

# The Adaptability of Myth in Old Norse and Finnish Poetry

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## I

In 1817, K. A. Gottlund wrote in a review in the *Svensk Literaturtidning*:<sup>1</sup>

Thus the youth of Finland, writers who care more about the products of their fatherland (for in this respect little may be expected of their elders), should try to cherish and nurture the literature of their homeland — in whatever field of work should help in their endeavour! They would encounter passages such as they would search for in vain in foreign literature — indeed, the reviewer will go so far in his claim, that if it should be desired to gather the ancient folk-poems and to form from them an orderly whole, be it an epic, a drama, or whatever, it would be possible for a new Homer, an Ossian, or a Nibelungenlied to arise; and a Finnish nationhood would awake, famed for the lustre and glory of its own particularity, conscious of itself, the admiration of contemporaries and aftercomers, made fair by its own aura. The reviewer asserts that in his view he has never used his time better than in sacrificing it to the gathering of the incomparable remains of the songs and poems of our forefathers, poems which contain so much philosophy and beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> No. 25, 21.6.1817, p. 394. I have translated from the Finnish translation cited in Kaukonen 16.

Elias Lönnrot probably never read these words, but within a few years he had realized Gottlund's desire. By publishing the *Kalevala* in 1835 he not only won fame for himself as Finland's Homer, but also provided the nation with a symbolic focus for its growing self-awareness. With an echo of the resurrectional activity of Lemminkäinen's mother in the poem as she gathers the remains of her son from the river of Tuonela, the Finnish Literature Society's assessment of Lönnrot's achievement records that:<sup>2</sup>

The sharp-sighted recorder and arranger has assembled the shattered pieces of this ancient Finnish song and thus saved it from imminent destruction, or more correctly: he has brought to light what was already lying as scattered fragments in the grave of oblivion.

Lönnrot himself does not indulge in such extravagant rhetoric as Gottlund or the Finnish Literature Society. These quotations however reveal a good deal about the context in which the composition of the *Kalevala* took place. I list some points of note:

1. There was a growing sense of nationalism (Finland was under Swedish rule until 1809, then under a resented Russian rule).
2. There was a desire for a native expression of this nationalism, in the people's language, Finnish,
3. It would, however, be modelled on other comparable national expressions such as the *Nibelungenlied*, Homer, or the *Edda*.
4. The work would secure its credentials as an expression of national identity by being formed from traditional folk-poetry.
5. The composer of the epic was seen more as a recorder than an original artist; he was responsible for reassembling the supposedly corrupt and fragmented remains of the people's epic.<sup>3</sup> Implicit here is the notion of a lost golden age of the nation, the restoration of which is signalled by the reconstitution of the lost epic.
6. The emphasis of the epic is upon heroic deeds; although many early recorders and we today regard the historical basis for the heroes of the *Kalevala* as close to non-existent, it was common for most of the nineteenth century to see a historical basis to the poem, which was regarded as extolling the deeds of the ancestors.
7. A mythological background to the heroic events was however necessitated by the fact that mythological poems existed in the folk tradition, and Lönnrot desired to include all possible poems in his all-encompassing scheme.
8. Lönnrot's endeavours would not have been possible without the work of

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<sup>2</sup> Trans. from Kaukonen 89; the original would have been in Swedish.

<sup>3</sup> This forms a rather crude interpretation of what we now know to be a characteristic feature of oral poetry production: the oral poet has one or several 'mental texts' encompassing the range of poetic narrative themes at his disposal, but on any particular occasion he would only put a portion of this into a poem; Lönnrot specifically set out to include the whole mental text, of all the poets he could find, in one all-encompassing written text.

predecessors; chief among these may be mentioned the work of G. Porthan, *De poesi fennica*, published in 1766, which is a guidebook to improve Finnish poetics with many examples from folk poetry, and C. Ganander's *Mythologia Fennica* of 1789, an encyclopedia of folk beliefs illustrated with copious quotations of actual mythological poems.

I have focused on the *Kalevala*, but similar points could be made about other nineteenth-century epics, such as the Estonian *Kalevipoeg*, or the Latvian *Lacplesis* (Bear-slayer).

