

Going to Hel: The Consequences of a Heathen Life

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For a moral code to remain in effect in any religion, there must be consequences for not following that code. Since Heathenism has a highly developed moral code, it stands to reason that it also spoke of the consequences of leading a life in accordance with or in opposition to its own moral standards, yet according to popular belief there is no mechanism for that to happen — primarily because *Snorri's Edda* doesn't mention a court to judge the dead or any reward for leading a pious heathen life; warriors go to Valhalla and everyone else goes to Hel, a dreary, dismal place. Do the sources of Heathen belief confirm this view?

Fáfnismál 10 informs us:

*Því at einu sinni
skal alda hverr
fara til heljar heðan.*

“For there is a time
when every man
shall journey hence to Hel.”

Fáfnismál unequivocally states that all men eventually travel to Hel. It names no exceptions. Other sources confirm that in heathen times, the way and its features were well known.

Gylfaginning 49 (A. Broedur tr.):

“Frigg spoke, and asked who there might be among the Æsir who would fain have for his own all her love and favor: let him ride the road to Hel, and seek if he may find Baldr, and offer Hel a ransom if she will let Baldr come home to Ásgard.”

And later in the same narrative:

“...Now this is to be told concerning Hermódr, that he rode nine nights through dark dales and deep, so that he saw not before he was come to the river Gjöll and rode onto the Gjöll-Bridge; which bridge is thatched with glittering gold. Módgudr is the maiden called who guards the bridge; she asked him his name and race, saying that the day before there had ridden over the bridge five companies of dead men; but the bridge thunders no less under thee alone, and thou hast not the color of dead men.”

“...Then Hermódr rode on till he came to Hel-gate; he dismounted from his steed and made his girths fast, mounted and pricked him with his spurs; and the steed leaped so hard over the gate that he came nowise near to it. Then Hermódr rode home to the hall and dismounted from his steed, went into the hall, and saw sitting there in the high-seat Baldr, his brother.”

The Eddaic poem *Sólarljóð* composed in the Christian era and freely combining both Christian and heathen elements, also knows this place. It speaks of a Hel-gate in the east (the opposite direction of the setting sun):

39. *Sól ek sá
sanna dagstjönu,
drúpa dynheimum í;
en Heljar grind
heyrðak á annan veg
þjóta þungliga*

39. The sun I saw,
true star of day,
sink in its roaring home;
but Hel's doors grated
on the other side I heard
heavily creaking.

And, as in *Gylfaginning*, the river Gjöll runs nearby:

42. *Sól ek sá
svá hon geislaði;
at ek þóttumk vættki vita;
en gylfar straumar
grenjuðu annan veg,
blandir mjök við blóð.*

42. The sun I saw:
she beamed forth so
that I seemed nothing to know;
but Gjöll's streams
roared from the other side
mingled much with blood.

In Book One of Saxo Grammaticus' *Danish History*, written a generation before Snorri Sturluson composed the Younger Edda, Saxo speaks of the same road of the dead. It is "a path that was worn away with long thorough faring" [O. Elton translation] or "a path worn away by long ages of travelers" [P. Fisher tr.]:

"While Hadding was at supper, a woman bearing hemlocks was seen to raise her head beside the brazier, and, stretching out the lap of her robe, seemed to ask, "in what part of the world such fresh herbs had grown in winter?" The king desired to know; and, wrapping him in her mantle, she drew him with her underground, and vanished. I take it that the nether gods purposed that he should pay a visit in the flesh to the regions whither he must go when he died. So they first pierced through a certain dark misty cloud, and then advancing along a path that was worn away with long thorough faring, they beheld certain men wearing rich robes, and nobles clad in purple; these passed, they at last approached sunny regions which produced the herbs the woman had brought away. Going further, they came on a swift and tumbling river of leaden waters, whirling down on its rapid current diverse sorts of missiles, and likewise made passable by a bridge. When they had crossed this, they beheld two armies encountering one another with might and main. And when Hadding inquired of the woman about their estate: 'These,' she said, 'are they who, having been slain by the sword, declare the manner of their death by a continual rehearsal, and enact the deeds of their past life in a living spectacle.' Then a wall hard to approach and to climb blocked their further advance. The woman tried to leap it, but in vain."

In Saxo's account, it is interesting to note that Hel is described as a warm, green place. Here, flowers grow when it is winter on earth.

Notably, both Snorri and Saxo place warriors in Hel. Snorri tells us that five *fylki* [“companies”, “military troops”] of dead men passed before, making less noise than Hermod alone on Sleipnir. Their numbers and arrangement suggest that they died together in battle. Similarly, Hadding sees “men slain by the sword” reenacting their battles in “the regions whither he must go when he died.”

That even warriors destined for Valhalla first came to Hel like everyone else is confirmed in the sagas.

In *Gisli Surson's Saga* (ch. 24) is mentioned the custom of binding Hel-shoes on the feet of the dead. Warriors in regard to whom there was no doubt that Valhall was their final destiny received Hel-shoes like all others, *það er tíðska að binda mönnum helskó, sem menn skulu á ganga til Valhallar*, (“It is custom to bind hel-shoes to men, so that they shall walk on to Valhall.”)

In several sources, we find examples of warriors killed in the line of duty who are said to come “to Hel”. Thus, like all men, warriors too first travel “to Hel” before entering Valhalla.

