

Significant Actions, Significant Time: The Nature of Man and the Cosmos
as Revealed in Germanic Myth and Ritual

by
Mark Alan Singer

ENGL 300: Heroic Myth and Legend

Dr. Frank Juszczuk

25 November 2002

Myth is the means by which man establishes his place in the world. As Mircea Eliade states in his study of the nature and significance of myth, myths not only tell how the world and its creatures were made but also relate “the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today” (ii). A culture’s myths of the origin and organization of the universe and its components (including man) state the context in which the members of that culture act and give their actions meaning. For example, the second Biblical myth of creation given in Genesis 2:7 through 3:24 not only establishes that man and woman were created by the Hebrew god from raw matter but also shows how these original creations changed through their defiance of the instructions of their creator. In this myth man is revealed as a creature who possesses both self-will and, as the result of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, self-awareness, and those attributes are shown to be the cause of man’s loss of paradise, of direct contact with the Hebrew god, and of immortality. The Biblical creation myth not only states the fact of human existence but also recounts the events that led to what is significant in the nature of man and in the relationship of man with the Hebrew god and cosmos.

The pre-Christian Germanic myth of the creation of man also recount those cultures’s “events of consequence” and relate the context in which members of those cultures acted. An analysis of this myth, however, shows a very different view of the creation and nature of man. Even more than that, this examination reveals that Germanic cultures assigned significance to man and his actions based on a cosmic model of the interrelationships among actions and actors, and that this model underlies significant religious actions within those cultures.

There are two versions of the Germanic myth of the creation of man in Norse literature. The first is in stanzas 17 and 18 of the poem *Völuspá*, which is part of the collection now known as the Elder or Poetic Edda.¹ The second was recorded by Snorri Sturluson in his thirteenth century textbook of vernacular Icelandic poetics, also called Edda. Snorri’s account of this myth appears in the “*Gylfaginning*” section of his Edda, a section that presents a number of the myths appearing in the Poetic Edda and other sources. There are both minor and significant differences between these accounts, so the first task in examining this myth to determine which account provides the clearest picture of Germanic belief.

In both accounts of this myth Óðinn and two other gods create the first man and woman by

giving specific gifts to existing natural objects they find along the coast or shore. In *Völuspá* stanzas 17 the objects are not described but are named as Ask and Emblu (the later name is also given as Emblo or Embla depending on the transcription). Ask is usually translated as “Ash,” and Emblu as either “Elm” or “Ash” according to Cleasby et al. (def. “Embla”), so these natural objects are living trees, logs, or driftwood. In “*Gylfaginning*” Snorri states that the gods found “two logs” on the shore, and that the man and woman created from those logs were named Ask and Embla (Edda 13). Both accounts agree that these primal beings were a part of nature that lacked the essential components of humanity, and that the three gods gave them what was needed to be man and woman.

Beyond this point, the two accounts diverge. Snorri says that the gods who gave these essential gifts to man are “Bor’s sons,” identified earlier in “*Gylfaginning*” as Odin (Óðinn in *Völuspá*), Vili, and Vé (Edda 11). However, *Völuspá* in stanza 18 identifies the three gods as Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr. Both the *Codex Regius*, which is the main source for *Völuspá*, and Snorri’s Edda were written more than two centuries after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in 1000 C.E., so both reflect a remembered rather than a living mythic tradition. This divergence in what should be the central question of who created man makes it necessary to examine the probable sources for both accounts and to determine which more accurately reflects pre-Christian Germanic thought.