I turn now to Iceland, and specifically to the Codex Regius of the Eddic poems. The manuscript dates from the latter half of the thirteenth century, but it is clear that an extended period of written transmission and composition lies behind it;<sup>4</sup> the recording of the poems in writing from orally transmitted versions may have begun in the last years of the 12th century (a date earlier than 1150 is anyway unlikely).<sup>5</sup> Clearly the purposes in recording the Eddic

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<sup>4</sup> This is the conclusion of Lindblad. His study was made possible largely through the good fortune that the scribe of CR was conservative, unlike many other scribes (such as that of the other MS of Eddic poems, AM 748 I 4<sup>to</sup>), and therefore preserves many of the features of his exemplars. Thus it is clear that the CR falls into two distinct portions, mythological poems and heroic, marked by orthographic differences great enough to suggest that they were brought together only in the extant manuscript. The division is recognized by the scribe, who starts the heroic section with an exceptionally large initial. It would appear also that earlier scribes, of antecedents of CR, must also have been conservative, though perhaps to a lesser extent, in so far as it seems to be possible to trace separate groups within the overall two-fold division, certainly within the heroic poems (at least the Sigurðr and the Helgi poems form two groups; other groups are more arguable) and possibly within the mythological. Thus clusters of poems already existed as written texts when the heroic collection, and perhaps too the mythological, was formed: CR was based on these two larger collections. In reality, the picture may have been more complex. For example, within the mythological poems *Háv* is so distinct in its orthography that it may have been joined to the mythological collection only in CR itself.

<sup>5</sup> I am not here concerned with the motivation for recording vernacular literature in the first place. Kurt Schier has offered some interesting thoughts on this subject, comparing the very different situations in Iceland and Sweden. Of note are the facts that in Iceland Christianity was introduced amicably (more or less) and patronage remained in the hands of the same families as before the conversion; the monks and clerics were largely Icelandic; the monasteries were Benedictine or Augustinian, which supported the writing of history, as opposed to Cistercian or Dominican, as in Sweden, which supported the production of sermons or spiritual works. I would argue that familiarity with Eddic mythological verse in orally transmitted form disappeared in the mid-thirteenth century, and heroic verse perhaps a little later. Its position was taken by *rímur*, which are first mentioned in *Sturlunga saga*. Snorri at least knew more Eddic poems than are extant, perhaps indicating access to oral versions. All of the evidence after Snorri seems to me to point to a literary tradition. Thus, if there were a rich oral culture preserving these poems in the 13th century, why did the scribes involved in the transmission of the Eddic poems not refer to a singer to correct mistakes? In *Norna Gests þáttur* (c. 1300) there is an oral presentation of *Helr* and *Regm*, but the texts derive from a literary tradition, not an oral one. I do not count the Hauksbók version of *Völuspá* as evidence of oral transmission taking place in the 14th century, other than in a few details (additional verses in H may have been supplied from other poems, possibly oral, though possibly written): see Ursula Dronke's arguments for the written basis of the Hauksbók variants in *The Poetic Edda* II; basically, it appears that H forms a jumbled version derived from a revision undertaken at Snorri's instigation, and which he has used in part in *Gylfaginning*. The Sturlunga age was one of rapidly changing political control and social upheaval, which would not have favoured the cultivation of traditional oral poetry; the literary tastes moved increasingly towards the romantic Continental tales, and the tradition of Icelandic court skalds in Norway came to an end by 1300 (see Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ch. IV for an outline of the rise of romance in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland). Part of the changing social scene centred around the Church, which became

poems and then gathering them into collections or cycles may have differed at different stages along this route. It seems likely that the heroic and mythological portions were joined only in CR itself, and the transmission of the two types of poetry may have been differently motivated.

The twelfth century was a period of antiquarian interest in Iceland. Most obviously Ari's *Íslendingabók* signifies the growing historical interest which led in the succeeding century to works such as *Sverris saga* or *Heimskringla* (reflecting a more general Scandinavian perspective), as well as the *Íslendinga sögur* (which are to be seen in this context as historical works reflecting a specifically Icelandic interest). However, the historical interest stretched back also to earlier days, and gave rise to works such as *Skjöldunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.<sup>6</sup> Snorri regarded skaldic verse as the best source of information about Norwegian kings; heroic Eddic verse, though seemingly ignored by Snorri, could be viewed as a historical source for earlier periods, and it is in this context that it may well have been first recorded.

