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Norse Mythology's English Connection: Methodological Notes

Scholars have expended much energy over the question of the origin or ultimate "home" of Norse mytholology or specific of its aspects or texts. Long ago Sophus Bugge argued, reasonably skilfully in my opinion, that much of Norse mythology, and indeed of Norse literary culture, derived from Celtic and Germanic Britain, with England the link. More recently, others have added to the evidence. This essay considers the efforts of two of these, Hans Kuhn and Wolfgang Butt.

Kuhn's arguments in this area go back at least to his remarks on "Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten" (1942), a paganism to which he assigned a large amount of syncretism. A likely breeding ground for this syncretism was tenth-century England, specifically the Danelaw, and in subsequent articles Kuhn argued the existence of various aspects of this syncretism, advancing the argument perhaps farthest in his his article, "Rund um die Vǫluspá"(1971).

As it may be extrapolated from these and other articles, the argument may be divided into four major parts.

1) The kenning type sverð-Freyr "man" shows a new and

less awed attitude toward the gods. The first attestation of the kenning type is in Egill Skallagrímsson's _Hǫfuðlausn_, according to tradition composed in York during the mid-tenth century.

2) The terms _alfaðir_ and _sigfaðir_ are applied to Odin. They differ fundamentally from the compounds in _-fǫðr_ (which Kuhn derives from IE *_potis_, Gothic _faþs_ "lord") and suggest influence of the Christian God. _Sigfaðir_ is attested in _Vǫluspá_ 55 and _Lokasenna_ 58 (where, however, it is used mockingly). _Alfaðir_ is attested in _Helgakviða Hundingsbana I_ 38--a poem with demonstrable connections with England--and in two eleventh-century Icelandic skalds.

3) Kennings of the type _farma gautr_ for Odin suggest the reinvigoration of the old pagan myth of Odin's self-sacrifice in light of the crucifixion. The _gautr_ complex must be understood as associated with a more general reinterpretation of Odin in light of the Christian god.

4) A new conception of Valhǫll as Odin's splendid hall emerges along with the new Odin and replaces the grim conception of Valhǫll as the corpses on the battlefield. The first attestation of _Valhǫll_, with this or any other conception, and of simplex _hǫll_, which Kuhn regards as an English loan, is in _Eiríksmál_, a tenth-century poem also associated with Northumbria; Kuhn accepts the poem as composed there.

The evidence associating Kuhn's perceived innovations in

Norse mythology with mid-tenth-century England are then primarily textual--or, more accurately, text/contextual--; the first attestations of relevant phenomena appear to be assignable to Northumbria around the middle of the tenth century.

By 1971 Kuhn was ready to add the language of the skalds of the Hlaðir jarls and even central cosmological myths to this milieu. He was writing, in the Helmut de Boor Festschrift, on de Boor's seminal contribution to our understanding of the religious language of Vǫluspá and the skalds of the Hlaðir jarls during the mid-tenth century. Kuhn acknowledged the possibility of innovations in religious language within this circle at this time, but he sought to connect those innovations with his own theory.

> Es liegt deshalb nah zu vermuten, dass auch die Neuerungen in der religiösen Sprache auf die de Boor vor 40 Jahren unsere Aufmerksamkeit gelenkt hat, mitsamt dem, was unter ihren steht, dort drüben ihre erste Entwicklung erfahren haben [Kuhn 1971:7]....
>
> Die Eiríkrsmál sind das erste zeitlich und raumlich fixierbar Gedicht, das den Walhallglauben bezeugt, daneben aber auch die vorstellung vom drohenden Weltuntergang und den mythus von Balders Tod. Sie gehören alle zu den zentralen themen der Vǫluspá und ihrer eddischen Trabanten, so dass wir

vom stofflichen her die Eiríksmál wohl als das früheste datierbare Denkmal dieses kreises zählen dürfen [Kuhn 1971:11].

Enormous claims are being made here. How solid is the textual/contextual evidence on which they are based? We may begin by dismissing the validity of Hǫfuðlausn as the first attestation of kennings of the sverð-Freyr type. Even without the philological evidence that now seems to put the poem in the twelfth century (e.g., Jón Helgason 1969), the existence of the many other head-ransom poems in Old Norse alone makes it clear that we are dealing with a traditional motif whose source value is highly suspect. It is far more likely that the most famous of the older skalds, Egill Skallagrímsson, should have such a story attached to him than that he should have been a model of whom stories were applied to lesser known skalds.

