

The Fantastic Future and the Norse Sibyl of *Völuspá*

Gro Steinsland
(Universitetet i Oslo)

When did the myth about a collective, soteriological, future, develop in Scandinavia? Was the mythology concerning the future, as we find it in *Völuspá* and *Snorra-Edda*, created within the mental horizons of heathendom, or must this mythology be understood as a product of Christian influence?

As a part of my research into the theme of the mythological future in the sources of Old Norse mythology, I should like to revive Anton Christian Bang's hypothesis about *Völuspá*, as given in his thesis of 1879. There he argued that the poem was created as an Old Norse parallel to the Jewish-Christian sibyl-oracle tradition. The sibyls, pagan prophets with the ability to see into the past and the future, were the main actors in a literary genre which received great authority within the early- and medieval-Church. The prophecies of these oracles, which were brought into circulation early in antiquity through text-collections, generated a vision of the apocalypse with strong eschatological tendencies. A seeress perceives all the events of history: she sees that the end of the world is close, a harsh image of the apocalypse with frightening and horrific overtones. This cosmic catastrophe is followed by a new age, where the world is re-created and re-shaped. The climax in this vision of the future is the prophecy of the arrival of the future ruler who will appear in a wondrous fashion, either as a special child, or most often, as a fully-grown, divine man, based on the pattern of the old royal ideology. The Old Testament is explicit about this tradition: in the prophecies of Isaiah a child shall be born by a virgin, and he shall become the creator of the new world. Jewish oracles were used by classical poets. Vergil cites the Cumæan sibyl's prophecies about the virgin-born child in book four of his *Eclogues*, while Augustine employed the Eritrean sibyl's prophecies in his *De civitate dei*. Commonly, the oracle has the form of the so-called *vaticinium ex eventu*, fictive prophesiers of the future who were so well described that the representatives of the early Church took them for genuine ones. The oracles were used by early Christian apologists because through them heathendom was shown to have realised its own undoing and prophesied the coming victory of Christianity through the medium of a pagan seeress.

Bang's bold argument, which was supported by Sophus Bugge (Bugge, 1881), was strongly opposed by Victor Rydberg (Rydberg, 1881) and the Germanic school, and was quickly set aside. A significant problem was that no potential intermediaries between the ancient sibyl-oracles and Old Norse traditions could be identified. However, in recent years, there have been new interpretations which have re-opened the door to these forgotten ideas. In her commentary on the *Edda*, Ursula Dronke has identified and combined a series of sources and secondary-discussions which show that a collection of works concerning sibyl-like oracles were translated into Latin in Anglo-Saxon England, and these were integrated into the liturgical traditions of that Church and its preaching traditions in the years between 700 and 1000. This had no direct consequences for Dronke's interpretation of the poem or her dating of it; she remained firm in her belief that the poet was heathen, and the poem must have been

committed to a written form around the year 1000 during the meeting of heathenism and Christianity. Additionally, she makes the important observation that Nordic peoples might have come to know such prophetic texts via England or Ireland (Dronke, 1997, 93ff.). Kees Sampsonius has explored further the existence of sources which contain sibyl-oracles, and he has argued that Bang was correct: the *Völva* in *Völuspá* is an Old Norse sibyl, a consciously created parallel to the classical-Christian seeress (Sampsonius, 2001). The prophecies which are placed in her mouth have their model in the literary descriptions of the sibyl-oracles. He concludes his analysis of the figure of the *Völva* with the idea that *Völuspá* contains two different layers of meaning: one which has meaning within the conceptual world of the heathen, and a deeper meaning aimed at an elite who had knowledge of the sibylline meaning in the poem's verses. My analysis of the mythological conception of the future endorses this view that the *Völva*'s speech is sibylline. However, the poem probably does not contain two different kinds of meaning, but it is the unclear, ambiguous speech of the sibyl which is the point and constitutes the interpretative key for the whole. The *Völva* is the wise voice from the past who perceives all things, but who herself stands rooted within a heathen conceptual world. She understands only fragments and pieces of what she sees, and this leads to her ambiguous and often original form of expression. The poem must have been shaped by a very learned, Christian master-theologian who through the historical seeress created a fictive heathen cosmology, and allowed the old world to collapse in a violent conflagration in order to establish the hope of a soteriological future after the pattern of a sibylline oracle's prophetic visions. Here there is a blending of the Old Norse myths with the Jewish-Christian prophecies, which in turn are transformed in order to be adapted to the pagan seeress and her horizons.