The recording of the mythological poems was the outcome of a more tenuous tradition. It is I think unlikely that we would have the mythological section of the *Poetic Edda* had it not been for Snorri's *Edda*. His aim was to preserve the myths for the use of poets, rather than to preserve the traditional poems themselves, but his citation of these poems must have acted as a spur to their full recording; this would be all the more clearly urgent if these poems were disappearing: the fact that Snorri felt the need to record the myths at all indicates they were being forgotten, and more specifically his references to at least six Eddic poems no longer extant, and probably forgotten by the time of the CR, indicate a pressing need to record what was left.<sup>7</sup> Some points of

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both more powerful and more foreign during the 13th century; Icelandic bishops were imposed by the Norwegian authorities after 1236, and they sought to overthrow secular control of church lands and to establish the precedence of ecclesiastical over secular law. The resulting loss of standing of the *goðar* may have lessened the patronage of traditional poetry, but this would be difficult to trace, especially as we know almost nothing of the practitioners of Eddic verse and how they might have been affected. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (100–101) believes that Eddic verse was still known in the region of Miðdalr in 1255, since Jóniðr then had a premonition of the battle at Pverá, in which a dream-woman appeared and uttered Eddic verse (*Sturlunga saga* IV. 43–47). But as Einar points out, 'everything about this dream-woman is cloaked in an air of antiquity', which may include her uttering of Eddic verse. The verses are moreover mainly 'loosely constructed', which implies a faltering tradition.

<sup>6</sup> *Skjöldunga saga* survives only in a Latin paraphrase, and the extant version of *Hrólfs saga* is later than the 12th century. Nonetheless, both these works appear to derive from 12th century originals; the unlucky turns of fate in manuscript preservation should not blind us to the importance of the interest in early as well as later Scandinavian history at this time.

<sup>7</sup> The particular Eddic poems known to Snorri seem to have differed considerably from our present canon. He quotes from the following: *Háv*, *Vsp*, *Grm*, *Vm*, *Fáfm*, *Skm*, *Ls* (in an adulterated form, probably Snorri's own adaptation), and from two poems not preserved in CR, *Grott*, *Vsp in skamma*. In addition, there is evidence of at least six further no longer extant poems in *Gylfaginning*:

a. Stattu fram meðan þú fregn,

sitja skal sá er segir

This is reminiscent of *Háv*, which has just been cited. It may simply be an ad hoc versification, however.

interest here are that the non-extant poems are not named, except *Heimdallargaldr*, and that they are either not quoted, or are quoted only briefly. The citations from extant poems usually identify their source, and the citations are mostly longer (in particular with *Vsp*, *Grm*, and *Vm*). The question must arise how far Snorri originally quoted his sources and named them, and how far the present state of Snorri's text is the result of later interpolation, at a time when various poems known to him were no longer available (and hence his text could not be interpolated with citations). In the Uppsala MS the citations, and much else besides, are indicated in an abbreviated form, and the distortions found in the Eddic verses there probably reflect writing from memory. It is tantalizing to speculate whether we here see Snorri's working methods: to what extent was the *Edda* written in a hasty manner, with citations unchecked, or indicated only by tags, which in the other MSS have been filled in soon afterwards by scribes checking a text, and perhaps filled in with longer quotations than Snorri intended? If many of Snorri's citations proved to be interpolations, it would still show that other texts of Eddic poems were available, but it would affect our perception of when they were available, and hence of our view of the manuscript transmission. Similarly, in Finland, the initial forays into folk poetry research in the eighteenth century soon aroused comment that the folk poems would be lost if not recorded quickly; in fact they had largely disappeared by 1914. It took the perception of *literati* — Snorri in Iceland; Porthan, Ganander, and others in Finland — to instigate the first impetus to record the traditional folk poetry. Snorri's *Edda*, a discourse on traditional poetic technique, with citation from poetic sources, stands to the CR as the works of Porthan and Ganander stand to the *Kalevala*.