Without Hǫfuðlausn, kennings of the sverð-Freyr type become the property of the skalds of the Hlaðir jarls, and it is precisely the relationship of the language of these skalds to England that Kuhn seeks to demonstrate. If, therefore, the argument is to succeed, it must turn on Eiríksmál, and it is indeed on that poem that Kuhn based the most far-ranging statement of his thesis, as we have seen.

Was Eiríksmál composed in Northumbria? And what is its English connection?

Eirikr bloodax did, indeed, reign in York on two short occasions and was deposed in 954; this we have from the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. He was slain in the same year at Stainmore. He may have been, at least off and on, in Northumbria or elsewhere in England between his departure from Norway after the death of Harald fairhair during the 930s and his assumption of the kingdom of York in 948. Furthermore, his father had sent Eirikr's younger brother, Håkon, to be fostered by Æthalstan of England.

Eirikr seems to have been something of an anomaly in the largely Hiberno-Norse York and was apparently unpopular, as it was the Northumbrians himself who expelled him. It is therefore perhaps unlikely that the opportunities for cultural and religious influence were very extensive.

As for the composition of the poem, Fagrskinna reports that Eirikr's widow Gunnhildr ordered it composed after his death. In the first place, it is possible that the account in Fagrskinna is false. The poem is openly pagan, and as they are uniformly critical of Gunnhildr, the Christian authors of the Icelandic sources might have concocted the story so as to associate her with a pagan document and thus vilify her. On the other hand, if there is any truth to the portrait these sources paint of Gunnhildr, she may well have requested not just a praise poem but a highly pagan one. Indeed, her nominally Christian husband had been slain by forces with a highly Christian orientation.

In any case, if we accept the account in Fagrskinna, the poem was commissioned by a Dane for a Norwegian, and although the poet's identity is unknown, he evidently was familiar with eddic and skaldic tradition, and the handbooks take him for Norwegian (e.g., Hallvard Lie in KLNM). The account in Fagrskinna itself leaves some doubt as to whether the poem was actually composed in England. In introducting the poem, it states that Gunnhildr commissioned it eptir fall Eiriks--how soon after, we do not know. After quoting the poem, however, the author continues:

> Eptir fall Eiriks konungs þvingask Jàtmundr konungr Gunnhildi ok sunum Eiriks, finnr pà sök til at Eirikr herjaði innanlands à riki konungs. Fór pà Gunnhildr à braut af Englandi með sonum sinum til Danmarkar.... [Fagrskinna, ed. P.A. Munch and C.R. Unger, Christiania, 1847, p. 18]

The collocation of eptir fall Eiriks with the commissioning of the poem and Gunnhildr's flight to Denmark leaves open the possibility that Eiriksmàl was composed in Denmark.

There are two additional problems, interrelated and powerful. The first is the absence of anything even remotely similar in contemporary English literature. The second is the presence of something similar in contemporary Nowegian literature. I begin with the second.

Like Eiriksmàl, Haraldskvæði is in mixed eddic meters

and offers dialog among mythological creatures, specifically a valkyrie and a raven. The transmission is problematic, but all three of the skalds whose names are associated with the poem are Norwegian, and no evidence links any of them with England. On the other hand, Þjóðolfr's Ynglingatal links him to some extent with Sweden.

Eiríksmál departs from Haraldskvæði in setting the poem in Valhǫll and allowing Odin to speak, and these elements are the core of Kuhn's argument. If, however, syncretism in the Danelaw was important to their development, we may wonder at the ease with which the Norwegian skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir adapted and developed them for Eiríkr's brother in Hákonarmál. Again, Hákon had spent much of his childhood in England, but he returned to Norway as a young man. For him there can be no question of Northumbrian syncretism. Syncretism may easily have obtained around him, but it will have been of a specifically English-Norwegian sort, and it is worth noting that he was on good terms with the Hlaðir jarls. Indeed, most scholars now read the conception of Valhǫll expressed in his memorial poem as containing more archaic elements than those of Eiríksmál [e.g. Marold and Wolf], but only von See doubts the usual chronology, and his reversed chronology does not seem to have won universal favor.