In *Egil's Saga*, chapter 45, we read how Egil saved himself from men whom King Erik Blood-axe sent in pursuit of him to Saud Isle. While they were searching for him there, he had stolen to the vicinity of the place where the boat lay in which those in pursuit had rowed across. Three warriors guarded the boat. Egil succeeded in surprising them, and in giving one of them a mortal wound before he could defend himself. The second fell in a duel on the strand. The third, who sprang into the boat to make it loose, fell there after an exchange of blows. The saga has preserved a verse in which Egil mentions this exploit to his brother Thorolf and his friend Arinbjorn, whom he met after his flight from Saud Isle. There he says:

*at þrymreynis þjónar
þrír nökkurir Hlakkar,
til hássalar Heljar
helgengnir, för dvelja.*

“I do not boast overly— by sending three servants o that tree of the valkyrie (i.e. the king) to the otherworld, to stay in Hel’s high hall.” [Bernard Scudder tr., 1997]

The fallen men were king's men and warriors. They were slain by weapons and fell at their posts of duty, one from a sudden, unexpected wound, the others in open conflict. But the skald Egil, who as a heathen born about the year 904 must have known the mythological views of his fellow-heathen believers better than the people of our time, assures us positively that these men from King Erik's body-guard, instead of going immediately to Valhal, went to the lower world and to Hel's high hall there.

This is NOT to suggest that Valhalla is located in Hel, only that warriors pass through Hel on their way to Valhalla, as shall be demonstrated below. There is every reason to believe that Valhalla is located within the city of Asgard located in the heavens. The context of *Grímnismál* 21-26 for example suggests a heavenly hall.

In the Eddaic poem *Baldrs Draumar*, we find a more detailed description of “Hel’s high hall”. It says:

3. ...fram reið Óðinn,
foldvegr dunði;
hann kom at hávu
Heljar ranni.

3. Odin rode forth -
the ground rattled -
to Hel’s high
hall he came.

4. Þá reið Óðinn
fyrir austan dyrr,
þar er hann vissi
völu leiði;
nam hann vittugri
valgaldr kveða,
unz nauðig reis,
nás orð of kvað:

4. Then Odin rode
to the eastern gate,
where he knew there was
a Völva’s grave.
To the prophetess he began
to chant a magic song,
until compelled she rose...
Odin asks her:

6. "Vegtamr ek heiti,
sonr em ek Valtams;
segðu mér ór helju,
ek mun ór heimi:
Hveim eru bekkir
baugum sánir
flet fagrlic
flóuð gulli?"

6. “Vegtam is my name,
I am Valtam’s son.
Tell thou me of Hel:
I remember that from the world:
For whom are those benches
strewn o’er with rings,
those costly couches
overlaid with gold?”

She responds:

7. "Hér stendr Baldri
of brugginn mjöðr,
skírar veigar,
liggr skjöldr yfir,
en ásmegir
í ofvæni;
nauðug sagðak,
nú mun ek þegja."

7. “Here stands mead,
for Baldr brewed,
over the bright potion
a shield is laid;
but the Æsir race
are in despair.
By compulsion I have spoken
I will now be silent.”

Loki’s daughter is not clearly identified as Hel in any of the existing Eddaic poems. In light of this, it’s important to note that the description of “Hel’s high hall” stands in stark contrast to the hall of Loki’s daughter in Snorri’s Edda (*Gylfaginning* 34):

“Hel [Loki’s daughter] he cast into Niflheim, and gave to her power over nine worlds, to apportion all abodes among those that were sent to her: that is, men dead of sickness or of old age. She has great possessions there; her walls are exceeding high and her gates great. Her hall is called Sleet-Cold; her dish, Hunger; Famine is her knife; Idler, her thrall; Sloven, her maidservant; Pit of Stumbling, her threshold, by which one enters;

Disease, her bed; Gleaming Bale, her bed-hangings. She is half blue-black and half flesh-color (by which she is easily recognized), and very lowering and fierce.”

In the Eddaic poem *Baldurs Draumar*, whereas the benches in “Hel’s high hall” are strewn with costly things and mead stands poured out in goblets awaiting a guest, the hall of Loki’s daughter (whom Snorri calls Hel) is a dismal place with its dish called “Hunger” and its knife named “famine.” One finds no costly things or sparkling mead here.

In Snorri’s Edda, written more than 200 years after the official conversion of Iceland to the new religion, the words Hel and Niflheim or Niflhel are seemingly used interchangeably; there, being sent to Hel or Niflhel is synonymous with death. Loki’s daughter is thrown into Niflheim and makes her home there (*Gylf.* 34). Hermod rides “to Hel” to find Baldur and pleads with Hel, Loki’s daughter, for his release (*Gylf.* 49). In *Gylfaginning* 42, when Thor slays the giant builder, he sends him down “to Niflhel”. In *Skáldskaparmál* 17, when Thor kills Hrungrnir, he says he knocked that giant “into Hel”. In the older heathen poems Snorri quotes, however, a clear distinction between these realms is made.

In the Eddaic poems, Niflhel is a cold, dreary place located in the northern part of the underworld, corresponding to Niflheim the original world to the north of Ginnungagap at the beginning of time (*Gylfaginning* 4). It is a place filled with terrors and an appropriate location for the hall of Loki’s half-livid daughter. *Völuspá* 36-37 says:

38. *Sal sá hún standa
sólu fjarri
Náströndu á,
norður horfa dyr.
Féllu eiturdropar
inn um ljóra,
sá er undinn salur
orma hryggjum.*

38. She saw a hall standing,
far from the sun,
in Náströnd;
its doors are turned northward,
venom-drops fall
in through its apertures:
entwined is that hall
with serpent’s backs.

