

A Temporal Triad in Three Sagas

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Responses to my initial synopsis included the wish that I would clarify the context of myth and structure in which I am working and I am happy to do so in the opening, and more abstract, part of my paper. Those who would like to see first (or only) the specifics with which I am dealing may prefer to look ahead to the more tangible part where I introduce saga material.

I have every sympathy with those who are wary of structural explorations, for I was wary myself and it took me eighteen years of examining the evidence before I concluded that it was possible, and would be fruitful, to define structures, not just at the level of specific country or language, but at the more ancient level corresponding in linguistic terms to Proto-Indo-European. The two difficulties I could perceive in defining the relevant structures were, firstly, that they would obviously have been subject to modifications over time in ways that are comparable to language change, and, secondly, that they appeared to be inherently complex. Two of the basic components of a cosmological structure shaping a society before the intervention of writing are space and time. There are natural components in both cases but we have to be careful not to introduce our own concepts as to what are the most likely natural components to be included in a system. Calendar studies, in particular, make it clear that we have to take account of the cultural selection that takes place on the basis of natural phenomena.

Looking ahead to the scholarly requirements of this developing field, it became apparent that we needed both assessment of the situation by scholars in specific subject areas within the bounds of the particular discipline concerned and also more overarching discussion aimed at eliciting any common ritual patterns that would necessarily have been laid down before literacy and therefore before any direct documentation can be available. With this in mind, as well as other matters of mutual interest, a new forum was established in 2004 that held an inaugural meeting in Edinburgh in July of that year. This is 'The Ritual Year' working group of SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore/International Society for Ethnology and Folklore) which is holding annual conferences at a variety of locations throughout Europe: 2005 Malta; 2006 Gothenburg, Sweden; 2007 Straznice, Czech Republic (www.ritualyear.com).

Perhaps the single most useful statement concerning a posited basic ritual calendar that is applicable to the whole 'Indo-European' area comes out of Iceland. It is the sentence in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 8) which runs:

Þá skyldi blóta í mótt vetri til árs, en at miðjum vetri blóta til gróðrar, it þriðja at sumri, þat var sigrblót.

Near winter's day they should sacrifice for a good season, in the middle of winter for a good crop, and near summer's day it was the sacrifice for victory.

(Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 1941-51, I.20; tr. Mosen and Smith, 1932, 6).

According to this statement, there is a set of three points in the ritual year and the ritual celebrations at these times cause the year to fall into three unequal parts or 'seasons'. There is an undivided summer half running from the summer nights to the winter nights (i.e. from mid-April to mid-October) whereas the winter half, running from the winter nights to the summer nights, falls into two parts with a division at midwinter or Yule. I suggest that, for purposes of definition, we call the first part of this winter half, the winter season and the second part the spring season. Both the ritual points and the seasons that fall between them form triads and here it is inevitable that I should make some reference to the work of Georges Dumézil.

Dumézil was a French scholar (1898-1986) who studied Indo-European mythology and made his main breakthrough in the thirties of last century (see Littleton, 1983; Belier, 1991). He recognised the importance of triple configurations in Indo-European conceptual structuring and, at an early stage of his thinking, saw this as the reflection of a division of society into the three classes of: priests, representing the sacred; warriors, representing physical force; and herders and cultivators, representing prosperity and fertility. Dumézil certainly did not invent the importance of the triad (we have, for example, just seen a clear case of it in Snorri Sturluson's statement) and his work has had considerable value in drawing together materials from all over the Indo-European area and subjecting them to close scrutiny, but, in my view, quite disastrous results followed from his mistaken interpretation of two key pieces of evidence on the pantheon – one of them Indic (the gods of the Mitanni treaty of c. 1350 BCE) and the other Scandinavian (the gods of the Uppsala temple as described by Adam of Bremen in c. 1075 CE). Adam's account runs as follows:

In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro partum est statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco. Quorum significationes ejusmodi sunt: 'Thor', inquit, 'praesidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges gubernat. Alter Wodan, id est furor, bella gerit, hominique, ministrat virtutem contra inimicos. Tertius est Fricco, pacem voluptatemque largiens mortalibus.' Cujus etiam simulacrum fi[n]gunt cum ingenti priapo. Wodanem vero sculpunt armatum, sicut nostri Martem solent; Thor autem cum sceptro Jovem simulare videtur. ... Si pestis et famis imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur, si bellum; Wodani, si nuptiae celebrandae sunt, Fricconi.