The three "eddic praise" poems' largest departure from skaldic style is their use of eddic style. Mythological

eddic poems rely on precisely those stylistic features that set off the eddic praise poems: dialogue and mythological characters and settings. What sets the three "eddic praise" poems off from eddic poems is the introduction of actual kings, well-known to the audience-- and, for us, the transmission of poet's names with two of the texts.

Precisely these features are, however, also found in another poem of Þjóðolfr, his Ynglingatal. It mentions kings who become increasingly historical as the poem progresses, and becomes contemporary with Rǫgnvaldr heiðumhæri. Ynglingatal's connections, however, are precisely not with England and the Danelaw, but rather with Sweden and Norway, and, again, Eyvindr seems to have found little trouble in imitating it in his Háleygjatal. The larger context of Eiríksmál, then, seems to point away rather than toward England.

To return to the first of the interrelated problems: all three of the eddic praise poems contain material for which direct English parallels cannot be demonstrated. Indeed, the best evidence for English syncretism--given the lack of textual evidence--is offered by the stone carvings alluding, apparently, to Thor's battle with the Midgard serpent. Precisely this subject was most popular in the earliest skaldic poetry, which we must set in Norway. Thor and his opponent are also on the Altuna stone, and some scholars have put Bragi the Old, the first skald, and one who sang of

Thor's battle with Jǫrmungandr, in Sweden or even further east, thus reducing the specifically English connection. These poems and stones raise another question: if Odin rose to the all-father in England, why was--as is generally accepted--Thor the most worshipped god there?

The parallels Kuhn thinks may be English are, in fact, not specifically English but generally Christian. Insofar as early Scandinavian Christianity came from England, then, we may look to English syncretism as a breeding ground for Norse mythology; but we must recall that Christianity reached Scandinavia through many conduits. The same objections apply to another argument based primarily on literary-historical evidence, namely that of Wolfgang Butt concerning the Vǫluspá. This argument is just as charged as those of Kuhn and just as important for the history of Scandinavian mythology.

Butt's contribution appeared in 1969 and is noteworthy because Joseph Harris informs us, in his article on eddic poetry to appear in the Dictionary of the Middle Ages, that Butt argues "convincingly." It is also significant because it offers a specific location for the composition of the Vǫluspá--the Danelaw--, and a fairly specific date--1001 to 1033. Butt's methodology is purely literary-historical; he believes that he has uncovered specific written sources for Vǫluspá. These are the homilies of Wulfstan and the poem "The Judgement Day II."

Let us examine the verbal similarities on which Butt bases his argument. The first of these are as follows:

<u>Vǫluspá</u>

38. Sál sá hon standa
sólo fiarri,
Nástrǫndo á,
norðr horfa dyrr;
fello eitrdropar
inn um kióra,
sá er undinn salr
orma hryggiom.
39. Sá hon þar vaða
þunga strauma
menn meinsvara
oc morðvarga,
oc þannz annars glepr
eyrarúno;
þar saug Níðhǫggr
nái framgengna,
sleit vargr vera--
vitoð er enn, eða hvat?
64. Sal sér hon standa
sólo fegra,
gulli þacþan,
á Gimlé;
þar scolo dyggvar
dróttir byggia

<u>De regula canonicorum</u> (Wulfstan)

Ne beon hi æfre manslagan
ne morðwyrhtan ne æwbrecan,
ac healdan heora riht æwa,
þæt is heora mynster.
Ne beon hi wordlogan ne weddlogan
ne ryperas ne reaferas ne hi
ænigum men beodan butan þæt
hi willan þæt man heom beode.

<u>Sermo ad Anglos</u> (Wulfstan)

Her syndan mannslagan 7 mægslagan
7 mæsserbanan 7 mynsterhatan;
7 her syndan mánsworan 7
morþorwyrhtan; 7 her syndan
myltestran 7 bearnmyrðran 7
fule folegene horingas manege;
7 her syndan wiccan 7 wælcyrian;
7 her syndan ryperas 7
reaferas 7 woroldstruderas 7,
hræðest is to cweþenne,
mána 7 misdæda ungerim ealre.