39. *Sá hún þar vaða
þunga strauma
menn meinsvara
og morðvarga
og þann er annars glepur
eyrarúnu.
Þar saug Niðhöggur
nái framgengna,
sleit vargur vera.*

39. There she saw wading
the sluggish streams
bloodthirsty men
and perjurers,
and him who beguiles the ear
of another’s wife.
There Nidhögg sucks
the corpses of the dead;
the wolf tears men.

The Eddaic poems clearly distinguish this place from Hel, the realm where “all men” must eventually come according to *Fáfnismál* 10. *Vafþrúðnismál* 43 separates those that come to Hel from those that pass through Hel into Niflhel:

43. "Frá jötna rúnum
ok allra goða
ek kann segja satt,
þvíat hvern hefi ek
heim of komit;
níu kom ek heima
fyr Níflhel neðan;
hinig deyja ór helju halir."

43. Of the secrets of the Jötuns
and of all the gods,
I can truly tell;
for I have traveled
Over each world;
to nine worlds I came,
to Niflhel beneath:
here die men from Hel.

Here the world of Niflhel is as sharply distinguished from Hel, as Hel is from Midgard, the world of living men. The heathen poet says that men “die” from Hel into Niflhel, just as men die from Midgard into Hel. As we know from *Völuspá*, Niflhel is a place filled with terrors reserved for the souls of adulterers, murderers and their ilk.

In agreement with this, paraphrasing the words of *Vafþrúðnismál* 43, Snorri himself states in *Gylfaginning* 3:

“wicked men go to Hel and onto Niflhel; that is down in the ninth world”

The poem *Baldurs Draumar* also distinguishes these two realms. It says:

2. Upp reis Óðinn,
alda gautr,
ok hann á Sleipni
söðul of lagði;
reið hann niðr þaðan
niflheljar til;
mætti hann hvelpi,
þeim er ór helju kom.

2. Up rose Odin
lord of men,
and on Sleipnir he
the laid saddle;
he rode down
to Niflhel.
He met a dog
coming out of Hel.

3. Sá var blóðugr
um brjóst framan
ok galdrs föður
gól of lengi;

3. It was blood-stained
on its breast.
At the father of galdur: -
it howled at length.

4. fram reið Óðinn,
foldvegr dunði;
hann kom at hávu
Heljar ranni.

4. Odin rode forth -
the ground rattled -
to Hel's high
hall he came.

In this poem, Odin rides “down” from Asgard to Niflhel. From Niflhel, he rides toward Hel. At the border between the two realms, a dog “bloody about the breast” runs to meet him, howling and snapping at him. Once in Hel, he finds the well-decorated hall, described above, in which Baldur will reside after death. In Hel, the road “rattles” or “thunders” beneath the weight of a living rider on a living horse.

The same is said of Hermod. When he later rides to Hel to converse with Baldur (as told in *Gylfaginning* 49), he is told by the guardian at the bridge that “five *fylki*” of

dead men have passed quietly before him. Hermod on Sleipnir makes more noise crossing into Hel than these five “fylki” together. The Zoega Dictionary defines a “fylki” as a battalion or host in battle, and a *fylking* as a battle array. According to the Cleasby-Vigfusson Dictionary of Old Icelandic, “fylki” is a poetic term meaning “troops” or divisions of a military, from the term “fylki” meaning a “county,” used especially in regard to a levy, as “from each *fylki* twelve ships of war were to be levied.” A *fylkinga-armr* is a wing of an army, and a *fylkiar-broddr* is the vanguard of an army. The verb *fylkja* is a military term meaning “to draw up”. Thus, five battalions of warriors passed over the bridge to Hel before Hermod. Despite their great number, these men made little noise. This description is consistent with other accounts we have of the journey to Hel.

Consider the words of the Eddaic poem *Sólarljóð*:

44. *Sól ek sá
sjaldan hryggvari;
mjök var ek ór heimi hallr;
Tunga mín
var til trés metin,
ok kólnat at fyrir utan*

44. “The sun I saw
seldom sadder;
I had almost left the world;
my tongue
become like wood,
and all was cold without.”

The poet informs us that the dead cannot speak. This is consistent with several heathen accounts, where runes are required to loosen the tongue of a dead man allowing him the power of speech. Odin employs speech-runes when he carves *í rúnum*, so that a corpse from the gallows comes and *mæli* (speaks) with him (*Hávamál* 157). According to Saxo (Book 1), Hadding’s companion Hardgrip places a piece of wood carved with runes under the tongue of a dead man. The corpse recovers consciousness and the power of speech, he sings a terrible song. In *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* it is told how Gudrun, mute and almost lifeless (*gerðist að deyja*), sat near Sigurd’s dead body. One of the kinswomen present lifts the veil from Sigurd’s head. At the sight of her loved one, Gudrun awakens, bursts into tears, and is able to speak. Brynhild then curses the being (*vættur*) which “gave speech-runes to Gudrun,” (23) that is to say, freed her tongue, until then sealed as in death. Thus it follows that the dead who pass silently into Hel cannot speak. Their tongues are sealed by death, unless they possess speech-runes.

The Eddaic poem *Sigurdrífumál* 12 describes these runes:

12. *Málrúnar skaltu kunna
ef þú vilt, at manngi þér
heiftum gjaldi harm:
þær of vindr,
þær of vefr,
þær of setr allar saman,
á því þingi,
er þjóðir skulu
í fulla dóma fara.*

12. Mál-(speech-) runes you must know,
if you would that no one
requite you for injury with hate.
Those you must wind,
those you must wrap round,
those you must altogether place
in that court (Thing),
where people have
to go into full judgment.