'In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: "Thor", they say, "presides over the air, and governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan – that is, the Furious – carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals." His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his sceptre apparently resembles Jove. ... If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wotan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Frikko.'

(Adam of Bremen, 1884, 642-643; tr. Tschan, 1959, 207-208)

Envisaging the three gods mentioned by Adam – Thor seated in the centre with Odin and Freyr at either side of him – Dumézil applied his template and saw Odin as representative of the priests and the sacred, Thor as representative of the warriors and physical force and Freyr as representative of prosperity and fertility (Dumézil 1939, 130-132; 1973, 4-5). Obviously the match has something to commend it, but there are other possibilities. Perhaps the main damage resulting from this interpretation is the undervaluing of the role of Thor (and also of his Indic equivalent, Indra). Indra is associated with kingship, as well as being a mighty warrior, and Adam gives Thor a central position here that is compatible with the idea that he related to the central person in a human society, who would often be the king, but in the absence of a royal component in a society, as in Iceland, would be a householder. In an exciting development, Terry Gunnell has envisaged the householder seated in his Icelandic hall as placed between the high-seat pillars on either side of him in a way that is comparable to the placement of Thor in the Uppsala temple.

‘Casting the mind’s eye further down to the foot of the pillars there is the *ǫndvegi*, or high seat, itself and the *god(i)* (god/priest-chieftain) seated before the flickering long fire, and in front of the pool-like cauldron that one can expect to have hung close by. If the two high seat pillars were carved with images of the gods (as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók* suggest) one faces a potential trinity of ‘sacred’ figures (like the gods in Adam of Bremen’s image of the ‘temple’ in Uppsala, and those in the oaths and toasts of *Ulfjóstlög* and *Hákonar saga góða*).’ (Gunnell 2001: 22)

I would like to explore this further.

We can question why the ‘Thor’ figure has a human representation while the ‘Odin’ and ‘Freyr’ figures do not, and useful ideas are suggested when we think not, as Dumézil did, in terms of social class but in terms of time. One distinction between Thor and Odin in the mythic narratives is that between generations. Odin is the father of Thor. Now I am well aware that in these same mythic narratives Odin is shown as ruler, but it is also the case that cult indicates that Thor was of greater importance (see, e.g. Schjødt). All I am suggesting is that Adam’s statement is more in keeping with cult than with narrative. Given that Thor is the king figure, in human terms he can only succeed after the predecessor’s death. In this particular context, I suggest that the connection with death is the most relevant feature of Odin’s complex make-up, and that he stands here for the ancestors. Naturally, he would then be absent in the representation at the human level of the king or the householder. The ancestors, then, I suggest, are represented by the high-seat pillar to one side of the human figure. Staying with the idea of time, it is rather natural to think that, if one pillar represents the ancestors in the past, the other will represent the descendants in the future. The main attribute of the Freyr figure in Adam’s account is his ‘immense phallus’, and this seems to hold out promise of future generations. This interpretation makes good sense of calling the tree in King Volsung’s hall in *Volsunga saga* ‘Child-trunk’. The context runs as follows:

Svá er sagt at Volsungr konungr lét gera hǫll eina ágæta, ok með þeim hætti at ein eik mikil stóð í hǫllinni, ok limar trésins með fögurum blómum stóðu út um ræfr hallarinnar, en leggrinn stóð niðr í hǫllina, ok kǫlluðu þat barnstokk.

The tale goes that King Volsung had a magnificent hall built, and in such a way that there was a great tree standing inside, its branches with their colourful flowers spreading out through the roof, while its trunk stretched down into the hall, and they called it Barnstock.

(*Völsunga saga* ch. 2; ed. and tr. Finch, 1965, 4)

We have a three-in-one unity here in the man seated between the seat pillars and, if this interpretation is correct, we can see how it might be embodied in the central figure of Thor, when the high-seat pillars are cast overboard to find their way to the place of settlement (cf. Strömbäck, 1928). When the man on board ship joins them he brings together in the one place his own immediate presence and symbols both of his ancestors and of a promise of progeny. One of the best indications of the importance of the high-seat pillars occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga* (*The Saga of the People of Eyri*).