<u>Sermo ad populum</u> (Wulfstan)

Þyder sculan manslagan, 7 þider
sculan mansworan; þyder sculan

oc um aldrdaga wiccan 7 bearnmyrðran....
ynðis niðta.

Butt believes that the two halls of strophes 38 and 64 belong together, on the basis of the obvious verbal parallels. They reflect, then, the Christian heaven and hell, and a catalogue of sinners accompanies the picture of hell. The several parallel passages from Wulfstan's homilies also present a catalogue of sinners in connection with a description of hell at the end of the world. The three sorts of sinners in Vǫluspá 39 are to be found, he argues, among the many more sorts Wulfstan enumerates, and precise verbal echoes rule out, in Butt's opinion, any possibility that the similarities are the result of chance. menn meinsvara corresponds to mansworan; the poetic hapax legomenon morðvargr imitates mordwyrhta, arguably a term limited to Wulfstan; and the circumlocution of 39:5-6 is necessary because Norse has no suitable etymon for æbreca.

To this we may begin with a textual objection. Even if we allow the juxtaposition of the halls in strophes 38 and 64, we are left in the Regius version of the poem with two additional halls in strophe 37. These also share verbal parallels with strophes 38 and 64: á Nidavǫllom, á Okólni, Nástrǫndo á, á Gimlé; ór gulli, gulli þacþan. In Regius, at least, all three halls seem to be associated with the "sinners" of strophe 39 (one for each hall?), which makes less persuasive the equation of the halls of strophes 38 and

64.

Even if we are to disqualify strophe 37 for not occurring in both major manuscripts, I do not find the verbal parallels compelling. While it is true that an adjective **meinsvarr* is nowhere else attested in Norse, and that the related nouns (e.g., *meinsvari*) may be loans from Old English religious prose, the hypothetical Old English original is a noun, not an adjective. The compound is composed of perfectly good Norse components: compare *meinstafir* in *Lokasenna* 28 and the kenning *Gauta eiðsvari* in *Þórsdrápa* 8. Finnur Jónsson (Lexicon Poeticum, s.v.) reads *eiðsvari* as an adjective "those bound by oath," and the compound seems a direct antonym to *meinsvari*. Oaths were important in ancient Norse culture and particularly in myth and religion--note that the old sky god Týr finds his only role in the extant mythology in making good a bad oath, and that Ullr is primarily associated with oaths sworn on a certain ring--, and I remain unconvinced that we need a concrete source to explain the appearance of the term in *Vǫluspá*.

The parallel between *mansworan* and *menn meinsvara* is, even so, the most compelling of the three alleged parallels. *morðvargr* "murder-warg" and *mordwyrhta* "murder-doer" are simply not the same, although they look similar. The Norse word is a technical term in the legal language, referring to a true murderer (one who kills in secret). The Old English word has a similar meaning, but its associations, as Beth-

erum puts it, "are all with witchcraft" (1971:310). (An attempt to render mordwyrhta etymologically into Norse would yield *morð-yrkir; the second component is unknown in literary Old Norse, although it may be attested in the dative singular on the eighth-century Eggjum rune stone.) So much for the direct parallels. For þann es annars eyrar-runo glepr, we are asked to postulate the model of Old English æbreca. Even if we accept that the unclear Norse sentence means "adulteror" ("the one who seduces another's true love"), there is a difference in number--æbrecan is plural, þann singular. Indeed, all the nouns in Wulfstan's catalogues are plural. If the Vǫluspá poet imitates a catalogue here, he does so in a highly idiosyncratic way.

Butt's argument here, then, is based on the general similarity of a catalogue of sinners (a beloved form in the Middle Ages), two questionable verbal parallels, and a possible translation. Butt argues that the juxtaposition of the catalogue of sinners with the end of the world is somehow unusual, but that is hardly the case. One of the points of the Judgement day is the punishment of the wicked, so sinners play a large role in Christian eschatology. Old English has, in fact, another poem with a short catalogue of sinners at the end of the world: "Christ III," 1609-1612a.

Here is what the Vǫluspá passage also contains--material without parallel in Wulfstan.

1) Hell and heaven as halls.

