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MYTH AND THE STRUCTURE OF MEDIEVAL PAGAN SOCIETY
IN ICELAND

1. Myth is hard to define. No single definition of myth would be acceptable to all students of the subject. Different types and functions of myths have puzzled scholars for decades. What most would be willing to concede is that "myth is an extremely complex cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints."¹⁾ These are the words of Mircea Eliade, one of the foremost authorities of our times in the field. Eliade opens his book on *Myth and Reality* with the following words:

For the past fifty years at least, Western scholars have approached the study of myth from a viewpoint markedly different from, let us say, that of the nineteenth century. Unlike their predecessors, who treated myth in the usual meaning of the word, that is, as "fable", "invention", "fiction", they have accepted it as it was understood in the archaic societies, where, on the contrary, "myth" means a "true story" and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant."²⁾

Later on in the same work Eliade adds that to man "in archaic and traditional societies myths constitute the sum of useful knowledge"³⁾.

Whichever interpretation of myth we prefer, one thing is certain: myth plays an important part in pagan society. Few, if any, exceptions have been found to that rule. Mythology is apparently coeval with mankind, mythological aims and concerns have shaped the life of our ancestors for millennia. These concerns have as a rule been based on

1) Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1964, p. 5

2) *ibid* p. 1

3) *ibid* p. 125

fundamental themes of mythological thought, surprisingly constant and universal. For a long time scholars have found the spiritual verities of our ancestors hard to evaluate, preferring to pronounce on the physical aspects of their culture, utensils, housing, technical knowledge and craftsmanship. The motivations of pagans have too often been thought to have been similar to those of modern western man in many important respects. Of late the picture has changed. Joseph Campbell, another outstanding authority on myth, has summed up the position thus:

the most/^{evident}distinguishing sign (of our species) is man's organization of his life according primarily to mythic, and only secondarily economic, aims and laws." (4)

To many Westerners this is a new and startling concept. Yet it seems to be borne out by most studies not only of primitive, but also of advanced pagan cultures. Along with it goes a realization of a certain attitude of man towards his society. Each of us is born into a specific social group. This group brings him up, protects him and expects a certain conformity in return. The idea that the social group will live after the individual is gone is inherent in most, if not all, mythologies. The seed of man runs through his lineage. Thus ancestors often become much more than merely objects of veneration on the part of pagans; they are also an integral part of the very identity of their progeny. An individual carries within him the seed, the prowess and the mythic essence of his forebears. As a rule family-trees of pagans have their roots in mythical ancestors and gods. Mythologically speaking, a person and his ancestor share a certain community, an individual of every society

confronts...the necessity to adapt himself to whatever order of life may happen to be that of the community into which he has been born, this being an order of life superordinated to his own. (5)

Campbell goes on to state his case in the following manner:

In every one of the mythological systems that in the long course of history and prehistory have been propagated in the various zones and quarters of this earth, these two fundamental realizations - of the inevitability of individual death and the endurance of the social order - have been combined symbolically and constitute the nuclear structuring force of the rites and, thereby, the society. (6)

4) Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By, The Viking Press, New York 1972, p. 22

5) *ibid*

6) *ibid* p. 22-23

2. According to our sources Iceland was settled mainly by pagans, only a small portion of the original population being Christian. Authorities on mythology tell us that certain rites of hallowing are to be expected of pagan settlers, possibly also of Christian ones.⁷⁾ As early as 1935 the Indian scholar A.K. Coomaraswamy published his *THE R̥G VEDA AS LAND-NÁMA-BÓK*, pointing out "the procedure of the first settlers being thought of as an establishment of law and order where savagery (*anṛta*) had previously prevailed".⁸⁾ Most mythologists agree that the main themes of such rites are in many ways similar to those of ancient epico-mythical poetry, which has been described thus:

the creation of the world, the future life, and the vegetation cycle: in other words, the origins, ends and laws of the universe. (9)

He who settles new land creates a new world, so to speak, he starts a new cycle of life/birth and secures new-found surroundings for human habitation. As a rule this is a sacred act.¹⁰⁾ The law of man is equated with the law of the gods, ancient Mesopotamian tablets show that "law is based on the 'code' which the king receives from his god and promulgates to his people"¹¹⁾