Out of considerations of space, I shall concentrate in my discussion here on one principal component of the mythological conception of the future, from the many which come to mind: that is, the future ruler who arrives with the new age. Following this, I shall move on to the great crux of research into the *Völuspá*: the existence of strophe 65 (the numeration follows several modern translations, but it is strophe 58 in Sophus Bugge's edition of 1867/1965), which occurs in the variant of the poem found in *Hauksbók* (hereafter *H*) and not in the *Codex Regius* (hereafter *R*). Snorri does not allow his prose paraphrase of *Völuspá*'s vision of the future in *Gylfaginning* to reveal the content of the strophe, although he does reveal in the Prologue that he is familiar with the sibyl's art of prophecy (I follow here the consensus view that Snorri was the author of the Prologue). In the Prologue the sibyl acts as Odin's Nordic maternal ancestor. It is because of her prophetic knowledge that the euhemerised Odin and his followers travel northwards and settle in Scandinavia. Thus, the author indirectly adds authority to the poem he chose as his principal model for the paraphrase of heathen mythology in *Gylfaginning* (Clunies Ross 1992). That Snorri had knowledge of the content of *Völuspá* 65, but omitted the strophe, can be explained by a consideration of the context of *Gylfaginning*: here it is the heathen cosmology and world of the gods which is to be presented through the voice of the three-fold personification of Odin. In this context Snorri omitted, with good reason, any part of the poem which began to resemble a Christian, theological belief-system. The compiler of *Codex Regius*, who put *Völuspá* foremost at the beginning of his work, might have followed the same path,

omitting a strophe which allowed the heathen world to end with the arrival of Christ. However, we shall probably never arrive at a firm conclusion to this question. Instead, we must bear in mind that what we have is the oldest variant of the text (*R*), which does not contain the prophecy about a ruler of heaven who will come from above, and a younger variant (*H*), which did allow such a prophetic link to make up the climax of its vision.

That which makes the variant found in *Hauksbók* especially interesting, is that the motif is used by another Eddic poem, the mysterious *Hyndluljóð* from *Flateyjarbók*. It is necessary to analyse here the occurrence of the motif in the two poems in relation to each other.

Those who accept strophe 65, *H*, as a genuine part of *Völuspá*, and interpret the man who shall come from above as Christ *parousi* — which according to the synoptic apocalypse and the Revelation of John will happen on Doomsday, or according to the younger tradition at the beginning of the messianic millennium — meet difficulties. This is partly because of context and partly because of linguistic form. Contextually, it fits badly that Christ is made to appear and reign together with a following of resurrected sons of gods from the pagan pantheon, albeit of the milder kind (McKinnell, 1994). It is this which led Ursula Dronke to strongly maintain her view that the poet must have been a heathen. Linguistically, there are also problems for those who, on superficial analysis alone, would like to see a Christ-prophet in the strophe.

The Future Ruler in *Völuspá*, *H*:

Þá kemr hinn ríki
at regindómi
öflugr ofan,
sá er öllu ræðr

Then the mighty one will come
to the kingdom,
powerful, from above,
he who rules over all.

It is clear that words and concepts in strophe 65 have a strong association with the heathen conceptual world; see for example *hinn ríki*, *öflugr*, *ráða* or in translation, 'the mighty', the 'powerful', to 'rule' or 'control'. Terms for power, lordship and authority predominate among the words chosen. In particular, the words *ráða* (to 'rule', 'control' or 'have authority over') and *öflugr*, ('great' or 'mighty') point towards the god Heimdallr, as he is presented in the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* (Thorvaldsen, 2003). The word *regindómr*, ('kingdom' or 'lordship') is striking in its occurrence here, as a combination of *regin* n. pl. ('power') and *dómr* ('decision', 'judgement' or 'age of time'). It has been interpreted as 'the great judgement', that is Doomsday (Nordal, 1927, 113). One difficulty with this Christian theological reading is that *regin* is commonly used collectively about heathen powers, and it is not a term which is easily applied to the Christian God. Again the word choice shows a special association with Heimdallr. In *Hyndluljóð* 35 the ancestral Heimdallr is given the epithet *rögn*, (sing. of *regin*). The word *dómr* can have the meaning 'age of time' and therefore be a concept for the new age foreseen by the *Völva*. *Regindómr* creates a parallel for *kristindómr* and *heiðindómr*, and could be translated as 'ruler-dom'. It is possible that the word was in fact coined for the poem's myth of the future. In an earlier paper, I have seen

traces of the future ruler who appears in strophe 65 as a developmental stage in the heathen image of god. The idea is that the Church's preaching of a monotheistic god might have supported a development within heathendom's polytheistic belief-system, so that a single deity stepped forward and took on superior functions. One could, religio-phenomenologically speaking, describe that as henotheism. On the basis of the choice of terms and the mythological background of the text I have suggested that this may be a transformation of Heimdallr, a Heimdallr *redivivus* (Steinsland, 1991, 292f.). It would be an example of *interpretatio norroena*, a conscious transformation of a Christian idea, so to speak an oppositional correspondence with Christian teachings.