Snorri clearly had among the sources he used when writing “*Gylfaginning*” a variant of *Völuspá*, as he quotes by name from that poem. However, while his description in “*Gylfaginning*” of the state of the universe before the slaying of Ymir and his account of the creation and the naming of the dwarfs directly quotes *Völuspá* stanzas 3 through 16 as they now stand in the *Codex Regius*, he does not quote from stanzas 17 and 18 which recount the myth of the creation of man. This gap may reflect the sources that Snorri used when composing his Edda. The first 27 stanzas of *Völuspá* are older than the rest of the poem; Lee Hollander states in his translation of the Poetic Edda that these initial stanzas were assembled from “snatches and patches” of older verse and added to a later poem recounting the history of the Germanic gods from the war with the Vanir through the final battle of Ragnarok (Poetic 1 - 2). Hollander also says that the *Codex Regius* was most likely compiled from at least two earlier manuscripts (Poetic xiv). It may be that

the manuscript of *Völuspá* that Snorri used when composing the Edda c. 1220 did not contain stanzas 17 and 18, and that these stanzas were added from another manuscript of *Völuspá* when the Codex Regius was compiled c. 1275 (dates from Edda ix).

However, Snorri's account of the myth is too close the one given in *Völuspá* for him to have never seen these stanzas. His telling of this myth is set in the same location, identifies the first man and woman using the same names, and even states that the gods gave much the same gifts as those recorded in *Völuspá*. Given those consistencies, a direct substitution by Snorri of the names Vili and Vé for Hœnir and Lóðurr is more likely. The sons of Bor who made Midgarth (Middle Earth, the realm of man) are mentioned but not named in stanza 4 of *Völuspá*. Vili and Vé, who Snorri identifies as the sons of Bor and the brothers of Odin, do appear in the Poetic Edda but only in the later poem *Lokasenna*. According to Hollander, *Lokasenna* is a strictly literary creation of a later date than these initial stanzas of *Völuspá*, and was most likely composed in Norway (Poetic 90). Given both Snorri's consistency with and direct quotation from other parts of *Völuspá* and the unlikely inconsistency of two Icelandic text sources giving different god names in a myth as central as that of the creation of man, it is probable that Snorri identified the "sons of Bor" in *Völuspá* stanza 4 as Odin, Vili, and Vé based on *Lokasenna* and "corrected" the original names given in stanza 18 to match this identification.² The triad of Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr can more closely be related to the significance of this myth, so the Poetic Edda account of the creation of man is more likely the best source for determining the meaning of this myth.

Snorri's more prosaic account also omits a key element of the creation of the first man and woman, which is their initial state of being. *Völuspá* first describes the state in which the gods found Ask and Emblu as *örlöglausa*. The compound word (*örlög+lausa*) is translated by Hollander and others as "unfated" (Poetic 3), and the Germanic concept of *örlög* is typically identified with ordained fate or predestination. However, Paul Bauschatz in his *The Well and the Tree* provides a picture of *örlög* that makes clear its importance not only in this myth but also throughout the Germanic world view. Examining this in the context of stanza 20 of *Völuspá*, which says of the Norns that they tended the well of Urth and the world tree Yggdrasil and that "of the children of men / they marked their fates [örlög]," Bauschatz states that *örlög* (in his spelling, *ørløg*) derives from the prefix *ör-* indicating "what is of yore," and the plural noun *lög*, "laws" from *lag*,

“stratum, what is laid” (6). He says that “to take the more literal reading of lóg [as ‘strata’], ørlög is ‘the most significant things laid down’, ‘the earliest things accomplished’” (7). Bauschatz argues throughout his work that ørlög is not imposed by the Norns or by any other divine force but is instead a function of the well of Urth and, along with the world tree Yggdrasil, a fundamental cosmological element of Germanic thought and myth. The world tree organizes the relationship among parts of the Germanic cosmos in space; the well and the ørlög resulting from the strata of actions “laid down” in the well organize the cosmos in time. As he states, “within the well, the interrelations among actions rather than the actions themselves are of paramount importance; here, within the realm of the well, are the motive and reasons for and the final causes of the acts that occur within the realm of the tree” (125).