The CR is presented as a cycle of poems; it is the culmination of a process which had been ongoing for some time, evidenced by the adding of linking prose passages between and in the midst of poems.<sup>8</sup> The cyclic tendency is

b. The complaints of Njörðr and Skaði, interposed amongst summary of *Grm*: why does not Sn quote st. on Nóatún here? These stanzas appear to come from a longer poem.

c. *Heimdallargaldr*: Snorri gives a short quotation, very much like something remembered. Note this is only one of these lost poems that is named.

d. A couple of short verses on the goddess Gný. It is difficult to imagine a context for these.

e. What may be termed *Skrýmiskviða* must be the origin of the long section detailing Þórr's adventures with the giant Skrýmir. This occurs in a long passage with no Eddic citations, but which is highly alliterative, and has been shown therefore to be probably a prose rephrasing of a poem.

f. The adventures of Hermóðr and Baldrs death, occurring in the same long prose section; here one verse on Þökk is cited.

<sup>8</sup> Whilst it is theoretically possible that the prose frameworks might derive from accounts given by the original oral singers of the Eddic poems, this scarcely seems to be the case, certainly with the mythological poems, despite analogues for such practices from elsewhere (e.g. Mongolia, where narrative portions of stories were often summarized in prose). The prose, especially in heroic poems, often distances itself from the poem, and is academic (e.g. *HH* II, after 51: 'it was believed in ancient times that people were reborn, but that is an old wives' tale'). The information contained in them is either derived from the poems themselves, or else may be paralleled in Snorri's accounts (e.g. in the case of *Ls* or *Skm*). The possible exception is the framework of *Grm*, which may have a different origin. Since the passages occur in both CR and A, they are likely to

widespread: manuscripts of sagas, for example, and indeed the structures of individual sagas are often cyclic; the trend reaches its climax in works such as *Flateyjarbók* in the early fourteenth century. The influences are Continental, the most obvious comparisons being with the French Arthurian cycles; needless to say, both the *Íslendinga sögur* and the Poetic Edda retain a distinctly Icelandic character, without close Continental parallels, despite this structural influence.<sup>9</sup> In composing the *Kalevala* Lönnrot adopted the rudimentary cycles of poems the folk poets produced, but welded them together into one poem with the aim of being all-encompassing, covering the whole of cosmic history from the creation to the appearance of Christ, and incorporating a version of nearly all the traditional non-Christian poems into this scheme. The CR does not go this far, for the traditional poems are not transmuted into a lengthy single composition, but the tendency to overstep the merely cyclical and attempt to be all-encompassing is nonetheless there. Thus we begin with *Völuspá*, which covers the whole of cosmic history, then we are given a wide range of poems covering the deeds of the gods, and move on to cover the great heroic cycles. It is no accident that poems of an anomalous nature, such as *Grottasöngur*, to say nothing of *Sólarljóð*, were not included.

There is no precise model on which the CR could have been based. We may suspect a familiarity with the *Nibelungenlied*, composed around 1200 and no doubt known in the northern lands through the activities of the Hanseatic League.<sup>10</sup> That German versions of the heroic legends were known is stated explicitly in the prose introduction to *Guðrúnarkviða* I. The Icelandic compiler may have wished to emulate something of the scale of the German epic, but the promulgation of the Icelandic poems with their huge stylistic differences from the German and the inclusion of the mythological poems must indicate a consciousness of the value of the more archaic poetry of the north.

The CR was compiled within the turbulent time of Iceland's loss of independence, made final in 1262 after a long seepage of power to Norway. It was the period when the Icelandic commonwealth was at its most vulnerable that it produced the greatest literature, as if in a final flowering of what was to be lost; we might compare Malory's great work of chivalry the *Morte Darthur*, produced at the dusk of the chivalric age. The emphasis of the CR, like that of

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have been added rather early in the manuscript transmission, soon after Snorri. It might be argued that the prose passages and Snorri's accounts derive from a common source used by both, but since there is no evidence of any mythological works other than Snorri's this seems unlikely. Since Snorri shows only a vague knowledge of the poetic forms of *Ls*, *Skm*, *Fáfm*, whereas the prose found in these poems is very close to what Snorri says, it is reasonable to conclude that the prose and poetry were not yet united c.1220 (Gunnell 221).

<sup>9</sup> See Clover on the influence of Continental cycles on Icelandic literature in the thirteenth century. Kurt Schier declares that the sagas indicate Icelandic innovation while the Eddic poems indicate conservatism, but in fact both are innovative and conservative at the same time: they both use traditional materials handed down orally, and shape these under the influence of Continental cyclicism into a new and distinctly Icelandic form.

