem surviving only in ancient *þulur*, to be resurrected for this confrontation with Óðinn, or secondly that Vafþrúðnir is merely a fabrication of the poet to highlight Óðinn's qualities. There is no way to know for certain, but the fact remains that Vafþrúðnir plays no other role in the mythology as a whole, if he did, one would expect to find such an important role explained at some point in *Vafþrúðnismál*.

Little about his age can be deduced from his name alone, save *Vafþrúðnir* is unusual in terms of word formation, but this gives no indication of age. It may be associated with names indicating power and cunning of giants (cf. *Þrymr*, *Fjölverkr*, *Stórverk*, and the dwarf *Alvíss*). *Vm* 53,3: *þess mun Viðarr vreka*, includes a clear case of alliteration between *v* and original *vr*, later *r*; which Bjarne Fidestøl regards as a probable indication of a date before ca. 1000.<sup>125</sup> There is no evidence that the giant-name *þulur* are as early as that, although it is not impossible that they could be. Yet another possibility is that there were other sources for Vafþrúðnir, now lost, and conversely, it is equally as possible that we may have all there ever was to know about this giant.

<sup>123</sup> *Vm*. 55. You will always be the wisest of beings!

<sup>124</sup> *Sn.E: Sk. Þul: Jötna heiti* I, 5 (ed. Faulkes I, p. 111).

<sup>125</sup> B. Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana XLI (Copenhagen: 1999), pp. 242, 245.

### 3.3 ÓÐINN AND THE ACQUISITION OF THE MEAD OF POETRY

The myth of Óðinn and the acquisition of the mead of poetry is similar to *Vafþrúðnismál* concerning the relationship between god and giant, yet there are important differences. The myth of Óðinn and Suttungr is only referred to in *Háv.* 12-14 and 104-110, and there are few surviving references in skaldic poetry to either Suttungr or Gunnlöð. In strophes 12-14 the myth of the acquisition of the mead of poetry is told as a warning against drunkenness. Strophes 104-110 are a synopsis of a longer myth, or collection of myths, which is also preserved in *Sn.E. Sk. 2.*

The myth is alluded to in kennings used by various skaldic poets, though we have no skaldic poem discussing the myth itself. Among these kennings, one of the more oft-cited is found in Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Höfuðlausn*:

berk Óðins mjöð  
á Engla bjöð.<sup>126</sup>  
(*Höfuðlausn 2*)

Other kennings for poetry include *Yggs full* 'Ygg's cup (Óðinn's cup)',<sup>127</sup> *Viðurs þýfi* 'Viðurr's theft (Óðinn's theft)',<sup>128</sup> *horna fors farms Gunnlaðar arma* 'the waterfall of the horns of the burden of Gunnlöð's arms',<sup>129</sup> *Surts ættar sylgr* 'the drink of Surtr's tribe',<sup>130</sup> and *Gillings gjöld* 'the wergild for Gillinger',<sup>131</sup> to name but a few. These kennings point to an early date for the myth, and also they incorporate many characters from the myth as we have it in *Hávamál*. This points, not only to an early origin of the myth, but one which was wide-spread and well-known. The only way one can interpret many of these kennings is knowing the myth, or cycle of myths, to which they refer.

<sup>126</sup> 'I bring Óðinn's mead to the land of the English.' Translation: E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London: 1964), p. 38.

<sup>127</sup> *Den norske-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, Finnur Jónsson, ed., (København: 1912-1915), B, I, 38, 6. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38. *Arinbjarnarkviða (Eg.)* c. 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, I. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38. *Sonatorrek (Eg.)* c. 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 387. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38. Steinþórr, 11th century(?). *Skj.* s.v.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 153, 15. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38. Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, (turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, I. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38. *Hál.* c. 985.



As mentioned above, *Vafþrúðnismál* seems to be a didactic colloquy specifically designed to relay varying mythological themes, whilst highlighting Óðinn's characteristics. The myth of Óðinn and Suttungr appears to be a combination of myths culminating in the acquisition of the mead of poetry. The myth itself recounts a complex series of events beginning with a treaty between the Æsir and the Vanir, which is sealed by their spitting into a vat and mixing it until it formed the all-knowing Kvasir, who was subsequently killed by the two dwarves, Galarr and Fjalarr.<sup>132</sup> They then brewed his blood into mead which was later paid to Suttungr as compensation for the murder of his father, Gillinigr. The mead was taken to Hnitbjörg where it was guarded by Suttungr's daughter Gunnlöð. Óðinn seduces her and manages to steal the mead, and taking the form of an eagle, carries the mead in his crop back to Ásgarðr where the Æsir are waiting with vessels to collect it. A drop spills out on the ground outside Ásgarðr; this is called the *skáll<d>fjfla hlut* (which Snorri seems to imply comes out of the bird's backside). Thus Suttungr plays an involved part in the mythology, unlike *Vafþrúðnir*, who seems to be essentially a component in the colloquy framework of a poem designed to relay a variety of mythological information.

The name 'Suttungr' appears in *Sn.E. Sk. Þul. IV Jötna heiti* II, 2 and *Alvíssmál* 34 where the giants are referred to as *Suttungs synir*.<sup>133</sup> The name also appears in the kenning *Suttunga mjöd*<sup>134</sup> referring to the mead of poetry. The comparatively frequent occurrence of *Suttungr* suggests that this giant may have had deeper roots in the mythology than *Vafþrúðnir*, particularly given his role in Óðinn's acquisition of the mead of poetry. Like the name *Vafþrúðnir*, the giant-name *Suttungr* is obscure in meaning. De Vries questioned whether the name is in some way connected with the giant name 'Surtr': 'Wie Suttungr zu verstehen ist, wissen wir nicht; der Name, der zu verschiedenen Deutungen Anlaß gegeben hat, ist nicht erklärt; nur ist es bemerkenswert, daß Eyvindr in seinem *Háleygjatal* (*Slj. I, 60*) erzählt, daß Odin den Met fliegend aus Surts sökkdölum

<sup>132</sup> It is noteworthy that these two names appear in the *Þulur* under *Jötna heiti* and not under *Dverga heiti*.

<sup>133</sup> It is noteworthy that the form *Suttunga* is either gen. pl. 'Suttungar', or gen. sg. of a name *Suttungi*.

Therefore there is a possibility that *Alvíss* is referring to someone or something else.

<sup>134</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 3 (ed. Faulkes I, p. 11).

geholt hat; gibt es einen Zusammenhang zwischen Surtr und Suttungr?’<sup>135</sup> Finnur Jónsson (*Háv.* 106) suggested *Suttungr* is a patronymic, which Magnússon discounts.<sup>136</sup> It seems feasible that *sutt-* is derived from either *sótt* ‘physical sickness’ or *sút* ‘grief, sorrow, affliction’. –*Ungr* is a patronymic suffix as found in *Völs-ungr*, but also is used in wider derivational senses as in *öld-ungr*, *kon-ungr* and *bræðr-ungr*. The circumstances in which *Suttungr* is introduced in *Hávamál* suggests ‘mourner’ as a possible interpretation. *Suttungr*, stricken with grief, seeks revenge for the murder of his uncle *Gillingr*. Simek comments that, ‘because there is no clear etymological interpretation of the name [*Suttungr*], it is extremely uncertain if *Suttungr* indeed played a role in the myth of the theft of the mead of the skalds, or if Snorri was the first to link the giant with this deed’.<sup>137</sup> One may also argue that because the etymology of *Suttungr* is so unclear, its original or early meaning may no longer have been understood at the time Snorri was writing.

*Gillingr* is similarly difficult to define. Orchard suggests ‘screamer’,<sup>138</sup> presumably deriving *Gillingr* from the verb *gjalla* which, according to Cleasby-Vigfusson, can mean ‘to scream or shriek’ in cases of birds of prey.<sup>139</sup> If *Gillingr* is in fact derived from *gjalla*, and being applied to a giant, the definition is more likely to be as Cleasby-Vigfusson define it ‘to bellow’<sup>140</sup> (as it appears in *Flateyjarbók* i. 545) or more likely ‘of a man, to yell, shout’.<sup>141</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson define the dwarf-name *Galarr* as ‘an enchanter, the name of a dwarf in *Völuspá*,’<sup>142</sup> overlooking the *Galarr* in *Skáldskaparmál* with whom we are presently concerned. He bases this on the verb *gala* (which is not the same verb as *gjalla*) meaning ‘to chant, sing’.<sup>143</sup> The second dwarf-name is *Fjalarr*, which may mean ‘deceiver/concealer’. Within the Germanic languages the etymology of *Kvasir* is obscure: possibly related to Danish *kvasse* ‘to crush a fruit in order to extract the juice’,

<sup>135</sup> ARG. II, p. 71.

<sup>136</sup> *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, Ásgeir Magnússon, s.v.

<sup>137</sup> DNM, *Suttungr*, s.v.

<sup>138</sup> A. Orchard, *A Dictionary of Norse Mythology* (London: 1997), p. 56.

<sup>139</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 202.

<sup>140</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 202.

<sup>141</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 202.

<sup>142</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 187.

<sup>143</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 181.

modern Icelandic *kvasa* ‘to become exhausted’, and modern English *quash*.<sup>144</sup> The Danish sense is probably related to Old Slavonic *kvasu* ‘fermented drink’ and modern Russian *kvass* ‘beer’. *Kvasir* seems therefore to mean something like ‘the one crushed to produce intoxicating drink’; this would fit his role very well, but its meaning would probably not have remained obvious to an Old Norse poet. The definition of these names is of secondary importance to this work, but the fact that so many names that elude easy interpretation appear in a single myth, seems to point to an early origin. If this is the case, it may be possible to compare these earlier giants and their roles with giants appearing in later sources.



Fig. 2.  
Lindby figurine.

The myth of the origin of poetry illustrates a few of Óðinn’s qualities and characteristics. Óðinn’s thirst for wisdom and knowledge is at the core of the myth and comparable with his role in *Völuspá*, in which he interrogates the prophetess seeking her knowledge of the future. Furthermore, Óðinn’s quest for the mead of poetry can be likened to the myth in which he surrenders an eye for a drink of the mead from Mímir’s well in the Underworld, one of the three wells beneath the roots of Yggdrasill, another of which contains dragons. This is corroborated by archaeological finds of figures bearing a face (presumably a god) with one eye closed (see Fig. 2). One difference is that in the myth of the mead of poetry, Óðinn does not sacrifice anything, though he puts his life at risk. In this sense it can be compared to *Vafþrúðnismál* in which Óðinn risks his life in the wits-contest with the giant Vafþrúðnir. Similarly this myth can be compared to the myth found in *Hávamál* 138 and 139 concerning how

he sacrificed himself to himself in order to seize the runes. The embodiment of inspiration, in the form of a liquor, may have roots in the Indo-European period, and particularly relevant is the Indian myth of the theft of soma. *Soma* is said to stimulate the mind and is closely connected with poets, and the *Rigveda* recounts how Indra, filled with soma, defeated the monster Vritra. The soma was brought to Indra from heaven by an

<sup>144</sup> de Vries, *AEW*, 336.

eagle that had broken into an iron fortress to seize it. Some sources identify Indra himself with the eagle.<sup>145</sup> There are differences in the myths of Indra and the soma and Óðinn and the mead, but there are enough similarities to rule out coincidence. It may be that as the myth diffused in opposite directions across Eurasia, Vritra and Suttungr took on different names, personalities and even roles in the myth, but both still act as an obstacle in both myths.

The myth of Óðinn and Mímir's well can be compared with the Irish legend of Finn and the well of Bec mac Buain of the Tuatha Dé Danann.<sup>146</sup> In this myth Finn gets a drink from the well of Bec mac Buain. He had been hunting with two companions and he found an open fairy-mount, within which was the well of wisdom guarded by the three daughters of Bec. When the three hunters approached the sisters tried to close the door, and some of the water fell from a bowl the eldest was carrying, and went into the mouths of the three. This shares similarities with both the myth of Óðinn and the mead of poetry, and also of Óðinn and Mímir's well. The fact that the water is guarded by the daughters of the Bec (owner of the 'fairy-mount', perhaps comparable to a fortress) is comparable to that of the mead of poetry being guarded in its three vessels by Gunnlöð, the daughter of Suttungr (the owner of the hall in which the mead was kept), as well as the fact that the mead/water is provided by a female figure. There is another important similarity to the myth of Óðinn and Mímir's well. The mead of Mímir's well contains 'wisdom' as opposed to 'poetry', and the same can be said of the water of Bec's well. In both cases the mead/water is kept in a well as opposed to vessels, at least until the appearance of Bec's daughter, who, for some unknown reason, tries to carry the water whilst running to close the door. It can also be compared to the Indian myth (discussed above) in which the eagle steals the soma from an iron fortress. The myth of Bec's well contains similar aspects of both the myth of the mead of poetry and the myth of Mímir's well. Although it cannot be proven, it can be suggested that the myth of Mímir's well, Bec's well, and the mead of poetry may have a common source, and may even be early derivatives of the same Indo-European myth. The Irish myth seems to have the fewest narrative

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<sup>145</sup> Turville-Petre (1964), p. 41.

<sup>146</sup> See T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: 1946), p. 326 ff; *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, M. Joynt, ed., (Dublin: 1936), pp. 40-1.

correspondences, since it lacks the central motif of the theft of the drink by a god in the form of an eagle. In the Sanskrit version the divine drink is a source of power rather than wisdom or poetry. The motif of the god stealing the divine drink (nectar) also appears in the Greek myth of the rape of Ganymede, cup-bearer of the gods, whom Zeus in the form of an eagle takes to Olympus. The Greek version also has the erotic element which appears in Norse associated with Gunnlöð.

### 3.4 SOME COMPARISONS BETWEEN *VAFPRÚÐNISMÁL*, THE MYTH OF ÓÐINN AND THE MEAD OF POETRY AND *FÁFNISMÁL*

Both Vafprúðnir and Suttungr are powerful and threatening, and they own mighty halls which Óðinn enters in disguise. Yet in *Vafprúðnismál* Óðinn pits his wisdom against a formidable enemy knowing the outcome of the contest before leaving Ásgarðr (or at least it is possible to see it this way). In his encounter with Suttungr, Óðinn does not seek to confront the giant in any physical or intellectual way, but he still seeks to outwit the dangerous giant who possesses the blood (mead) of the most knowledgeable of beings, Kvasir. Thus Óðinn's motivation here is more in line with his various other episodes and his endless search for wisdom and knowledge.

The thematic complexity of this myth differs considerably from that of *Vafprúðnismál*, and its primary objectives seem to be both to explain the origin of poetry and to tell how Óðinn came to be the of master it. Óðinn plays a typical role: in the guise of *Bólverkr* 'evil-doer', he outwits the giants, stealing the mead and gaining wisdom. The version of Óðinn's acquisition of the mead of poetry in *Hávamál* leaves out the origin of the mead and how it came to be in Suttungr's possession. Snorri's version in *Sn.E. Sk.* ties together the two myths of how the mead came to be, and how it came into Óðinn's possession. Ægir asks:

Myrkt þikki mér þat mælt at kalla skáldskap með þessum heitum.  
En hvernig kómu þeir æsir at Suttungamiði?<sup>147</sup>  
(*Sn.E. Sk. 2*)

<sup>147</sup> *Sn.E. Sk. 2*: It seems obscure [to] me to refer to poetry with these heiti. How did the Æsir get the Suttungamiðr (mead of *Suttungi* / *Suttungar*)? (ed. Faulkes I, p. 4).

This break in the myth suggests that Snorri saw these as two separate myths.

The blood of Kvasir, being a source for wisdom (in the sense of poetry), is comparable to the legend of Sigurðr and the blood of the dragon Fáfnir's heart. In this myth the blood enables Sigurðr to understand the chirping of the birds:

<En> er hann hugði at fullsteikt væri, ok freyddi sveitinn ór hiartano, þá tók hann á fingri sínom ok skyniaði hvárt fullsteikt væri. Hann brann ok brá fingrinom í munn sér. En er hiartblóð Fáfnis kom á tungu hánom, ok skilði hann fuglsrödd.<sup>148</sup>

(Fm. 31 prose)

There is a possibility that the myths of Kvasir's blood and Fáfnir's blood share a common source. Both Kvasir and Fáfnir were wise beings. (A refrain appears twice in *Fáfnismál* in which Sigurðr refers to Fáfnir as a possessor of wisdom: *Segðu mér, Fáfnir, allz þik fróðan kveða ok vel mart vita...*<sup>149</sup>) Where Kvasir's blood was fermented into mead, Fáfnir's blood was boiled to a froth, but in both cases the blood had been processed. Both Fáfnir and Kvasir are killed, and the blood provides the consumer with wisdom. Thus not only does the myth of Óðinn and the mead of poetry appear to be comprised of several individual myths, it may be possible to identify branches of its various segments.

### 3.5 ÓÐINN AND THE GIANTESSES / FEMALE FIGURES

According to Snorri, Óðinn sleeps with Suttungr's daughter, Gunnlöd, for three nights and she allows him three drink of the mead which is kept in three vessels, Óðrærir, Boðn and Són:

<sup>148</sup> Fm. 31: Then when he considered that [it] was fully cooked, and the blood frothed out of the heart, then he took [it] on his finger and checked whether it was fully cooked. He burned (got burnt) and brought the finger in his mouth. But when Fáfnir's heart-blood came onto his tongue, <and> he understood the bird-voice.

<sup>149</sup> Fm. 12: Tell me, Fáfnir, since they say you are wise and [know] very many things. (Cp. Fm 14.)

Fór Bólverkr þar til sem Gunnlöð var ok lá hiá henni iii. nætr, ok þá lofaði hon honum at drekka af miðinum .iii. drykki. Í enum fyrsta drykk drakk hann all<ϕ> ór Óðreri, en í öðrum ór Boðn, í enum þriðia ór Són ok hafði hann þá allan miððinn.<sup>150</sup>

(*Sn.E. Sk.* 2)

Snorri's account mentions the relationship between Óðinn and Gunnlöð only in passing, focusing solely on the acquisition of mead. In *Hávamál* Óðinn, perhaps mockingly, presents Gunnlöð as the naïve woman who too hastily offers her affection:

Gunnlöð mér um gaf  
gullnom stóli á  
drykk ins dýra miaðar;  
ill iðgiöld  
lét ek hana eptir hafa  
síns ins heila hugar,  
síns ins svára sefa.<sup>151</sup>

(*Háv.* 105)

Evans suggests that the last line of this strophe is strictly illogical and *svárr* can only mean 'heavy' or 'melancholy' in this sense.<sup>152</sup> One might take *svára sefa* in terms of being the reward to which *iðgiöld* refers, but there is little supporting evidence. Gunnlöð is instrumental in Óðinn's successful theft, and he admits that he might never have left the mountain without her aid:

Ifi er mér á,  
at ek væra enn kominn  
iðtna görðom ór,  
ef ek Gunnlaðar ne nytak,  
ennar góðo kono,  
þeirar er lögðomk arm yfir.<sup>153</sup>

(*Háv.* 108)

<sup>150</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* (G58): Bólverkr went to where Gunnlöð was and lay with her for three nights, and then she permitted him to drink three drinks of the mead, in the first drink he drank all [the mead] out of Óðrerir, then in the second draught out of Boðn, in the third draught from Són and he then had all the mead (ed. Faulkes, I, p. 4).