To some students of Germanic culture this may sound somewhat out of place; former research does not tell us that the pagan law of Iceland was based on prototypes from ancient cultures of the Middle East. Conversely we have no basis to assume that was NOT the case. Peculiar as it sounds, none of our best scholars have seriously pondered these questions in the past. At least not on paper. Konrad Maurer and Vilhjálmur Finsen who wrote the most comprehensive studies of our pagan constitution, both wrote in the latter half of the 19th century - when study of myth was in its infancy. And, although some useful papers have been published on the subject in the 20th century, they cannot be compared in scope to the

7) Mircea Eliade, *Myten om den evige tilbagekomst*, Munksgaard København 1966, passim

8) Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Rg Veda as Land-náma-bók*, Luzac & Co. London, 1935, p. 1

9) Sabatino Moscati, *The Face of the Ancient Orient*, Doubleday & Co. Inc. New York, 1962, p. 319

10) M. Eliade, *Myten om den evige tilbagekomst*, passim

11) S. Moscati, *op. cit.* p. 145

work of Maurer and Finsen. Nor can they claim to have followed the great discoveries in anthropology and related fields. Learned comment is still distinguished by its avoidance of major ideological questions pertaining to religious thought. Our pagan law is looked at in isolation, somewhat as if its religious implications were hardly there. An important aspect of the picture is missing.

3. A functioning social framework was established in Iceland ca. 930 A.D. At that time Iceland was still pagan. The political structure of pagan Iceland ca. 930-1000 A.D. has often been called a Republic. Some scholars have found that designation misleading and used words like Aristocracy, Priest-Chieftainship, Oligarchy or something similar to describe the inner workings of this society. The words most commonly used in Iceland are Lýðveldi or Þjóðveldi - the rule of the people or the nation - to distinguish it from the political structure of kingship.

The creation of this pagan political structure has long been a puzzle. Scholars have been at a loss to find a model on which it was based. Was this Goðaveldi (Priest-Chieftainship) a new invention? What were its basic premises? Did a prototype exist, and if so where? In what way was the Icelandic Goðaveldi different from that prototype? Why the strange insistence on the "mörkun" - the measuring or the marking off of þings (law-assemblies)? Why a "democracy" in Iceland during a period when such political structures seemed non-existent in related areas? In short: What was the framework based on - what were the institutional concepts in medieval or ancient Europe which made the creation of Alþingi on Þingvellir possible?

If our pagan settlers believed in gods they are likely to have hallowed their settlements. If so, a certain law was thus established from the very beginning. The first settlers were probably "most highly honored" - "the height of social distinction to be descended from these firstcomers from the other side" in the words of Coomaraswamy.¹²⁾ All that is very clear from our records, Landnámabók being one great monument of just such respect. Then, rites pertaining to the beginning and end of the world may have been enacted - Völuspá itself shows

12) A.K. Coomaraswamy, op. cit. p. 1

clearly that our ancestors knew myths of cosmogony. The origins, ends and laws of the universe might thus have played a part in the formation of our early social structure. And, needless to say, such "reality" will have been preserved in myths.

We are here on highly problematical ground. Concepts long disregarded because of their "absurdity" suddenly spring to life as if they were to be taken seriously. It therefore behooves us to ask some simple questions:

a) Did pagan settlers of Iceland believe in gods?

The answer is YES.

b) Did these settlers possess myths?

The answer is YES.

c) Have those myths been preserved?

The answer is YES, at least some of them.

d) Are there serious reasons to suppose that the pagan settlers did not hallow land?

The answer is NO, all our sources indicate that land was indeed hallowed. The very seizure or taking of land - the LANDNÁM - is normally referred to as LANDHELGUN - AÐ HELGA SÉR LAND.

This means that we have ample reason to expect settlements in various parts of Iceland to have been accompanied by cosmogonic rites. Preserved myths may thus refer to the hallowing of land; the said hallowing will have followed a pattern inherited by the settlers. Land will then have been bound to the laws of the gods.

This calls for further questioning. To what laws of the gods was land bound? And if the answers are contained in myths - how does one understand myths? What is their language? Or, if theirs is a special language - how does one decipher their language?