When Thorolf Mostur-Beard (Þórólfr Mostrarskegg) was about to leave Norway:

Hann tók ofan hofit ok hafði með sér flesta við, þá er þar höfðu i verit, ok svá moldina undan stalleinum, þar er Þórr hafði á setit.

'He dismantled the temple, and along with most of its timbers he put aside some of the earth from under Thor's pedestal.'

It was when they were within sight of Iceland that further action was taken:

Þórólfr kastaði þá fyrir borð gndvegissúlum sínum, þeim er staðit höfðu i hofinu; þar var Þórr skorinn á annarri. Hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja á Íslandi, sem Þórr léti þær á land koma. En þegar þær hóf frá skipinu, sveif þeim til ins vestra fjarðarins, ok þótti þeim fara eigi vánur seinna. Eptir þat kom hafgula; sigldu þeir þá vestr fyrir Snæfellsnes ok inn á ffrðinn.

'Thorolf threw overboard the high-seat pillars from the temple – the figure of Thor was carved on one of them – and declared that he'd settle at any spot in Iceland where Thor chose to send the pillars ashore. No sooner had the pillars begun drifting away from the ship than they were swept towards the western bay and not at all slowly either, from what people could see. Then a breeze sprang up, and Thorolf sailed westward round Snæfell Ness into the bay.'

Thorolf brought his ship ashore at a place later known as Hofsvág and established his dwelling there. They found that 'Thor had come ashore with the pillars' (*Þórr var á land kominn með súlurnar*) at the tip of a headland. This became known as Thor's Ness (Þórsnes) and:

Þar sem Þórr hafði á land komit, á tanganum nessins, lét hann hafa dóma alla ok setti þar heraðsping.

'Thorolf used to hold all his courts on the point of the headland where Thor had come ashore, and that's where he started the district assembly.'

(*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Sveinsson and Þorðarson, 1935, 7-10; tr. Pálsson and Edwards, 1973, 39-41)

Reimund Kvideland mentioned in his presentation at the Folk Narrative Congress in Tartu in July 2005 that the custom of floating timbers ashore was carried over into the fully Christian context and is referred to in narratives about the founding of churches, and he has kindly made available to me his paper as it is to appear in

Fabula. His concern is with the acting out or ostension of legends including ML 7060 'Disputed Site for a Church' (Christiansen, 1958, 201-209) which is widely known both in Norway, as indicated by Christiansen, and in Sweden (Nyman and Campbell, 1976, 1.12-16, 2.37-42). I am interested here in only the form of the legend that Kvideland gives as subtype 3: 'Building lumber is put into a river, a lake or the sea; where it is found the next day, the church is built.' The belief that motivates the setting of logs afloat is that supernatural guidance will direct the logs to the place that is supernaturally chosen for the building that humans plan to erect. It is interesting that the concept is often applied here to the church and that supernatural beings (God, trolls, fairies, the dead) are thought of as having a particular concern with the establishment of the special holy place which is not a human residence. In the early accounts, the house where the man who takes the action will live is thought of as subject to the same kind of supernatural selection which is made by the same means. The human and non-human are closely intermingled in the building on the site. Kvideland is interested in pointing out cases where people manipulate the belief and intervene so that the logs come to land at the place where they would like the church to be built for their own convenience; when this happened clearly the belief in supernatural control of the augury had weakened at least in the part of the community that was bold enough to interfere in this way. It is interesting to find the concept carried on into the modern period. Folklore as well as saga material can potentially give us insights into aspects of the mentality of a remote past.

Returning to *Ynglinga saga*, we can look again at the ritual triad within the year referred to by Snorri Sturluson. One of the points of the year is Yule, and I do not think there is any need to emphasise the connections of this period with the dead (cf. Lyle, 2000). Odin has his place here. It has also been found that there are special connections between Freyr (and weddings) and the winter nights (Gunnell, 2000). The central sacrifice at the beginning of summer is 'for victory', which accords well with the might of Thor. One way of looking at the Uppsala triad is that it gave physical expression in one place to a series that was enacted in the course of the year. There are no archaeological traces of three images at Uppsala, but it is worth keeping in mind, as a possible parallel, the laterally aligned post-holes of three free-standing pillars in a building of apparent ritual significance in the British and Anglo-Saxon centre at Yeavinger in Northumbria (Hope-Taylor, 1977, Fig. 43; 100, 158, 258-270).