This heathen verse tells us that speech-runes are particularly useful in “that court” where people go into “full judgment.” What is meant by “full judgment” is not stated.

Hávamál 77 speaks of just such a judgment. It informs us that everyone who dies is “judged” without describing the process. This judgment is eternal.

77. *Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama.
Eg veit einn
að aldri deyr:
dómur um dauðan hvern.*

"Your cattle shall die;
your kindred shall die;
you yourself shall die;
one thing I know
which never dies:
the judgment on each one dead."

Popular translations of this and the following verse would have us believe that this judgment constitutes the judgment of the living on the dead, in other words, the fame that a man acquires in his life, even though we know that the fame of most people fades within a generation or two, and that the majority of people die in obscurity. *Hávamál* 77 and 78, however, assure us that the judgment on “each one dead” is eternal. Where and how this judgment takes place is of great importance to determining the heathen belief regarding the dead. Thankfully, the Eddaic poems contain clues that illuminate the process.

In *Sólarljóð*, after traveling the road to Hel, the poet informs us that dead men must sit on “Norns’ seats” for nine days. What they wait for is not stated.

51. *Á norna stóli
Sat ek níu daga,
þaðan var ek á hest hafinn,
gýgjar sólir
skinu grimmliga
ór skýdrúpni skýjum.*

51. In the Norns' seat
nine day I sat,
thence I was mounted on a horse:
there the giantess's sun
shone grimly
through the dripping clouds of heaven.

In *Hávamál* 111, we find a similar scene:

112. *Mál er að þylja
þular stóli á
Urðarbrunni að.
Sá eg og þagða'g,
sá eg og hugða'g,
hlydda eg á manna mál.*

112. 'Tis time to speak
from the sage's chair. -
By the well of Urd
I sat silently,
I saw and meditated,
I listened to men's words.

113. *Of rúnar heyrða eg dæma,
né um ráðum þögðu
Háva höllu að,
Háva höllu í,
heyrða eg segja svá:*

113. Of runes I heard discourse,
nor of sage counsels were they silent,
at the High One's hall.
In the High One's hall
Thus I heard them speak.

Here the speaker “sits silently” by Urd’s well listening to discourse, just as in *Sólarljóð*, where a dead man sits silently “on the Norns’ seats.” Since Urd and her sisters are “norns” might this be the court where men go into “full judgment”?

Without drawing any conclusions, let’s restate what we have learned according to these heathen sources:

1. All men eventually come to Hel, even warriors whose final destination is Valhalla.
2. Every dead man is judged. The judgment is eternal.
3. There is a court at “Urd’s well” with a rostrum where discourse is heard. There, a person sits silently listening to Odin “The High One”.
4. Dead men “sit in Norn’s seats” for nine days before moving onto their final fate. Urd and her sisters are Norns.
5. Dead men’s tongues are cold and silent, unless one possesses “mal-runes” which are particularly helpful in “that court” where men go into “full judgment.” Odin possesses such runes.

Based on this wide range of evidence, it is now reasonable to hypothesize that all the dead gather in Hel by Urd’s well, and more specifically at a court found there, awaiting judgment, their final fate not yet determined. From our sources, we know that those who die on the battlefield will pass onto Valhalla, while “wicked” people will “die” again and be sent northward to Niflhel or Niflheim. Presumably, the rest will remain in Hel, the warm green fields surrounding Urd’s thingstead. Saxo tells us these realms are “sunny” and *Sólarljóð* speaks of a “sun” shining grimly through the dripping clouds.

At this point, the destination of the dead is not certain, apparently even for those who died on the battlefield. In *Njáls Saga*, ch. 88, of the heathen Hrapp, who had burnt a heathen temple and stripped the idols of their riches, Hakon says: "The gods are in no haste to seek vengeance, the man who did this shall be driven out of Valhalla forever." (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson translation)

If the purpose of the journey to Hel is to appear at the court by Urd’s well and wait for judgment and even warriors chosen for Valhalla must stop here before passing over Bifröst to Asgard and Valhalla, we must suspect that the gods have some involvement in the matter, since ultimately it is Odin and Freyja who decide who enters their halls Valhalla and Sessrumnir. *Grímnismál* 14 states:

14. *Fólkvangr er inn níundi,
en þar Freyja ræðr
sessa kostum í sal;
hálfan val hún kýss hverjan dag,
en hálfan Óðinn á.*

14. “Fólkvang is the ninth,
there Freyja directs
the sittings in the hall.
She chooses half the fallen each day,
but Odin the other half.”

Since *Njal’s Saga* (above) tells us that the gods are in no hurry to seek vengeance against those who desecrate their shrines, this suggests they expect there will be a time for certain redress in the future. Such a view would give comfort to the faithful heathen who might see such men prosper in life, seemingly unpunished for their violations of

heathen moral laws. They could take solace in their knowledge that the gods would act in the due course of time, if not in this lifetime, then the next.

One sticking point remains. Snorri informs us that Urd's well is located in the heavens, providing an even distribution of the three wells that feed Yggdrasil, according to medieval Christian cosmology, i.e. one in heaven, one on earth, and one in Hell. But is this the original heathen conception?

While other Eddaic poems speak of a judgment on each one dead, place dead men "on Norn's seats," and speak of a court at Urd's well, the Eddaic poem *Grímnismál*, verses 29 and 30, inform us that the gods ride over Bifröst "every day" to sit in judgment by Urd's well. What they judge is not stated.

