

Yuri Kleiner

THE WORLDS AND OTHER WORLDS OF SCANDINAVIAN MYTHOLOGY¹

The Scandinavian mythological *Weltbild* is more complicated than that represented, horizontally, by the 'centre' and 'periphery' (the 'world of men' and the 'world of giants' = *Miðgarðr* — *Útgarðr*), and, vertically, along the ash *Yggdrasil* as the axis, by *Hel* — *Miðgarðr* — *Heaven*, corresponding to the 'Other World' — the 'World of Men' and — the 'Realm of the Gods'. The east-oriented arrangement of the worlds and realms in the mythological geography is superimposed by the vertical orientation towards the Ash's roots, which is functional rather than spatial. Likewise, the Other World, although allotted to mortals, those who 'fall in battle' (*Valhöll*) and 'wicked men', plus the god Baldr (*Hel* of the goddess of the same name), is not connected with *Miðgarðr*. The gods' functions include 'journeys to the 'outer world' (*Útgarðr*), which therefore is the 'Other World' in its own right. Inhabited by gods' doubles (*Prymir* = *Pór*) or pseudo-doubles (*Útgarða-Loki* = *Loki*), it mirrors, as it were, the two Otherworlds of the gods' realm, being different from them both locationally and functionally. The 'patchy' mythological picture may result from concomitant traditions, being responsible for various story types, from (the world) tragedy (the story of Baldr) to 'novella' (*Prymskviða*) and parody (*Skrýmir/Útgarða Loki* episode in the Prose Edda).

Keywords: Scandinavian mythology, the other world(s), Thor, Loki.

¹ Supported by St. Petersburg State University; grant No. 31.41.405.2017.

Based on the paper given at the 2017 IACM Conference that Yaroslav Vladimirovich Vassilkov was not able to attend.

The simplest way to represent the Scandinavian Universe would be in terms of two axes, horizontal, corresponding to the world of gods (*Ásgarðr*), the world of men (*Miðgarðr*) and the world of giants, or the outerworld (*Útgarðr*), and vertical, with the ash *Yggdrasil* as the axis with *Hel* (= 'Other World'), *Miðgarðr* and Heaven along it. This type of cosmology, with the world of men between *Hel* (or Hell) and Heaven is reminiscent of the 'mortal life vs. Paradise-and-Hell' model of Christian theology, which obviously had its effect on the interpreters beginning with Snorri Sturluson, cf.

(1) *hann smíðaði himin ok jörð... hann gerði manninn ok gaf honum ond þá er lifa skal ok aldri tynask, þótt líkaminn fúni at moldu eða brenni at osku. Ok skulu allir menn lifa, þeir er rétt eru siðaðir ok vera með honum sjálfum þar sem heitir Gimlé ..., en vándir menn fara til Heljar ok þaðan í Niflhel, þat er niðr í inn níunda heim* 'He fashioned heaven and earth ... he made man, and gave him the spirit, which shall live and never perish, though the flesh-frame rot to mould, or burn to ashes; and all men shall live, such as are just in action, and be with himself in the place called Gimlé. But evil men go to Hel and thence down to the Misty Hel; and that is down in the ninth world' (SE 3).

But the *Weltbild* of *Snorra Edda* must have been much more complicated. Horizontally, the space surrounded by the ocean includes the giants' territory separated by a wall from the realm of men, Midgard, cf.

(2) *Hon [jörð]. er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggir inn djúpi sjár, ok með þeiri sjávarströndu gáfu þeir lönd til byggðar jötna ættum. En fyrir innan á jörðunni gerðu þeir borg umhverfis heim fyrir ófriði jötna ... ok kolluðu þá borg Miðgarð* 'The earth. is ring-shaped without, and round about it without lies the deep sea and along the strand of that sea they gave lands to the races of giants for habitation. But on the inner earth they made a citadel round about the world against the hostility of the giants ... and called that place Midgard' (SE 8).

It is only after the gods had completed the entire creation, including that of the terrestrial bodies and the progenitors of the population of Midgard that they made a dwelling for themselves, cf.

(3) *...jörð ok himinn var gert ok sól ok himintungl váru sett ok skipt dægum ... fundu þeir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok sköpuðu af menn. Hét karlmaðrinn Ask, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er bygðin var gefin*

undir Miðgarði. Þar næst gerðu þeir sér borg í miðjum heimi er kallaðr er Ásgarðr ‘earth and heaven were made, and the sun and the constellations of heaven were fixed, and division was made of days ... they found two trees, and took up the trees and shaped men of them... the male was called Ask, and the female Embla, and of them was mankind begotten, which received a dwelling-place under Midgard. Next they made for themselves in the middle of the world a city which is called Ásgard’ (SE 9).

In addition to *garðar*, ‘lit. enclosed territories’ (*Ásgarðr* and *Miðgarðr*), the world of Scandinavian mythology has a number of *staðir* ‘lit. places’ and *hofuðstaðir* ‘capital places’, such as *Álfheimr*, the abode of the Light- and the Dark-Elves, *Glitnir* ‘glittering’, Odin’s *Valaskjálf* ‘Seat of the Fallen’, *Gimlé*, fairest of all, and brighter than the sun, and *Breiðablik* ‘broad-gleaming’ (SE 17). Snorri does not specify their location, except that of *Himinbjörg* (see below), in respect to the two *garðar*, or even to the horizontal and the vertical arrangement of the world.