4. The language of myth has often been called symbolism. Symbolism is a mode of expression universally adopted in religious thought:

All that essential and indescribable part of man that is called imagination dwells in realms of symbolism and still lives upon archaic myths and theologies (13)

says Eliade. But symbolism has its dangers - "that of precipitate

13) Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols, Harvill Press, London, 1961, p.19

generalization".¹⁴⁾ Now, if this elusive mode of expression was the essence of our pagan heritage - how can we understand that heritage unless we attack the problem of meaning in myth? Difficult? Yes. Outside our area of study? Well, consider the words of the eminent scholar of the ancient Middle East, W.F. Albright:

It has well been emphasized by thinkers that no science can be regarded as solidly established while there is any serious gap in recording and interpreting accessible evidence. (15)

The pagan culture of Iceland and the literature based thereon obviously falls within the category of accessible evidence which has not been seriously studied in one of its most important aspects. A sobering thought: Until a serious study of the gap is undertaken, "Icelandic" or "Germanic" studies based on Icelandic sources cannot be regarded as a solidly established science.

5. The writer of this paper has long been dismayed by what he considers a fatal standstill in method on the part of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Iceland in the study of old-Icelandic culture. A far more comprehensive survey of the field than has so far been attempted should be possible. A primary requisite for advance is the comparison of related and divergent concepts in the mythological sources of different cultures. Further, the problem of the ideology underlying the social structure of pagan Iceland must be resolved. He who does not know the motivation of a people cannot interpret its actions. The study of this neglected field could well become the turning point in the history of "Germanic" studies. The horizon of Icelandic source material should be expanded; important new discoveries could lead up to an entirely fresh approach to historical as well as literary studies of the sagas. In contrast to the standstill of method in the so-called "literary" evaluation of our sagas, the advances in cultural anthropology have gained momentum during this century.

14) M. Eliade, *ibid* p. 22

15) William Foxwell Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity, Doubleday & Co. Inc. New York, 1957, p. 29

This advance in knowledge particularly affects the study of meaning within our sources. Symbolism now remote may become a key to our understanding of a "lost" era. But - needless to say - in any new undertaking of this kind research is necessary. One must sort symbolic material and make divisions in order to attack the meaning of specific parts. In the effort to do so one must adduce basic research to support the correctness of any attempted divisions. The aim is to try to discover the interrelationships between history, myth, folklore, legend and plain hearsay. Solutions to such questions do not easily force themselves upon any investigator at the present time. Basic research is a SINE QUA NON. Without it scholars are almost certain to miss salient points. They have no standard of measurement.

Words are always inaccurate unless interpreted in context. The context of myth comprises and ideology; within the structure of that ideology reciprocal relationships should be looked for. Not just as words but as ideas. By observing resemblances in different sources one arrives at a basis for deductions. At the very least one has reasonable hope of interpreting evidence which is now useless because not read. Comparison allows us to determine what is likely to be due to literary borrowing, what to foreign influence, what to indigenous sources - and what to an actual living ideology in pagan Iceland.

The discovery of certain patterns of thought, myths and ritual greatly affects the judgements pronounced on the sagas. Study of such material means progress in an entirely new and potentially fertile field. If left unstudied our conception of a great part of Icelandic source-material will not only be devoid of understanding - our approach will be purely un-historical. One must evaluate each culture on its own terms.

6. The conception of a separate Germanic mythology - as opposed to classical mythology - has haunted the minds of scholars for centuries. That conception has been based mainly on "Old Norse" sources

die ihrer Zahl und Beschaffenheit nach einen unvergleichlich höheren Quellenwert als alle sonstigen religiösen Urkunden der germanischen Stämme haben ... (16)

16) Jan de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, Walter de Gruyter & Co. Berlin, 1956, I, p. 1

in the words of Jan de Vries. Yet nobody has worked through all the accessible material in order to investigate its basic components. Despite the meticulous works of J. Grimm, Jan de Vries and G. Dumézil there is still a crying need for a thorough study of possible mythic connotations of our major sagas. Because of the vastness of the field many scholars have - of necessity - been content with what they stumbled upon accidentally. Such encounters tend to concern only the most glaringly obvious references to gods and myths. To be sure, some students of culture have suspected that Germanic mythology might not have been so utterly isolated in spite of appearances to the contrary. "Evidence" supplied by respected Germanic scholars has tended to put such critics in their place, however. Research, the building brick of science, has been woefully inadequate.