2) The placenames Nàstrǫnd and Gimlé and their attributes.

3) The notion that the doomed vaða þunga strauma "wade through heavy streams."

4) Niðhǫggr sucking corpses and the wolf devouring men-- apparently a typical Norse mythological collocation of wolf and serpent.

A basic problem seems to me to inform Butt's method. Once we accept that Vǫluspà reflects notions from Christianity, we may look everywhere, or so it seems to me, for specific models. Missionaries had been in Scandinavia for some time by the early eleventh century (Butt's dating of the text), and the millenium must have been on the minds of many men.

As regards the halls, point 1) above, we may note that iconography frequently or usually portrayed heaven as a building or even a town and used a gate or portico as its symbol, and that vision literature often locates a hall or building in hell. Again, I take an example from "Christ III" (1603b-1606a), where hell is described in the context of the end of the world.

Bið susla hus
open ond oðeawed, aðlongum ongean,
ðæt sceolon fyllan firengeorne men
sweartum sawlum.

A few lines later hell is called *mordorhusa mæst* "greatest of murder-houses" (1624a) and *dreamleas hus* "joyless house" (1627b). Here we may note in passing that iconography can have been involved in the reformation of Valhǫll as a vast hall, as postulated by Kuhn, and that such iconography cannot be localized to Northumbria and England.

In vision literature, heaven and hell are usually separated by a river. Although it usually has a bridge over it--the narrow path of souls--there are visions in which sinners wade through the river: Boniface mentioned such a case in a letter of 717, and the German vision of Wethnus (De visionibus Wethni) repeats it. Níðhǫggr's sucking of corpses and the wolf's tearing of them is not so distant from the basic image of hell as devouring the souls of the evil; here note the iconographic feature of the maw of hell as a large monster's mouth, spitting flame and with great sharp teeth.

We now turn to Butt's other parallel passages.

Vǫluspá	*Secundum Marcum* (Wulfstan)
45. Brœðr muno beriaz	Nis se man of life þe
oc at bǫnum verðaz,	mæge oððe cunni swa yfel
muno systrungar	hit asecgan swa hit sceal geweorðan
sifiom spilla;	on þam deoflican timan. Ne byrhð
hart er í heimi,	þonne borðor oðrum hwilan
hórdómr mikill,	ne fæder his bearne ne bearn his
sceggǫld, scálmǫld,	ægenum fæder ne gesibb gesibban

scildir ro klofnir, þe ma þe fremdan....
vindǫld, vargǫld,
áðr verǫld steypiz;
mun engi maðr
ǫðrom þyrma.

Butt stresses the moral or ethical nature of the two passages, a nature he finds common in Old English but lacking in other Germanic literature when kinsmen kill kinsmen; and he adds the philological observation that the usage of _spilla_, the compound _hórdomr_, and the _annarr_ construction appear to have been influenced by Old English. Lines 45:5-12 seem to Butt to display only a general stylistic similarity with the following passage from Wulfstan--a kind of breathless quality.

> And þeodscypas winnað 7 sacað heom betweonan foran to þam timan þe þis sceal geweorþan. Eac sceal aspringan wide 7 side sacu 7 clacu, hol 7 hetu 7 rypera reaflac, herre 7 hunger, bryne 7 blodgyte 7 styrnlice styrnlice styrunga, stric 7 steorfa 7 fela ungelimpa.

We may pass over the alleged similarities between _Vǫluspá_'s _hart er í heimi_ and Wulfstan; they are not compelling, and indeed Butt makes little of them.

The first question, if we accept Christian influence on _Vǫluspá_ 45:1-4, is whether Wulfstan offers the best possible

model. The answer, of course, is no. The Old High German Muspilli seems just as close: dar ni mac denne mak andremo helfan vora demo Muspilli " there and then no kinsman can help another, before that Muspilli." Looking for specific analogues in Germanic languages, however, is quite unnecessary. If the ultimate source is Christian, one need look no further than the Bible. Mark 13:12 tells us that "brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death." Wulfstan was surely not the only person in northern Europe to paraphrase this passage in a sermon.