29. *Körmt ok Örmt*
ok Kerlaugar tvær,
þær skal Þórr vaða
dag hvern,
er hann dæma ferr
at aski Yggdrasils,
því at ásbrú
brenn öll loga,
heilög vötn hlóa.

29. Körmt and Örmt,
and the Kerlaugs twain:
these Thor must wade every day,
when he to goes to 'sit as judge'
at Yggdrasil's ash;
for the As-bridge
is all on fire,
the holy waters boil.

30. *Glaðr ok Gyllir,*
Glær ok Skeiðbrimir,
Sillfrintopp ok Sinir,
Gísl ok Falhófnir,
Gulltoppr ok Léttfeti,
þeim ríða æsir jóm
dag hvern,
er þeir dæma fara
at aski Yggdrasils.

30. Glad and Gyllir,
Gler and Skeidbrimir,
Sillfrintopp and Sinir,
Gisl and Falhofnir,
Gulltopp and Lettfeti;
on these steeds the Æsir
every day ride,
when they go to 'sit as judges',
at Yggdrasil's ash.

That the gods consider this journey to be of the utmost importance is clear from the effort they make to get there. They ride from their homes in Asgard "every day" over the bridge Bifröst to "sit as judges" (*dæma*) by Urd's well. The journey is particularly arduous for Thor, who must walk, wading four rivers to arrive there "every day".

Grímnismál 29 and 30 do not tell us which direction the gods travel when they leave Asgard, riding toward Urd's well. As we saw in the poem *Baldrs Draumar*, when Odin rode from Asgard to Niflhel, he rode "downward." But in *Gylfaginning* 14, Snorri interprets the *Grímnismál* verses to mean that the Aesir ride over Bifröst every day from their *earthly* city of Asgard (which he expressly identifies with the classical city of Troy, located in present day Turkey) "upward" to Urd's well which he locates in the heavens. Snorri clearly states that Bifröst connects Earth [Midgard] and the heavens. He portrays the Aesir as clever human beings who built a bridge to heaven, and founded a court (not homes) there. Snorri depicts the human Aesir as riding their horses from their home in Troy "upward" to Urd's well in the heavens. That he used *Grímnismál* 29 and 30 as his

source is clear in that he quotes verse 30 and paraphrases verse 29, reciting the list of horses the Aesir ride over Bifröst daily.

Despite Snorri's direct statement that the Aesir ride "upward", we have reason to doubt that the heathen poet who composed *Grímnismál* meant this. First of all, no heathen poem portrays the Aesir as human beings or identifies Asgard with the earthly (and foreign) city of Troy. These are late Christian interpretations of genuine heathen concepts. Secondly, no other source places Urd's well in the heavens. The *Grímnismál* verses do not state which direction the Aesir ride. The word "up" is Snorri's addition.

While we may doubt that ancient heathens conceived of Urd's well as being located in the heavens, we have little reason to doubt that they placed Asgard there. Snorri informs us that in Asgard Odin has a throne "from which he saw over all the worlds." The poem *Skírnismál* confirms that this was a genuine heathen concept. In support of this, *Sonnatorek 21*, composed by the heathen skald Egill Skallagrímsson speaks of his son being raised "up to the home of the gods" (upp í goðheim) upon his untimely death.

Þat mank enn, es upp of hóf
í goðheim Gauta spjalli
ættar ask, þanns óx af mér,
ok kynvið kvánar minnar.

"I remember Gautar's (Odin's) friend
raising up into the god-world (goðheim)
The family ash-tree which grew out of me
and the kin-wood (son) of my wife."

In the sole passage of genuine heathen poetry where the location of Urd's well is indicated, we are told that it lies "in the south" (*Skáldskaparmál* 65 in a verse by Eilíf Guðrúnarson). In this verse, Christ is said "to sit in the south at Urd's well". Thus in the words of a newly converted heathen poet, the primary figure of his new religion, Christ, sits where the primary figures of his old religion, the Aesir, "sit as judges" that is "in the south at Urd's well."

This coincides with what *Fáfnismál* 15 tells us about Bifröst's fate. During Ragnarök, when the fire giant Surt rides forth to battle the gods, the bridge Bifröst breaks under the weight of riders.

Sigurðr kvað:

14. "Segðu mér þat Fáfnir,
alls þik fróðan kveða
ok vel margt vita:
hvé sá holmr heitir,
er blanda hjörlegi
Surtr ok æsir saman."

Sigurd spoke:

"Tell me then, Fafnir,
for you are famed wise,
And you know much now:
How do they call the isle where
all the gods and Surt shall
mingle sword-liquor (blood)?"

Fáfnir kvað:

15. "Óskópnir hann heitir,
en þar öll skulu
geirum leika goð,
Bilröst brotnar,
er þeir á brú fara,
ok svima í móðu marir.

Fafnir spoke:

15. "Óskópnir (Not-cold) it is called,
where all the gods shall
seek the play of swords (battle);
Bilröst [Bifröst] breaks
when they cross the bridge,
And the steeds shall swim in the flood."

As we know, Surt dwells in a world of fire located to the far south. When Ragnarök approaches, Surt comes "from the south" (*Völuspá* 53), the same direction as Urd's well. Then, Bifröst (i.e. Bilröst), the path between Asgard and Urd's well, "breaks" under the weight of riders.

In *Gylfaginning* 4, Snorri informs us that at the beginning of time there were two worlds: a world of fire and a world of ice on either side of a great abyss called Ginnungagap. The world of fire was located to the south of it, and the world of ice was located to the north of it. According to *Gylfaginning*, Surt dwells in the fiery south, while in the north is found one of the three world fountains: the cold well named Hvergelmir. In *Gylfaginning* 15, Snorri informs us that a second of the three world fountains, Mimir's well, is located "where Ginnungagap" once was.