<sup>151</sup> *Háv.* 105: On the golden chair Gunnlöð gave me a drink of the dear mead; after I gave her an ill payment, for her sincerity, for her heavy mind.

<sup>152</sup> D. Evans (1986), I, p. 120.

The first element of her name, *gunn-* [gunnr] is a by-form of *guðr* meaning 'battle',<sup>154</sup> and the second element *-löð* means 'bidding' or 'invitation',<sup>155</sup> therefore 'one who invites battle' would be a suitable translation. This name is reminiscent of valkyrie names, though *Gunnlöð* does not appear listed as such anywhere in the *Pulur*. Interestingly the meaning of her name does not seem to reflect her character in the myth, unless it is to make her seem foreboding and threatening, and thus adding to the daring of Óðinn's deeds. Furthermore it seems a possibility that *Gunnlöð* may have another association with valkyries, in that the image of the woman offering a horn is a common motif. On the Tjängvide Stone there is a depiction of a figure sitting on the eight-legged Sleipnir, who is almost certainly Óðinn, and greeting him is the figure of a woman offering a drink. This figure in particular could show *Gunnlöð* offering the mead to Óðinn, but the only literary instance of a woman offering a horn to Óðinn is in this myth. The idea that Óðinn manages to win the heart and trust of a giantess named 'battle-inviter' certainly illustrates the necessity of his cunning and adds an element of irony in that if it were not for *Gunnlöð* he may never have escaped.

*Hávamál* on the whole is a compilation of various Óðinn-related themes, and immediately preceding the myth of Óðinn and *Gunnlöð* is another myth (*Háv.* 96-102) concerning one of Óðinn's less successful affairs with one who is presumably a giantess. Both myths fall within a section devoted primarily to relationships between man and woman, and particularly the themes of trust and deceit within such relationships. The female in question is neither named nor identified as a giantess, and her relationship to *Billingr* is ambiguous.

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<sup>153</sup> *Háv.* 108: Doubtful am I that I would come again out of the giants' courts, if I had not made use of *Gunnlöð*, the good woman, who I put my arm around.

<sup>154</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 221.

<sup>155</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 404.





Plate 1.  
The Tjängvide picture stone, Gotland.

Billings mey  
ek fann beðiom á  
sólhvíta sofa;  
iarls ynði  
þótti mér ekki vera,  
nema við þat lík at lifa.<sup>156</sup>  
(Háv. 97)

*Mær*, in poetry, might refer to either 'daughter' or 'wife'. The use of *löstr*<sup>157</sup> and *flærðir*<sup>158</sup> might suggest 'wife' as the most likely meaning.<sup>159</sup> The question as to whether Billingr is a dwarf or giant is nearly impossible to determine. Orchard points out that his name appears in a single kenning describing poetry as *Billings burar full*<sup>160</sup> 'the cup of Billingr's son', which seems to suggest that Billingr was the father of the dwarves Fjalarr and Galarr who fermented the mead.<sup>161</sup> Yet Billingr could just as easily be a kinsman of Suttungr, as the similarity between the names *Billingr* and *Gillingr* is comparable to the similarity between the names of the brothers *Fjalarr* and *Galarr*. This need not be taken as evidence that *Billingr* and *Gillingr* actually are brothers, but it certainly seems plausible.

The role of *Billings mær* appears to be that of the deceitful woman, and her actions are exemplary of the fickleness of women (according to Óðinn) in a previous strophe:

Meyiar orðom  
skyli manngi trúa,  
né því er kveðr kona,  
þvíat á hverfanda hvéli  
vóro þeim hiörto sköpoð,  
brigð í brióst um lagið.<sup>162</sup>  
(Háv. 84)

<sup>156</sup> Háv. 97: I found Billing's sun-white maiden asleep on her bed<s>, it seemed to me an earl would have no pleasure, unless to live with that body.

<sup>157</sup> Háv. 98.

<sup>158</sup> Háv. 102.

<sup>159</sup> D. Evans (1986), I, p. 118.

<sup>160</sup> *Skj.* B, I, 385, 4. Translation by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 38.

<sup>161</sup> A. Orchard (1997), p. 20.

<sup>162</sup> Háv. 84: No man must believe the words of a maiden, nor what a woman says, because their hearts were shaped on a turning wheel, and deceit laid in their breast.

The instance in which Óðinn is 'stood up' by *Billings mey*<sup>163</sup> provides an example or model of *Háv.* 84. The *hverfanda hvél* 'turning wheel' seems to be somewhat out of place as the Icelanders, and Norse in general, did not use wheels for wool or pottery until the later medieval period. There is the possibility that this strophe has been influenced by Latin concepts of the 'wheel of fortune', and might be a relatively late arrival to Iceland.<sup>164</sup> In *Alvíssmál*, *herfanda hvél* is what the moon is called in Hel:

Máni heitir með mönnum,  
en mýlinn með goðom,  
kalla hverfanda hvél helio í.<sup>165</sup>  
(*Alv.* 14)

The phrase in *Háv.* 84: *þvíat á hverfanda hvéli vóro þeim hiörto sköpoð* may therefore be translated as 'because their hearts (mind / feelings) were made on the moon (or the phases of the moon)' to be understood as perhaps emblematic of mutability in an Aristotelian world-view: something which is constantly changing. In wider European tradition the moon is commonly seen as the patroness of fortune.<sup>166</sup> *Háv.* 84 could be understood as referring to a woman's menstrual stress.

Óðinn also seduces Rindr, who becomes the mother of Váli. According to Kormakr Ögmundarson,<sup>167</sup> Óðinn used *seið* 'magic, enchantments' to entrap her.<sup>168</sup> The magic appears to affect the mind and body as in the Bergen charm<sup>169</sup> the intent of which is to make its target into a nymphomaniac. Saxo Grammaticus offers a long description including the use of magic. It can be compared with the account of *Billings mæri* in

<sup>163</sup> *Háv.* 96-101

<sup>164</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Heimur Hávamála* (Reykjavík: 1990), p. 164-165.

<sup>165</sup> 'Moon' it is called with men, and 'luminary' with the gods, in Hel it is called turning wheel.

<sup>166</sup> *Carmina Burana* I 1, 1-6: *O Fortuna / velut luna / statu variabilis / semper crescis / aut decrescis / vita detestabilis* (J. A. Schmeller, ed., Breslau: 1904, 1); Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale* 2681-2: *For wommen, as to speken in commune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune.* (*The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry Benson, ed., Oxford: 1988, p. 61).

<sup>167</sup> *Sigurðardrápa*, *Skj.* BI, 69, (3): 'Seið Yggr til Rindar'.

<sup>168</sup> D. Strömbäck (1935a), 'Sejd; textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria' *Nordiska texter och undersökningar* 5 (Stockholm: 1935), p. 32.

<sup>169</sup> 'Ek sendi þer, ek síða þer, ylgjar ergi ok úþola. Á þer renni úþóli ok 'ioluns' móð. Sittu aldri, sof þu aldri ... ant mér sem sjalfri þér. Berist rubus' etc. 'I send on you, I enchant on you the she-wolf's perversion and (what is) unbearable. May the intolerable and *ioluns* (*jötuns?* 'giant's') mood run onto you. Never sit, never sleep... love me as yourself. *Berist rubus*, etc.'

which he fails as a seducer of women. In Saxo Book 3 Óðinn makes Rindr ill by touching her with a piece of bark inscribed with spells, and then reappears later in the guise of a female physician. He then brews a concoction to cure her, and tells her that the potion is so bitter that she must allow herself to be tied up in order to bear the potency. It is noteworthy that Saxo adds an alternative ending in which the king allows Óðinn (who has failed to seduce Rindr and is groaning with passion) to secretly have sexual intercourse with her in return for his services. This alternate ending is interesting insofar as giving us a glimpse into a myth in transition. The key elements of the myth such as Óðinn's failure to seduce Rindr are preserved in both versions, whereas the alternate endings are evidence of the development of the details at a late date. Snorri counts Rindr among the *Ásynjur*.<sup>170</sup> She also appears in *Baldrs draumar* 11, but we are told no more than that she will give birth to Váli. It appears that the original myth (if there ever was one) involved some element of disguise or shape-changing, not unlike that which occurs in Óðinn's acquisition of the mead. Clearly the giantess is not perceived as lacking in virtue, therefore Óðinn resorts to disguise or magic.

One of the possible reasons for Óðinn's seduction of giantesses may be to beget important sons. Váli, the son of Rindr and Óðinn, avenges the death of Baldr.<sup>171</sup> The most famous son is Þórr, a product of the union between Óðinn and the giantess Jörð. Only fragments of the myth regarding the relationship between Óðinn and Jörð remain in skaldic poetry, none of which offers any detail regarding the circumstances of their union.<sup>172</sup> Þórr's primary role is to defend the gods and Ásgarðr from giant-kind. Víðarr, son of Óðinn and Gríðr, avenges his father's death at Ragnarök by killing Fenrisúlfr. What we can say concerning the role of these giantesses is that they bear sons with the ability to either defend or avenge the gods. In this sense the role of Gunnlöð differs because she does not produce a son.

<sup>170</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 36 (ed. Faulkes, p. 30).

<sup>171</sup> *Bdr.* 11; *Hyndl.* 29; *Vm.* 51; *Þul.* IV e. g.

<sup>172</sup> *Ólv.* (*Skj.* I B, 6); *Þrm.* 1; *Ls.* 58; *Þdr.* 15 (*Skj.* I B, 142); and *Sn.E. Sk.* ed. Faulkes for the *þula* I, 114, (which lists Jörð among the goddesses); *Haustl.* 14 (*Skj.* I B, 17).

There are other instances in which Óðinn brags of his seduction of women, but whether these women are giantesses, goddesses or mortals is often impossible to determine. In *Hrbl.* 18 Óðinn tells how he slept with seven sisters, winning them with his wits:

[Hárbarðr kvað:]  
 Sparkar átto vér konor,  
 ef oss at spökum yrði;  
 horskar átto vér konor,  
 ef oss hollar væri;  
 þær ór sandi  
 síma undo  
 ok ór dali díúpom  
 grund um grófo;  
 varð ek þeim einn öllum  
 efri at ráðom;  
 hvílda ek hiá þeim systrom siau  
 ok hafða ek geð þeira allt ok gaman.  
 Hvat vanntu þá meðan, Þórr?<sup>173</sup>  
 (*Hrbl.* 18)

Óðinn then speaks of an encounter with the giant Hlébarðr and how he once used *manvélar* (love tricks) to sleep with ogresses (presumably giantesses or something similar as *myrkriða* appears in *Ful.* IV *Tröllkvenna Heiti* C. 4 and seems to be in the same category of creatures as *trollriða*, *kveldriða* and *túnriða*):<sup>174</sup>

<sup>173</sup> *Hrbl.* 18: Hárbarðr said: We had lively (?) women if they became wise for us; we had wise women if they were trusty for us, they wound wire out of sand, and they dug the ground out of a deep valley, I alone outwitted them all, I slept beside these seven sisters, and I had all their mind and pleasure. What were you doing meanwhile, Þórr?

<sup>174</sup> D. Evans (1986), I. p. 139.

[Hárbarðr kvað:]  
 Miklar manvélar  
 ek hafða við myrkriðor,  
 þá er ek vélta þær frá verom;  
 harðan iðtun  
 ek hugða Hlébarð vera,  
 gaf hann mér gambantein,  
 en ek vélta hann ór viti.<sup>175</sup>  
 (Hrbl. 20)

Hlébarðr appears nowhere else in the mythology, nor is he listed in the *Pulur*. His name can be translated as ‘leopard’ but is used indiscriminately as ‘bear, wolf, etc.’<sup>176</sup> It is tempting to associate the *gambanteinn* with that in *Skírnismál*, and even to note a striking similarity between Óðinn and Skírnir. Óðinn obtained a *gambanteinn* from Hlébarðr though we are not told the location. Skírnir states that he sought a *gambanteinn* in the woods, and a *gambanteinn* he got.<sup>177</sup> One complication is in the prose introduction of *Skírnismál* which states that Skírnir is Freyr’s *skósveinn* ‘shoe-boy’.<sup>178</sup> However, it may be noted that the methods of subduing Gerðr are indeed reminiscent of the way in which Óðinn wins over women. Skírnir threatens to cut magic runes as part of a curse on Gerðr, and as far as we know from the mythology, only two figures possess the runes, Óðinn and Skírnir:

Þurs ríst ek þér  
 ok þríá stafí,  
 ergi ok æði  
 ok óþola;  
 svá ek þat af ríst,  
 sem ek þat á reist,  
 ef gøraz þarfar þess.<sup>179</sup>  
 (Skm. 36)

<sup>175</sup> Hrbl. 20: I used mighty love-frauds against enchantresses/giantesses, when I tricked them away from their husbands, I thought Hlébarðr to be a hard giant, he gave me a magic wand and I tricked him out of his senses.

<sup>176</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 270.

<sup>177</sup> Skm. 32.

<sup>178</sup> Skm. 1. Prose Introduction.

<sup>179</sup> Skm. 36: (The rune Þurs [Þ] according to Cleasby-Vigfusson was cut to induce love-madness. Cleasby-Vigfusson p. 729.) I will carve Þurs against you and three letters, ‘perversion’, ‘frenzy’ and ‘restlessness’; so I scratch it off as I cut it on, if needs arise for it.

The author of the prose introduction does not seem to suggest that Skírnir and Óðinn are the same, but they are the only figures capable of winning or capturing the hearts of giantesses, and they do this through coercion and magic.

In *Hrbl.* 30 Óðinn brags about his seduction of a giantess in Jötunheimr for which we have no corroborative evidence:

Hárbarðr kvað:  
Ek var austr  
ok við einhverja dæmðak,  
lék ek við ena línhvító  
ok launþing háðak,  
gladdak ena gullbiörto,  
gamni mær unði.<sup>180</sup>  
(*Hrbl.* 30)

Óðinn's boasting about this affair continues with strophe 32 in which he tells Þórr that he could have used his help to restrain (possibly referring to her passionate lovemaking) or to retain her:

Liðs þíns væra ek þá þurfi, Þórr,  
at ek helda þeiri enni línhvító mey.<sup>181</sup>  
(*Hrbl.* 32)

What follows in strophe 37 illustrates the differences in attitude and character between Óðinn's relationship with giantesses and that of Þórr who boasts about how he battled women of the berserks on the island of Hlésey. Thus where Óðinn seduces giantesses, Þórr battles them, and in strophe 38 Óðinn chastises Þórr, further illustrating the differences in their relationships with the women or possibly giantesses:

Hárbarðr [kvað:]  
Klæki vanntu þá, Þórr,  
er þú á konom barðir.<sup>182</sup>  
(*Hrbl.* 38)

<sup>180</sup> *Hrbl.* 30: I was east and conversed with a certain woman; I sported with the linen-white one, and had a secret meeting, I gladdened the gold-bright maid; the maiden enjoyed pleasure.

<sup>181</sup> *Hrbl.* 32: I would have been in need of your help, Þórr, to hold that linen-white maiden.

<sup>182</sup> *Hrbl.* 38: You performed a shameful deed then Þórr, when you did battle with women.

One of Þórr's motivations for fighting the women of the berserks is because they involve themselves in trickery, perhaps witchcraft. For the sake of the theme of *Hárbarðsljóð*, these are typically Óðinn characteristics as is his general patronage over berserks:

[Þórr kvað:]  
 Brúðir berserkia  
 barðak í Hléseyio;  
 þær höfðu verst unnit,  
 véltu þjóð alla.<sup>183</sup>  
 (Hrbl. 37)

It cannot be known for certain if these 'women of the berserks' are intended to be berserks themselves or giantesses. It seems likely that they are berserks as Þórr likens them to *vargynjur* 'she-wolves' in strophe 39, and references connecting berserks and wolves are plentiful. Óðinn's seduction of the linen-white woman (perhaps a giantess) is meant to contrast with Þórr's battling of the berserk women, and the poet may therefore use the giantess and female berserk interchangeably. The poet's point is most likely to illustrate their differing attitudes to the female sex of their adversarial race, namely the giants, be they monstrous berserks or beautiful maidens.

In his pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, Óðinn twice interrogates prophetesses which may or may not be of giant-kind. The most notable is the *völva* 'prophetess / sibyl' of *Völuspá*.<sup>184</sup> The prophetess states in strophe 2 that she was raised among giants:

<sup>183</sup> Hrbl. 37: I fought women of the berserks in Hlésey; they had done the worst (of things), and deceived all the people.

<sup>184</sup> According to Hermann Pálsson 'Heiðr' can be none other than the *völva*. Hermann Pálsson (1996), p. 12. This is much debated.



Ek man iötna  
 ár um borna,  
 þá er forþom mik  
 fædda höfðo;  
 nío man ek heima,  
 nío íviðjur,<sup>185</sup>  
 miötvíð mæran  
 fyr mold neðan.<sup>186</sup>  
 (Vsp. 2)

The received wisdom is that the *völva* is not a giantess, though she may consider herself to be of giant-kindred. She, like *Vafþrúðnir*, possesses knowledge of all that has gone before and what is to come, and included in this wisdom is knowledge of Óðinn's own fate:

Ein sat hön úti,  
 þá er inn aldni kom,  
 yggiungr ása,  
 ok í augo leit:  
 'hvers fregnið mik?  
 hví frestið mín?  
 alt veit ek, Óðinn,  
 hvar þú auga falt:  
 í enom mæra  
 Mímis brunni!  
 Drekkur miðð Mímir  
 morgin hverian  
 af veði Valföðrs –  
 vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?<sup>187</sup>  
 (Vsp. 28)

If wisdom is a form of power, the *völva* has power over Óðinn, and her taunting refrain *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?* certainly suggests this is the case. She may or may not be a giantess, but her affiliations with the giant race seem to suggest that she is somehow

<sup>185</sup> Stefán Karlsson, 'Íviðjur', *Gripla 3* (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1979), pp. 227-8.

<sup>186</sup> Vsp. 2: I remember the iötnar who were born at the beginning of time and reared me in former times. I remember nine worlds beneath the earth, nine troll women, and also the glorious tree of fate. Translation by Hermann Pálsson, (1996) p. 58.