Based on this understanding of ørlög, Ask and Emblu in their primal state lacked the ability to be affected by and to affect significant action in the world; they could not participate in life in a meaningful way. *Völuspá* stanza 18 describes them as lacking both the internal attributes of “soul” and “sense” and the external attributes of “being,” “bearing,” and “blooming hue” (Poetic 3). These attributes, then, must be necessary for ørlög to operate, and the gods in giving their gifts to the first man and woman must therefore have endowed them with gifts that gave them the ability to give and receive with significance.

Who then are the gods named in this myth, and what did they give? The first, Óðinn, is extensively documented throughout Germanic mythology as the god of war, of runes, and of kingship. Óðinn’s gift, önd or “breath,” is related to his name and was later used as the Christian term for “soul” (Cleasby et al. def.). However, Hilda Davidson also relates Óðinn with óðr, which she translates as “raging, furious, intoxicated” in her description of Óðinn as the god who inspires not only “the battle fury of the berserks, but [who] also obtained the mean of inspiration for the Aesir, and is associated with the ecstatic trance of the seer” (147). Cleasby et al. relate óðr to the Gothic *weit-wodei* (def.), which has as its root the Indo-European *wet-, “To blow, inspire, spiritually arouse” (American Appendix I def.). *Völuspá* states that óðr is the gift of Hœnir, the second of the three gods, so to determine the relationship between önd and óðr we need to examine the relationship between Óðinn and Hœnir.

According to Snorri’s “*Ynglina saga*” Hœnir (Hone) is one of the two Aesir who is given as a

hostage to the Vanir following the war between the two pantheons (*Heimskringla* 1). The other Aesir is Mimir (Mime), and it is in Mimir that we find the connection between Óðinn and Hœnir. Three wells are specifically named in Norse mythological literature, and Mimir is associated with the particular well to which Óðinn sacrificed an eye in order to gain wisdom. Bauschatz sees Mimir's well as the same well as that of Urth since "each of the additional wells enforces a particular aspect already inherent in Urth's Well" (22). So, with the sacrifice of his eye Óðinn gains direct knowledge of örlög from the well of Urth. Hœnir, however, receives knowledge not directly from the well but instead through Mimir; as Edgar Polomé summarizes this from the "Ynglinga Saga," "whenever [Hœnir] attends the þing as chief of the Vanir and fails to get Mimir's advice he does not take a stand but instead merely says: ... Let others decide" (Polomé 271). Hœnir's other recorded action is in *Völuspá* stanza 62 where he casts runes, a method used to determine fate or örlög. Polomé concludes that Hœnir's function is to interpret "the signs given by an outside power," and that "he is the vehicle for divine inspiration [who is] instrumental in endowing man with 'inspired mental activity' (oðr)" (272). These myths concerning Hœnir express the value in Norse culture of inspired wisdom expressed through speech and through runes, and the core of both that wisdom and that expression are the gifts of önd and óðr.

Lóðurr, the third god in the *Völuspá* triad, is not only little known (the name is not cited anywhere else in Norse literature except in kennings for Óðinn as "Lóðurr's friend" (Polomé 273)) but has also often been identified by scholars as Loki. This identification is on the face of it wrong. The gifts Lóðurr gives – lá, which Polomé translates as either "face" (284) or "hair" (285) and litu goða, "good hue/complexion" (281) – bear little relation to the strife and discord gifted by Loki in every other part of Norse literature. Loki is described as traveling with Óðinn and Hœnir in the prose opening of the Poetic Edda's *Reginismál*, but his actions there, which consist of killing the dwarf Otr and involving the gods in the curse placed on the gold he steals from Andvari (*Poetic* 216), hardly resemble the kind of action taken by Lóðurr in *Völuspá*. An attempt to determine the derivation of the name Lóðurr leads to lóð, which is "crop" or "produce [of the land]" (Cleasby et al. def.) as well as possibly to lóða, which is "heat" as in "estrus" (Cleasby et al. def.). These potential root words relate Lóðurr not to Loki but instead to a god of fertility and growth such as Freyr.⁴ Polomé makes a much more detailed examination of the probable etymology of

“Lóðurr” and concludes that Lóðurr, “the divinity responsible for these purely external features of man[,] is a god governing the physical aspect of living beings” (290). Both inspiration and the potential to act on inspiration would be useless without a physical form that can translate those forces to the outside world; there must be a mouth to speak the inspired words and a hand to carve the runes. The gifts given by Lóðurr in this myth are critical, for without them none of the other gifts of the gods could manifest through man.