If one of the three world fountains, Hvergelmir, is located to the north of the abyss and the second world fountain, Mimir's well, is located "where Ginnungagap once was", one world fountain remains: Urd's well. We are told it lies "in the south", the same direction we find Surt's fiery realm. Thus we find an even distribution of the three world fountains among the three most prominent geographical features of the primeval age: Hvergelmir in Niflheim, the cold north; Mimir's well in the mild midst of Ginnungagap, and Urd's well in the hot south.

Mimir and Urd are older than the gods and more powerful than them. Odin, the father of the Aesir, regularly goes to consult Mimir and must sacrifice of himself to drink from Mimir's well, nor can Odin thwart the will of Urd (Fate). As owners and guardians of two of the world's primeval fountains, logic dictates that Mimir and Urd had established their claim on them long before the younger gods led by Odin created Midgard and the upper worlds. This strongly suggests that Mimir's and Urd's wells are located in the first world. As giants, they must have been among the world's first beings. *Vafþrúðnismál* 33 tells us that "a man and a maid together" sprang from under Ymir's arm, while a three-headed monster was bred from his feet. This "man and maid" (whom are not identified) may well have been Mimir and Urd, the oldest and most powerful beings in the universe.

In Hvergelmir to the north, we are told that icy rivers find their source. In contrast, we have reason to believe that Urd's well in the south is warm. Snorri tells us that swans swim in its water (*Gylfaginning* 16). In the same vein, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 2 tells us that when "wights confounded the weather with magic", Urd was appointed the protector of Odhrerir (one of the world wells) "against the mightiest winter." In *Völundarkviða* 1, three swan-maidens fly "from the south" to meet their lovers in the north. The same verse connects them with fate and weaving, the occupations of the Norns.

According to *Gylfaginning*, when the ice floes of Hvergelmir flowed into the vast abyss and met the molten floes of Surt's home, a temperate region was created where life took hold. There, the giant Ymir arose. Later the gods slew Ymir and created Midgard from his bones and the stony vault of heaven from his skull. Thus, Midgard and the upper worlds must rest on the foundation of the first world, where we know for certain that at least two of the three world fountains are located. When the gods built Asgard and Midgard, they must have used the first world as their foundation. The Tree Yggdrasil itself is said to grow out of these three fountains.

Grímnismál 29, 30 tell us that Bifröst connects the gods' home in Asgard with Urd's well. It does not inform us where Asgard or Urd's well is located. If we imagine that Asgard is located in the heavens (not on earth as Snorri says), then Urd's well, on the opposite end of the bridge, must be located somewhere below. This vision is supported in Snorri's identification of the Bifröst bridge as a rainbow. A rainbow forming a half-arc extends from its apex in the heavens down past the horizon. A rainbow forming a full half-circle, extends its two ends beyond the horizon in two opposite directions. If we imagine Midgard as a smaller plate suspended above the larger underworld, then Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, extends from its apex in the heavens (Asgard) past the edge of the earth-plate, with its end or ends landing somewhere in the underworld. The *Poetic Edda* informs us that at least one end extends to Urd's well, which the skaldic verse quoted above places "in the south". Thus at least one end of Bifröst extends from Asgard in the heavens downward to Urd's well in Hel, the southern portion of the lower world.

If we imagine Bifröst as a full half-circle with its apex in heaven and one bridgehead in the south by Urd's well, then we must locate the other end to the north in Niflhel. That this is probably the genuine heathen conception of the bridge is supported by the passage in the poem *Baldur's Dreams*, where we are told that Odin rides from Asgard to Niflhel, and in several passages where we find Heimdall guarding one end of the bridge to prevent giants from crossing over it into Asgard. The gods ride over the southern half of the bridge daily to act as judges in Hel, while Heimdall guards the northern half from invasions from Niflhel. In support of this, the Eddaic poem *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, verse 25, states:

25. *Jörmungrundar*
í jódyr nyrðra
und rót yztu
aðalpollar
gengu til rekkju
gýgjur og þursar
náir, dvergar
og dökkálfar.

25. At Jörmungrund's
 northern border
 under the outermost root
 of the noble tree
 go to their couches
 giants and giantesses,
 dead men, dwarves,
 and dark-elves.

When the Bifröst bridge breaks under riders shortly before Ragnarök, their horses are said to swim in the sea of air (*Bilröst brotnar, er þeir á brú fara, og svima i módu marir* - *Fáfnismál* 15); A horse does not swim as fast and easily as it runs. The solid connections which were used by the gods and which they built in space are thus necessary for swift movement. The valkyries, as well as the gods, have found solid roads

advantageous. The Bifröst bridge would not have been built or established for the daily connection between Asgard and Urd's realm if it had not been necessary.

Grímnismál 30 informs us that Thor cannot ride over the bridge, as the other gods do, but must walk, lest the “holy waters boil”. The poem *Haustlöng* provides a reason, in its description of Thor riding in his goat-drawn chariot:

15. *Knöttu öll (en Ullar endilög fyr magi
grund vas grápi hrundin) ginnunga vé brinna,
þás hofregin hafrar hógreiðar fram drógu
(seðr gekk Svólvins ekkja sundr) at Hrunnis fundi.*

15. “All the sanctuaries of the falcons [the skies] did burn, while down below, thanks to Ullr’s step-father [Thor] the ground was kicked with hail, when the bucks drew the temple-deity of the easy-riding chariot [Thor] forward to meet Hrunnir. At the same time Svólnir’s wife [Odin’s wife, the earth] did split asunder.” [Based on Richard North’s translation]

Thor cannot ride across Bifröst because his fiery chariot would damage the bridge and endanger Urd’s well, the same fate that is to befall the bridge when Surt’s men ride from the south during Ragnarök. Still, Thor’s chariot requires a road. In the preceding verse, *Haustlöng* 14, that road is not Bifröst but *Mána vegr* (Mani’s path):

“Earth’s son [Thor] drove to the play of iron [the battle], while Moon’s path clattered beneath him.” [Richard North tr.]