As regards the philological arguments, they are potentially persuasive but customarily subtle. Butt's reading of spilla as "kill," a common usage of Old English spillan, is based on Snorri's interpretation of the passage, which may have been influenced by Mark 13:12. Stefán Einarsson and Einar Ól. Sveinsson argued in 1948 whether hórdomr was Norwegian or Icelandic, and Magnus Már Lárusson shows that there may be native usage at work here too. I am prepared to accept the annarr construction as a possible sign of Old English influence, but it is only one phrase. There is also ample philological evidence putting the poem far from the Danelaw; of the many examples, let me cite Hugo Pipping, who found arguments to locate the poem in Uppsala, whence it was, according to him, transported to Iceland via Hedeby and Norway.

Butt's third parallel is between numerous passages in Vǫluspá associated with Ragnarǫk and corresponding passages in "The Judgement Day II" (Be domes dæge), an expanded translation of the De die judicii by Bede or Alcuin, undertaken probably in the late tenth century.

	The Judgment Day II		Vǫluspá
99	Eall eorde bifad,		
	eac swa þa duna		
	dreosad and hreosad,	52,5–6	griótbiǫrg gnata,
	and beorga hlidu		enn gífr rata,
	bugad and myltad,		
	and se egeslica sweg		
	ungerydre sæ	57,2	sigr fold í mar
	eall manna mod		
	miclum gedrefed.		
	Eal bid eac upheofon	41,5–7	svort verda sólscin
	sweart and gesworcen,		of sumor eptir,
	swide geþuxsad,		vedr ǫll válynd –
	deorc and dimhiw,	57,1–4	Sól tér sortna,
	and dwolma sweart.		sigr fold í mar,
107	þonne stedelease		hverfa af himni
	steorran hreosad,		heidar stiǫrnor;
108	and seo sunne forswyrcd		
	sona on morgen,		
	ne se mona næfd		
	nanre mihte wiht,		
	þæt he þære nihte		
	genipu mæge flecgan.		
145	Ufonan eall þis		
	eac byd gefylled	57,7–8	leicr hár hiti
	eall uplic lyft		vid himin siálfan.
	ættrenum lige.		
	Færd fyr ofer eall,		
162	þær beod þearfan		
	and þeodcyningas,		
	earm and eadig,		
	ealle beod afæred;	47,5–6	hrædaz allir
	þær hæfd ane lage		á helvegom,
	earm and se welega,		
	fordon hi habbad ege		
	ealle ætsomne.		
	Dæt rede flod		
	ræscet fyre		
	and biterlice	7–8	ádr Surtar þann
	bærnd da earman sawla,		sefi of gleypir.
	and heora heortan		
	horxlice wyrmas,		
	synscyldigra,	39,7–8	þar saug Nidhǫggr
	ceorfad and slitad.		nái framgengna,
			sleit vargr vera –
211	and hy wælgrimme		
	wyrmas slitad		
	and heora ban gnagad		
	bryniguın tuxlum.		

The Judgment Day II 107–109	Vǫluspá 5,5–10
þonne stedelease	sól þat né vissi,
steorran hreosad	hvar hon sali átti,
and seo sunne forswyrcd	stiǫrnor þat né visso,
sona on morgen,	hvarþær stadi átto,
ne se mona næfd	máni þat né vissi,
nanre mihte wiht,	hvat hann megins átti.

"The Judgement Day II" is preserved only in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 201, a manuscript from Worcester or perhaps York, containing important minor verse, some legal materials, the Old English Appolonius of Tyre--and homilies of Wulfstan. The manuscript evidence therefore places the poem in or near the Danelaw and associates it with Wulfstan, and Butt believes that if the *Vǫluspá* poet did not actually know the poem itself, he had heard something like it in a sermon of Wulfstan.

Are the parallels compelling? Please note that Butt has cut sections of the Old English poem, those which bear no relationship to *Vǫluspá*, and that the order of events in "The Judgement Day II" differs from that in *Vǫluspá*. Apocolypse was a popular subject in the Middle Ages, and one need not look far to find other verbal parallels to *Vǫluspá*.

The passages Butt singles out from *Vǫluspá* include the following motifs, in the order in which they appear in *Vǫluspá*.