<sup>187</sup> Vsp. 28: She was sitting outside alone when the old Yggiungr of the Æsir came and looked her in the eyes. What do you ask of me? Why do you put me to a test? I know everything, Óðinn, where you hid your eye in the glorious well of Mímir. Every morning Mímir drinks mead from the Valföðr's pledge. Do you see what I mean or do you want more? Translation by Hermann Pálsson (1996), p. 76.

associated with them. She is similar in many respects to the *völva* of *Baldrs draumar*, but in the circumstances surrounding their confrontation with Óðinn they are far from identical. The *völva* of *Baldrs draumar* is more clearly defined as a prophetess long dead in her grave outside the hall of Hel. She is raised from the grave by Óðinn's magic and forced to speak, and the subject-matter in both cases is that of fate. In the case of *Völuspá* the subject is the fate of the gods, whereas in *Baldrs draumar* the subject is the fate of Baldr. Neither of the prophetesses appear to be willing to serve Óðinn: in fact both are unwilling. Both poems include refrains suggesting unwillingness, *Völuspá*: *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat* and *Baldrs draumar*: *Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegia*.<sup>188</sup> This raises the possibility that perhaps both *völur* are one and the same but also that they have no desire to continue being interrogated. The source of this hostility could be an affinity to the giants, be they giantesses or not.

### 3.6 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of Óðinn's relationships with the giants and those affiliated with them can loosely be divided into two categories: begetting offspring capable of performing great deeds, and the acquisition of wisdom. *Vafþrúðnir* and Óðinn engage in a wisdom-contest, *Vafþrúðnir*'s questions asking for the names of mythical and cosmological features, and Óðinn's questions concerning processes and sequences of events. Óðinn learns nothing new from the contest, but proves his ability to outwit the wisest of the giants by asking a question impossible for *Vafþrúðnir* to answer, yet within the bounds of the mythological subject-matter. The function of *Vafþrúðnir* is possibly to demonstrate the cunning of Óðinn, and we learn little of *Vafþrúðnir* himself apart from his lineage.

This differs from Óðinn's theft of the mead, in which the giant *Suttungr* plays an important role. Although *Suttungr* does not create the mead of poetry, his possession of it gives the giants the upper hand. Óðinn's cunning is again the theme of this myth, the difference being in his goals. In *Vafþrúðnismál* his goal is to challenge the wisest among giants to an outright contest, whereas here Óðinn's objective is the acquisition of wisdom, in the form of the mead of poetry, perhaps related to the acquisition of the mead

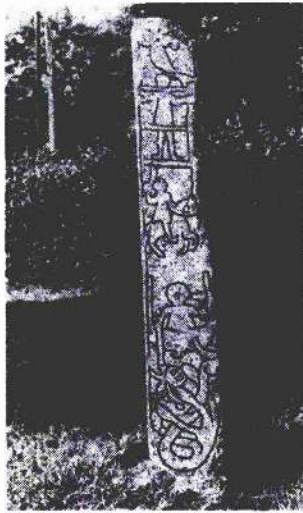
<sup>188</sup> *Bdr.* 7, 9, 11: I spoke under duress, now I will be silent.

of Mimir's well. In doing so he seduces a giantess, Gunnlöð, who not only provides him with access to the precious mead, but also a means of escape. The myth highlights Óðinn's characteristics, namely his cunning, charm and skill as a thief. We learn little of the admirable characteristics of the giants; in fact, we learn that giants are somewhat easily tricked and giantesses often easily manipulated. This pattern must also be associated with seduction of giantesses for other purposes. There may have been many other myths involving Óðinn stealing or deceitfully acquiring items of magical importance from the giants, and a fragment of one survives in *Hárbarðsljóð* in which Óðinn acquires a magic wand from a giant and then drove him insane. This can be seen in terms of gods versus giants, in that Óðinn creates for the Æsir a monopoly on wisdom in the form of magical items, abilities and knowledge, thus always having the upper hand. In addition to this he seems to require sexual relationships with giantesses to beget sons capable of great deeds. Óðinn's own mother, Bestla, also seems to have been a giantess (*Háv.* 140, *Gylf.* ch. 6). The relationship between Óðinn and giants can also be seen in simpler terms, in that the giants merely provide an enemy from whom Óðinn acquires these items and knowledge, making his character what it is.

Þórr [kvað:]  
 Ek drap Þjaza,  
 enn þrúðmóðga iötun,  
 upp ek varp augom  
 Allvalda sonar  
 á þann inn heiða himin;  
 þau ero merki mest  
 minna verka,  
 þau er allir menn síðan um sé.  
 Hvat vanntu meðan, Hárbarðr?<sup>189</sup>  
 (Hrbl. 19)

## 4 ÞÓRR AND THE GIANTS

### 4.1 THE MYTH OF ÞÓRR'S FISHING EXPEDITION



The Stele of Alnäs, Sweden.

Fig. 3.

The myth of Þórr's fishing expedition is one of the most widely attested in Norse mythology. The longest version appears in the Eddaic poem *Hymiskviða* which is of uncertain date, and is possibly a 'newer' version containing older material.<sup>190</sup> It is difficult to know if Snorri knew the poem *Hymiskviða*, but he certainly knew more than one version of the myth of Þórr's fishing expedition.<sup>191</sup> Snorri cites a number of skaldic poems such as Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* which has been dated to the first half of the ninth century or possibly a little later.<sup>192</sup> References also appear in Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa*,<sup>193</sup> (c. 985) and the poems of Ölvir hnúfa,<sup>194</sup> *Gamli gnæfaðarskáld*<sup>195</sup> and Eysteinn Valdason.<sup>196</sup>

<sup>189</sup> Hrbl. 19: Þórr said: I killed Þjazi, the mighty-spirited giant, I threw the eyes of Allvaldi's son up into the clear sky; they are the greatest mark of my deeds, those which all men see since. What were you doing meanwhile, Hárbarðr?

<sup>190</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Thor's Fishing Expedition', in *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue Between Archaeology and History of Religion*, Gro Steinsland, ed. (Oslo: 1986), pp. 257-78, p. 258.

<sup>191</sup> Sn.E. Gylf. 47.

<sup>192</sup> Finnur Jónsson, 'De ældste Skjalde og deres Kvad', *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed* (1895), pp. 271-359; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Skaldic Poetry* (Oxford: 1976), pp. xxi-xxiii.

<sup>193</sup> See Einar Ól Sveinsson, *Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld* (Reykjavík: 1934), p. lix. Úlfr Uggason: *Húsdrápa* 3-6 [ca. 985]:

Þjokkvaxinn kvezk þykkja  
 þiklingr firinmikla  
 hafra njóts at höfgum

Four picture stones from elsewhere in northwestern Europe supplement our Icelandic literary sources. The Altuna stone in Sweden has been dated to the beginning of the eleventh century (Fig. 3).<sup>197</sup> The stone at Hørdum (Thy, Denmark) similarly depicts



The Stone of Hørdum, Thy in Denmark.

Fig. 4.

Pórr's fishing expedition, and has been broadly dated to between the eighth and eleventh centuries (Fig. 4).<sup>198</sup> The Gosforth stone in Cumbria (England) has been dated to the tenth century (Fig. 5),<sup>199</sup> and finally the Ardre VIII stone in Gotland has been dated to the eighth century (Fig. 6)<sup>200</sup>. Furthermore the Miðgarðsormr is believed to be present on the Lowther hogbacks in its role as holding the world together.<sup>201</sup>

During the course of the twentieth century, comparative mythologists have subjected this myth to rigorous analysis.

Georges Dumézil<sup>202</sup> and Franz Schröder<sup>203</sup> both viewed the myth as an integral component of wider Indo-European religious history. The myth has also been seen in the

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hætting megindrætti.

'It is said that the stout lubbard thought that the goat-owner's severely heavy haul was exceedingly dangerous.'

<sup>194</sup> Ölvir hnúfa: Fragment [9th century]

Ƿestisk allra landa,  
umgjörð ok sonr Jarðar.

'The girdle of all lands became enraged, and the son of Jörð ...'.

<sup>195</sup> Gamli gnævaðarskáld [10th century]:

Þás gramr, hinn's svik samðit,  
gljúfrskeljungs nam rjúfa.  
grundar fisk með grandi  
snart Bilskirnis, hjarta,

'When the ruler of Bilskirnir, whose heart never planned deceit, swiftly mangled the ground's fish with the destroyer of the canyon-whale.'

<sup>196</sup> Eysteinn Valdason: [ca. 1000]

Sín bjó Sifjar rúni  
snarla fram með karli,  
hornstraum getum Hrímnis  
hræra, veiðarfæri.

'Sif's spouse quickly prepared his fishing-gear with the old one. We know how to stir the flow of Hrímnir's horn.'

<sup>197</sup> O. von Friesen, 'Tors fiske på en uppländisk runsten', *Festschrift Eugen Mogk* (1924), pp. 474-83.

<sup>198</sup> J. Brøndsted, 'Thors Fiskeri', *Nationalmuseets arbejdsmark* (Copenhagen: 1955), p. 102.

<sup>199</sup> R. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London: 1980), p. 131.

<sup>200</sup> J. Brøndsted (1955), p. 95; Lindqvist, S., *Gotlands Bildsteine 1-2* (1941), p. 42.

<sup>201</sup> R. Bailey (1980), pp. 136, 137.

<sup>202</sup> G. Dumézil, *Les dieux des Indo-Européens* (Paris: 1952), p. 23 ff.



Fig. 6.  
Ardre VIII picture-stone,  
Gotland.

light of the Christian myth of Leviathan, and thus interpreted as a product of the conversion.<sup>204</sup> Many parallels have been drawn between the myth of Þórr's fight with the Miðgarðsormr and Beowulf's fight against the Dragon.<sup>205</sup>



The Stone of Gosforth, England. Photo: Elie Rosenthal.

Fig. 5

The Miðgarðsormr does not appear to be a typical *jötunn*, but seems to belong in a subclass with its siblings Fenrisúlfr and Hel (and possibly Niðhöggr). According to Snorri they are the offspring between Loki, and a giantess *Angrboða* (distress-bringer);<sup>206</sup> thus these creatures are at least half-giant:

Angrboða heitr gýgr í Jötunheimum. Við henni gat Loki .iii. börn; eitt var Fenrisúlfr, annat Iörmungandr, þat er Miðgarðsormr, .iii. er Hel.<sup>207</sup>  
(*Sn.E. Gylf.* 34)

This information also appears in *Hyndl.* 40:

Ól úlf Loki  
við Angrboðu,<sup>208</sup>  
(*Hyndl.* 40)

The kenning *lögseims faðir* 'sea-band's father' in the first stanza of Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* (late 10<sup>th</sup> century) is a reference to Loki as father of the Miðgarðsormr. The Æsir see the danger posed by these siblings and thus Óðinn casts Hel into Niflheimr, and throws the Miðgarðsormr into the sea where it grows to encompass Miðgarðr.<sup>209</sup> The Miðgarðsormr and Hel both have cosmological functions. Hel has authority over nine

<sup>203</sup> F. Schröder, 'Das Hymirlied. Zur Frage verblasster Mythen in den Götterliedern der Edda', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 70 (1955), p. 29 ff.

<sup>204</sup> A. Kabell, 'Der Fischfang Þórs', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 91 (1976), pp. 123-129.

<sup>205</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936), p. 245 ff.

<sup>206</sup> Etymology from P. Meulengracht Sørensen (1986), p. 272. Perhaps a more accurate translation is 'grief-bidder' or even 'grief-announcer'.

<sup>207</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 34: In Jötunheimar a giantess is called Angrboða. With her Loki got three children. The first was Fenrisúlfr, the second Jörmungandr (that is Miðgarðsormr), the third is Hel (ed. Faulkes, p. 27).

<sup>208</sup> *Hyndl.* 40: Loki produced (gave life to) the Wolf with Angrboða.

<sup>209</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 34. (ed. Faulkes, p. 27).



Plate 2.  
Þorr and the World-Serpent, as depicted by the  
eighteenth-century Icelandic scribe, Jakob  
Sigurðsson in a privately held copy of *Snorra  
Edda*.



worlds of Niflheimr, and the Miðgarðsormr may be seen as holding the world together. These functions are, however, not voluntary. Hel is cast into Niflheimr:

Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henne valld yfir .ix. heimum, at hon skipti öllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váro sendir, en þat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir.<sup>210</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf. 34*)

Hel does not assume this role, but rather it is bestowed upon her. It should be noted that Snorri may be influenced by Christian ideas: the appointment of Hel to rule the nine worlds of Niflheimr could be influenced by the story of the fall of Lucifer (an idea already present as early as the Old English *Genesis B*, l. 300 – ed. G. P. Krapp in the *Junius Manuscript*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records I, New York and London, 1931, p. 12); similarly the casting of Miðgarðsormr into the sea could be influenced by the casting of the dragon into the pit, and later into the lake of fire (Revelations 20, 2-3 and 10). She, like Ymir, is forced to fulfil a cosmological function, as guardian of Niflheimr. The Miðgarðsormr is similarly cast into the sea:

Ok er þau kómu til hans, þá kastaði hann orminum í enn diúpa sæ, er liggr um öll lönd, ok óx sá ormr svá at hann liggr í miðiu hafinu of öll lönd ok bítr í sporð sér.<sup>211</sup>

(*Sn.E. Gylf. 34*)

The serpent's role is a passive one. There is no evidence to suggest that it is in any way an intelligent being; this therefore separates it from other giants.

Only a few elements of the myth are common in the surviving picture stones, and the Miðgarðsormr may or may not be one of them. The Gosforth stone depicts four creatures (possibly a fifth in the lower-left corner) and at first sight these creatures do not appear to be serpentine. It seems possible that the creature in the lower-right corner represents a snake-like animal as its head is connected to a distinctive S-shaped figure, distinguishing

<sup>210</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf. 34*: He cast Hel into Niflheimr, and gave her authority over nine worlds so that she should apportion provisions / lodgings among those who are sent to her, and they are men dead of sickness and dead of age (ed. Faulkes, p. 27).

it from the other three creatures (which are probably fish or at least are whale-shaped). These fish-shaped creatures may be depictions of whales, as is told in *Hym.* 21 that Hymir pulled two whales out of the sea prior to Þórr's impressive catch:

Dró mærr Hymir  
 móðugr hvali  
 einn á öngli  
 upp senn tvá;  
 en aprt í skut [sic]  
 Óðni sífiadr  
 Véorr við vélar  
 vað gærði sér.<sup>212</sup>

(*Hym.* 21)

The 'whales' on the Gosfoth stone may depict those mentioned in *Hym.* 21.

Unfortunately we cannot easily know for certain what the creature in the lower right-hand corner of the Gosforth stone is meant to represent, seeing that the bottom of the stone (containing the rest of the 'S-shaped' figure) is now missing.

Sørensen treats *Hymiskviða* with a great deal of scepticism as he believes it to be a comparatively late source, and takes into consideration only the parts which have parallels in other myths.<sup>213</sup> Sørensen is not unfair in treating *Hymiskviða* with such scepticism, but perhaps his other source, Snorri, leaves out details he deemed unimportant. Regardless of the age of *Hymiskviða*, the myth which it involves may be of great antiquity. Ægir's cauldron, referred to in *Hym.* 33 and 34, has a likely parallel with the Irish myth of the mighty Otherworld cauldron possessed by the Daghdha from which 'no company ever went away unsatisfied'.<sup>214</sup> There is always the possibility of recent borrowing from Irish myth or even of independent development.

<sup>211</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 34: And then when they came to it, he then cast the serpent into the deep sea, which lies around all lands, and the serpent grew so that he lies in the middle of the sea around all lands, and he bites into his tail.

<sup>212</sup> *Hym.* 21: In a rage renowned Hymir by himself drew up two whales at once on his hook, but back in the stern, Óðinn's kinsman, Þórr, made the line cunningly for himself.

<sup>213</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen (1986), p. 259.

<sup>214</sup> D. O'Hogain, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopædia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (New York: 1991), Daghdha s.v.

The stone of Ardre (Fig. 6) does not depict the Miðgarðsormr, and may or may not depict Þórr's fishing expedition. There are three boat scenes. Two depict a couple in a small boat (possibly Þórr and Hymir) and the third is a longship with a full crew. The boat-scene, immediately below the longship, appears to depict two men rowing (which again may be Þórr and Hymir), seeing that the arms of the left-hand figure are downwards as if to grip an oar. The boat-scene immediately below could possibly be the same two figures, one of whom spears a fish. The fact that a spear is used differs substantially from all the other sources, and the spear is associated with Óðinn, not Þórr. Lindqvist suggested that the depiction at the very bottom of the stone is a house and within it stands Hymir and Þórr and the ox Himinhjótr. He also suggests that the figure entering the house is Þórr. The left-hand figure within the house, according to Lindqvist, depicts Þórr carrying the ox head on his shoulder.<sup>215</sup> This interpretation is exciting, and, if it could be adequately proven, it would imply that the myth had survived in a stable form for perhaps five hundred years prior to the writing of our literary sources.<sup>216</sup>

Unfortunately the scene is so vague that it may also be interpreted as the tying-up of Fenrir in the Gnípa cave. Firstly, the fact that the 'house' is rounded and completely open without any doors, may suggest that it is a depiction of a cave as opposed to the giant's hall. The figure on the far right could be Óðinn attaching the fetter *Gleipnir* to the back of the cave. The other figure behind him holds the fetter (perhaps a harness as well) on his shoulder. The figure outside could be the god Týr with his hand in the mouth of Fenrir whilst the fetter is being attached. The fact that the mouth of the creature is open further supports this hypothesis. It is not my purpose here to present the 'correct' interpretation of the Ardre stone, but merely to show that it is too ambiguous for any single interpretation, and far too ambiguous to offer valuable evidence to aid us in interpreting the myth or attributing a date to it.<sup>217</sup> Such sources must be handled with extreme caution.

<sup>215</sup> S. Lindqvist (1942), p. 22 ff.

<sup>216</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen (1986), p. 269.

<sup>217</sup> See *Sn.E. Gylf.* 34 (ed. Faulkes pp. 28-9).

There are elements, or motifs, which can be used to indicate that a myth is being depicted. The Altuna stone and the Hørdum stone both show a foot (or possibly feet) penetrating through the bottom of the boat. This correlates with Snorri's account, though neither *Hymiskviða* nor skaldic sources contain this detail. However in *Hym.* 34, Þórr sticks his foot through the floor, which seems to echo him putting his foot through the bottom of the ship. Furthermore the Gosforth stone does not depict the foot. It seems that this was a semi-stable element of the myth or possibly of one version of it. Furthermore the 'giant' (if it is a giant) appears on three of the four picture stones: Gosforth, (possibly) Ardre, and Hørdum, and this seems to suggest that Hymir, or the presence of another figure, was also a stable element of the myth. We can see that as late as the seventeenth century *Hymiskviða* is still being depicted in terms of the fishing trip, yet by this time Þórr threatens to strike Hymir rather than the serpent.

Hymir's role is of importance to this discussion. Þórr visits Hymir prior to the fishing trip in both *Gylfaginning* and *Hymiskviða*, and it is Hymir's ox that provides the bait. Hymir is apparently a crofter living at the edge of Jötunheimar and some have interpreted his occupation there as symbolic of civilisation.<sup>218</sup> The giant has thus been perceived as the necessary agent for Þórr's transition from order to chaos, or from the civilised world to the uncivilised.<sup>219</sup> Hymir's boat takes Þórr to the middle of the 'uncivilised' sea (albeit Þórr does the rowing and chooses the distance from land). According to this line of reasoning Hymir plays the part of the moderator between order and chaos. In *Gylfaginning* Hymir cuts Þórr's fishing line, allowing the Miðgarðsormr to reassume its place (possibly holding the world together), thereby preventing a cosmological catastrophe. The account in *Hymiskviða* does not fit this picture, since Þórr strikes the serpent on the head, causing the whole world to move, and then the serpent sinks by itself back into the water.<sup>220</sup> Hymir is thus presented in *Gylfaginning* as the mediator between the world of Þórr and the world of the Miðgarðsormr / Ásgarðr and the bottom of the

<sup>218</sup> K. Hastrup, 'Kulturelle kategorier som naturlige ressourcer. Exempler fra Islands historie', A. Hjort, ed., *Samhälle och Ekosystem* (Stockholm: 1983), ff. 40-54.