Thus the atmosphere is seen as a great river or sea that is difficult to traverse without a solid path. This would seem to preclude the Valkyries from riding directly from Midgard with their charges to Valhalla in the heavens. In agreement with this theory, *Grímnismál* 21 informs us that the breadth of the atmospheric sea is too great and its currents too strong for those riding on their horses from the battlefield to wade across (*árglaumur þykir ofmikill valglaumi að vaða* — “Hard does it seem to the host of the slain to wade the torrent wild.” [For further illumination of this verse, see <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/grm21.html>].

According to *Grímnismál* 29, 30 Bifröst connects Asgard and Urd’s well. Its very name, Bifröst (Trembling Way), indicates that this connection is of such a nature that it quakes and trembles beneath the weight of horses and riders; this is confirmed in that Thor is forbidden from crossing this bridge on his thunder-chariot and it shall break under the weight of a host of riders led by Surt.

As we have seen in the oldest heathen sources, all men come to Hel when they die, including warriors destined for Valhalla. The sources examined above make it probable that they gather by the Thing at Urd’s well, where the gods gather daily to “sit as judges.” If Valhalla is located in heaven, then logically, the fallen warriors, like the gods, must cross Bifröst to reach their final destination.

We have at least one poetic example depicting the arrival of fallen warriors into Valhalla. The poem *Eiríksmál* begins:

1. “What dreams are these? I thought I arose before daybreak to make Valhall ready for the host of the slain. I woke up the Einherjar. I bade them rise up to strew the benches and to fill up the beer-vats, and I bade the Valkyries bear the wine, as if a king were coming.
2. “I look for the coming of some noble chiefs from the earth, wherefore my heart is glad.”
3. “What is that clashing” said Bragi, “as if a thousand men or some great host were tramping — the walls and the benches are creaking withal — as if Balder were coming back to Odin’s hall?”

When King Eirik, with five other kings and their attendants come riding up to Asgard, the gods hear a mighty din on their approach, as if the very foundations of Asgard were shaken. All the benches of Valhall quake and tremble. Did the skald who composed this suppose that the chosen heroes came on horses that swam in the air, and that the movements of their horses in this element produced a noise that made Valhall tremble? Or was it a solid road which thunders under the hooves of hundreds of horses, and quakes beneath their weight? The poem provides a clue: The skald makes Bragi say that from the din and quaking it sounds as if it was Baldur who was returning to the halls of the gods. As we know, after his death, Baldur resides in Hel, i.e. in the lower world. If indeed King Eirik and his men arrived in the heavenly halls of Asgard (home of Valhalla) via Bifröst, we may reasonably suspect that they came from the direction of Urd’s well, a warm place located to the south of Mimir’s well “where Ginnungagap once was.”

Only one other source provides us information about the route the Valkyries take when they arrive in Valhalla with their chosen heroes. In the poem *Hákonarmál* 13, the valkyrie Skogul says:

*Ríða vit skulum,
kvað en ríkja Skögul,
græna heima goða
Óðni at segja,
at nú mun allvaldr koma
á hann sjalfan at séa.*

“Now we must ride to the green world [*heim*] of the gods to tell Odin that a mighty king is coming there to see him.”

Might this “green world of the gods” refer to Hel with its thingstead near Urd’s well where the gods gather there sit in judgment every day?

According to the poem *Eiriksmál* quoted above, Odin is not at the Thing by Urd’s well when the fallen heroes arrive. He greets them in Valhalla. Thus it would seem that these warriors chosen for Valhalla were not required to stop at Urd’s thingstead, unless, like Hrapp (*Njal’s Saga* ch. 88), they had committed some nothing act that required judgment by the gods. However, even here, Odin does not act independently of the Norns. The *Younger Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 36) informs us:

“There are still others, whose function it is to wait in Valhall, serve drink and look after the tableware and drinking vessels. Thus they are named in *Grímnismál* (36):

Hrist and Mist I desire should bring me a horn, Skeggiold and Skogul, Hild and Thrud, Hlokk and Herfiotur, Goll and Geirahod, Randgrid and Radgrid and Reginlief. These serve ale to the Einherjar.

These are called Valkyries. Odin sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and govern victory, Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings.” [Faulkes tr.]

What Snorri says is confirmed in the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*. In verse 20, the norns who determine the fate of men are enumerated:

20. *Þaðan koma meyjar
margs vitandi
þrjár úr þeim sæ,
er und þolli stendur;
Urð hétu eina,
aðra Verðandi,
skáru á skíði,
Skuld ina þriðju.
Þær lög lögðu,
þær líf kuru
alda börnum,
örlög seggja.*

20. Thence come maidens,
much knowing,
three from the hall,
which stands under that tree;
the first is named Urd,
the second Verdandi, -
on a tablet they graved -
Skuld the third.
Laws they established,
life allotted
to the sons of men;
destinies pronounced.

In verse 30, when the Valkyries, who chose men’s fate on the battlefield, under the direction of Odin, are named, the youngest Norn, Skuld, is foremost among them.