The attempt to establish a specific position in this field is understandable, even imperative. Without some such footing Germanic scholars are bound to feel lost. But high-handed methods to "prove" a theory will be suspect as long as basic research is not encouraged. When entirely new concepts spring up - in any discipline - scholars are well advised to show caution. But scepticism cannot be healthy if based on uninformedness pure and simple. Scepticism can be an instrument of mind only of those who do their basic reading. To make objections to hypotheses or theories valid they must be reasoned. Unfortunately failure to differentiate between a legitimate thrust into unknown territory and a wild goose chase has been the sorry lot of some universities through the ages. Not all "scientific" methods inherited by our age will stand up to criticism. That certain methods are current does not mean they are infallible or even right. Interpretation of the social implications of a given saga must for example be grounded in observation of its material. If sociology is mirrored in mythical material - and such material is present in the saga - it will not be understood unless the underlying ideology is clarified. The aim of the SISC is to throw light on these problems. "Truths" of social theories in pagan times bypassing the vital and vast area of mythology may be demonstrable to a body of scholars only if they are unwilling to listen to the findings of other disciplines. Such scholars would then be ready to sacrifice precision to lethargy. Such an attitude can hardly be seriously expected in 1973.

7. If genuine myth is regarded as a certain kind of "truth" - sacred, exemplary and significant - hardly distinguishable from the truth of sociological reality - the whole concept of truth in the sagas needs revision. When furthermore we note that the social organization of ancient pagan cultures is considered to have been based on "mythic forms"¹⁷⁾, it is obvious that we cannot behave as if myth did not exist in pagan Iceland. The very least we can do is to take a good look. Granting the notion of truth in mythology changes the nature of our studies: mythical material in the sagas acquires source value. This again raises the question: What kind of truth is myth and how is it arrived at?

We are confronted with the problem of decipherment. Incredible as it may seem in the late 20th century, the material of sagas is often described inadequately as either "historical" or "fictitious" - little or no distinction being made between the kind of historicity or fiction in question, and mythological implications being totally disregarded. By the same token, myths underlying our pagan culture are often held to be mere crudities, intelligence being reserved for the commentators. The idea that myth can be a meaningful vehicle of information, or that a saga may contain valuable source-material which differs from "historical veracity" AND "fiction", has not taken hold.

As all decipherers of language know

Each language is a uniquely complicated lock. There is only one key, and the test of its rightness is that it should open the door. (18)

About 15 years ago the writer of this paper started an inquiry into the essence of the language of myth. By and by a solution presented itself to certain highly intricate and baffling problems. The studies on which the results were based were far too voluminous for publication to be contemplated. Consequently an outline of the main conclusions was published in the form of 64 hypotheses.¹⁹⁾ The hypothesis seemed the

17) J. Campbell, Myths to Live By, p. 62

18) Leonard R. Palmer, Mycenaeans and Minoans, Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1965, p. 63

19) Einar Pálsson, Baksvið Njálu, Mímir, Reykjavík, 1969, p.80-207

correct medium for presentation; hypotheses are published to be tested, not believed. Scholars in different fields are invited to compare their material to the findings. If found wrong or inadequate a hypothesis can easily be discarded and a new one proposed. It should hardly need emphasizing to scholars, that the hypothesis protects studies from "opinions" which are not rooted in basic research. Yet this approach seems to have been unexpected by most Germanic scholars. Furthermore, the mythic material was unintelligible to many, which is perhaps not to be wondered at, since its language has long defied analysis. The question then is: Can philology dissociate itself from the study of meaning - even when the language is totally unfamiliar? The 19th century Danish linguist Holger Pedersen stated that philology could be defined

as a study whose task is the interpretation of the literary monuments in which the spiritual life of a given period has found expression (20)

If this definition be accepted, the elicitation of meaning in Icelandic myth is inextricably bound up with saga-study. After all, what is the object of saga-study if not "the interpretation of the literary monuments"? And where was the "spiritual life" of the pagan period in question contained if not in myths? Pedersen goes on to say: "The process of interpretation requires first of all an insight into a linguistic system."²¹⁾ If language is defined as a vehicle for the expression of ideas - do we then not need an insight into the system of mythical language? How can we interpret it without such an insight? And how do we acquire such an insight without basic research? In order to proceed with our interpretation of mythic material a beginning must be made - however startling. It is to be hoped Germanicists now feel the time has come to evaluate the soundness of the hypotheses here referred to.