In summary, the analysis of this myth in *Vóluspá* reveals that:

- The first human beings were created as man and woman from existing natural materials;
- Before they were made human, these beings had life but were not connected to *örlög* and not capable of significant action;
- Three gods gave the first man and woman gifts according to their divine natures, including raw inspiration, the mental ability to recognize that inspiration and to organize it as speech and as written language (runes), and the physical being to manifest that inspiration.

According to this myth, speech, writing, and action based on the animating spirit of inspiration are human characteristics which have as their source divine gifts, and which have as their result the tying of humanity to the action of *örlög*. This underlines the significance and power of, and the responsibility for correct human use of, these gifts. As Bauschatz states in his examination of the Germanic drinking ritual of *symbol*, the oaths (significant words) made in *symbol* combine with the ritual action of drinking so that “the speaker of the speech, his actions, and the drink become one, assuring that all now have become part of the strata laid within the well” (78). So, speech and action in religious ritual gain significance through the operation of *örlög*. Using runes to determine *örlög*, as *Hœnir* does at the end of *Vóluspá*, is another example of significant action rather than being a simple “fortune telling” rite. This is stressed in stanza 146 of *Hávamál* in the Poetic Edda when the narrator, who is assumed to be *Óðinn* himself, asks those who would use the wisdom of the runes:

Know'st how to write, know'st how to read,
 know'st how to stain, how to understand,
 know'st how to ask, know'st how to offer,
 know'st how to supplicate, know'st how to sacrifice? (Edda 37)

The word translated as “to offer” in stanza 146 is blóta, which Cleasby et al. defines as “worship” or “sacrifice” (def.). Worship combines intention, speech, and action to forge a connection to the divine based on the myths of a culture. The drinking done and the words said in the ritual of symbol are two examples of significant actions taken in Germanic worship, and the performance of sacrifice is a third. Having explored the pre-Christian Germanic myth of the creation of man, we can now examine how the significant components of that myth are reflected in the rite of sacrifice.

Blót, the noun form of blóta, is the name used in Germanic literature for the act of worshipping or sacrificing. Eric Wódening writes in his essay examining the Germanic ritual of blót that this word “appears to be related to Old English blétsian, modern English bless. In turn blétsian derives from the same root as modern English blood... Blétsian may have originally meant ‘to mark as to hallow with blood.’” Blóta, “to offer” in Hávamál is therefor to offer a blood (animal) sacrifice.⁵ The following account from Snorri’s Heimskringla describes the blót:

... all kinds of cattle, as well as horses, were slaughtered, and all the blood that came from them was called "hlaut", and the vessels in which it was collected were called hlaut-vessels. Hlaut-staves were made, like sprinkling brushes, with which the whole of the altars and the temple walls, both outside and inside, were sprinkled over, and also the people were sprinkled with the blood; but the flesh was boiled into savory meat for those present. (quot. in Oðinssen sec. e.)

Unlike animal sacrifice in many other cultures, where all or part of the meat of the animal was immolated as an offering to the gods or god, in Germanic cultures the meat was eaten and the blood was reserved to bless the worshipers and the area of worship. Craigie observes that “especially the sacrificial blood (hlaut) was considered as belonging to the gods” (quot. in Oðinssen sec. e.). Just as the physical gifts of Lóðurr serve as the vehicle for the less tangible gifts of önd and óðr, the blood collected in the blót serves as the vehicle for conveying the gifts of the gods to man.