<sup>10</sup> De Vries §168.

national epics such as the *Kalevala* but not necessarily like that of cyclic collections of traditional poetry in general, is very much on heroic verse: eleven of the poems are mythological, whereas at least nineteen (depending on what was lost in the Great Lacuna), and these the longer poems, are heroic. The mythological poems provide a backdrop to this, in the way the creation story does for the *Kalevala*.<sup>11</sup> Might we then view the CR text as an embryonic national epic produced at a time when the nationhood of Iceland was most threatened?

To pose this question, after presenting the circumstances of the formation of the *Kalevala*, implies that I believe there can be a fair degree of similarity in thinking and approach between thirteenth-century Iceland and nineteenth-century Finland. Naturally, there are many differences too. The most important in this context is nationalism. This is commonly regarded as a nineteenth-century phenomenon; I do not wish to enter the historians' debate on the rise of nationalism, but it seems reasonable to accept that forms of nationalism, perhaps more amorphous than in the nineteenth century, can exist in many times and places. Nationalism may be defined as a desire for political independence and security based on a perception of cultural worth and individuality; a national epic is one which is seen (whether by its author or by its audience) as expressing this ideal. It is not necessarily free of the influence of foreign models: indeed it will often emulate earlier models from elsewhere. Problems arise if we start thinking of a national epic as exclusive (that no more than one may exist for each nation) and therefore selected by some process, which may have been feasible in the nineteenth century but not earlier: no such presupposition is to be entertained. The *Aeneid*, based overtly on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is thus clearly a national epic; however, an example of greater weight here is Layamon's *Brut*. This is a long work (around 16,000 lines), composed in the early thirteenth century. Layamon sets out to write an epic telling how the English acquired their land:

Hit com him on mode & on his mern þonke  
þæt he wolde of Engle þa æðelan tellen  
wat heo ihoten weoren & wonene heo comen. (lines 6–8)

Yet his subject matter is British, not English: it tells of King Arthur. Moreover, the main model was French (the work of Wace). Despite this, Layamon manages to produce a distinctly English work by adhering to the tradition of alliterative verse in the face of the increasing influence of French-inspired verse patterns. The example of Layamon demonstrates also that differing literary values can exist in one age: similarly, the CR shows an adherence to the

<sup>11</sup> Lönnrot of course knew the *Edda* and used it as a model. Nonetheless, the fact that an essentially heroic work with a mythological introduction was found to meet the demand in the nineteenth century may imply a similar demand in the thirteenth, whatever the level of structural influence.

traditional forms of literature, like Layamon, whilst contemporary works such as the *riddara sögur* illustrate a more wholesale adoption of foreign tastes.

The *Brut* and the *Aeneid*, however, both concern at least the land (if not the people) whence they sprang; this indicates a perception of cultural individuality which is a necessary part of the definition of nationalism. The Poetic Edda does not concern Iceland. It is in fact unclear how far the Icelanders of the thirteenth century regarded themselves as having a culture very distinct from the Norwegians. There was an obvious lack of enthusiasm for enforcing Norwegian rule in Iceland, and when it came the Icelanders were insistent on keeping their own laws. Occasionally differences from Norway are commented upon, such as when Snorri, after returning from a visit there, is said to have celebrated Christmas in the Norwegian fashion (*Sturlunga saga* II. 142). Such instances show at least the rudiments of cultural distinctness, I think. And if we are to judge the Icelanders by their literary works, then an intellectual culture quite distinct from that of Norway is apparent in the thirteenth century, one which largely succumbed to Norwegian political control. The subject matter of the Poetic Edda may not in fact be of great significance: the Eddic poems would have been seen as the oldest poetry of the people, such as is characteristically used in the formation of national epics such as the *Kalevala*, but most of it was composed at a time before there could be any consciousness of Icelandic identity: the lack of Icelandic focus is therefore accidental. Although the Eddic poems are the last remnants of a common Germanic heritage, by the time of the CR it is possible — but cannot be demonstrated — that the Icelanders regarded traditional poetry as particularly their sphere; at least the court skalds of Norway were Icelandic after the tenth century. I have suggested a cultural and even political motivation for the composition of the CR, in some respects comparable with that underlying the *Kalevala*; however, it is ultimately not so much the Icelanders' desire to demonstrate their cultural acumen as their actual possession of that acumen that produced the CR.