Heathendom knew a god who had his home in the heavens and about whom it therefore can be said that he came from above: Heimdallr, a strange figure of a god whose presence surrounds the whole course of the world. He was born in ancient times, and in the end he signalled the onset of Ragnarök. In *Völuspá* Heimdallr has a special position together with Odin. He is the first god who is mentioned by name in strophe 1, where high-born and low-born families are described as 'the children of Heimdallr'. In *Völuspá* he does not appear in the battle-scene of Ragnarök, and the *Völva* has no knowledge of his death. As this watchman of the gods stands, in a way, apart from the others, he watches over and observes the course of the world. It would accord well with the mythological picture of Heimdallr that those in the backwaters of the process of religious change could have transformed this god and given him new functions. Such an identification of Heimdallr as a ruler in a future world fits with his pre-existing position as the shaper of social order; see for example, *Rígsþula*, where the prose introduction identifies Ríg with Heimdallr. It appears probable that at a late stage in Old Norse mythology there were important 'theological' activities connected with Heimdallr.

Heimdallr's remarkable family relationships underline his special position within Old Norse mythology. One myth presents Heimdallr as the son of nine giant-women (for this see *Heimdalargaldr*, *Húsdrápa* and *Hyndluljóð*). Heimdallr had no father, only mothers, something which is strange within a culture where familial relationships were the most important social codes and where, as a rule, the paternal dynastic line had precedence. Heimdallr did not have the duality of descent which characterised the other *Æsir*. Odin and his followers were created in the crossing-point between different species and were thereby loaded with connotations of fate, destiny and familiar bonds in different directions. Heimdallr was the son of an all-female collective, mothers from the ancestral period. The strange origin-myth suggests that in Heimdallr's background there lies a principle of singularity which transcends the complexity of this world. There is good reason to emphasise both the importance of the genealogical and rulership-ideological elements which are connected to this figure associated with the future. The heavenly leader who is expected to come in the new age represents, both linguistically and semantically, a rulership-ideology which dramatically breaks with the pre-existing genealogy connected to Norse rulership. The prototype of the ruler within the Yngling-dynasty, as well as that of the jarls of Hlaðir, was at a mythical level seen as having descended from a god and a giant-woman. From the context of this we are going to approach the motif in *Hyndluljóð*.

The Future Ruler in *Hyndluljóð*

Völuspá, H, is not alone in its vision of the ruler of the new age. A parallel prophecy can be found in *Hyndluljóð*, a difficult source which for a long time was assumed to be a rather young compilation from several pre-existing poems. Snorri speaks of the last part as *Völuspá in skamma*, which indicates that he identified the apocalyptic parallels between the two poems. I have previously argued that *Hyndluljóð* should be seen as a single unified poem, with thematic connections between its constitutive layers. The poem's framework deals with the ruler-initiation in a context where genealogical knowledge plays an important role. The genealogical theme is emphasised in the last section of the poem through a cosmic and apocalyptic plan, in which the genealogy of the rulers is traced back to a mythical origin in gods and giants, in the final instance to giant women (Steinsland 1991, 242–306). Finally, the *Völva*-giantess transfers the perspective to the future, where a superior nameless figure is prophesied (*Hyndluljóð* 44):

Þá kemr annarr
enn mátkari,
þó þori ek eigi
þann at nefna;

Then will come the other,
even mightier,
though, I dare not
name him;

From the context it is clear that there is a close connection between the future ruler and one who has already been referred to in cryptic terms: a nameless figure from the ancestral past who was born above all others, who had nine giant-women as mothers, and who was raised on strange nourishment: the 'strength of the earth', the 'cold sea waves' and 'sacrificial blood' (strophe 38). He is the greatest of all and has family in all places (strophe 43). This figure obviously is meant to be Heimdallr. After having revealed these secrets of the past, Hyndla turns her attention in strophe 44 to the future: then one will come who is even more powerful, a future leader who she will not dare to reveal the name of. After him shall come *annarr*, 'the other', a ruler of the future who shall transcend all. This leader of the future world is shaped both by his correspondence with and contrast to the figure of Heimdallr; he is a form of continuation to Heimdallr, but remains hidden and nameless, a secret. Can this riddle be solved? I have concluded that the mythological conception of the future as it was employed in *Völuspá* og *Hyndluljóð* receives meaning when it is read as a parallel to the early- and medieval-Church's sibylline oracle tradition.