<sup>219</sup> See Meulengracht Sørensen (1986), pp. 268-274.

<sup>220</sup> *Hym.* 23, 24.

sea.<sup>221</sup> One must bear in mind that in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri appears to try to make sense of the mythology, and this attempt may be misleading at times.

Snorri tells another version in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 48 (which Snorri finds less credible), in which Þórr throws the hammer after the serpent, cutting off its head. This version is often disregarded, but is still evidence for the diversity and popularity of the myth. It raises the question: how universal was the cosmological importance of the serpent and could this role have developed later? It seems that those who knew (or preferred) this version of the myth were more interested in Þórr's victory than the cosmological significance of the serpent. Nevertheless, in *Gylfaginning* Snorri tries to build a comprehensive and 'logical' account of the mythology (as opposed to relaying every version of every myth), and, thus, he chooses not to accept this version. We are fortunate that he mentions it at all.

Who is the central figure of the myth, Hymir, Þórr or the serpent? In all surviving versions of the myth, the serpent plays a relatively small, though climactic role, and Hymir is present throughout. The competition between the giant and god is the central theme. Hymir challenges Þórr to fetch the head of a giant ox, which he does with ease. Þórr challenges Hymir to row further out to sea and he refuses. Hymir begins fishing and catches two whales. Þórr, however, catches the serpent, causing the earth to move. The following passage is of importance to this discussion:

Óteitr iötunn,  
er þeir aptr rero,  
svá at ár Hymir  
ekki mælti,  
veifði hann rœði  
veðrs annars til.<sup>222</sup>  
(*Hym.* 25)

The giant had been made a fool of, dishonoured, and sulking, he refusing to speak, but the competitiveness continues after landing. Hymir asks Þórr to share the work. One

<sup>221</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen (1986), p. 268.

task is to haul the whales to the house, while the other is to secure the boat. Þórr does both. He lifts the whole boat, bilges and all, secures it, and hauls the whales to the house. Þórr is then challenged to break a goblet. He fails, and then (with the advice of a giantess) he succeeds by throwing it at the giant's hard head. Þórr is then challenged to carry the cauldron back to the Æsir. Týr tries and fails to budge it, but Þórr lifts it without difficulty. Finally Hymir, leading a host of giants, attacks, and, in a single sweep of Mjöllnir, Þórr defeats them all. Thus one can possibly see Hymir as an opponent/opposite of Þórr. He is mighty, but nowhere near as mighty as Þórr. Insofar as the poem itself is concerned, Þórr is central whereas the serpent, and their meeting is peripheral. This is possibly the case with *Hymiskviða*, but the myth concerning Þórr and the serpent was probably more popular than Þórr's encounter with Hymir (or so one might gather from the archaeological evidence).

Hymir's role appears to be purely that of an adversary, challenging Þórr at all points throughout the myth. The purpose of this series of challenges may be simply to illustrate Þórr's physical and godlike characteristics, and the giant may be seen (at least in a literary sense) as merely an illustrative instrument. Hymir is associated with winter (*Hym.* 10,5-8) and barrenness (*hraunhvala*, *Hym.* 36,5), and Þórr's victory may also be seen as an illustration of victory over these. One might deduce from the fact that Hymir seems to be Týr's father (perhaps therefore an unacknowledged proxy-father to Þórr himself)<sup>223</sup> the possibility that the two are opposite equals, just as with Þórr and Þrymr. We cannot easily know how these poems and myths were once interpreted, and the best we can do is bear in mind that people once believed in a god of might, daring and heroic victory. *Hymiskviða* is a portrait of such a god.

#### 4.2 ÞRYMR'S THEFT OF MJÖLLNIR

*Þrymskviða* appears in the thirteenth century Codex Regius manuscript of the Elder Edda. Only upon occasion has it been a focal point of modern scholarly work, and those who have published on *Þrymskviða* have focused much upon the comical element and its

<sup>222</sup> *Hym.* 25: The giant [was] uncheerful when they rowed back, so that Hymir early on spoke nothing; he swung the oar to another weather.

<sup>223</sup> See *Hym.* 5,5-6, 11,3-6.

relation to the strength of pagan belief.<sup>224</sup> Hallberg and Kvillerud have published important studies concerning its possible dating,<sup>225</sup> and Singer, among others, has written about its possible Indo-European roots.<sup>226</sup> The fact that Snorri never mentions Þrymr, or the myth surrounding the theft of the hammer, may be significant. Furthermore, the fact that the myth seems to have much in common with the diction of other Eddaic poems and skaldic poems (such as *Hymiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, *Baldrs draumar*, *Völuspá* and *Húsdrápa*)<sup>227</sup> seems to suggest it is of considerable age. The age of *Þrymskviða* is certainly a matter of concern, but that will not be discussed here. For the moment it is possible to assume that *Þrymskviða* draws on long-established traditions concerning giants and their roles with the gods, traditions in which any possible number of such myths were composed and since forgotten. Generally it is believed that Loki steals the hammer to land Þórr in this situation, and though this would be consistent with Loki's character, it is never actually mentioned, and, arguably, it is never even suggested in the poem. Indeed Loki's role here is far more akin to that in *Reginismál* which we believe to be ancient in origin. Furthermore the theme is similar to that of the theft of Iðunn's apples, which is also known to be ancient as it appears in the ninth century *Haustlög*.

Þórr's hammer is stolen and Loki flies to Jötunheimar in search of it. There he meets the king of the giants, Þrymr, who offers to return the hammer in exchange for Freyja. Þórr is then persuaded to dress in the likeness of a bride and, Loki volunteers to pose as a handmaiden, and they travel together to Þrymr's hall. Loki's uses his guile to keep Þórr undercover despite his burly and unladylike behaviour. When the hammer is brought to sanctify the wedding, and laid on Þórr's lap, he then proceeds to kill Þrymr and all the remaining giants. The poem appears to be relatively straightforward and generally comical.

<sup>224</sup> See A. Gurevich, 'On the Nature of the Comic in the Elder Edda: A Comment on an Article by Professor Höfler', *Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (1976), pp. 127-37.

<sup>225</sup> See P. Hallberg, 'Om *Þrymskviða*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 69 (1954), pp. 51-77, and R. Kvillerud, 'Några anmärkingar till *Þrymskviða*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 80 (1965), pp. 64-86.

<sup>226</sup> See S. Singer, 'Die Grundlagen der *Þrymskviða*' *Neophilologus* 17 (1932), pp. 47-8.

<sup>227</sup> A. Orchard (1997), p. 165.

Þrymr differs from most giants in that, unlike Vafþrúðnir, he comes across as rather stupid and genuinely naïve. Unlike Hymir he is relatively tame and not aggressive. It is even possible to see Þrymr as a sympathetic character. Yet it is Þrymr who acquires Ásgarðr's most treasured possession, thereby endangering the gods, elves and men, and thus rendering Þórr helpless. It is Þrymr who essentially blackmails the Æsir into giving him Freyja as a wife, and thereby threatening their fertility. Therefore Þrymr's actions make him profoundly antagonistic and threatening. In *Grm.* 11 we learn that *Þrymheimr* is the seat for the giant Þjazi. It should be mentioned that this need not be related to Þrymr the giant, but it could be. The word *þrymr* has a poetical meaning 'thunder' as it is found in compounds such as *þrym-draugr*, *þrym-kennir*, *þrym-lundr*, and arguably *þrymheimr*.<sup>228</sup> The names Þórr and Þrymr are cognate and have identical meanings. In this sense Þrymr and Þórr appear as opposite equals (or possibly Þrymr is Þórr's sinister alter-ego given a psychological reading of the poem),<sup>229</sup> and also can be seen as the playthings of Loki.

Þrymr is the *þursa dróttin* or 'lord of the giants' and is depicted in strophe 6 sitting on a burial cairn, twisting gold collars for his dogs and trimming the manes of his mares. Interestingly the word *þrymja* (present tense *þrymr*) means 'sitting fast, or moping',<sup>230</sup> but also the image of the king sitting on a burial mound is common. In the first chapter of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, a saga containing numerous archaic motifs, we are told, *Konungr sat jafnan á haugi drottningar, því at honum þótti mikit fráfall hennar*. The custom of the king sitting on a burial mound is still practised today. At the annual ceremonial sitting of the House of Keys in the open at Tynwald, Isle of Man, all the officials sit at various levels of the mound, but the top is always reserved for the current Lord of Man (the British monarch). In strophe 23 Þrymr tells of his golden horned cattle, pitch-black oxen and that many are his gifts and treasures, and all that is lacking in his life is Freyja. Again, the adjective *þrymr* has a poetical sense meaning 'glorious',<sup>231</sup> so perhaps his name also refers to his kingship. All taken into account, Þrymr is not

<sup>228</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 747.

<sup>229</sup> J. McKinnell, 'Myth as Therapy' *Medium Ævum*, 69 (2000), p. 9.

<sup>230</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 747.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 747.



described in the myth as the powerful, angry giant we find in *Hymiskviða*, or even what his name implies. He seems to be presented as spoiled and lovesick.

When one asks who is the central character, and where should the focus fall, it is difficult to decide between Þórr and Loki. If one views *Brymskviða* as a series of challenges such I have done with *Hymiskviða* and *Vafþrúðnismál* thus far, it appears that Loki emerges as the god in the fore. Indeed Loki's guile and cunning is challenged much in the same way as Þórr's strength in *Hymiskviða*. In order to retrieve the hammer, Þórr's disguise as Freyja must be convincing, which would seem impossible at best. When Þórr's true character shines through the bridal linen, and Þrymr's suspicions are aroused, it falls on Loki to recover the situation. Should Loki fail and Þórr be discovered, he would be helpless against the giant's wrath. The first of such instances occurs at Þrymr's feast (strophe 24 & 25) in which Þórr engulfs an ox, eight salmon, three casks of mead, and all the dainty dishes meant for the ladies. Þrymr comments that never before had he seen a woman eat so greedily, to which Loki replies that such was 'Freyja's' longing for Jötunheimar that she fasted for eight nights. Secondly, in strophes 27 and 28 Þrymr bends under the bride's veil for a kiss and staggers back the length of the hall in terror commenting that Freyja's eyes seem to be filled with fire. Loki covers for him saying that such was 'Freyja's' longing for Jötunheimar, that she has been awake for eight nights. Loki always manages to resolve the situation.

Loki is forced to make such a recovery in two out of the three instances in which there is dialogue and interaction between the two groups. Insofar as the theme of the poem is concerned, the conflict lies between Þórr and Þrymr, yet Þórr plays an unusually passive role relying solely on Heimdallr's plan and Loki's guile. The role of Þrymr appears to be that of a menace. His role as the challenger may not be as obvious as that of Hymir (at least concerning his relationship with Loki). What we can say is that the giants in this myth are instrumental in illustrating the characteristics of the gods. The characteristics of Þórr as a big eater, excessively masculine, and a fierce warrior are made obvious through situational irony. Furthermore Loki's cunning is stressed along with his role as a messenger of the gods. *Brymskviða* tells us little about the giants save they desire Freyja,

and fear Mjöllnir. Gullibility seems to be a common characteristic whether it be subtle as with Vafþrúðnir or blatantly obvious as with Þrymr.

#### 4.3 ÞJAZI, ÞÓRR AND ÓÐINN

In *Hrbl.* 19 Þórr boasts that he killed the giant Þjazi:

Þórr [kvað:]  
 Ek drap Þiaza,  
 enn þrúðmóðga iötun,  
 upp ek varp augom  
 Allvalda sonar  
 á þann inn heiða himin;  
 þau ero merki mest  
 minna verka,  
 þau er allir menn síðan um sé.  
 Hvat vanntu meðan, Hárbarðr?<sup>232</sup>  
 (*Hrbl.* 19)

Þórr attributes himself two deeds: the killing of Þjazi, and making stars from his eyes.

Snorri's account is in no way specific about who killed Þjazi saying that it was simply the Æsir:

Þá vóro æsirnir nær ok drápu Þjazi iötun fyrir innan Ásgrindr, ok er þat víg allfrægt.<sup>233</sup>

In *Ls.* 50, Loki takes credit for being foremost in the killing of Þjazi:

[Loki kvað:]  
 Veiztu, ef mik á hiörvi skolo  
 ens hrímkalda magar  
 görnóm binda goð,  
 fyrstr ok øfstr  
 var ek at fiörlagi,  
 þars vér á Þiaza þrifom.<sup>234</sup>  
 (*Ls.* 50)

<sup>232</sup> *Hrbl.* 19: Þórr said: I killed Þjazi, the mighty-spirited giant, I threw the eyes of Allvaldi's son up into the clear sky; they are the greatest mark of my deeds, those which all men see since. What were you doing meanwhile, Hárbarðr?

<sup>233</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 1: Then were the Æsir near and killed the giant Þjazi within Ásgrindr (the gate to Ásgarðr), and that killing is very famous (ed. Faulkes I, p. 2).

<sup>234</sup> *Ls.* 50: You know if the gods shall on a sword bind me [with] the guts of the frost-cold son, first and foremost was I in the killing, when we caught Þjazi.

The first consideration here is that, perhaps, Loki is emphasising his own role to upset Skaði, but, nevertheless, one can deduce from the strophe that more than one individual was involved in the killing. Here as in *Haustl.* vv. 1-13 Loki's ambivalent role is stressed.

Snorri's account of Þjazi's eyes differs from that of *Hrbl.* 19:

Svá er sagt at Óðinn gerði þat til yfirbóta við hana at hann tók augu Þiaza ok kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stiörnur .ii.<sup>235</sup>

(*Sn.E. Sk.* 1)

There are several possibilities as to why these accounts differ. Snorri twice gives the impression that the myth was well known, perhaps even in his own day. He says of the victory over Þjazi: *ok er þat víg allfrægt*,<sup>236</sup> and of the casting of the eyes into heaven he says: *Svá er sagt...*<sup>237</sup> This might indicate that the myth was well-known. One may assume that the myth concerning the origin of the two Þjazi-stars would have been widespread given the use of stars to navigate ships. It is comparable with the myth of Þórr breaking off one of Aurvandil's frozen toes and casting it up into the sky thus making it into a star.<sup>238</sup> If this is to be taken as evidence that the myth was highly popular, it may explain why there are two or possibly three variations. It is also possible that the myth shifted between cults. Snorri's major source for this myth must have been *Haustlög* 1-13 (*Skj* I B, 14-17), which also emphasises Loki's role and says almost nothing about that of Þórr. It is difficult to know whether or not Snorri knew *Hárbarðsljóð*, seeing that he never quotes it, but it is possible that he did, but chooses not to incorporate it in his work.

An alternative possibility is that the myth was so popular that a change in the details would have been unacceptable to a general Icelandic audience. This is to say that, perhaps the *Hárbarðsljóð*-poet deliberately has Þórr take credit for the killing of Þjazi

<sup>235</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 1: So it is said that Óðinn made it as extra compensation towards her (Skaði), that he took Þjazi's eyes and cast them up into heaven and made of [them] two stars (ed. Faulkes, I, p. 2).

<sup>236</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 1: and that killing is very famous.

<sup>237</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 1: So [it] is said...

<sup>238</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 17 (ed. Faulkes, I, p. 22).

(*Hrbl.* 19) to suit the theme of his poem. Þórr does not realise Hárbarðr is Óðinn in one of his many disguises, and this point is axiomatic to the poem. From a safe distance Óðinn provokes Þórr's wrath by refusing to ferry him across the sound:

[Þórr kvað:]  
 Harm liótan mér þikkir í því,  
 at vaða um váginn til þín  
 ok væta ögur minn;  
 skylda ek launa kögorsveini þínom  
 kanginyrði,  
 ef ek komumk yfir sundit.<sup>239</sup>  
 (*Hrbl.* 13)

They then engage in a boasting match in which Þórr claims to have killed Þjazi and made his eyes into stars. Þórr may be made to look a fool by unwittingly boasting about a deed that he did not do, to the very person who had. This would, if it is the case, explain why Snorri would not mention Þórr's claim even had he had been familiar with *Hárbarðsljóð*. It may be the case that the *Hrbl.*-poet is using a detail which was attributed to the two different gods in order to exploit a conflict between cults.

#### 4.4 ÞÓRR AND HRUNGNIR

The myth of Þórr's encounter with Hrungrnir is similar to the myth of Þórr's fishing expedition in that it was once popular and wide-spread. The myth survives in the skaldic poem *Haustlög* by Þjóðólfr of Hvin, and is thought to have been composed around the turn of the ninth to tenth century. The poem is called a 'shield lay', as it describes the scenes from mythology which were depicted on a shield. The two myths depicted on this shield were the rape of Iðunn by Þjazi and Þórr's encounter with Hrungrnir. This part of *Haustlög* is preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*<sup>240</sup> and Snorri frequently refers to the poem to illustrate skaldic diction. Due to a blunder of Óðinn's, Hrungrnir is invited to Valhöll and drinks with the gods. He boasts that he will kill them all except Freyja and Sif, who he wishes to have for himself, and that he will sink Ásgarðr. The gods call Þórr, who arrives from the East in a rage. Hrungrnir, being weaponless, requests a fair duel. The giants

<sup>239</sup> *Hrbl.* 13: Þórr said: A great sorrow it seems to me to wade through the water to you and wet my food/genitals bag (?) I should/ought to pay your kid for [the] abuse, if I get myself across the sound.

<sup>240</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 17 (ed. Faulkes I, pp. 22-4).

were worried that they might lose their strongest and bravest, so to frighten Þórr they built an enormous giant out of clay and gave it the heart of a mare. They named it *Mökkurkálfi*. Snorri tells us that Mökkurkálfi was far more frightened of Þórr: *Svá er sagt at hann meig er hann sá Þórr.*<sup>241</sup> As Þórr and his helper, Þjálfi, approached Hrungrnir, Þjálfi ran out in front and told Hrungrnir that Þórr would attack from underground, and that he should stand on his shield. Hrungrnir took the deceitful advice, thus leaving himself defenceless. Hrungrnir threw a whetstone and at the same time Þórr threw Mjöllnir. Both weapons met in mid-air. The hammer struck Hrungrnir's head, killing him, and a shard from the whetstone was lodged in Þórr's skull. Þjálfi then despatched Mökkurkálfi.