We know, for instance, that nothing in the observable world is higher than Odin’s seat in *Hliðskjálf*, cf.

(4) *Þar er einn staðr er Hliðskjálf heitir, ok er Alföðr sezt þar í háseti sér hann um heim allan ok hvers manns athæfi* ‘There is one place there that is called *Hliðskjálf*, and when All-father sits down in the high seat there he sees over the whole world and what everyone is doing’ (ibid.).

But from the point of view of the mythological cosmology, being ‘above’ and ‘below’ means belonging to the vertical plane. This implies position in respect to the world’s axis, i.e. the ash *Yggdrasil*. with ‘its limbs above heaven’ cf.

(5) *Askinn er allra trjá mestr ok beztr. Limar hans dreifast um heim allan ok standa yfir himni* ‘The Ash is greatest of all trees and best: its limbs spread out over all the world and stand above heaven’ (SE 15).

The ash has three roots:

(6) *Ein er með ásum, en önnur með hrímþursum* ‘one is among the Æsir; another among the Rime-Giants’ (ibid.).

The location of the third root is indicated twice, cf.

(7a) *In þriðja stendr yfir Niflheimi, ok undir þeiri rót er Hvergelmir* ‘the third root stands over Niflheim, and under that root is Hvergelmir’ (ibid.).

and

(7b) *Þriðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá, er mjök er heilagr, er heitir Urðarbrunnr* ‘The third root of the Ash stands in heaven; and under that root is the well which is very holy, that is called the Well of Urdr’ (ibid.).

Near Urðarbrunnr, ‘the gods hold their tribunal, riding there every day over the Bifröst bridge’

(8) *eiga goðin dómstað sinn Hvern dag ríða æsir þangat upp um Bifröst* (ibid.).

The bridge leads to the heaven (SE 13), to a certain place near Himinbjörg, the only *staðr* specified locationally,

(10) *Himinbjörg stendr á himins enda við brúarsporð, þar er Bifröst kemr til himins* ‘Heaven-crag stands at heaven’s end by the bridge-head, in the place where Bifröst joins heaven’ (SE 17).

If, on the other hand, the Well of Urdr is a synonym of Hvergelmir, as Turville-Petre (1964: 279) has suggested, both must be under the third root and, thus, near Niflheimr, which, in this case, is both ‘high’ and ‘low’ on the vertical plane.

Niflheim belongs to Hel, Loki’s daughter, whom Odin

(11) *kastaði ... í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum at hon skipti öllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, en þat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir* ‘cast into Niflheim, and gave to her power over nine worlds, to apportion all abodes among those that were sent to her: that is, men dead of sickness or of old age’ (SE 34).

Hel is both the name of the realm of the dead and that of the goddess-guardian of the place, this being similar to the Greek Ἅιδης. An interesting parallel to this may follow from Anatoly Liberman’s etymology of the name Loki as akin to German *Loch* ‘hole’, hence the interpretation of him as “initially ... a chthonic deity guarding the dead” (Liberman 2016: 191 — 192).

Besides those who die a natural death, Hel and Niflhel are the abode of ‘wicked men.’

(12) *vándir menn fara til Heljar ok þaðan í Niflhel. Þat er niðr í inn níunda heim* ‘evil men go to Hel and thence down to the Misty Hel; and that is down in the ninth world’ (SE 34).

Although the god Baldr does not belong to either category, he, too, finds himself in the realm of Hel after death (see SE 49).

Another realm of the dead is Odin’s Valhalla, cf.

(13) *allir þeir menn, er í orrustu hafa fallit frá upphafi heims eru nú komnir til Óðins í Valhöll* ‘all those men who have fallen in battle from the beginning of the world are now come to Odin in Valhall’ (SE 34).

Both Niflheim and Valhalla are the realms of the dead, and in this respect they belong to the ‘other world’ category. But as Anatoly Liberman has pointed out, “Death as the be-all and end-all of human existence would be an unusual mythological idea. In all religions. death means going elsewhere, and the Scandinavians developed a varied geography of the Other Worlds: Valhöll, Hel, mounds, and so forth” (Liberman 2016: 189). Indeed, accommodating the dead is not the only function (not even the main one, probably) of the other world. Not less significant is that of the ‘goal of traveling’, cf. Odysseus, Aeneas or the Irish Bran. Here, the other world is opposed to the world of man. In Scandinavian mythology, however, the role of human beings is obscure enough. For instance, the husband of Nótt ‘night’, the giant Narfi’s daughter, was the *man* named Naglfari; their son was Auðr. Nótt’s second husband was Annarr ‘another one’, their daughter was Jorð ‘earth’. The last one was Delligr ‘dayspring’; their son was Dagr ‘day’ (SE 10). Delligr was “of the race of the Æsir”, but Dagr was not a demigod, simply because this category did not exist in Scandinavian mythology. He “rode round about the earth every two half-days” (ibid.), but so did the children of “a certain *man* named Mundilfari”, Sun and Moon, “set up in the heavens to drive the horses that drew the chariot of the sun” and “steer the course of the moon” (SE 11). What was their relationship with the people of Midgard is not known; nor is that of Askr and Embla, the progenitors of “the men that people the world”

(SE 9), with their descendants, either the *vándir menn* of Hel or the heroes of Valhalla.