The Future Ruler = Heimdallr–Christ

As mentioned above, the vision of the future ruler forms a climax in the prophecy of the *Völva* in *Völuspá, H*. This future ruler is both hidden and ambiguous, both as a Heimdallr and a Christ, and this points towards the sibyl-genre. The coming of Christ is, in the sibyls' presentation, in hidden or obscure wording, wrapped up in heathen mythology and rulership-ideology.

The future ruler as prophesied in *Völuspá, H*, as well as *Hyndluljóð* in *Flateyjarbók* is at one and the same time a transformed Heimdallr-figure and a hidden Christ. The double meaning, which is the characteristic feature of the oracle tradition, seems thus to lie within these two Old Norse apocalyptic Eddic poems.

There are many reasons why one could choose Heimdallr as the heathen prototype for the Christian saviour. The name 'Heimdallr' can be read as 'light of the world', as a combination of *heimr*, 'the world', and *dallr*, 'light' or 'glowing'. In many sources Heimdallr is described as *hvít* ('white'), an epithet which may be compared with Christ, who in the Nordic traditions became the 'Kvite-Krist', an image which may have descended from the apocalyptic context of the Revelation of John (Tveito 2002, 40). Heimdallr could, with his home in the heavens, *Himinbjörg*, function as a prototype for Christ, who from his throne in heaven would come again in the last hours to judge the living and the dead. In the apocalyptic, eschatological context, which probably was accentuated in Christian preaching during the meeting of the two religions, Heimdallr fits the bill for many reasons. Moreover, many researchers have pointed to parallels between Heimdallr and the Archangel Michael. It is notable that both have an eschatological function, Heimdallr announcing Ragnarök by blowing his horn, and Michael, in the Revelation of John, announcing Doomsday by blowing his trumpet.

However, is this eschatological Heimdallr a possible product of late-heathendom or is he a literary-theological product of the Christian Middle Ages? This is not easy to answer. As mentioned above, heathendom could have potentially taken a step towards a henotheistic image of god, where one of the many gods in a polytheistic pantheon was given precedence within certain contexts. An alternative explanation is that the apocalyptic Heimdallr is a product of a learned, theological speculation in the Middle Ages. The version of *Völuspá* which is found in *Hauksbók* accentuates the apocalyptic and future-orientated perspective of the poem more strongly than the variant found in the *Codex Regius* (Johansson, 2005). It is in the younger manuscripts from the fourteenth-century that Heimdallr is given the function of shaper of the social structure (*Rigspula*, *Codex Wormianus*) and leader of the future age. It appears that this younger tradition has been able to build on the older origin myth which put Heimdallr in a special position, raised above the family feuds which would prove to be so destructive to Old Norse society. The figure of the future, as prophesied by Hyndla, contains a double-meaning; he signalises both Heimdallr *redivivus* and the Coming Christ. I see this possible double-perspective as a conscious possibility entertained by the poet. The unique word *regindómr* in *Völuspá* 65, *H*, acts in the same way and, inspired by the sibyl tradition, contains two possible interpretations. Medieval audiences must surely have been able to recognise both Heimdallr and Christ in the future leader described in *Völuspá* 65, *H*, and *Hyndluljóð*.

The vision of the *Völva* corresponds with the Jewish-Christian sibylline oracle which ends the visions with a glimpse of 'the king of the great kingdom': 'for a prince will come to gain sway of the sceptres of the earth forever' (*Oraculum Sibyllae* III; Collins, 1983, 363). Prophecies from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah describe the child who will be born on a remarkable fashion and nurtured on exceptional food: milk and honey. Here the specification of these foods points to both the power of kings and to desert exile. See Isaiah 7, 14–15, 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey ...'. This virgin-born, royal child will subsequently show himself to be a future ruler; Isaiah 9, 6, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful

Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'. Furthermore, according to the symbolism of the New Testament exceptional food was also connected to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Saviour. There it is said that he lived on grasshoppers and wild honey, apparently corresponding to the Emmanuel-child's desert-nourishment. The future ruler should come from outside, and in the world of early Christianity that meant the desert. The same mythical image is used in the Revelation of John about a sun-woman who gives birth to the heavenly child, the future ruler, and thereafter must hide herself in the desert (Revelation of John, ch. 12). Heimdalr is said to be born on 'the edge of the world', and thus was an outsider, as Emmanuel and John the Baptist were. They all represent the mythical figure, the hero, the god-king, who emerges when the time is right. Heimdalr, in a similar way to John the Baptist, functions as a forerunner for the eventual future leader, and he is nurtured on strange and symbolic food (*Hyndluljóð* 38). Thus, it seems reasonable to ask if the model for this virgin-birth origin-myth and the detail that the child was nurtured on special food lies hidden within the sibylline oracle tradition. These traditions made use of the Isaiah prophecies about the Emmanuel-child, a myth that is transformed in the re-telling of the Revelation of John into the myth of the sun-woman who fled into the desert and her child.