## II

Different questions arise when we consider the role of individual poems. The poems could in principle have been composed at any time up to their appearance in the CR or Snorri's *Edda*; however, I take it as my starting point that most of the mythological poems were composed before or shortly after the conversion to Christianity. Given that the older poems would have been transmitted for most of their existence in oral form, it is necessary to spell out my conviction that memorization played a greater part than extemporization in the performance of Norse poetry, and in this respect it differed from Finnish and much other oral poetry. Had we a text of *Völuspá* from 1020, for example, it would be recognizable as the same poem we find in the CR, though it would no doubt differ in many details.



It is therefore clear that any poem may have served one purpose at the time of its composition and another at its recording in CR. I welcome Margaret Clunies Ross's call for a greater synchronic understanding of the myths in the context of the Middle Ages, but am less happy at the implications of her regret over the tradition of philological and literary explication that has occupied much of the last century and a half<sup>12</sup> — there are good reasons to justify the traditional approach: the original authors of the poems were also working within a system of belief and artistic technique which by the christianized thirteenth century was alien. Is it more legitimate to try to uncover the world of the scribe than of the author? I think not.

Moreover, our extant records of Norse myth are almost exclusively literary. Any approach which does not acknowledge that the primary form of interpretation must be literary is in my view misplaced. Religious or anthropological research can be highly illuminating, but in these fields poems are secondary, not primary sources. In general terms the purpose of the myths, as we have them, is to provide material for literary elaboration, which may be approached according to the well-established principles of literary criticism, supplemented, but not supplanted, by other approaches.

It is important, as Clunies Ross points out, to consider particular myths as part of an overall system;<sup>13</sup> circumstances preclude the possibility of doing this here, and I present merely one mythologem in a regrettably isolated fashion. I consider both Norse and Finnish poems; I am not here suggesting borrowing, but wish to show how a definable mythological motif may be variously used in different societies and in different places within an individual society. The observation of the adaptability of a myth may further our efforts to frame questions about why myths take particular forms in particular circumstances, even if answers are not immediately forthcoming.

Many mythologies imagine a concrete entity holding up the cosmos; most often this is a mountain, a pillar, or a tree. In Norse, there are indications of all three of these, but the tree is the most prominent. The initial choice between these images already implies adaptation to a particular purpose. A mountain is something vast and impenetrable, a symbol of permanence apparently unaffected by the ravages of time. It tends to contrast the puny nature of man

<sup>12</sup> 'There has been a strong and persistent tendency in the study of Old Norse myth, which is still by no means dead, to value the supposedly 'original' form and meaning of a myth more highly than what the text and medieval context tell us was its likely meaning or meanings in the Middle Ages' (16).

<sup>13</sup> 'What seems certain now . . . is that myth is rarely, if ever, merely an explanation of a religious usage. It has independent life even when closely associated with ritual and needs to be considered as a cognitive system in its own right that has its own communicative and affective dimensions. Above all, individual myths need to be considered in the context of the whole complex of myths that a society gives expression to at any particular time, if the richness of their meanings is to be perceived' (14). 'The spirit of this new analysis of Old Norse myth requires us to move away from the study of individual myths and individual texts as discrete entities without much connection with the rest of the mythic system, towards a kind of analysis that respects individual myths but sees their meanings in a larger textual and contextual frame' (17).

with that of the cosmos. Óðinn's victorious retrieval of the mead of poetry from the depths of Suttungr's mountain is made all the more glorious for choosing such a setting. The tree is a living being, which clearly does suffer from the ravages of time. It is a more unifying symbol: the cosmos has a life, like man, and suffers and will come to an end. The pillar is found only in vestigial form in Norse,<sup>14</sup> though it appears to have been the main representation of cosmic support among the Saxons in the form of the *irminsul*; it is halfway between mountain and tree, emphasizing the holding up of the world, but without emphasis on its life. In many Siberian shamanic societies the symbolic world-tree is in fact reduced to a pillar by lopping off branches and turning it into a ladder by which the shaman climbs to other worlds.