8. The 64 hypotheses of Baksvið Njálu were welded from many different materials, some drawn from the sagas. Their central principle is to bring the interrelationships between various components of Icelandic pagan culture into focus. If the attempt has succeeded not only a few but most or all

20) Holger Pedersen, *The Discovery of Language*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London 1965, p. 79

21) *ibid.*

the major aspects of our pagan culture should find their place within the framework.

Nearly all classical decipherments of the last century used a simple expedient: identifications were guessed at, placenames and proper names being the yardstick of orthography. Signs identified in first guesses were tested by their occurrence in other possible connections until the decipherer had a working formula. Although one might hesitate to call the studies here undertaken "decipherment of language" - "interpretation of data" would perhaps be a happier term - the methods used were much the same. Each new discovery provided a salutary opportunity for self-examination and the critique of method. Thus WHAT could be achieved by analysis of different materials if related to the pertinent literary document, slowly emerged. It was the CONTEXT, the meaning and arrangement within a specific whole, that finally gave the clue to each solution. Here, as in archaeology, the associations proved to be all-important.

The astounding difference between this study and classical decipherments of the past proved to be - aside from merit - that whereas no one doubted that for example the cuneiform of Rawlinson or the hieroglyphs of Champollion were an unknown script needing decipherment, few Germanic scholars seem to have suspected that there was any similar need to decipher the mythical language of the Icelandic heritage.

9. In judging decipherments of formerly closed linguistical systems, grammatical phenomena are the surest key. What is the grammar of myth?

The answer found in this instance was: The grammar of myth consists of physical and natural phenomena that make up an image. To each is attributed a certain nature consistent with its appearance or effects. Numbers, colours, stones, animals, plants, the elements, all are parts of an imaginative language based on visual objects, appearances and essence.

Leonard R. Palmer has a simple formula for decipherments:

What we require (in a proper decipherment) are whole sentences exhibiting grammatical machinery and yielding a meaning appropriate to the context. (22)

This may be translated: When you decipher myth, what you require are whole structures - literary or graphic - exhibiting the machinery of mythology and yielding meaning through interconnections appropriate to the context. Such structures might reasonably be called the "grammar" of myth.

If properly forged, the 64 hypotheses of Baksvið Njálu should show just that.

10. The studies on which this paper is based indicate clearly that the establishment of a social organization in Iceland was firmly bound up with myth. Indeed the very selection of a site for Alþingi seems to have been part of a system for determining the original settlements. Thus the law and order inherent in the landnáms of the first settlers would appear to have been two sides of the same coin: on the one side the creation myths and the hallowing of land - on the other the tying up of both with the measurement of land and time calculation.²³⁾ The strong emphasis on the measurement (mörkun) of the site of Alþingi at Þingvellir rested on the sacredness of certain numbers thought to embody divine wisdom. The words commonly used for exploring a new area - að kanna land - seem to mean not just to reconnoitre land but to measure it according to strict standards. Those were religious standards based on a highly involved and intricate ideology. That ideology corresponds in many important respects to that of the ancient Middle East; the numerology perhaps being the most conspicuous witness to that fact. The studies thus indicate that myth in pagan Iceland contained not simply an incoherent belief in divine beings but rather decipherable and fairly reliable concrete data. The abundance of such data, the recent writing down of mythic material and its preservation give stunningly accurate - although tentative - answers to some of the most baffling questions of cultural history.