It is only the gods that travel beyond the wall separating Midgard from the giants' territory and the giants' hostility which men share with the gods (see (2) above). Not coincidentally, the place is called *Útgarðr* 'the outer city or the outer world', outer in respect to both *Miðgarðr* and *Ásgarðr*. *Útgarðr* is the easternmost territory of the mythological geography, outermost from the center of the earth, which is *Ásgarðr*. The eastward-directed horizontal arrangement, *Ásgarðr* — *Miðgarðr* — *Jötunheim* (the land of giants), also includes a forest farther east. Judging by its population (troll-women and a witch), the forest is outside the *Ásgarðr*-*Miðgarðr* area, cf.

(14) *Gýgr ein býr fyrir austan Miðgarð í þeim skógi, er Járnvíðr heitir. Í þeim skógi byggja þær trollkonur, er Járnvíðjur heita* 'A witch dwells to the east of Midgard, in the forest called Ironwood: in that wood dwell the troll-women, who are known as Ironwood-Women' (SE 12).

Another forest is the one that Thor and Loki pass in their voyage to *Útgarðr*, together with two servants, *Þjalfi* and *Rǫskva*, they picked up at a farm, where they spent the night before leaving *Ásgarðr*/*Miðgarðr* (see SE 45). According to Liberman (2016: 150), the farm is "a typical frontier post (checkpoint), like Baba Yaga's hut on chicken legs in Russian folktale". The forest is probably in *Útgarðr* already. Again, the question may be asked 'One forest or two different ones?', as in the case of *Urðarbrunnr* and *Hvergelmir* in (7a) and (7b). The same applies to different posthumous abodes (a Scandinavian specificity) and the worlds of Scandinavian mythology generally.

As problematic is the relationship between the gods and their opponents. That *Útgarðaloki*, Loki's opponent, was, at the same time, his double in *Útgarðr*, must have been clear to the contemporaries and near-contemporaries of the eddic mythology. *Þrymr*, the victim of Thor, is Thor's double etymologically (see Kleiner 2017). To quote Anatoly Liberman (2016: 159), "Only a man called *Björn* could kill a bear; only with another *Isolde* could *Tristan* hope to forget his own *Isolde*".

These and other aspects of mythology may seem to be 'inconsistencies', but only from the point of view of the logic of literature, different from that of oral tradition unprotected by a canon. In Old Norse heroic

poetry, Brynhild, for example, without kith or kin, acquired father and brother; Sigurðr Fafnisbani became a Volsung, etc. A similar process of “genealogical ordering towards ancestors and descendants” (Jarxo 1934: 48) may have been at work in the mythological tradition. On the Germanic soil, Hades became Óðinn with many functions in addition to the chthonic one (see Kleiner 2016). Likewise, Loki may not have necessarily been the god of the Other World originally. He may have acquired this function in the same way as he became Óðinn’s sworn brother or the father of Hel and Fenrir, the helldog.

The patchy mythological picture may have resulted from concomitant traditions, in turn, resulting in various story types, from (the world) tragedy (the story of Baldr) to ‘novella’ (Þrymskviða) or a parody as the Skrímir/Útgarda Loki episode in the in the *Elder and the Younger (Snorra) Edda* respectively. The route from the Ur-Mythus is meandering, and each of the turns leaves to us a ‘system’, which is a reflection of a certain *Weltbild* adopted and accepted in some or other location and represented by texts created (or distorted) in accordance with the rules of their tradition and their genre.

References

- Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist. 1916. *The Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson. (Scandinavian Classics 5) New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation.
- Jarxo, Boris (ed). 1934. *Saga o Volsungax* [Völsungasaga]. Translation, introduction and notes by B.I. Jarxo. Moscow and Leningrad. Academia. (In Russian)
- Kleiner, Yuri. 2016. ‘*Wōðanaz outside the Germanic pantheon’. *Scandinavica*. 17/1: 30–42 (in Russian, with a summary in English).
- Kleiner, Yuri. 2017. ‘Thunder and Thunder God (*Þórr* — *Þrymr*): Eddic Calque’. In: *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)*. Volume 122. *45th International Philological Conference (IPC 2016)*. Atlantis Press: 310–313. (in Russian, with a summary in English).
- Lieberman, Anatoly. 2016. In *Prayer and Laughter. Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic Mythology, Literature, and Culture*. Moscow: Paleograph Press.
- SE (= Snorra Edda): *Die Prosaische Edda im Auszuge nebst Volsunga-saga und Nornagesthaattr*. Hrsg. von E. Wilken. Padeborn, 1877.
- Turville-Petre, E. O. G. 1964. *Myth and Religion of the North: the Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.