While Isaiah stands safely within the Hebrew Old Testament prophecy tradition, and thereby is qualified to reveal the future leader's name, the heathen sibyl/Völva is not worthy to utter the name of the future ruler. According to Isaiah and the sibyls, the reign of the future leader shall prevail, and received its Old Norse correspondence in *regindómr* in *Völuspá* 65, H.

I shall conclude this discussion with a few remarks. In the Old Norse milieu there was a great transformation of the world view and the perception of time from the Viking Age to the Medieval period, which took the form of a blending together of heathen and Christian mythology. Some results of this transformation process are set down in the apocalyptic poems *Völuspá* and *Hyndluljóð*. The god Heimdalr functioned in some contexts as a focal-point in the mythological melting pot, connecting old and new ideas. *Völuspá* is an Old Norse poem which in both its fundamental conception and individual themes appears to be influenced by the sibylline oracle poems. With *Völuspá* the Old Norse culture got its own sibyl. With this sibyl the future as a mythical idea was brought to Scandinavia.

From the perspective of History of Religion, it fits that the myth about a future as a collective, soteriological, messianic existence does not belong within the pagan folk-religion which had a family-based society and the needs of that society as its foundation stone. For Christendom the ideas about the future kingdom of God, the return of the Saviour, the resurrection and eternal life for the righteous in a messianic existence, all belonged to the central concepts of belief.

Bibliography

- Bang, Anton Christian. 1879. 'Vøluspaa og de Sibyllinske Orakler', *Videnskabs-Selskabet i Christiania, Forhandlinger Aar 1879*, nr. 9, Christiania, 1-23.
- Bugge, Sophus. (1867) 1965. *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, Oslo.

- Bugge, Sophus. 1881. 'Nogle bemærkninger om sibyllerne og Völuspá', *Nordisk tidsskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* 4, 163–72.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. 1992. 'Quellen zur Germanischen Religionsgeschichte', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, hgg. von Heinrich Beck et al., Berlin, New York, 633–655.
- Collins, John J. 1983. 'Sibylline Oracles', *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, New York, 317–472.
- Dronke, Ursula. 1997. *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II, *Mythological Poems*, Oxford.
- Eddadigte I, Völuspá Hávamál*, udg. Jón Helgason, Nordisk filologi, København, Oslo, Stockholm 1951.
- Johansson, Karl G. 2005. 'Översättning och originalspråkstext i handskrifttraderingens våld – Merlínusspá och Völuspá i Hauksbók'. *Neue Ansätze in der Mittelalterphilologie*, hrsg. Susanne Kramarz-Bein, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Germanistik und Skandinavistik, band 55, 97–113, Frankfurt am Main.
- McKinnell, John. 1994. *Both One and Many. Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, Roma.
- Mowinckel, S. 1959. *He that cometh*. Oxford.
- Nordal, Sigurður, ed. 1927. *Völuspá*, København.
- Rydberg, Victor. 1881. 'Sibyllerna och Völuspá', *Nordisk tidsskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* 4, 1–29; 317–434.
- Samplonius, Kees. 2001. 'Sibylla Borealis: Notes on the Structure of Völuspá', *Germanic Texts and Models: Medieval Reconstructions*, ed. by K. E. Olsen et al., Leuven, 187–228.
- Samplonius, Kees. 2002. 'Imago dei in Völuspá?' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117, 77–87.
- Steinsland, Gro. 1991. *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi. En analyse av hierogami-myten i Skirnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygatal og Hyndluljóð*, Oslo.
- Steinsland, Gro. 2001. 'Ask og Embla i Völuspá – fri fantasi eller gammel tradisjon? Om et mulig imago dei-motiv i Völuspás skapelsesmyte', *Sagnaheimur*, Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26. May 2001, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir et al., *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 6, Wien, 247–262.
- Thorvaldsen, Bernt Øyvind. 2003. 'Kampen om den kommende verden', *Nordica Bergensia* 29, 171–193.
- Tveito, Olav. 2002. *Kvite-Krist*. En analyse av Gudsildet i eldre norrøn skaldediktning, Senter for studier i vikingtid og nordisk middelalder, Skriftserie 3/2002, Universitetet i Oslo.