Perhaps the greatest revelation is that myth in pagan Iceland is not shown to have been conflicting, contradictory and full of inconsistencies, as formerly held by so many scholars. The basis of its ideology was at the same time the basis of the mythological "grammar" - the WHEEL. All major problems of the context here referred to found an easy solution

23) Einar Pálsson, Trú og landnám, Mímir, Reykjavík, 1970, passim

within the Wheel. Thus it would hardly seem possible to find a more perfect, intricate and yet complete structure than that of the creation myths connected with the establishment of the pagan constitution of Iceland. From the system we can also infer that the settlers had a general knowledge of medieval learning. Technical skill was combined with a knowledge of astronomy and mathematics. Although utterly unexpected, there seems no way around the lastnamed conclusion. At the same time the mythology of pagan Iceland shows the characteristics of sacred ritual and specific time-calculations of ancient city-states in the Middle East. And, as previously noted, Icelandic myth was no unconnected abstraction, it dealt with the forms and norms of a society of men.

11. In brief: the "social" mythology of Iceland shows the distinguishing marks of classical paganism based on neolithic ideas. Even the "corn-god" is a conspicuous feature thereof. We know that the hieratic city state evolved certain cosmic imagery. That imagery became fundamental to man's ideology for millennia in the Middle East. Man learned many secrets of the skies and the revolutions of the seasons; these were considered the laws of their gods. The law of man was modelled on the law of divine beings. Joseph Campbell has compared the social organization of a certain "primitive" people to those ideas in the following words:

And so it appears that, just as in the great creative period of the hieratic city state a game of identification with the round dance of the planets in the heavens led to an organization of society in which the notion of a macrocosmic, calendrically rendered, celestial order supplied the mythology according to which the "mesocosm" of the state was composed. (24)

The above is a fairly accurate description of what basic research revealed about pagan Iceland. The Miðgarður of Icelandic myth seems to have been much the same concept as the "mesocosm" here referred to. That Miðgarður was based on the circle, the cardinal points, the heavenly bodies, time-calculations, grand years, seasons, numerology and the accord between macrocosm and man the microcosm. The canons of social order

24) Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*, The Viking Press, New York, 1969, p. 294

make for the good of the individual, man himself is a mirror of the larger world, as society is a mirror of the social organization bound up with the laws of the gods. These were more or less the concepts underlying social organization in the West during the middle ages - in Christian garb. Religion apart, the ideology inherent in the "social" paganism of Iceland thus coincides with that of many Christian states. This greatly facilitated the acceptance of Christianity. Even the medieval Christian empire is said to have been "an earthly reflex of the order of the heavens, hieratically organized."²⁵⁾ The pagan roots of the constitution of Iceland as elicited through these studies of myth thus also correspond fairly accurately with the dominant ideology of the Christian middle ages. The social reality of pagan Iceland, in other words, exhibits the structure and ideology which might have been expected of people well acquainted with the geocentric world of antiquity and the mental make-up of the average western medieval man.

12. A major point in the hypotheses (based on tests) is, that time was equated with distance in pagan numerology. Time was sacred as the "law" of the universe, space became sacred through being consecrated to the numbers of time. Alþingi at Þingvellir was based on the basic number - 432000 - of which it was the centre. Tests indicate that Jelling in Denmark and Uppsala in Sweden were based on the same number - the "yardstick" so to speak, of Indian and Babylonian numerology. Valhöll was the obvious prototype, witness the Grímnismál. The reason then for the great importance of the measuring of the sites of the þings was, that through the numbers of time they were integrated in the order of the cosmos. Through this simple but logical expedient every aspect of our pagan culture seems to have been put into organic relationship to every other.

The Circle was the most important symbol of Icelandic paganism. It comprised the idea of the horizon and the division of the sky into segments. Each segment seems to have corresponded to a particular place on the ground - fixed by the setting of the sun in midwinter and the rising of the sun in midsummer. These points of the Circle and of

25) J. Campbell, Myths to Live By, p. 5

time were of major importance in the social order. Bergþórshvoll, for instance, the corner-stone of Njáls saga, corresponded to a place called Heiðrún in the sky - the Capricorn of the classical Zodiac. Heiðrún was connected with much the same major ideas as Capricorn. It was the place of the beginning - of Creation with a capital letter - that locus amoenus where ideas in the garb of "persons" might have been expected in medieval allegory - where the embodiment of Water dispensed law and good advice, where the corn-god was reared in his "delta" (Landeyjar), where the three elements of Wind-fire-water formed new life and destroyed it in a conflagration at the end of the proper time-cycle. All these major ideas coincide well with the characters of Njáls saga.