Naturally, these ideas need to be further explored and tested, but I am hopeful that it will be apparent straight away that this is a much more fruitful way of looking at the triads considered here than through the Dumézilian lens that has rather controlled thinking about Scandinavian triads in the recent past (but see also Bek-Pedersen 2001).

I suggested in my abstract that it would be interesting to re-examine how the gods in Adam's account of the Uppsala temple were regarded before Dumézil's theory took the field, partly as a matter of the history of ideas and partly to see if there is any additional illumination to be gained. It may be of interest to mention that the Indic parallel in the Mitanni treaty had been valuably studied as a set before Dumézil's interpretation became current by the Danish scholar Arthur Christensen (Christensen, 1925-26; Lyle, 2002, 13-14), but he was concerned only with the Indic materials and made no comment on the Uppsala triad. I turned for information to John Lindow's

annotated bibliography of Scandinavian mythology (1988) and located there only one relevant entry (2511), an article by Henrik Schück published in 1941 which argues for the identification of the triad Odin, Thor and Freyr in Adam of Bremen's description of the Uppsala temple with Odin, Vili and Vé. I expect that there are other passing comments in the literature and I would be very interested to have any such comments brought to my attention. The identification made by Schück, however, gives me the opportunity to say that in my view, in terms of the emerging cosmological model, the Odin, Vili and Vé triad is quite distinct from the Odin, Thor, Freyr triad, except in so far as they share one member – the god Odin. Vili and Vé are old gods, like Odin, and unlike Thor and Freyr. Their rather shadowy figures can probably be understood most clearly in the cosmological context in the story that they both lie with Odin's wife, Frigg (see Bek-Pedersen, forthcoming; cf. Lyle, 1991, 53, and Lyle, forthcoming, 'Narrative').

Once the Scandinavian context has been explored, the insights gained there can then be applied, with due caution and with an awareness of likely sources of modification, elsewhere in the Indo-European area. Similarly, insights gained elsewhere can be brought to bear on the Scandinavian situation. It was borne in on me how important the strongly marked division of the year into summer and winter halves was when I had been speaking on the calendar first in Reykjavik and then at a Celtic colloquium at Harvard (Lyle, forthcoming, 'Celtic Seasonal Festivals'). Massive study of Slavic material undertaken by Nikita I. Tolstoy led him to posit the idea that the overall contrast of a summer half and a winter half corresponds analogically to the contrast between day and night, with the festivals that mark the transitions between them coming at times in the year that correspond to sunrise and sunset in the diurnal cycle (Tolstoy 2002). Tolstoy was also able to adduce evidence for a mid-part of the night being understood as equivalent to the 'twelve days' at midwinter. He was unaware of publications of mine (e.g. Lyle 1990) where I have also posited the view that processes of analogy like this are at work in the composition of the calendar, and he came to this conclusion independently. It is useful to keep this possibility in mind since the analogical level of the day has much less flexibility than that of the year with all its variety of climatic conditions and human agricultural and pastoral activities and may (if we can be assured of its role) serve as a guide in our cross-cultural researches. Midsummer and noon also have an importance in addition to the ritual points discussed here but not as part of the triad.

I will end by summing up my position in the Scandinavian context and offering some points for debate. Possibly Dumézil's interpretation of the Uppsala temple images is not widely supported and there will be no difficulty about discarding it, as I suggest should be done. I would like to distinguish, though, between the specific interpretation (which I find invalid) and the concept, which was of course part of Dumézil's thinking, that the images in Adam of Bremen's account should be regarded as a significant grouping of three, which I think has potential. It seems to me that putting this triad in correspondence with the triad of sacrifices in the year mentioned by Snorri Sturluson and exploring them together may prove fruitful, and may throw interesting sidelights on both the pantheon and seasonal cult practices. Terry Gunnell's insightful suggestion that the configuration of a man seated between two high-seat pillars forms a triad which is comparable to the Uppsala triad gives an interesting new

focus. It has, in turn, suggested to me the possibility that, in one of its aspects, the triad is a dynamic one encapsulating a period of time (the contemporary) which contains a memory of the past (the ancestors) and a desire to control the future (the descendants). This cannot stand on its own as an unsupported hypothesis, for there is very little to go on, but it may be that it will eventually achieve a fit with a broader cultural context of thinking about royal succession.

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