30. *Sá hún valkyrjur
vitt um komnar,
görvar að ríða
til Goðþjóðar;
Skuld hélt skildi,
en Skögul önnur,
Gunnur, Hildur, Göndul
og Geirskögul.
Nú eru taldar
nönnur Herjans,
görvar að ríða
grund valkyrjur.*

30. She saw the Valkyries
coming from afar,
ready to ride
to the gods’ people:
Skuld held a shield,
Skögul was second,
then Gunn, Hild, Göndul,
and Geirskögul.
Now are enumerated
Herjan’s [Odin’s] maidens,
the Valkyries, ready
over the earth to ride.

According to both Eddas, Skuld, the youngest of the three Norns, is also the leader of Odin's valkyries which explains why warriors chosen for Valhalla are allowed to bypass the Thingstead at Urd's well. They are led past Urd's thingstead by one of the Norns themselves, thus not even the selection of Valhalla's heroes is free of Urd's oversight, underscoring the truth of *Fjölsvinnsmál* 47 which says: "No one can oppose Urd's decree," including Odin himself (further illustrated by his inability to prevent Baldur's death, as well as his return from the underworld).

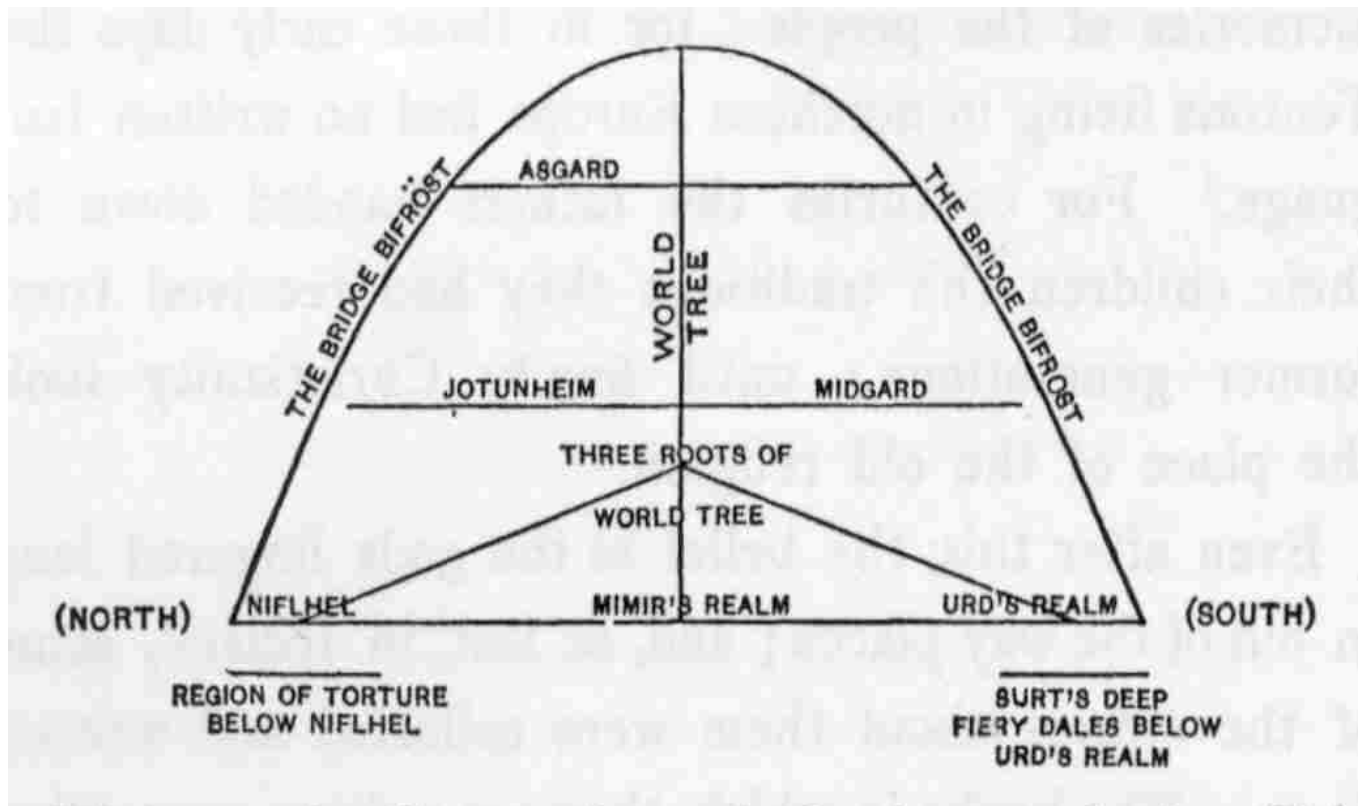
By placing inordinate weight on the words of *Snorri's Edda* and paying insufficient attention to what the older heathen poems say regarding the fate of the dead, we have been misled into believing that the gods did not judge their followers and that only warriors were rewarded for leading a virtuous life according to the precepts of heathen morality. The oldest heathen sources, the Eddaic poems, make it plain that there are consequences for leading a life in accordance with or in opposition to heathen values. The gods judge the souls of all men and reward their actions accordingly.

There is no need to interpret this judgment of souls as a Christian interpolation, since a similar court is found in most all Indo-European mythologies.

For further information, please see:

"Old Norse Cosmology Drawn from passages in the Poetic Edda"

<http://www.germanicmythology.com/original/cosmology2.html>



"Yggdrasil" from Mary E. Litchfield's *The Nine Worlds* (1895)