The role of Hrungrnir is that of a menace to the gods. During his visit to Ásgarðr, he tells the gods what he, as a giant, wishes to inflict upon them. That he should want Freyja for himself is a common theme and can be compared with *Þrymskviða*, but this is, perhaps, the only myth in which Sif is also threatened in such a way (the aim, no doubt, being to cuckold Þórr). He boasts that he will pick up Valhöll and bring it to the worlds of the giants, and also that he will kill all the gods and sink Ásgarðr. This scenario is very similar to the description of Ragnarök, in which the gods meet their fate, and, interestingly, that the earth will sink beneath the waves.

En er hann gerðiz drukkinn, þá skorti eigi stór orð, hann létz skyldu taka upp Valhöll ok færa í Iötunnheima en sökva Ásgarði en drepa guð öll, nema Freyiu ok Sif vill hann heim færa með sér.<sup>242</sup>

(*Sn.E. Sk.* 3)

This can be compared to an extent with *Vsp.* 57:

Sól tér sortna,  
Sígr fold í mar,<sup>243</sup>  
(*Vsp.* 57)

<sup>241</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.*: So it is said that he wet himself when he saw Þórr (ch. 17 in *Sk.*, ed. Faulkes I, p. 21).

<sup>242</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 3: Then when he became drunk, then big words were not wanting, he said he would take up Valhöll and take [it] into the worlds of the giants and sink Ásgarðr and kill all the gods, except Freyja and Sif who he wishes to take home with him (ch. 17 in *Sn.E. Sk.*, ed. Faulkes I, p. 20).

It is often thought that *Vsp.* 57 is of Christian origin.<sup>244</sup> It may be suggested, though, that the idea of the world sinking into the sea after the fate of the gods, not a Biblical motif, has a native origin, which can be seen as essentially the same type of apocalypse that Hrungnir boasts he will bring about.

This myth, and that of Þjazi (also in *Haustlög*), differ from other Þórr-myths in that the giants involved threaten or harass the gods in or near Ásgarðr. These two myths may have been chosen to be depicted on the shield described by Þjóðólfr because they, apart from having been popular, involve divine defence. This might indicate possibly recognised functions and meanings of myth within pagan society. In this respect the myth of Hrungnir and Þórr differs from that of Þórr and Hymir in that the giant does not simply function as a device to illuminate Þórr's characteristics. Hrungnir is a truly potential threat, and the only one who can stop him is Þórr. In this myth Þórr plays out the role for which he best known, the mighty defender of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr.

#### 4.5 WHO OWNS THE GLOVE: SKRÝMIR OR FJALARR?

Some of Þórr's great adventures come back to haunt him. Allusions to a myth in which Þórr has hidden inside the thumb of a glove can be found in the Eddaic poem *Lokasenna*:

[Loki kvað:]  
 Austrföllum þínom  
 skaltu aldregi  
 segja seggiom frá,  
 sízt í hanska þumlungi  
 hnúkðir þú, einheri,  
 ok þóttiska þú Þórr vera.<sup>245</sup>  
 (Ls. 60)

A strikingly similar strophe is *Hrbl.* 26, in which Hárbarðr similarly accuses Þórr of cowardice:

<sup>243</sup> *Vsp.* 57: [The] sun turns dark, earth sinks into [the] sea.

<sup>244</sup> In *Blickling Homilies* 7 (R. Morris, ed., Early English Text Society, o.s. 58, 1874, p. 93) the 'depths' want to swallow the earth. *Neolnessa* 'depths' may refer to both the sea and to Hell. If it refers to Hell then it could be related to the 'hell-mouth' motif in Christian iconography. If this refers to the sea it may be of Germanic origin.

<sup>245</sup> *Ls.* 60: Loki said: About your journeys east you should never tell anyone, since, lone warrior you cowered in the glove's thumb, and you didn't seem to yourself to be Þórr.

Hárbarðr kvað:  
 Þórr á afl ærit,  
 en ekki hiarta;  
 af hræzlo hugbleyði  
 þér var í hanzka troðit,  
 ok þóttiska þú þá Þórr vera;  
 hvárki þú þá þorðir  
 fyr hræzlo þinni  
 hniósa né fisa,  
 svá at Fjalarr heyrði.<sup>246</sup>  
 (*Hrbl.* 26)

This episode is also found in Snorri's account of Þórr's journey to Útgarðaloki.<sup>247</sup> McKinnell aptly describes the myth as a parody full of ironic reversals in which Þórr becomes the victim of trickery.<sup>248</sup> During Þórr's journey he and his companions spend the night in a house, which later turns out to have been the thumb of a giant's glove. Snorri's account has nothing to do with Þórr actively hiding from anyone or anything, as implied in *Ls.* 60 and *Hrbl.* 26. Furthermore, Snorri omits the name *Fjalarr*, mentioned in *Hrbl.* 26. This strophe from *Hárbarðsljóð* gives us the impression that Þórr is hiding in Fjalarr's glove and from him. Both strophes are quite specific about Þórr's fear, and this detail should not be readily discounted. Þórr is susceptible to fear, particularly if his hammer has gone missing, as his panic in *Brm.* 1 and 2 seems to imply. *Fjalarr* is best known in connection with *Galarr*, and Snorri says they are dwarves involved in the brewing of the mead of poetry. His name appears in *Vsp.* 16 listed as a dwarf, but in the *Dulur* he is listed as a giant (*Sn.E. Sk. b. Jötna heiti* I) and in *Háv.* 14 he seems to be identical with Suttungr. It is logical to assume that in *Hrbl.* 26 the glove in which Þórr hides belongs to the giant Fjalarr (unless Fjalarr is an exceptionally large dwarf). Fjalarr is commonly thought to be the same person as Skrímir, though this need not be the case. Snorri may have had to choose between two variations of the same myth, in one, the giant was Skrímir, and in the other, Fjalarr. In *Ls.* 62 Skrímir is named as owner of the food-bag which Snorri associates with the glove mentioned in *Ls.* 60. Another possible reason why Snorri chooses Skrímir as the owner of the glove may be that Fjalarr is attested in

<sup>246</sup> *Hrbl.* 26: Hárbarðr said: Þórr has sufficient strength but not heart, from fear and cowardice you were stuffed in a glove, and you did not then seem to be yourself Þórr; for your fear, you dared neither sneeze nor fart, so that Fjalarr heard you.

<sup>247</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 45 (ed. Faulkes, pp. 37-8).

<sup>248</sup> J. McKinnell (1994), p. 83.

kennings as a dwarf, and again as a dwarf in connection with the mead of poetry. Being tidy-minded, Snorri may therefore have disregarded *Hrbl.* 26 (and conceivably *Ls.* 60, where the giant is not named) to avoid having Fjalarr the dwarf and Fjalarr the giant.

The word *fjalarr* has no obvious definition, but if it could possibly mean ‘deceiver’ as Orchard has translated it,<sup>249</sup> or perhaps more accurately ‘concealer’ if it is derived from *fela* ‘to hide’, the name would be suited to Snorri’s account. Fjalarr also appears in *Háv.* 14,<sup>250</sup> where he seems to be the same as Suttungr. For this reason de Vries (*AEW* 122-3) interprets the name as ‘he who hides (the mead of poetry)’.<sup>251</sup> To further complicate the matter, it seems as though *Skrýmir* may be associated with either the verb *skræma* ‘to scare away’ or the noun *skræmi* ‘a scary monster’. De Vries offers comparisons with Nynorsk *skrymja*, Swedish *skrymma* ‘to take up a lot of space’, ‘look big’, and with Icelandic *skrum* ‘boasting’, *skraumi* ‘boaster’ (cf. also Simek (1993), 292-3 ‘boaster’). If this were the case *Skrýmir* would be rather a suitable name in the myth as Snorri tells it, and perhaps aptly suited to *Hrbl.* 26 (unless we are to see that in terms of Þórr being ridiculed for having been frightened by a giant named ‘deceiver’).

Snorri was faced with many complications, conflicting myths and possibly corrupted accounts. It is generally agreed that he was interested in accuracy and was also a genuine antiquarian. Yet it may be the case, at least in this myth, that he has unfairly disregarded the account in *Hrbl.* 36 and *Ls.* 60. It may also be the case that Snorri’s version of the myth is far newer than the one (or those) alluded to in *Hrbl.* 36 and *Ls.* 60. Because we cannot accurately reconstruct myths that are no longer extant, we have an answer to the question of ‘who owns the glove?’ – both and neither. It must be said that this particular problem, although central to the topic, raises many questions which cannot be fully handled in this dissertation.

<sup>249</sup> A. Orchard (1997), p. 43.

<sup>250</sup> cf. D. Evans (1986-7), p. 81.

<sup>251</sup> See also R. Simek (1993), p. 84.



[Freyr kvæð]:  
 Löng er nótt,  
 langar ro tvær,  
 hvé um þreiyak þriár?  
 opt mér mánaðr  
 minni þótti  
 en síá hálf hýnótt.<sup>252</sup>  
 (Skm. 42)

## 5 GERÐR AND SKAÐI: FROM GIANTESS TO GODDESS

### 5.1 GERÐR 'THE WOMAN' OR 'THE ENCLOSED FIELD'?

The giantess is found in various roles throughout the Eddaic myths, some similar to the giants, some differing greatly. Often the giantess can be an object of profound beauty, and thus an object of sexual desire. Gerðr is among the giantesses falling into this category and has been the subject of frequent debate. The myth in which she plays the greatest role is preserved in the Eddaic poem *Skírnismál* or *För Skírnis*. The poem begins with a prose introduction followed by forty-two verses with two prose links and a prose ending. It is found in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, GkS 2365 4to, and the first twenty-seven verses can also be found in AM 748 4to. Snorri Sturluson provides an account of the myth in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 37, and a euhemerised version in *Heimskringla*.<sup>253</sup> Snorri's source is likely to be *Skírnismál*, seeing that he quotes strophe 42 in *Gylfaginning*. Other references to the myth are found in *Ls.* 42 and *Hyndl.* 30 and indirectly in *Vsp.* 52. No surviving skaldic works refer to this myth, but *gerðr* commonly forms the basis of kennings for women.

Felix Niedner was the first to interpret *Skírnismál* in terms of the marriage of sky and earth.<sup>254</sup> Magnus Olsen,<sup>255</sup> who saw it as a fertility myth, later expounded this interpretation. *Gerðr* is presented as the daughter of the earth/winter giant Gymir, and he derives the name from *garðr* meaning 'an enclosed field'. Olsen presents Skírnir as the

<sup>252</sup> Long is a night, long are two, how will I endure three? Often a month has seemed less to me than this half a [stag night]. (Cleasby-Vigfusson defines hýnótt as one of three nights before or after a wedding.) Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 304.

<sup>253</sup> *Ynglinga saga*, chs. 10, 13, 14, 19. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, ed., *Heimskringla* I, Íslenzk fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík: 1941), pp. 23-5, 28-31, 37-9.

<sup>254</sup> F. Niedner, 'Skírnis För', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 30 (1886), pp. 132-150.

<sup>255</sup> M. Olsen, 'Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus', *Maal og Minne* (1909), pp. 17-36.

illuminator offering the light of Freyr (interpreted as the sky-god) to the dark earth (interpreted as Gerðr) which is refused. She is threatened with a curse of perversion and infertility to which she finally submits, agreeing to meet Freyr at *Barrey* 'Isle of Barley'. The poem was thus seen as a ritual drama to be re-enacted by Freyr's worshippers, and Bertha Phillpotts saw it as purely such a dramatic re-enactment.<sup>256</sup> Ursula Dronke explores the myth in terms of the *hieros gamos* (divine wedding) first mentioned by Olsen, and presents various parallels for the cursing of unwilling women.<sup>257</sup> Gro Steinsland, inspired by Snorri's account in *Ynglinga saga* 10, presents the view that the *hieros gamos* in *Skírnismál* is a depiction of the conquest of the king (with powers of fecundity) and his domination over the land. She believes that *Hliðskjálf* represents a throne, the apples represent an orb, the ring is that which a king traditionally wears, and the *gambanteinn* represents a sceptre.<sup>258</sup>

Lars Lönnroth<sup>259</sup> and Stephen Mitchell<sup>260</sup> applied the structuralist approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss to seek the meaning or purpose behind the poem. They concluded that the myth is based on marriage-customs in Icelandic society. Essentially they believe that the poem is based on the buying of peace between two opposing factions through marriage. We are told in *Hyndl.* 30 that Freyr and Gerðr are married, *Freyr átti Gerði*, 'Freyr married Gerðr', but Freyr and Gerðr never actually marry in *Skírnismál*, in fact they never even meet each other within the poem. It is possible that marriage is implied, or at least sexual union. Nowhere is it suggested in the poem that peace between the gods and giants is a factor, nor the necessity for its purchase. Another structuralist approach by Julie Randlev<sup>261</sup> concludes that the poem is centred on the concept of *munr* (longing), and is therefore a love poem, which she dates to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Paul Bibire argues that the rune-names mentioned in the love-curse are unlikely to be older than *ca.*

<sup>256</sup> B. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: 1920).

<sup>257</sup> U. Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda*, II (Oxford: 1997), p. 388-9 (see references therein).

<sup>258</sup> G. Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i 'Skírnismál', 'Ynglingatal', 'Háleygjatal', og 'Hyndluljóð'* (1991), p. 130 ff.

<sup>259</sup> L. Lönnroth, 'Skírnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen', *Opuscula Septentrionalia* (Copenhagen: 1977), pp. 154-178.

<sup>260</sup> S. Mitchell, 'För Skírnis as Mythological Model: *fríð at kaupa*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983), pp. 108-122.

<sup>261</sup> J. Randlev, 'Skírnismál. En tekst – og dens udsagn; digtning og tradition', *Maal og Minne* (1985), pp. 132-158.

1200.<sup>262</sup> This would imply that the form of the poem we now have should probably be read in the light of medieval courtly literary ideas of *fin amour* instead of (or possibly as well as) the crop-fertility symbolism seen by Olson, which would also strengthen the argument put forward by Randlev. Her conclusions contrast greatly with that of Olsen (and his followers) and to that of Lönnroth and Mitchell in that it focuses on Freyr and Gerðr the characters, rather than what they are believed to symbolize.

The views of Olsen have been contested or at least questioned in the later twentieth century by Lotte Motz among others, questioning Olsen's etymology of the name *Gerðr*. She suggests that *Gerðr* may be related to *gjörð* and thus it is possible to interpret the name as 'girdled one'. Paul Bibire suggests that, among a range of possibilities, the name could be seen as a by-form of the name *Geirriðr*, and developed as a name-element with no evident meaning.<sup>263</sup> It is tempting to point to the possibility that it may be, or may have become, associated in some way with *gerð*. The foremost meaning of *gerð* is 'armour' or 'war-gear', but it has a secondary meaning according to Cleasby-Vigfusson, 'girth; *digrask í gerðum, to become stout in the waist, euphon.,[sic] of a woman, to be with child*'.<sup>264</sup> If this were the case it would confirm Gerðr's role as a fertility giantess / goddess, and certainly has no immediate connection with the earth or enclosures of land. However this is entirely speculative and dependent upon a secondary meaning within a colloquial phrase which itself is likely to be modern.

*Gerðr* appears in several giantess names: *Ímgerðr* 'dust, ashes-gerðr', *Amgerðr* 'black-gerðr', *Flaumgerðr* 'din-gerðr', *Hergerðr* 'war-gerðr', *Hrimgerðr* 'frost-gerðr', *Skjaldgerðr* 'shield-gerðr' and *Unngerðr* 'wave-gerðr'. *Gerðr* and other names incorporating *-gerðr* belong exclusively to female names and it is possible that this may be a result of its now lost meaning. In this context, *gerðr* must not only function as a word by itself, but would logically have some feminine implication. *Gerðr* is found in

<sup>262</sup> P. Bibire, 'Freyr and Gerðr: The Story and its Myths', in *Sagaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen, edd. (Vienna: 1986), p. 20.

<sup>263</sup> P. Bibire (1986), pp. 19-40.

<sup>264</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 197.

numerous kennings for 'women' one of which is, 'Gerðr-of-the-gold-ring'.<sup>265</sup> Motz's interpretation 'girdled one' seems to work for *Gerðr* in the context of *Skírnismál*, and it should be noted that the name is widely attested in personal names.

## 5.2 SKÍRNISMÁL AS LAY CONCERNING SKÍRNIR AND GERÐR

*Skírnismál* is different from the other poems surveyed thus far. For example, we have seen that *Hymir's* role in *Hymiskviða* exemplifies Þórr's god-like characteristics; the poem is not about Hymir, rather it is about Þórr. Similarly *Vafþrúðnir* in *Vafþrúðnismál* exemplifies Óðinn's god-like characteristics. Yet in *Skírnismál*, it is neither Freyr nor Gerðr who is the subject of such exemplification, but Skírnir who is neither a god nor an elf.<sup>266</sup> This is not to suggest that the poem is entirely about Skírnir in the way that *Hymiskviða* is about Þórr, as the poem tells about the events leading up to the meeting of Freyr and Gerðr. Skírnir takes it upon himself to perform the difficult task of going to Jötunheimar and retrieving Gerðr's affection:

Skírnir [kvað]:  
 Mar gefðu mér þá,  
 þann er mik um myrkvan beri  
 vísan vafþloga,  
 ok þat sverð  
 er síálftr vegiz  
 við iötna ætt.<sup>267</sup>  
 (*Skm.* 8)

Gerðr plays hard to get, and his cunning, capacity for persuasion and perhaps his determination to serve his master are exemplified. Skírnir brings three, perhaps four items with him to Jötunheimar: *Epli ellifo* 'eleven' apples *algullin*,<sup>268</sup> a golden ring (i.e. *Draupnir*) which drops eight new rings of equal weight every ninth night, and Freyr's

<sup>265</sup> *gollhrings Gerðr*: Haraldr Sigurðarson 7, l. 6 & 7; Magnús berfœttr 5, l. 3 (Kock I, 166-199).

<sup>266</sup> *Skm.* 18.

<sup>267</sup> Skírnir said: Give me a horse then, that might bear me through the dim, certain flickering flame, and the sword which fights by itself against giant-kind.

<sup>268</sup> These are commonly presumed to be the apples of Iðunn which give the gods eternal youth. It is conceivable that *epli ellifo* is a scribal error for *epli ellilyf* 'apples [which are] medicine against old age'.

sword which fights by itself. Skírnir also possesses a *gambanteinn* 'magic wand' which he claims to have sought and found in a forest.

Gerðr refuses the apples as they are insufficient to make her change her mind, and she also refuses the ring as she has her father's gold at hand. Skírnir threatens to cut off her head should she refuse, and to this she says that no such oppression will make her change her mind. Thus Skírnir threatens her with a curse of his magic wand, a curse of isolation, perversion, and misery. The curse is ten strophes in length, making up just under a quarter of the total number of strophes, and it is the curse which is central to the poem. The curse need not be central to the myth as Snorri does not include it in his description of events. According to Snorri, the significance of Skírnir's journey is two-fold, he wins Gerðr for Freyr and does not return with Freyr's sword. It is implied in *Ls.* 42 and *Vsp.* 52 that the sword was given away, and Freyr finds himself weaponless at Ragnarök.