Generosity was a personal and social virtue in Germanic societies, and gifts and the sharing of gifts underlies the practice of blót just as it underlies the act of the creation of man. Oðinssen quotes Jacob Grimm’s observation that those participating in the blót sacrifice and feast “became partakers in the holy offering, and the god is regarded as feasting with them at their meal” (sec. k.). When animal sacrifice was performed to ask for favor from a specific god, both the favor asked and the sacrifice offered were named as gifts:

In *Víga-Glúms Saga* Þorkell the Tall wanted revenge upon Glúm for driving him from his home, so he took an ox to Freyr's temple. He presented the animal to the god with the words, "Freyr, you who have long supported me and accepted many gifts and repaid them well, now I give you this ox so that Glúm may leave the land of Þverá." (Wódening)

Here the worshiper performing blót saw Freyr as returning gifts for the gifts given in sacrifice; as Hávamál states, "for ay doth a gift look for gain" (Edda 37). The myth of the creation of man shows that it is the gifts of the Aesir that made significant action such as blót possible, so it is reasonable to conclude that not only was blót performed to ask for specific gifts from the gods (such as Þorkell's asking that Freyr drive Glúm away) but also to give a gift back to the gods in exchange for their initial gifts to man. The cosmic and the specific do not exclude each other, especially in Norse cosmology. Since örlög is based on actions of the past, the action of giving sacrifice as a named gift to the gods would resonate in the well of Urth with the initial gifts given by the gods to man, increasing the significance and the resulting positive örlög of the act of sacrifice.

Þorkell's words to Freyr ("you who have... accepted many gifts and repaid them well") not only ensure that the act of sacrifice is related through örlög to previous acts but also underline that in Germanic religious through sacrifice was not done as appeasement or in atonement but rather as exchange (Wódening). Neither is the Germanic act of sacrifice the recreation of a primal sacrifice or event, as Mircea Eliade and other religious scholars unfamiliar with Germanic myth often assume such rites to be. Those scholars characterize the function of religious rites as returning the worshiper to the time of the creation so that those worshipers can "experience that time, to reenact it as often as possible, [and] to witness again the spectacle of divine works..." (Eliade 19). However, in Germanic cosmology the operation of örlög means that the past is not a lost, paradisaical time from which a profane present proceeds, but that the past is instead the significant ground on which the significant present rests. In opposition to Eliade's concept of the mythic past as the sacred primal time recaptured through religious rite, Bauschatz writes of Germanic sacred time that:

... [profane or ordinary time that] Eliade has called 'duration' and 'history' form the essence of the 'sacral' moment in Germanic thinking. The Norns speak the ørlóg and maintain the tree hvern dag, 'every day.' These paradigmatic gestures do not look back to some primal moment, to some original act that is to be reenacted or commemorated: rather, they empower and create the present! ... [the] past... is not

distant, inaccessible, or purer than the present... The past grows and becomes more powerful through duration and the flow of time. (151 - 2)

This interaction of past and present is the marker for all significant acts in Germanic thought, and the actions of the gods in creating the first human beings made it possible for humanity to participate in this interaction. So, this Germanic myth of the creation of man reveals the nature and function of man in Germanic cosmology, and further reveals the distinct Germanic view of the interrelation of action and actor in time. The consequence of the actions of the first human beings in Biblical myth was their loss of a static paradise, and as a result the cultures based on those myths view man as a failed creature whose nature led to that fall. As revealed in the Germanic myth and confirmed through ritual practice, man has not fallen from stasis but is instead created as an active partner in the cosmos whose nature demands that he consider the implications of what he does and says. His place is not in some past now lost, but is instead tied firmly into the significant web of the present world.