It was as a link between worlds, such as is exploited by shamans, rather than primarily as a structural support of the cosmos, that the ancient Finns must have regarded the great oak tree. In the recorded poems, the tree is ambivalent: in its natural state it is a threat which has to be dealt with, because it grows so huge it blocks out the light of sun and moon. This may originally have reflected the disappearance of most light for a large part of the winter in the far north, but this is not stated in the poems. The situation is resolved by felling the tree; it appears that its fallen trunk became the Milky Way, and is said to have acted as a soul-bridge to the other world. None of the recorded poems however is cosmological in intent, and the earlier cosmological system can only be gleaned from remaining hints in the poems and from comparative research involving neighbouring peoples' beliefs. The poems themselves reflect different, more practical considerations;<sup>15</sup> thus in one Ingrian variant the motif of the tree blocking the light has disappeared, and hence the cosmic significance of the tree. The emphasis is entirely on beer drinking: the tree springs from beer froth, and when felled it is used to make mugs for drinking beer. A ritual association of this type of poem may once have existed: the brewing was associated at least by the neighbouring Balts with rituals centred round an oak. Beer represented a major source of nourishment, and its brewing was probably associated with the new life which emerges in the spring, i.e. when the tree's felling frees the light, but this is not explicit in the poem. In a Karelian variant the tree poem forms part of an incantation to exorcize illness. Illnesses were typically banished to the central cosmic pillar, often simply called the stone, in Finnish folk practices, and the tree is a variant of this. The reason appears to be that the passage to the otherworld takes place at this one spot, so the illness is in fact banished out of this world. The felling of the tree is therefore necessary in order to form the soul-bridge for the illness to cross.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Arguably in the high-seat pillars dedicated to Þórr, the *ǫndvegissúlur*; the image may be echoed in *Þórsdrápa*'s designation of Þórr as *himinsjóli*, if *sjóli* here means 'pillar'.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of the poems may be found in Finnish and English in Kuusi et al., nos. 49, 50.

<sup>16</sup> A brief account of the Finnish tree poems is found in English in Kuusi et al. pp. 546–547. I have also used Polttila's useful consideration of the tree mythologem (written in Finnish).

Ritual associations for Eddic poems are impossible to demonstrate, and indeed seem unlikely, given that there is little hint of them in the poems themselves. Thus, while we may for example imagine that some form of poem celebrating the recovery of Þórr's hammer may have accompanied a rain-welcoming ritual — for fertility and weather considerations surely underlie this myth — it is difficult to think that *Þrymskviða* corresponds very closely with this ritual verse. In Finland, especially in the Orthodox east where most of the poems were recorded, a considerable body of ritual practice and accompanying verse survived the arrival of Christianity; in Iceland, although the stories about the gods were not deemed offensive, poems focusing on actual pagan ritual clearly were, and have not survived. In the case of the world-tree, there is in fact the hint of a medicinal use for the tree in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 22, where its fruit helps sick women.<sup>17</sup> The poem is a late composition, but reflects folk developments of traditional beliefs; it is in fact more directly comparable with the Finnish examples.

There is no Norse poem devoted just to the world-tree. Indeed, it is not always clear when a world-tree is being described: for example, is 'Hoddmímis holt' in *Vafþrúðnismál* a variant of the world-tree in which the human couple shelter at the end of the world, or is it a grove? The main appearances of the world-tree are in *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál*, and *Völuspá*, poems very different from each other. The windy tree on which Óðinn hangs himself in *Háv* is essentially the tree connecting the worlds: he is acquiring wisdom from the otherworld, accessible only via this axis. This at least would be the interpretation for shamanic societies where the world-tree constitutes a central ritual object. But in Norse the tree is transformed into a gallows, is the very instrument of death; this marks a departure from the possibly older image such as the shamans used. The tree here is truly Yggdrasill, the Óðinn steed, a name in which the god is called The Terrible (Yggr); it must surely have been this myth which gave rise to this particular designation of the tree, though the few lines of *Hávamál* do not use it: we have lost the original poetic context for the birth of Yggdrasill. *Hávamál*, no doubt following some earlier poem, adapts the life-giving tree of the cosmos to the deathly instrument of a god's acquisition of supernatural knowledge: and the tree becomes terrible like the master and victim who swings on it. The image of the tree in *Háv* cannot be considered apart from the overall image of the god Óðinn, or of Scandinavian attitudes to death penalties: and in these respects there were notable differences from more primitive shamanic societies.

*Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* bear some superficial resemblance, in that they are both collections of mythological information. However, *Vm* might loosely be characterized as a cosmic history, whereas *Grm* is a cosmic description. Of the two *Grm* comes closer to *Háv*: it shows Óðinn's revelation

<sup>17</sup> See Robinson 118–123 for the interpretation of this stanza.

of his own wisdom and power under duress, the fires here taking the place of the tree. Again, comparisons may be made, with the provisos already mentioned, to a shamanic revelation. Typically, a shaman would have the picture of the cosmos revealed to him after a painful experience of imagined dismemberment, and this revelation would be repeated by him whenever he went into trance and visited these other worlds.<sup>18</sup> The graphically described repetition of the cosmic picture confirmed for his audience that he was truly visiting these realms and had power there. It is clear that the purpose of the revelation in *Grm* is likewise to demonstrate Óðinn's power; on the basis of shamanic texts it may be suggested — but cannot of course be proved — that *Grm* alludes to practices of *seiðr* where a seeress would visit other worlds to demonstrate her power (I stress alludes: the poem is not itself an example of such a ritual text). Given the concentration upon cosmic structure, it is not surprising that the world-tree Yggdrasill features prominently in *Grm*, whereas it is absent from *Vm*. The emphasis of the description is upon the tree's suffering; this is a specifically Norse feature, reflecting concerns of the society which produced it (it is difficult in this case to say that it represents a concern specifically of this poem).

The subjection of the tree to fate is exploited in literary terms most forcibly in *Völuspá*. This is a poem of greater creative power than either *Grm* or *Vm*. Like *Vm* it presents a cosmic history, but one which is much tighter, where one event is consequent upon another. The poet is able to reflect the course of events by describing the world-tree at crucial points in the cosmic development: in st. 2 it is 'the famed tree beneath the ground'; in st. 19, immediately following the creation of man, Yggdrasill is said to stand tall and green over the well of Urðr: the tree is thus associated with man's life, and his fate and that of the cosmos. The world is at its zenith here, represented by the green and tall tree. In st. 27–28 the seeress links the hearing of Heimdallr and the sight of Óðinn with the tree: they are buried beneath or near it. The gods have pledged away what they most need, have pledged themselves to fate who resides at the tree. In st. 47 Yggdrasill is mentioned as shuddering as the giant is released, marking the imminent culmination of *ragnarøk*. *Völuspá* I believe shows a more detailed awareness of *seiðr* and the *völur* who practised it than any other source; in so far as *seiðr* bears comparison with shamanism, the world-tree may have formed a focus of ritual. Be that as it may, the poet has manipulated the potential of the tree, already associated with suffering, as seen in *Grm*, to form an essentially literary use of the image as a symbol for the developing fate of the gods, the *ragnarøk*.

Thus we may see how the basic mythologem of the world-tree is developed in different ways. The early Finnish emphasis on the tree as a soul-bridge is a

<sup>18</sup> There are many such descriptions; a particularly graphic and substantial one is to be found in Siikala 175–183.

natural development in an originally shamanic society, where the tree was above all the path along which the shaman travelled to the otherworld in trance. The necessity of felling the tree was a particular Finnish development, originally perhaps reflecting a cosmological perception of the seasons. The cosmological or shamanic element has been forced into the background in the existing poems, however; these are semi-ritualistic texts which reflect the concerns of everyday life, be it drinking beer or banishing illness. It is important to realize that Norse texts are very different. An everyday use of the world-tree (or its physical representative) is hinted at only in *Fjölsvinnsmál*; our other texts are neither religious nor ritualistic. A basic image of the tree as sustainer ravaged by fate, as seen straightforwardly in *Grm*, is developed to literary ends in *Vsp*. The darker image of the tree as gallows appears in *Háv*. The various presentations of the tree illustrate, I think, that myth was open to adaptation by the poets: the poems do not so much reflect an inert belief system, as foster a perpetual development of mythological imagery, the demise of which is marked, amongst other things, by the prosaic freezing of the stories in Snorri's *Edda*.

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