1) *Vǫluspá* 5:5-10 — chaos of heavenly bodies
2) *Vǫluspá* 39:7-8 — dragon and wolf devour corpses
3) *Vǫluspá* 41:5-7 — sun turns black, woeful weather
4) *Vǫluspá* 47:5-6 — all (men?) fear
5) *Vǫluspá* 52:5-6 — earthquake
6) *Vǫluspá* 57:1-4 — sun turns black; earth sinks into sea; stars vanish

7) Vǫluspá 57:7-8   flames lick the heavens

These motifs are everywhere in apocolyptic tradition. Many of the motifs Vǫluspá assigns to Ragnarǫk are to be found in the Bible's Revelation-- not to mention the apocrypha. Revelation 6:12-17, for example, tells of an earthquake, the blackening of the sun and moon, the falling of the stars, the moving of mountains, and men's fear--an often stressed feature in apocylyptic literature. These are repeated at various points in John's revelation, which also offers, in ch. 12, "one who is to rule all the nations," a clear analogue, as every student of Vǫluspá knows, to str. 65(H). The chapter also offers the ubiquitous dragon of eschatological tradition, who perhaps appears as one or more of Vǫluspá's dragons.

In Revelation and in the Christian Judgement Day traditions more generally, angels do battle with devils, a clear analogue to the last battle at Ragnarǫk. This motif is missing from "The Judgement Day II," which focuses on men's reactions to the end. Vǫluspá pays far less attention to that aspect of the story.

My complaint is more with Butt's method than with his conclusion. It seems impossible to me to pinpoint textual models for Vǫluspá's vision of the end, given the widespread popularity of apocylyptic traditions throughout the Middle Ages. If the Vǫluspá poet may for other reasons plausibly be located in the Danelaw ca. 1000, then

he cannot have composed his poem outside the influence of Wulfstan's eschatological preaching and perhaps also "The Judgement Day II." But if the poet's dates and location constitute the question, the alleged textual parallels cannot provide a convincing answer. He could have heard Wulfstan preaching about the judgement day--but he could have heard him in London, before 1002, and he might have heard another preacher, equally eloquent, in Norway or Iceland. _Íslendingabók_, _Hungrvaka_, and _Kristni saga_ mention several bishops who were in Iceland around the millenium, and it is difficult to believe that they did not use conceptions of the judgement day to impress their would-be converts or in sermons for the devout.

In searching for textual evidence, we may overlook other, less traceable evidence. Norsemen certainly will have seen iconography of the judgement day in many places, and presumably some will have learned what the images meant and the grand story that went with them. This could have happened anywhere, and the kind of syncretism in which _Vǫluspá_ developed could just possibly have obtained only in a single poet's sensibility.

From my reading of these two scholars' methodology, I conclude that we cannot on the basis of their arguments prove at least part of what they set out to prove: the central importance of the geographical entity England, and particularly the Danelaw, in the formation of our extant Norse

mythology. I would by no means deny England that importance, but I understand the process perhaps somewhat differently. What both Kuhn and Butt perceived was the influence of Christianity. I take it as a given that Norse mythology cannot be interpreted outside of Christian influence, which may have been massive. This influence probably ranged from reforming old myths in Christian forms, probably by emphasizing certain aspects of the "original, pagan" myths, as Kuhn argued, through assimilation of Christian modes of expression, as Butt argued, to outright imitation of Christian forms, perhaps to mock. But seeking for specific geographic locations for the actual operation of this influence is almost certainly a lost cause. Christianity was by its nature an international religion, with a portable international language and portable culture. "Skaldic" culture, too, if I may use the term for the literary and religious culture of some Scandinavians during the ninth and tenth centuries, was also relatively portable. The two cultures had ample opportunities to meet and doubtless did so in an enormous number of contexts. A viking could perhaps be prime-signed in England, see Christian iconography in France, and have exempla retold to him while at sea. A priest might be born in England, educated in France, posted to Germany, and meet vikings in any of these places or at sea.

If, however, we speak of English Christianity, instead of Christianity in England, we are on the right track.

Archaeological and textual evidence point increasingly to an important Christian presence in Norway during during the tenth century, and the importance of the English church in Norway is well documented. The kind of syncretism Kuhn and Butt describe probably did obtain, but it can have obtained as easily in Norway as in England, or even in Norwegian colonies. What demands our attention is not where it took place, but how and why.

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