Gerðr refuses to submit to the passions of fair Freyr. Everlasting youth, gold, and the threat of death fail to compel her to change her mind. Yet the threat of an eternity of being raped by freakish giants convinces her to reconsider:

Heill vér þú nú heldr, sveinn,  
ok tak við hrímkálki,  
fullom forns miaðar;  
þó hafða ek þat ætlat,  
at myndak aldregi  
unni Vaningia vel!<sup>269</sup>  
(*Skm.* 37)

Only the threat of a future so grim persuades Gerðr to Freyr's side. The curse itself shares striking characteristics with a love charm discovered in Bergen among a vast number of runic inscriptions:

<sup>269</sup> *Skm.* 37: Hale be now rather, boy, and accept the frosty cup full of old mead; though I had intended that I would never love the son of the Vanir well.

Ristek:bot:runar:rist:ekbiarh:runar:eæin:faluip:aluom:tuiualtuir:  
 trolom:preualt:uip:þ(us)---uipenneskøþo:skah:ualkyrriu:sua:at:eæi-  
 mehi:þo:atæuili:læuis:kona:liui:þinuk?---eksender:þer:ekseaper:  
 ylhiar:erhi:okopola:aþer:rini:upole:auk:ioluns:mop:sittu:aldri:sop-  
 þu:aldri---ant:mer:sem:sialpre:þer:beirist:rubus:rabus:ep:aranta-  
 bus:laus:abus:rosa:gaua?---<sup>270</sup>

Skírnir's curse contains a number of significant verbal parallels:

Þvrs rist ek þer  
 oc þria stafi:  
 ergi oc æði  
 ok opola;  
 sva ec þat of rist,  
 sem ec þat á reist,  
 ef goraz þarfar þess.<sup>271</sup>  
 (Skm. 36)

Rather than rejecting Freyr, she leaps at the opportunity to meet him at the grove Barri. The poem does more than exemplify Skírnir's characteristics, it tells us how Freyr and Gerðr came to be together (possibly married). The poem certainly seems to be concerned with fertility, and the necessity of the union between a fertility god, and, if not a fertility goddess/giantess, then the one whom he desires (or possibly requires) to share his sexuality. Gerðr may simply represent only a fair and beautiful woman (as she is described in the prose introduction and in strophe 6), and if she keeps herself to herself she would become an infertile old maid, not unlike the dried-up thistle mentioned in strophe 31. To some degree she may simply be representative of the female sex and sexuality, and thus the myth is still a fertility myth though not necessarily as Olsen and many others have viewed it. The theme of the poem certainly concerns the coming together of a god and giantess, but the thrust of the poem is, not necessarily why, but how Skírnir accomplishes this difficult task.

<sup>270</sup> A. Liestøl (1963), p. 41.

<sup>271</sup> Skm. 36. I will carve Þvrs against you and three letters, 'perversion', 'frenzy' and 'restlessness'; so I scratch it off as I cut it on, if needs arise for it.

## 5.3 FURTHER COMPARISONS BETWEEN ÓÐINN AND SKÍRNIR

[Skírnir] kvað:  
 Kostir ro betri  
 heldr en at kløkkva sé,  
 hveim er fúss er fara;  
 eino dægri  
 mér var aldr um skapaðr  
 ok alt líf um lagit.<sup>272</sup>  
 (*Skm.* 13)

Stylistically this strophe seems to have much in common with *Hávamál*, in which Óðinn relays 'words of wisdom' in a series of loosely connected strophes. Many of these Óðinic gnomic verses can be found throughout the Eddaic poems involving Óðinn. One of many parallels to *Skm.* 13 in this sense is *Háv.* 72:

Sonr er betri,  
 þótt sé síð of alinn  
 eptir genginn guma;  
 sialdan bautarsteinar  
 standa brauto nær,  
 nema reisi niðr at nið.<sup>273</sup>  
 (*Háv.* 72)

In *Hrbl.* 22 Hárbardr (Óðinn in disguise) speaks the following gnomic verse:

Hárbardr kvað:  
 Þat hefir eik,  
 er af annarri skefir;  
 um sik er hverr í slíko.  
 Hvat vanntu meðan, Þórr?<sup>274</sup>  
 (*Hrbl.* 22)

<sup>272</sup> *Skm.* 13: Skírnir said: There are better choices than to whimper, for him who is willing to travel, one day was my fate shaped and all (my?) life was laid out.

<sup>273</sup> *Háv.* 72: A son is better, though born late [and] after the man departs. Seldom [do] memorial stones stand near the road, unless kinsman raise to kin.

<sup>274</sup> *Hrbl.* 22: Hárbardr said: One oak gets what is cut off another; each sees to himself in such. What were you up to meanwhile, Þórr?

This is the only such verse in *Hárbarðsljóð*, but seems to serve as a sort of trademark for Óðinn. It is possible that a similar comparison can be made between *Grm.* 51 and *Háv.*

12:

Ölr ertu, Geirrøðr!  
hefr þú ofdrukkít;  
miklo ertu hnugginn.  
er þú míno gengi,  
öllum einheriom  
ok Óðins hylli.<sup>275</sup>  
(*Grm.* 51)

This can be compared with Óðinn's sayings about the repercussions involved with overdrinking in *Háv.* 12:

Era svá gott  
sem gott kveða  
öl alda sonum;  
því at færa veit  
er fleira drekkur  
síns til geðs gumi.<sup>276</sup>  
(*Háv.* 12)

It seems that Snorri was aware of such gnomic interjections in myths involving Óðinn as he quotes strophe 1 of *Hávamál* in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 2:<sup>277</sup>

Gáttir allar  
áðr gangi fram  
um skygnaz skyli;  
þvíat óvist er at vita  
hvar úvinir  
sitia á fleti firir.<sup>278</sup>  
(*Háv.* 1)

*Skm.* 13 may or may not be one such gnomic verse, but it does have much in common with the verses in *Hávamál*. One of Óðinn's identifying characteristics seems to be his

<sup>275</sup> *Grm.* 51: Drunk are you Geirrøðr! You have over indulged in drink; You are deprived of much, when you [pass from] my support, from all the Einherjar, and from Óðinn's grace.

<sup>276</sup> *Háv.* 12: It is not so good as they say, ale for the sons of men; because a man knows less of his own mind, the more he drinks.

<sup>277</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 2 (ed. Faulkes, p. 8).

<sup>278</sup> *Háv.* 1: One should look around all thresholds before going in, because one cannot know for certain where enemies sit on the hall-floor.



wise sayings, and these appear not infrequently in other myths involving Óðinn. In the cases of *Grm.* 51 and *Hrbl.* 22 Óðinn is in disguise as Grímnir and Hárbarðr respectively. The gnomic verses may be intended to identify him. *Skm.* 13 may or may not be one such verse, but it seems to have all the same overtones. Furthermore Óðinn is the only character in the mythological poems of the Elder Edda who speaks in gnomic verses, with the possible exception of Skírnir. Óðinn and Skírnir are the only two characters to use rune-magic, and they are the only two characters actively to seek the affection of giantesses (albeit Skírnir seeks Gerðr's affection for Freyr). They are also the only two characters who have possession of a magical *gambanteinn*. The character who is most often associated with horse-riding is Óðinn, and his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir seems to have the ability to cross between worlds as can be inferred from *Bdr.* 2:

Upp reis Óðinn,  
 alda gautr,  
 ok hann á Sleipni  
 söðul um lagði,  
 reið hann niðr þaðan  
 Niflheliar til,  
 mætti hann hvelpi,  
 þeim er ór heliu kom.<sup>279</sup>  
 (*Bdr.* 2)

This can be compared to Skírnir riding to Jötunheimr, and in this instance he rides through a certain flickering flame. In the poem Skírnir borrows the horse from Freyr which complicates this general comparison, but need not be seen as an invalidating factor to this argument.

It may not be the case that Óðinn and Skírnir are variants of the same character, or that Skírnir is Óðinn in one of his many disguises. Óðinn and Skírnir appear together in a separate myth regarding Skírnir's journey to *Svartálfaheimr* to have the fetter *Gleipnir* made.<sup>280</sup> Incidentally it is the Alfður who sends him there. There is a possibility, however, that, based on the parallels presented above, the myth of Skírnir's journey may

<sup>279</sup> *Bdr.* 2: Up rose Óðinn, Gautr of men, and he laid a saddle on Sleipnir, he rode down thence to Niflhel; he met the whelp which came out of hel.

<sup>280</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* ch. 34 (ed. Faulkes, p. 28).

have been based on an Óðinn myth, in which he travels to Jötunheimr seeking the affection of a giantess. This hypothetical myth would have much in common with the myth of Óðinn and Billinger's daughter (*Háv.* 96-102) in which the giantess plays hard to get. Perhaps Skírnir's use of rune magic and the *gambanteinn*, his possession of *Draupnir*, and the gnomic-like verse in strophe 13 are fossils from such an Óðinn myth. Skírnir may have replaced Óðinn in *Skírnismál* (possibly even at an early stage in the development of the myth) much in the way that Þórr seems to have replaced (or parodied) Óðinn in *Alvissmál*. Snorri mentions that Skírnir is sent to seek Gerðr, but he omits all the details regarding their meeting (*Sn.E. Gylf.* 37).<sup>281</sup> Conversely the kenning *gollhrings Gerðr*<sup>282</sup> which refers to a woman, may be drawing on the myth of Draupnir as a wedding gift (the ring which was eventually burned with Baldr), which drops eight rings of equal weight every ninth night. If this could be substantiated it would suggest that certain details in the myth of Skírnir's journey, such as the wedding gifts, may be ancient, though it means little insofar as Skírnir's role is concerned.

#### 5.4 SKADI'S MARRIAGE INTO THE ÆSIR

The pantheon of the Norse gods is roughly comprised of three types: the Æsir, Vanir and those affiliated through marriage. Vafþrúðnir seems to give a reason why Njörðr is like one of the Æsir and yet was not born among them. Óðinn asks:

[Óðinn kvað:]  
 Segðu þat it tíunda,  
 allz þú tíva rök  
 öll, Vafþrúðnir, vitir,  
 hvaðan Niörðr um kom  
 með ása sonom,  
 hofom ok hörgom  
 hann ræðr hunnmörgom,  
 ok varðat hann ásom alinn.<sup>283</sup>  
 (*Vm.* 38)

<sup>281</sup> *Sn.E. Sk. Gylf.* ch. 37 (ed. Faulkes, p. 31).

<sup>282</sup> *gollhrings Gerðr*: Haraldr Sigurðarson 7, l. 6 & 7; Magnús berfœttr 5, l. 3 (Kock I, 166-199).

Vafþrúðnir's answers:

[Vafþrúðnir kvad:]  
 Í Vanaheimi  
 skópo hann vís regin  
 ok seldo at gíslingo goðum;  
 í aldar røk  
 hann mun aprt koma  
 heim með vísom vönom.<sup>284</sup>  
 (Vm. 39)

Thus Njörðr is a god in that he has temples and worshippers, regardless of his lineage. Snorri provides a longer account in *Ynglinga Saga* concerning the war between the Æsir and Vanir, which need not be included here.<sup>285</sup> It is possible that once it was believed that only the Æsir and those associated with them (through hostage-trading and marriage) were worshipped as deities, that those in the world *Vanaheimr* were somehow inaccessible or unknown altogether. If Óðinn's description of a god in *Vm.* 38 (having temples and worshippers) in any way defines godly status, then Skaði may have had such status, given place-names suggesting a cult, and the fact that she is called *öndurgoð* 'skir-deity'. It is important that Snorri clearly does not regard her as a goddess, therefore her cult following may have died out although she was remembered by others albeit in the form of a giantess married to a god.

### 5.5 VENGEANCE AND THE GIANTESS

As a giantess Skaði's role is that of a threatening menace, but upon marrying Njörðr she takes on the role of a goddess. Snorri relates the myth concerning Skaði's anger at the killing of her father Þjazi:

<sup>283</sup> *Vm.* 38: Óðinn said: Say tenthly, since you, Vafþrúðnir, know all the fate of the gods, whence did Njörðr come among the sons of the Æsir, he governs innumerable temples and places of worship, and was not born among the Æsir.

<sup>284</sup> *Vm.* 39: Vafþrúðnir said, In Vanaheimr, the wise powers shaped him, and handed over as a hostage to the gods; at the downfall of time, he will come back, home with the wise Vanir.

<sup>285</sup> *Ynglingasaga*, 4. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed. (Reykjavik: 1941), ch. 4 pp. 12, 13.

En Skaði, dóttir Þjaza iðtons, tók hiálm ok bryniu ok öll hervápn ok ferr til Ásgarðz at hefna föður síns.<sup>286</sup>

(*Sn.E. Sk. 1*)

Skaði's giant-like predilection towards the seeking of vengeance is similarly noticeable in *Lokasenna*:

[Skaði kvað:]  
Létt er þér, Loki;  
munattu lengi svá  
leika lausom hala,  
þvíat þik á hiörvi skolo  
ins hrímkalda magar  
görnóm binda goð.<sup>287</sup>

(*Ls. 49*)

In strophe 50 Loki brags about having been foremost in the killing of Þjazi, and in the following strophe Skaði threatens: *frá mínom véom ok vöngom skolo þér æ köld ráð koma*.<sup>288</sup> Skaði finally gets her vengeance as during the binding of Loki she hangs a poisonous snake over Loki's head:

Skaði tók eitrom ok festi upp yfir annlit Loka; draup þar ór eitr. Sigyn kona Loka sat þar ok helt munnlaug undir eitrit. Er en munnlaugin var full, bar hón út eitrit; en meðan draup eitrit á Loka. Þá kiptiz hann svá hart við, at þaðan af skalf iórð öll; þat ero nú kallaðir landskiálptar.<sup>289</sup>

(*Ls. prose following 65*)

There is a depiction of this scene on the Gosforth cross (Fig. 1) which suggests a widespread knowledge of the myth and of most of its details. Skaði is not depicted on the cross, but this need not influence our impression of the myth as told in *Lokasenna*.

Skaði's vengefulness is comparable to the vengeance Suttungr seeks against Fjalarr and

<sup>286</sup> *Sn.E. Sk. (G56)*: But Skaði, Þjazi the giant's daughter took helmet and armour and all war-weapons and went to Ásgarðr to avenge her father (ed. Faulkes, I, p. 2).

<sup>287</sup> *Ls. 49*: You are cheerful, Loki, you will not sport so with a loose tail for long, because the gods must bind you on a sword with the guts of the frost-cold son.

<sup>288</sup> *Ls. 51*: From my sanctuaries and fields shall always come to you cold counsel.

<sup>289</sup> *Ls. prose following 65*: Skaði took a poisonous snake and fastened it up over Loki's face, poison dripped out of it. Sigyn, Loki's wife, sat there and held a bowl under the poison. But when the bowl was full, she carried the poison out; but meanwhile the poison dripped on Loki. The he jerked so hard against [it], that the whole world shook; that is now called earthquakes.

Galarr, they having killed his father, Gillingr. Vengeance is not necessarily a trait confined to giants; Óðinn's son Víðarr is conceived with the sole intention of one day avenging his father. Similarly Váli is destined to be born with the specific purpose of avenging Baldr. It is worth noting that both Víðarr and Váli are sons of Óðinn, but moreover they are sons Óðinn has with the giantesses Gríðr and Rindr respectively. All this does is awaken the possibility that giants and giantesses may be inherently associated with vengeance, as is Óðinn who himself was the son of the giantess Bestla.

### 5.6 SKAÐI THE GODDESS?

If *véom ok vöngom* means 'sanctuaries and fields' it suggests that Skaði had been equivalent to a goddess. The early references to Skaði are by two of the earliest skalds. In *Ragnarsdrápa* 20 (c. 850) Bragi refers to Skaði as *öndurdís* 'ski-goddess' and in *Haustl.* 7 (c. 900) Þjóðólfr of Hvin refers to her as *öndurgoð* meaning 'ski-deity'. This can be compared with references to the god Ullr who was not only *önduráss* 'ski-god' but is also referred to as *veiðiáss* 'hunting-god' and *bogaáss* 'bow-god'.<sup>290</sup> In *Sn.E. Gylf.* 23 Snorri describes Skaði's characteristics:

Þá fór Skaði upp á fiallit ok bygði í Þrymheimi, ok ferr hon miök á skíðum ok með boga ok skýtr dýr. Hon heitir Öndurguð eða Öndurdís.<sup>291</sup>  
(*Sn.E. Gylf.* 23)

It seems likely, given the accounts of Bragi and Þjóðólfr, that Skaði had been seen as a *goð / dís* goddess in earlier times. By the time Snorri is writing she has a deep love for Jötunheimar regardless of her marriage to Njörðr. In this way she voluntarily remains tied to Jötunheimar, and one might assume that these ties make her more giantess than goddess. Yet the mountains to which she belongs may be more significant than the fact that they are in Þrymheimr. Just as Njörðr is associated with the sea, so Skaði is with the mountains, and just as the mountains and sea are figuratively opposites, so are Skaði and Njörðr. Evidence for a possible early cult of Skaði is given by place-names, above all

<sup>290</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* 22.

<sup>291</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 23: Then Skaði goes up on the mountain and lives in Þrymheimr, and she goes often skiing and shoots wild animals with her bow. She is called ski-goddess or ski-dís (ed. Faulkes, p. 24).

Scandinavia itself.<sup>292</sup> The Háleygjar (the family of Hákon jarl) apparently derived their descent from a supposed sexual union between Óðinn and Skaði (Eyvindr skáldaspillir, *Háleygjatál* 3-4, in *Skj.* I B, 60). This would associate her with the pattern of giantess-mistresses of Óðinn, but it may also reflect an older cult in which she was a personification of the land over which they ruled (which would make her rather like Jörð); whether this makes her a goddess or not seems uncertain. We must therefore ask if Skaði was originally a local goddess<sup>293</sup> who became assimilated into the Norse pantheon. The myth of her marriage to Njörðr provides a means of explaining this. One consideration is that if a god or goddess, with its cult following, is assimilated into another group of deities, how is the addition of such a god or goddess to be rationalised? Does it develop gradually into a myth or series of myths like that of Þjazi and Skaði? Perhaps Skaði was once a goddess who had been redefined as giantess as a result of the development of a myth explaining how she came to be among the Æsir, and possibly also as a result of reinterpretation of her name to a meaning more suited to a giantess ('harm').<sup>294</sup>

### 5.7 ÞORGERÐR THE GIANT TROLL GODDESS

Þorgerðr requires exploration, because she is identified as both a giantess or troll, and as a goddess. Þorgerðr's appellative appears in various manuscript forms:

|             |                        |
|-------------|------------------------|
| Hölga brúðr | Holga troll            |
| Höldá-      | Höldá-                 |
| Hörþa-      | Hörþa-                 |
| Hörga-      | Horga-. <sup>295</sup> |

*Hölgabrúðr* appears in Snorra Edda<sup>296</sup> and may be mentioned by Saxo (Book 3, ch. 2, para. 8, p. 65). The element *brúðr* generally means 'bride'. In *Snorra Edda* we learn that *Svá er sagt at konungr sá er Hölgi er nefndr, er Hálogaland er við kent, var faðir Þorgerðar Hölgabrúðar.*<sup>297</sup> Therefore it has long been argued that *Hölgabrúðr* must be connected with the figure Hölgi, who according to Snorri, is the founder of

<sup>292</sup> J. Svennung, *Scandinavia und Scandia: Lateinisch-Nordische Namenstudien* (Lund: 1963).