Another salient point of the hypotheses is the equation of the world with the human body. The Circle was divided into the parts of human anatomy which corresponded to the same parts of the sky in classical and medieval astrology. Man, in other words, corresponded to the universe. The time of man was determined by the laws of the universe - both corresponding to measurements in space. Thus Alþingi at Þingvellir was in effect the centre of Man - his innermost being, his law, his justice and his "fertility" - for the simple reason that time-space were equated with Man as an idea.

As in the sacred lore of so many pagan cultures, the concept of Three Stones played a key role in Iceland. Three rocks in the sea were the corner stone of the whole system of measurement - comprising at the same time the idea of the origin of law, that on which you can stand in a sea of the unknown. The abstract idea had a concrete foundation. Runes were the instruments of numerology, numbers as well as ideas and an alphabet; they were considered to have their origin in the same fountain as Man and his law - the fountain of Heiðrún, the goat of fertility in the sky.

13. To some scholars the most startling conclusion of these studies is the one pertaining to the foundation of the pagan constitution of Iceland.²⁶⁾ The construction of the Icelandic Goðaveldi, which has so long been a riddle, resolves itself into logical components - a simple division of KINGSHIP. The original power over the country, secular and sacred,

26) Einar Pálsson, *Tíminn og Eldurinn, Mímir*, Reykjavík, 1972, passim

was divided into the 36 decans of the circle, 9 to each part of the land. Thus the original 36 priest-chieftains in effect represented the same concrete symbol as one king - one whole circle. Together on the central bench of lögrétta the 36 goðar constituted the state of Iceland - which was at the same time a replica of the universe as well as of Man the microcosmos. The state was Miðgarðr, the middle order between Man and the universe. This middle order was represented by the 36 decans of the circle - the 36 goðar. The neolithic corn-god became the lord of the land - an embodiment of the state - his signature, so to speak, being one FOOT comprising 36 corns of barley, one for each priest-chieftain. Together the 36 formed one body of the corn-god - one perfect Man - one king. There seem to have been three main prototypes for this "kingship" - those of Jelling in Denmark, Uppsala in Sweden and Tara in Ireland.

14. Remembering that "precipitate generalization" is the danger of symbolism, it is well to bear in mind that the above solutions refer to myth of a definite period, a definite locality and a definite society. At the same time it should be clear, that hypotheses which can be tested greatly reduce such danger. In this case we are not dealing with hazy concepts, we are confronted with the most explicit answers to specific situations within a highly intricate context. Guesswork is hardly required at the present stage, just comparison. And for the study of the symbolism of other cultures it is extremely important that the mythology of Iceland can be pinpointed in time and place.

The approach here selected is unconventional in saga-study, easily understood in certain other disciplines. The conclusion that Njáls saga reflects ideas of ancient epico-mythical poetry will be a stumbling block to some, although, in reality, there can hardly be any doubt whatever on that score. All other major conclusions coincide with those of the main tenets of cultural anthropology today. From the time of E. Durkheim it has been generally accepted that religion is essentially the function of society. W.F. Albright has summed up the position of Durkheim and his followers thus:

the source of religion is society and the idea of the sacred is only a reflection of hypostatized society itself. The great contribution of religion has been in the creation and preservation of social solidarity and it must, therefore, exist forever, in some form or other. (27)

Whether or not one agrees with precisely this formulation, one thing is hardly in doubt: society and religion were inseparable in pagan Iceland. If the fate of man, the cycle of life and the social order were combined symbolically and constituted the sum of useful knowledge - the nuclear structuring force of the rites and society - then few things in the above conclusions should prove unintelligible to Germanic scholars. Given that the language of religion is mythical symbolism it is simply reasonable to look for signs pertaining to the creation and the preservation of the pagan constitution of Iceland in the relics of religion.

27) W.F. Albright, *op. cit.* p. 94