Notes

1. For clarity the Hollander translation of the Poetic Edda is referenced here as Poetic, and the Edda of Snorri Sturluson as Edda. The transcribed text of stanzas 17 and 18 of *Völuspá* listed in Works Cited is as follows:

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| 17. | Unz þrír kvámu
öflgir ok ástgir,
fundu á landi,
Ask ok Emblu, | ór því liði,
æsir, at húsi;
lítt megandi,
örlöglausa. |
| 18. | Önd þau né áttu,
lá né læti,
önd gaf Óðinn,
lá gaf Lóðurr, | óð þau né höfðu,
né litu góða;
óð gaf Hœnir,
óð gaf Lóðurr, |

2. Given both the Norwegian provenance of Lokasenna and Snorri's courtship of the Norwegian monarchy (Edda xii), it may be that Snorri chose to substitute the specifically Norwegian names he gleaned from Lokasenna for the Norse names of the two less well known of the three gods in stanza 18 of *Völuspá*. It would be interesting to know if the names Vili and Vé appear in the genealogy of the Norwegian monarchs that Snorri courted.

3. Óð is consistently given as óðr in all of the sources cited, so that form is used throughout the text.

4. It seems unlikely that Freyr is the deity referred to in stanza 18 of *Völuspá*. The chronology is wrong for his appearance at this point, as the exchange of hostages between the two which brought Freyr into the Aesir does not occur until stanza 24, and I am not aware of any names or kennings for Freyr which use a form of lóð. It is possible that Lóðurr is a name or title for an earlier Aesiric deity of growth and fertility whose function was supplanted by Freyr when the Vanic deities entered the Norse pantheon, and that this name was recorded in the older verses from which the beginning of *Völuspá* was compiled.

5. Other types of sacrifice were practiced by Germanic cultures, including human sacrifice by strangulation and stabbing as famously recorded by Ibn Fadlan in his tenth century account of a Rus burial rite, but these appear to be much more specific and situational than the ritual of blót. See Oðinsson sec. e. et passim for a comprehensive description of Germanic ritual practices.

6. While the description given by Snorri is of a blood sacrifice, both Wódening and Oðinsson along with many other writers describe both ancient and modern practices of blót that

use other substances, most commonly drink such as mead or ale, as a sacrifice.

Works Cited

- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 6 November 2002 <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/>>.
- Bauschatz, Paul. *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
- British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]. "Image of Stone Cross from the Isle of Man". Image file. *Ancient History - Vikings*. Not dated. 16 November 2002 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/religion_03.shtml>.
- Cleasby, Richard, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William Craigie. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Davidson, H. R. Ellis. *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. London: Penguin Books, 1964.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- "Hattula Bird Brooch". Images file. *NordicArts*. Not dated. 16 November 2002 <<http://www.nordicarts.com/brooches01.htm>>.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. "Approaching the Unconscious". *Man and His Symbols*. 1964. Ed. by Carl G. Jung. New York: Dell, 1968.
- Oðinssen, Alfta. "Religious Practices of the Pre-Christian and Viking Age North". *Lenstjarna* 3,1 (2001). 1 November 2002 <<http://www.northvegr.org/leidstjarna/mothernight2001/religious.html>>.
- The Poetic Edda*. Trans. by Lee Hollander. 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962.
- Polomé, Edgar. "Some Comments on Völuspá, Stanzas 17 – 18". *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*. Ed. Edgar C. Polomé. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969.
- Snorri Sturluson. *Edda*. Ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1987.
- . *Heimskringla*. Online Medieval and Classical Library Release #15b. Ed. and transcription by Douglas B. Killings and Diane Brendan ("Ynglinga saga"). April - May 1996. 14 November 2002 <<http://www.northvegr.org/lore/heim/index.html>>.
- Tacitus, Cornelius. *Germania*. Trans. Thomas Gordon. 12 November 2002. 22 November 2002 <<http://www.northvegr.org/lore/tacitus/index.html>>.
- Völuspá. Transcribed by Ari Oðinssen. *The Poetic Edda in Old Norse*. 2 July 2002. 6 November 2002 <<http://www.northvegr.org/lore/poeticon/index.html>>.

Wódening, Eric. "Knowest How to Blót? The How and Why of Heathen Sacrifice". *Wednesbury Theod.* 2001. 3 November 2002
<<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Atlantis/2575/blot.html>>.