<sup>293</sup> See distribution-map, ARG. II, p. 339, for localisation of placenames containing the name *Skaði*.

<sup>294</sup> AEW: s.v.

<sup>295</sup> Forms are as they appear in: G. Storm, 'Om Thorgerd Hölgebrud' *Arkiv* 2 (1885), pp. 124-135.

<sup>296</sup> *Sn.E. Sk.* ch. 45 (ed. Faulkes, I, p. 60).

Hålogaland.<sup>298</sup> Saxo tells us that King Helgi (possibly here used for *Hölgi*) of Hålogaland unsuccessfully courted Thora, daughter of Gusi king of the Finns. Helgi eventually married her despite her father's disapproval and thus Hölga-brúðr appears to mean 'bride of Hölgi'. The alternative Hölga-troll is taken by Storm to mean 'fiend', and does not commit to any definition beyond 'malevolent supernatural being'.<sup>299</sup> *Hörða-* could be an indication of wider geographic spread of her cult in southwestern Norway as well as the North. *Hölða-* could be an indication of her affiliation with people of the status of hölðr. *Hörga-* apparently refers to an outdoor cairn of stones, *hörgr*, often associated with female divinities, and which may be an early term for a cult centre. If this is the case it could suggest the cult might belong to an older stratum of local deities, which may be comparable with that of Skaði. None of these names is attested early enough to determine which is original, and each may merely be a reinterpretation of the name to make sense of it.

References to the cult of Þorgerðr Hölga-brúðr / Hörgabrúðr / Hörgatröll and her sister Irpa can be taken as instances of giantess-worship. One of which occurs in *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (by Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, d. 1222), mentioned in stt. 30, 32.<sup>300</sup> In st. 32 Hölga-brúðr is named and she uses battle-magic:

Þá frá k él it illa  
æða Hölga brúði:  
glumdi hagl á hlífum  
harða grímt ór norðri.<sup>301</sup>  
(*Jóms.* 32)

Earlier in *Jóms.* st. 30 her devotees are identified, as is her propensity towards destroying her devotees or demanding another male human life as substitute.

<sup>297</sup> *Edda*, Finnur Jónsson, ed., (1931) p. 142.

<sup>298</sup> G. Storm, 'Om Thorgerd Hölgebrud' *Arkiv* 2 (1885), pp. 127.

<sup>299</sup> G. Storm (1885), p. 126.

<sup>300</sup> E. A. Kock, *Den Norsk-Islandska Skaldediktningen* (Lund: 1946-9), II, 4-5.

<sup>301</sup> Then I heard the woman of Hölgi to make frenzied the evil storm; grim hail crashed from the north, on to shields harshly.

Áðr í örva drífu  
 ýtum grimmr at blóta  
 – framm kom heipt en harða –  
 Hákun syni tæki.<sup>302</sup>  
 (Jóms. 30)

In Þórkell Gíslason's *Búadrápa* (ca. 1200?) battle-magic again appears in reference to the giantess in st. 9.

Hagl vá hvert eyri,  
 hraut á lög dreyri  
 – blóð þó bens órum –  
 ór bragna sórum.  
 Þar fell valr víða,  
 vé sá gyld riða.  
 Barðisk sveit snarla  
 á snekkjum jarla.<sup>303</sup>  
 (ÞGísl. 9)

She is referred to in st. 10 *flagð et forljóta* (*flagð* 'trollwoman' is a term of generic abuse for unpleasant female supernatural beings). It also refers to battle-magic being used on behalf of the 'greedy ones' suggesting a lust for gold.

Örum réð sér snörpum  
 – slíkt vas raun górpum –  
 flagð et forljóta  
 af fingrum skjóta.  
 Gerðisk grimt fikjum  
 at gumnum ríkjum  
 – gnýr vas hór hlífa –  
 hregg ok loptdrífa.<sup>304</sup>  
 (ÞGísl. 10)

<sup>302</sup> Before in the snowstorm of arrows Hákun grim to men, the hard vengeance came forward, should begin to sacrifice his son.

<sup>303</sup> Each lump of hail weighted an ounce, it splattered blood onto the sea, blood of the wound washed then for our people from the wounds of men. There the slaughtered fell widely, they saw the gilded shields quiver, the troop fought keenly on the earls' warships.

<sup>304</sup> The hideous trollwoman caused keen arrows to shoot from her fingers. That was testing for warriors. There happened a grim storm and driving snowstorm from the sky for the greedy ones against the mighty men; there was a loud clashing of shields.



Skúli Þórsteinsson mentions Hölgi in his account of the Battle of Svold (1000) but with no associations of cult or female deities.

Þás ræfrvita Reifnis  
 rauðk fyr Svöldr til auðar,  
 herfylgins bark Hölga  
 haugþak saman baugum.<sup>305</sup>  
 (Skúli. 4)

In *Jómsvíkinga saga*<sup>306</sup> the tide of battle turns against Earl Hákon and he invokes Þorgerðr Hölgabráuðr.

‘Þat þykkjumk ek sjá at á oss tekr at hallask bardaginn ok hugða ek til þess  
 verst at berjask við þessa menn enda reynisk mér at því. Nú mun oss eigi  
 hlýða svá búit nema vér takim nakkvat gott ráð...’<sup>307</sup>  
 (*Jómsvíkinga saga*, ch. 32)

Facing north, Hákon kneels in a wood in that but his prayers are not answered because Þorgerðr is angry. She rejects all his offerings including human sacrifice, save that of Erlingr, his 7-year-old son.

The figure of Þorgerðr is entangled in the sources and this scene expresses that very well. Here one could easily replace the variation of her name beginning with the *hölga*-element, with *hörgra*- (*hörgr* meaning ‘a sacrificial cairn built in open air’).<sup>308</sup> The *hölga*-element works just as well given Earl Hákon’s relationship with Hölgi and the lineage of the earls of Hålogaland as discussed in *Háleyjatal*.

<sup>305</sup> E. A. Kock, *Den Norsk-Islandska Skaldediktningen* (Lund: 1946-9), I, 145.

<sup>306</sup> N. F. Blake, ed. and trans., *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* (London: 1962), pp. 36-38.

<sup>307</sup> ‘It looks as though the battle is beginning to go against us, and it’s turning out as I thought when I feared it would be a hopeless task to fight with these men. It’s pointless to carry on with this unless we adopt some shrewder course.’ (trans. Blake, 1962).

<sup>308</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, (1956) s.v.

In *Njáls saga* (c. 1290?) we are told that a temple existed for Þorgerðr in which were the idols not only of her but of her sister Irpa and the god Þórr. Each was adorned with a gold arm-ring and were dressed in fine clothes.<sup>309</sup>

In *Ketils saga hængs* (c. 1400)<sup>310</sup> Þorgerðr Hörgatröll is mentioned clearly in a comic context of trolls. There is no evidence here to support any godlike attributes, and the fact that this is such a late source, which is actually set in Iceland rather than Norway, seems to show the end result of a gradual development from goddess to troll.

Þorgerðr Hörðabrúðr appears in *Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*<sup>311</sup> and here she is portrayed more fully as a goddess. In ch. 114<sup>312</sup> there is a description of her temple which is referred to as having glass windows; this seems to be an indication of Christian influence, given that elsewhere her sanctuary is out-of-doors. She gives a gold arm-ring to Sigmundur (or perhaps he takes it from the idol), lending credence to her recognition as a local deity. Chapters 154-5 are very similar to the account in *Jómsvíkinga saga* chs. 32-34; the most notable difference is the name *Hölgabrúðr* as opposed to *Hörðabrúðr* in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*. In ch. 173<sup>313</sup> the words *tröllskapr* 'malicious magic' and *fitonsandi* 'sorcery' are used to define the way in which she and her sister Irpa assist Þorleifr, but these do not imply any connection to trolls. In ch. 326 reference is made to the apparent marriage between Hákon and the goddess Þorgerðr, again dressed in fine clothes; this relates back to her marriage with Hölgir the eponymous ancestor of the earls of Hlaðir. This might be echoed in the pattern of the marriage between Freyr and Gerðr, since the same passage states that the idol of Freyr was also stood in the same temple and was destroyed at the same time.

The legend of Earl Hákon and his sacrifices to Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr and her sister Irpa sheds more light on the relationship between ruler and this peculiar deity. It may be

<sup>309</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga* ch. 88: Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Íslenzk fornrit* (1954) XII, pp. 214-5.

<sup>310</sup> *Ketils saga hængs* Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, edd., *Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, I, p. IX.

<sup>311</sup> *Flateyjarbók, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, chs. 114, 154-5, 173, 326, Sigurðr Nordal and others, edd., 1944-5, I, pp. 157, 210-211, 235, 452-4.

<sup>312</sup> This is also regarded as ch. 23 of *Færeyinga saga*, Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., (1967), pp. 43-45.

possible to draw a connection between the female deity, married to the male ruler, and the sacrifice of the male ruler's offspring. The suitability of this form of the name, *Hölgabrúðr*, may be explained in the wider context, that is if one sees the apparent conflict of interests in *Hölgabrúðr* bride of Hölgi (the founder of the dynasty) demanding the sacrifice of Erlingr (its last pagan generation).

### 5.8 STEINSLAND'S VIEWS CONCERNING GIANTS AS RECIPIENTS OF CULTS

Gro Steinsland once questioned whether the giants were ever recipients of cults in the Viking Age.<sup>314</sup> Her premise rests on a study of Norwegian place-names conducted by Hjalmar Lindroth in 1930.<sup>315</sup> This study brought to light a number of names which may have included *skeðju* (fem. gen. of *skeðja*: feminine form corresponding to the apparently grammatically masculine name *Skaði*). The feminine form of these names is linked to well-known place name elements possibly referring to cult-places such as *vé*, *hof* and *lundr*. According to Lindroth the toponyms seem to belong to old agrarian areas,<sup>316</sup> and he concludes that *Skaði* may have been a goddess at one time. This conclusion is highly speculative but it does raise an important possibility that *Skaði* may have originated as a localised deity that became absorbed into the greater pantheon of gods. Lotte Motz pursues the possibility that the giants represent older gods of the Nordic inhabitants,<sup>317</sup> though this cannot be sufficiently proven. It is difficult to imagine worshipping a goddess named 'scathe', unless the name is of such great age that it survives as a corrupted form of a different word.<sup>318</sup> Nevertheless there has been substantial disagreement concerning the origin and meaning of the *Skaði* place-names, therefore the position will be taken here that the matter is uncertain.

<sup>313</sup> Also regarded as *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds*, ch. 7, Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., *Íslensk fornrit*, (1956) IX, pp. 225-227.

<sup>314</sup> G. Steinsland, 'Giants as Recipients of Cult in the Viking Age?', G. Steinsland, ed., *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue between Archaeology and History of Religion* (Oslo: 1986), pp. 213-222.

<sup>315</sup> H. Lindroth, 'Skee-Skødve-Skedevei', in *Göteborgs Universitets årskrift* 36 (Göteborg: 1930), pp. 38-49.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>317</sup> L. Motz, 'Gods and Demons of the Wilderness', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 99, 1984, pp. 175-87.

<sup>318</sup> *DNM*, s.v.; *AEW*, s.v.

On the basis of a refrain from *Völsa þáttr* 'penis-story', Steinsland questions whether the giants were recipients of cults: *þiggi mörnir þetta blæti* 'accept, mörnir, this offering'. She argues that *mörnir* is to be interpreted as 'giantesses':

'The interpretation of mörnir has caused a great deal of trouble. Linguistically there are two possibilities of interpretation:

- (1) *mörn*, masc. sing., meaning 'sword', testified among sword-*heiti* in *Sn.E.*
- (2) *mörnir*, fem. pl., meaning 'giantesses'. This meaning is best exemplified in the sources: *Sn.E. Þulur*; *Haustlög* 6; *Þórsdrápa*; *Sturl.saga* I, 280.

Most of the scholars who have been occupied with *Vþ*, consider that linguistically the plural form is to be preferred. Still, this form has been rejected. This is the case with Andreas Heusler, who analysed the story in 1903; with M. Olsen in 1909, and their followers. What is the reason for their choice of interpretation? The answer is: the dogma that giants were never the object of any form of [sic] cultic ritual.<sup>319</sup>

There are a few inconsistencies within this argument, at least in its published form. *Mörn* is listed in the *Þulur* under (*Sn.E. Sk. IV c, 3. Tröllkvenna heiti*) as the name of a single giantess.<sup>320</sup> *Mörn* seems to be feminine, not masculine as is apparently the word *mörnir*,<sup>321</sup> which, incidentally, appears listed in the *Þulur* (*Sn.E. Sk. IV l, 8. Sverða heiti*) as the name of a sword. Steinsland continues: 'Most scholars accept the former possibility: *mörnir* = masc. sing. meaning *sword*... Nevertheless the fact remains that *mörn* is a term meaning 'giantess'.<sup>322</sup>

According to Turville-Petre the plural form *mörnir* is possible, and comparable to an ancient Indian rite,<sup>323</sup> but he feels it is unlikely philologically, 'A fem. pl., whether of the *o*, *i*, or *u*-stem, in the form *mörnir* would be exceptional, although forms such as *marnar*, *marnir*, even *mernir* might well be possible.' The form *marnar* appears in printed editions of at least one skaldic poem *marnar faðir* (*Haustl. 12, Skj. I B 16*), apparently referring to Skaði, but this is unlikely to be the same word since the form *marnar* has

<sup>319</sup> G. Steinsland (1986), p. 216.

<sup>320</sup> *Mörn* may be associated with the sea as the name appears in a kenning *Marnar mór* possibly referring to the sea or a ship. See Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-islandske skaldedigting* (København: 1912-16), BI 1 66 (Niddigt om kong Harald blátand).

<sup>321</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 444. under entry *mörnir*. s.v.

<sup>322</sup> G. Steinsland (1986), p. 216.

<sup>323</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964), p. 257.

been produced by editorial emendation from manuscript *mornar*. One must also consider that the offering is the severed penis of a horse. The image of the horse-phallus being offered to and possibly even passed around between a number of giantess-deities is as amusing (if low-brow) as the bulk of *Völsa þáttur*. According to Turville-Petre, 'mörnir' is recorded as a name for a "sword", and it is most probably related to the verb *merja* "to crush" (cf. *bauta* "to hit, strike"), which also appears in verses of the "Story of Völsi" with the meaning "phallus".<sup>324</sup> On this basis the horse-phallus might be an offering to *mörnir* (= penis) as a part of a fertility ritual, and may not involve giantesses at all.

### 5.9 A SUMMARY OF THE TRANSITION FROM GIANTESS TO GODDESS

Gerðr and Skaði are associated with the gods in the source material. They are or were of giant kin, and have their roots in Jötunheimar, and in the case of Skaði this connection is kept alive. It may be the case, as the place-name evidence seems to show, though it does not conclusively prove, that Gerðr and Skaði were once localized deities. If this were the case it seems a possibility that, as they gradually became incorporated into a wider pre-existing pantheon of gods, these myths developed explaining their addition or popularity. The fact that Gerðr and Skaði are said to come from another world, Jötunheimar, seems to suggest that they are 'new' insofar as they are new to the pantheon. Their addition to the Æsir through marriage can possibly be compared to the addition of Njörðr, one of the Vanir, as a hostage. As speculative as this is, Snorri tells us in *Sn.E. Gylf.* 23<sup>325</sup> that Hœnir and Njörðr were traded as hostages after the war between the Æsir and Vanir. Insofar as the transition from giantess to goddess is concerned, the marriages of Gerðr and Skaði to gods seem to be a key element of their change of status.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>325</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* 23 (ed. Faulkes, p. 23), and *Ynglinga saga* ch. 4 in, Bjarni Aðalbjardarson, ed., *Heimskringla* I, Íslenzk fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík: 1941), p. 12.

*Hrymr ekr austan,  
 hefiz lind fyrir;  
 snýz iörmungandr  
 í iötunmóði;  
 ormr knýr unnir,  
 en ari hlakkar,  
 slitr náí neffölr;<sup>326</sup>  
 Naglfar losnar.<sup>326</sup>  
 (Vsp. 50)*

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 THE LITERARY MATERIAL

The bulk of our knowledge and understanding of Norse mythology is derived from only a few Icelandic literary sources whose manuscripts date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, between 250-300 years after the conversion of Iceland. Both *Snorra Edda* and the Elder Edda share information, and it is sometimes difficult to know if these sources borrow from each other, or if they both draw on earlier sources. If so, one cannot always know for certain if they draw on the same earlier sources. This must be borne in mind when anomalies arise such as the question of 'who owns the glove? Skrymir or Fjalarr' (see subchapter 4.5) in which Snorri can be seen picking and choosing details which suit his purpose.

Poems such as *Vm.*, *Grm.*, *Hrbl.*, *Hym.*, *Vsp.*, *Bdr.*, and *Alv.* employ a framework involving at least one god, and an opponent which can be a giant, dwarf, sibyl, or Óðinn, and at least one of the characters involved has or has had access to the dead. It appears that the purpose of these frameworks is to relay mythological information on the one hand, and express the characteristics of the god on the other. We learn much about the giants discussed within the wisdom-game in *Vm.*, but Vafþrúðnir himself may be a sort of stock figure. The dwarf Alviss 'all-wise' and Vafþrúðnir 'inn alsvinni iötunn'<sup>327</sup> are made out to be worthy opponents in the wisdom game, but their characters are not necessarily central to the myths. Óðinn's characteristics are exemplified by and within

<sup>326</sup> *Vsp.* 50: Hrymr drives from the east, raises his shield in front of him, the world serpent stirs in giant-rage, the serpent presses down on the waves, but the eagle screams, pale-beaked tears corpses; Naglfar is loosened.

<sup>327</sup> *Vm.* 1: The all-wise giant.

the wisdom games, and the fact that he initiates them is in line with his proclivity for provoking conflict. Snorri employs this literary structure in *Gylfaginning* and the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, and his choice of this structure to present the mythology must be deliberate. This would suggest that the convention was old and associated with Eddaic poetry, and that Snorri is following earlier models, as in the case of *Háttatal* which is modelled on the *Háttalykill* of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali and Hallr Þórarinsson. In the case of *Gylfaginning* he not merely reproduces but plays with this older convention. For example the god always wins the wisdom contest, whereas in *Gylfaginning* the god does not lose but neither does he win. He reaches the limits of his knowledge because he has no knowledge of further truth (reaching the end of pagan wisdom), and then Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði vanish with a thunderclap along with the hall and fortress, leaving Gylfi alone in an open field. *Gangleri* (Gylfi's pseudonym) is listed as an Óðinn-name in *Sn.E. Gylf. 20*.<sup>328</sup> The title *Gylfaginning* means simply 'Gylfi's tricking', but Snorri leaves us wondering who is tricking who, or, perhaps, whether Snorri is tricking us as well?

Essentially each myth must be examined and understood as fully as possible in its own right before drawing parallels. This can only aid the value and accuracy of the parallel once drawn. Undoubtedly a great number of Norse myths have Indo-European origins or parallels, and the difficulty of the task may not be spotting the similarities but rather in sorting out the Indo-European from the Norse. To say that Ymir was a hermaphrodite<sup>329</sup> may be accurate in that parallels from Iran suggest that an original figure from which both Norse and Iranian myth are derived may have been a hermaphrodite. Yet this may not mean that, by the time our sources were composed, Ymir was still strictly seen as a hermaphrodite in terms of gender. Concerning the clear and certain parallels between the myth of Óðinn's theft of the mead, and Indra and the soma, the one myth cannot easily be used to explain what we find in the other, as there are too many variables in the development of both myths. What such parallels seem to tell us is the age and durability of such myths. Furthermore myths such as Óðinn's theft of the mead and the myth of Þórr's fishing expedition seem to be comprised of various sub-myths, indicating the age

<sup>328</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf. ch.20* (ed. Faulkes, p. 21), quoting from *Grm.* 46.

<sup>329</sup> See subchapter 2.7.

of the material and also its complexity. If more than one version of a narrative such as that in *Hymiskviða* occur, how does one determine which is 'accurate', if a myth can actually be considered so? It may be that myths were constantly developing in different areas across the Norse world, just as the variations in the picture-stones seem to suggest about Þórr's fishing trip. This need not be applied strictly to geographical or temporal variations, but variation may also occur between different cults or strata of society, and thus there are numerous dimensions in which variation can take place. We must conclude that there cannot be a single 'correct' version of a myth.

## 6.2 ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES

Caution must be exercised when applying iconographic evidence to the myths, and one must be equally cautious when applying mythological evidence to archaeological finds. Some of the picture stones bear completely ambiguous scenes, and sometimes myths can be read into them. In this way Sørensen reads the myth of Þórr's fishing trip into the Ardre stone.<sup>330</sup> In subchapter 4.1, I have presented an equally plausible explanation for exactly the same features on the stone. We cannot now know whether the carvers meant to depict two distinct myths using the same image, but it seems almost certain that they sometimes intended to depict one myth but also to include in it a symbolic allusion to another. The Gosforth cross, however, seems to have the potential to depict both pagan Norse and Christian scenes with the same images.<sup>331</sup>

## 6.3 FUNCTIONS OF THE GIANTS

In the Eddaic myths the giants seem to play the part of worthy opponents to the gods. It is unclear if or when they came to be *illir* as Snorri describes them. Perceptions seem to have changed during the development of the myths, as must be expected, and the parts the giants play can often be highly ambiguous. We know that giantesses can cross the divide into the families of the gods, but we must raise questions such as the extent to which these giantesses were once goddesses. Otherwise the giants and giantesses often

<sup>330</sup> See subchapter 4.1.

<sup>331</sup> For a discussion of the Christian and pagan interpretations of the Gosforth Cross, see R. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London: 1980), p. 125 ff.



act as opponents, be it a wise giant against Óðinn or a strong giant against Þórr. The cosmological giant Ymir seems to partake in this opposition, if not by actively confronting a god, then by producing the race of giants, but this is complicated by the fact that Óðinn himself is at least half-giant in descent. It is possible the giants were believed to have been not only the opposites of the gods but also of mankind, thus acting as a constant threat to human safety, and that people required a god such as mighty Þórr to protect them. Interpretations and explanations have been put forward, some attractive and some less so, and in most cases they have either been discounted or accepted, at least for a while. So it is with Norse mythology that we have multiple sources of potential evidence, yet rarely is it enough to prove a single point conclusively.

**APPENDIX A: Giant Names with Possible Relevance to Ymir's Characteristics and Role in Norse Cosmogony**

| EARTH / ROCK / BONE                                   | WATER / FROST                                     | YELLING / NOISE                                     | MALEVOLENCE / OPPOSITION                            |
|---|---|---|---|
| <i>Aurgelmir</i> 'muddy-yeller' <sup>332</sup>        | <i>Brimir</i> 'sea' <sup>333</sup>                | <i>Beli</i> 'bellow' <sup>334</sup>                 | <i>Alsvartr</i> 'all-black' <sup>335</sup>          |
| <i>Aurgrímnir</i> 'mud-masked' <sup>336</sup>         | <i>Hrímgrímnir</i> 'frost-masked' <sup>337</sup>  | <i>Bergelmir</i> 'naked-yeller' <sup>338</sup>      | <i>Andaðr</i> 'fearsome, terrible'?? <sup>339</sup> |
| <i>Aurnir</i> 'muddy' <sup>340</sup>                  | <i>Hrímnir</i> 'frost-maker' <sup>341</sup>       | <i>Galarr</i> 'yeller' 'crower' <sup>342</sup>      | <i>Ann</i> 'black, loathsome' <sup>343</sup>        |
| <i>Aurrekr</i> 'mud-driver' <sup>344</sup>            | <i>Hvalr</i> 'whale' <sup>345</sup>               | <i>Gillingr</i> 'bellower' <sup>346</sup>           | <i>Brandingi</i> 'Burner' <sup>347</sup>            |
| <i>Bergbúi</i> 'Mountain Dweller' <sup>348</sup>      | <i>Kaldgrani</i> 'cold-moustached' <sup>349</sup> | <i>Glaumarr</i> 'noisy one' <sup>350</sup>          | <i>Bölþorn</i> 'Bale-thorn' <sup>351</sup>          |
| <i>Bergdanir</i> 'Mountain Danes' <sup>352</sup>      | <i>Vagnhöfði</i> 'head of a whale' <sup>353</sup> | <i>Glaumr</i> 'noisy with merriment' <sup>354</sup> | <i>Eldr</i> 'fire' <sup>355</sup>                   |
| <i>Bergmærir</i> 'Mountain Norwegians' <sup>356</sup> | <i>Vasaðr</i> 'wetness, sleety' <sup>357</sup>    | <i>Gyllir</i> 'yeller' <sup>358</sup>               | <i>Geirröðr</i> 'spear-reddener' <sup>359</sup>     |
| <i>Bergsalr</i> 'Mountain Hall' <sup>360</sup>        | <i>Vindsvatr</i> 'cool-wind' <sup>361</sup>       | <i>Gullnir</i> 'shrieker' <sup>362</sup>            | <i>Hafli</i> 'greedy' <sup>363</sup>                |

<sup>332</sup> *Aur*- 'muddy, dirty'; *gjalla* 'to yell'; *Vm.* 29.

<sup>333</sup> *Vsp.* 9.

<sup>334</sup> *Belja* 'to bellow'; *Sn.E Sk.* (ed. Faulkes I, p. 18); *Vsp.* 53 (kenning); *Pul.* II 1; *Hál.* 5; *Haustl.* 18.

<sup>335</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 4.

<sup>336</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 2.

<sup>337</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 2; *Skm.* 35.

<sup>338</sup> *Berr* 'naked'; *gjalla* 'to yell'; *Pul.* IV b, 6; *Vm.* 29 & 35.

<sup>339</sup> *And*- a prefixed prep. 'against, and metaph. hostile, adverse'. *Lex.Poet.* 662 and *Simek* 251 connect it with *öndóttir* 'fearsome, terrible'.

<sup>340</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 4; *Bergb.* 9. 12; *Örv.* XI, *Sturl.* 4.

<sup>341</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 1; *Skm.* 28.

<sup>342</sup> *Gala* 'to crow' or more likely *gjalla* 'to yell'; *Pul.* IV b, 3.

<sup>343</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 4; *Ófs.* 5.

<sup>344</sup> *Aurr* 'mud, clay, humus'; *reka* 'to drive'; *Korm.* 60.

<sup>345</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 2.

<sup>346</sup> *Hál.* 1.

<sup>347</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 6, (see *Simek*, 1993 p. 44).

<sup>348</sup> *Hym.* 2.

<sup>349</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 2.

<sup>350</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 1.

<sup>351</sup> *Sn.E. Gylf.* (ed. Faulkes, p. 11); *Háv.* 140.

<sup>352</sup> *Hym.* 17; *Haustl.* 18. (kenning)

<sup>353</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 1.

<sup>354</sup> *Þdr.* 19.

<sup>355</sup> *Pul.* IV, b 5.

<sup>356</sup> *Hofgarða-Refr skáld* 3, 1.

<sup>357</sup> *Vasaðr* 'wetness, sleety'; *Sn.E. Gylf.* (ed. Faulkes, p. 21).

<sup>358</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 1.

<sup>359</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 3; *Sn.E. Gylf.* (ed. Faulkes, p. 21).

<sup>360</sup> *Nið* on *Haraldr Blue-Tooth*.

<sup>361</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 5.

<sup>362</sup> *Göll* 'a shriek'. *V.S.* 103 l. 12.

<sup>363</sup> \**Hafall* – *Lex.Poet.* s.v; *Pul.* IV b, 1. *Simek* 128.

| <i>Bergstjóri</i> 'rock/mountain ruler' <sup>364</sup>     | <i>Ægir</i> 'sea' <sup>365</sup> | <i>Hlói</i> 'roarer' <sup>366</sup>                | <i>Hati</i> 'hater' <sup>367</sup>                  |
|--|----------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Bergþórr</i> 'mountain-Þórr / thunderer' <sup>368</sup> |                                  | <i>Þriðgelmir</i> 'powerful-yeller' <sup>369</sup> | <i>Helreginn</i> 'hell-powers' <sup>370</sup>       |
| <i>Hamarsbúi</i> 'crag-dweller' <sup>371</sup>             |                                  | <i>Þrymr</i> 'noise of battle' <sup>372</sup>      | <i>Hræsvelgr</i> 'carrion-swallower' <sup>373</sup> |
| <i>Járnhaus</i> 'iron-skull' <sup>374</sup>                |                                  | <i>Öskruðr</i> 'bellow' <sup>375</sup>             | <i>Ímr</i> 'dirty/sooty' <sup>376</sup>             |
| <i>Járnefr</i> 'iron-nose' <sup>377</sup>                  |                                  |  | <i>Leiði</i> 'loathsome' <sup>378</sup>             |
| <i>Járnskjöldr</i> 'iron-shield' <sup>379</sup>            |                                  |  | <i>Skrati</i> 'monster' <sup>380</sup>              |
| <i>Rangbeinn</i> 'crooked bone' <sup>381</sup>             |                                  |  | <i>Surtr</i> 'black' <sup>382</sup>                 |
| <i>Sækarlmúli</i> 'Seaman's Mull' <sup>383</sup>           |                                  |  | <i>Svartr</i> 'black' <sup>384</sup>                |
|  |                                  |  | <i>Ösgrúi</i> 'ash pit, ash heap' <sup>385</sup>    |

<sup>364</sup> *Giz* 2, 2.

<sup>365</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 5; *Hym.* 1; *Ls.* 3.

<sup>366</sup> *Hlóa* 'to bellow, roar'; *Pul.* IV f, 2.

<sup>367</sup> *HHj.* 17, 24.

<sup>368</sup> *Skraut-Oddr* 2

<sup>369</sup> *Vm.* 29; *Pul.* IV b, 2.

<sup>370</sup> *Pul.* IV f, 2.

<sup>371</sup> *Grettis.* 41 (in a verse).

<sup>372</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 2; A central figure in *Þrymskviða*.

<sup>373</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 2.

<sup>374</sup> *HBr.* ch. 6, p. 334.

<sup>375</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 4.

<sup>376</sup> *Pul.* IV 1; *Gd.* 22. The weak form *Ími* is found in a runic charm from Bergen (Liestøl, 1963, pp. 38-40), in a set formula *imistein hætti* (probably 'let a stone be called *Ími*', cf. a comparable formula on the Ribe healing stick: *suart hetær sten* 'there is a stone called Black' See Erik Moltke, *Runes and their Origin.*

*Denmark and Elsewhere*, (Copenhagen: 1985), p. 493.

<sup>377</sup> *HBr.* ch. 4, p. 331.

<sup>378</sup> *Þdis.* 1, 2.

<sup>379</sup> *Ffb.* I. 285, 286, 312.

<sup>380</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 3.

<sup>381</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 5.

<sup>382</sup> *Vsp.* 53; *Vm.* 17, 18; *Fáfn.* 14; *Vsp.* 47; *Fj.* 24.

<sup>383</sup> *Múli* 'a jutting crag, peak' [Scots *Mull*]; *Pul.* IV b, 4.

<sup>384</sup> *Pul.* IV b, 4.

<sup>385</sup> Etymology uncertain: possibly *assa* 'an eagle' / *grúi* 'swarm, crowd', or possibly, *asi* 'hurry' / *Grúi* 'crowd' – (a stamped?); *Pul.* IV b, 4.

**APPENDIX B: Giantess and Troll-Wife Names with Relevance to Ymir's Characteristics and Role in Norse Cosmogony.**

| EARTH / ROCK / BONE                                 | WATER / FROST                                 | YELLING / NOISE                                      | MALEVOLENCE / OPPOSITION                            |
|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Aurboða</i> 'mud-bidder' <sup>386</sup>          | <i>Dröfn</i> 'wave' <sup>387</sup>            | <i>Gjálp</i> 'yelp' <sup>388</sup>                   | <i>Angrboða</i> 'grief-bidder' <sup>389</sup>       |
| <i>Hamra víf</i> 'Crag-wife' <sup>390</sup>         | <i>Dúfa</i> 'wave' ? <sup>391</sup>           | <i>Glumra</i> 'rattle' <sup>392</sup>                | <i>Áma</i> 'black' <sup>393</sup>                   |
| <i>Grottintanna</i> 'rotten-toothed' <sup>394</sup> | <i>Fenja</i> 'fenny, swampy' <sup>395</sup>   | <i>Gnissa</i> 'the one who cries out' <sup>396</sup> | <i>Amgerðr</i> 'black-Gerðr' <sup>397</sup>         |
| <i>Járnglumra</i> 'iron-rattling' <sup>398</sup>    | <i>Hrimgerðr</i> 'frost-Gerðr' <sup>399</sup> | <i>Hljóð</i> 'noise' ? <sup>400</sup>                | <i>Blóðughadda</i> 'bloody-hair' <sup>401</sup>     |
| <i>Járnsaxa</i> 'iron-sworded one' <sup>402</sup>   | <i>Kolga</i> 'cold wave' <sup>403</sup>       | <i>Járnglumra</i> 'iron-rattling' <sup>404</sup>     | <i>Bakrauf</i> 'arsehole' <sup>405</sup>            |
| <i>Járnviðja</i> 'iron-hag' <sup>406</sup>          | <i>Margerðr</i> 'sea Gerðr' <sup>407</sup>    | <i>Skríkja</i> 'shrieker' <sup>408</sup>             | <i>Búseyra</i> 'one who ruins farms' <sup>409</sup> |
| <i>Jörð</i> 'earth' <sup>410</sup>                  |   |  | <i>Gryla</i> 'bugbear' <sup>411</sup>               |
| <i>Leirvör</i> 'muddy-lips' <sup>412</sup>          |   |  | <i>Guma</i> 'great fusser' <sup>413</sup>           |

<sup>386</sup> *Hyndl.* 30; *Fj.* 38.

<sup>387</sup> *Pul.* III, 4 & IV a, 4; *Ormr.* 1, 5; *Katr.* 40; *Egils.* 1, 9; *Korm. Lv.* 40. (She is one of the daughters of Ægir.)

<sup>388</sup> *Hyndl.* 37, where she is one of Heimdallr's nine mothers; *Sn.E. Sk.* ch. 18, (ed. Faulkes I, p. 25), where she is one of the two daughters of Geirröðr who try to destroy Þórr and have their backs broken by him; and perhaps *Vetrl.*; *Pul.* IV c 2; *Hfl.* 12; *ÞKolb.* (Þorm) 3, 14; *Grettis* 3.

<sup>389</sup> *Hyndl.* 40; *Sn.E. Gylf.* (ed. Faulkes p. 27).

<sup>390</sup> *Ísldr.* 2.

<sup>391</sup> One of the daughters of Rán and Ægir who were associated with waves; *Pul.* IV xx 4, 7.

<sup>392</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 1.

<sup>393</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4; *Egils.* 3, 15.

<sup>394</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 1.

<sup>395</sup> *Grott.* 1; *Þorm.* 2, 24; *ESk.* 11, 6.

<sup>396</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 1.

<sup>397</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3; *Egils.* 3, 10.

<sup>398</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4.

<sup>399</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3; *HHj* 17, 20, 21, 24, 27, 29, 30.

<sup>400</sup> *VS.* ch. 2, p. 3.

<sup>401</sup> One of the daughters of Ægir who were associated with waves; *Pul.* u, 4; *ESk* 12, 17.

<sup>402</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3; *Hyndl.* 37.

<sup>403</sup> *Þdr.* 12.

<sup>404</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4.

<sup>405</sup> Motz suggests that this might reflect a learned Latin pun whereby Latin *amus* also means 'ugly witch'. L. Motz, 'Giantesses and their Names', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981), p. 506. If one accepts Motz's argument, this would suggest a post-conversion invention. The likelihood of a Latin pun seems to be a stretch of the imagination given no Latin influences can be traced in any other giantess name. All that may be implied in the name *Bakrauf* is probably a sense of unpleasantness. *Pul.* IV c 1; cf. Simek 26 'backside', *Lex.Poet.* 33 'with a cleft back, or an unusually big arse.'

<sup>406</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4; *Hál.* 3; *Sn.E. Gylf.* (ed. Faulkes p. 14).

<sup>407</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4; *Hjálmp.* III 11.

<sup>408</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3.

<sup>409</sup> *Þdis* 2; *Lex.Poet.* 71 (cf. *Herkja*). It may also be translated as 'the one with big ears', see *AEW* p. 66 and R. Simek (1993), p. 50.

<sup>410</sup> *Pul.* IV h, 1; *Haustl.* 14; *Ölv.* 1; *Þrm* 1; *Ls.* 58; *Þdr.* 15.

<sup>411</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 1. See Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, (Cambridge: 1995) p. 160-178.

<sup>412</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 5; *Egils.* 3, 11.

<sup>413</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 1.

|  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  |  |  | <i>Herkja</i> 'dearth' <sup>414</sup>       |
|  |  |  | <i>Járnsaxa</i> 'iron-sword' <sup>415</sup> |
|  |  |  | <i>Myrkriða</i> 'dark-rider' <sup>416</sup> |
|  |  |  | <i>Skaði</i> 'scathe' <sup>417</sup>        |

<sup>414</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3; *Anon.* (XII) C 36; *Harð.* 7.

<sup>415</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 3; *Hyndl.* 37.

<sup>416</sup> *Pul.* IV c, 4; *Hrbl.* 20.

<sup>417</sup> *Grm.* 11; *Hyndl.* 30; *Hál.* 3; *Pul.* IV h, 1.

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