

# ***Viktor Rydberg's*** **Investigations into** **Germanic Mythology** **Volume II**

Part 1: Indo-European Mythology  
Translated and Annotated by William P. Reaves  
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## **I.**

### **Germanic Myths of Proto-Indo-European Origin.**

With any attempt to determine the age of the Germanic myths, it is first necessary to identify what in them may be a legacy of ideas from the Proto-Indo-European era.<sup>1</sup>

With the legacy of language from that time has followed a legacy of ideas, a conveyance from generation to generation of ideas that have their expression in language. Human psychology teaches us that within these ideas, myths constitute the element that changes least under normal conditions, because in that form they are regarded as traditional truth with religious sanctity. Myths defy time best, because they work themselves more deeply into the people's imagination than do other ideas.

The material that exists for the study of the age of Germanic mythology comprises the remaining preserved Indo-European myths: the Asiatic Indo-European and the Greek. (Of Italian mythology, little is preserved for us, of Celtic and Slavic even less; and the attempt that has been made to reconstruct the lost cycle of myths from Celtic and Slavic *folklore* is burdened with difficult uncertainties.) Of these, the Greek myth-complex requires preliminary preparation before it can be used successfully for comparative research to any great degree. Specifically, in the condition they have come down to us, the Greek myths are a new construct to which some of the collapsed Hellenic Indo-European mythic cycle certainly supplied building material, but which were combined with, and at times reduced by, non-Indo-European elements. Thus, the comparisons I make here are limited to the Asiatic Indo-European mythic cycle, although Greek myths are also employed where called for and without the risk that errors may occur.

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<sup>1</sup> In this translation, the word "Indo-European" refers to the Indo-European family of languages and its speakers. The word "Aryan" will be used exclusively to denote the Indo-Iranian peoples and their languages. Such a distinction is not made in the original text. For Rydberg's understanding of the word "Aryan" (*Ariska*) see *Undersökningar i Germanisk Mythologi, första delen*, no. 2, where Rydberg defines his use of the word "Aryan" as meaning "Indo-European." Further references to the first volume of this work, formerly translated as *Teutonic Mythology* by Rasmus B. Anderson (1889), will be listed as *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I. This text is widely available online and in print.

Throughout the comparison, a broad comprehensive commonality develops among the myths—a breadth greater than I had suspected at the outset of my investigations. I have done my best to disregard all similarities that may stem from common human nature or may have arisen spontaneously after the dispersal of the people. Analogous formations in which similarities obviously progress from one common root, however, I neither could nor did I want to exclude. In regard to what contributions Asiatic Indo-European language studies make to these investigations, I have limited myself only to those that the foremost specialists in this area consider best supported.

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## 1.

### The Beginning

1) The world in which we live is not eternal. It had a beginning. Existence arose from non-existence.

*Rigveda* X, 72, 3: Out of non-existence was born existence.

*Rigveda* X, 129, 1: Existence was not found, nor non-existence,  
no space was found, no heavens beyond it.

*Völuspá* 3:

*Ár var alda  
þat er ekki var.  
Vara sandr, né sær,  
né svalar unnir;  
jörð fannsk eigi,  
né upphimmin*

When time was young,  
what is was not.  
There was no sand, no sea,  
no cool waves;  
earth did not exist  
nor heaven above.

*Wessobrunn Prayer*:

*ero ni was,  
noh ûfhimil  
Earth did not exist  
Nor heaven above.*

## 2.

### Ginnungagap.

2) How was it explained that the world arose out of nothing? A bard among the *Rigveda*-Aryans has asked himself questions concerning “the path from non-existence to existence.” The passage cited above (*Rigveda* X, 129), shows how one of them sought to sever this Gordian knot, with a clause that states there was neither existence nor non-existence before the world's origin. In other words, for the human mind, the problem is insoluble. It then lies close at hand to escape this difficulty by moderately rejecting non-existence and saying: the world is eternal. But none of the ancient Indo-European bards chose this way out, as far as we can tell from the existing testimony. They stop short of the insoluble problem, which was proposed in ancient times, and confess its incomprehensibility. The bard who composed *Rigv.* X, 129 adds incomprehensible perhaps for the Creators themselves: “He from whom this creation originates, either he has founded or not founded it; He, who watches over it from the highest space, he alone knows who it is—or does he not know this?” (v. 7).

However, when the leap from non-existence to existence must be made, a concept of space is the first condition for a conception about the origin of the world, due to our mental organization. After having said that non-existence (*þat er ekki var*)<sup>2</sup> was “the origin of the ages” and emphasizing it by denying original existence of the elements earth (*sandr*) and water (*sær*), *Völuspá* 3, 7 says: *gap var ginnunga*, “Ginnungagap was.” The Indo-Aryans also knew Ginnungagap as “the dark gaping abyss.” The meaning of the Norse word's prefix, *ginnunga*, is disputed. The suffix is identical to the suffix in the Indo-Aryan expression for the same concept: *gabhîra*, deep, which word is related to the Iranian *gafya*, chasm and the Germanic *gap*.

In the chasm, *Rigveda* (X, 129, 2) says no mortals nor immortals were found, day and night were not yet distinguished, space was enveloped in darkness. The *Wessobrunn prayer*<sup>3</sup> says that there was *noh sunna ni scein* (“nor did the sun shine”), which meant that darkness brooded in the original depths. And *Völuspá* (4, 5, 6) locates the sun's activity, night's name-giving (i.e. adoption into the circle of divine powers), and the establishment of their regular posts in a later period of creation when many of the divine beings had already arisen and held regular assemblies concerning the world's final shape.

## 3.

### Chaos. The Elements.

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<sup>2</sup> [Rydberg's footnote:] See the variant in the *Prose Edda*. [The mss. of *Völuspá* read instead *þar er Ýmir bygdí*, “when Ymir lived.” Margaret Clunies Ross observes: “Strictly speaking, there is no single Old Norse myth or myth-fragment that postulates creation in its Christian theological sense of bringing something or someone into existence *ex nihilo*. The sole exception is *Gylfaginning*'s endorsement of a version of *Völuspá* 3, 2. ...Faulkes (1983, 298) argues plausibly that Snorri may have made up this variant himself under the influence of contemporary Christian theories that God created the world *ex nihilo*.” *Prolonged Echoes*, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> *Das Wessobrunner Gebet* c. 800 AD, a Saxon poem, one of the earliest literary remnants of the German language, consisting of nine alliterative lines.

3) Space, the first condition for the origin of a world, was thus provided. But space, in and of itself, cannot be depicted as a foundation for creation. One or many elements, by the power of imagination, must move into the empty space. Rigvedic and Germanic mythology are in agreement in assuming only *one* element, which they identify as water.

*Rigv.* X. 129, 3: Darkness reigns. In the beginning, an indiscriminate sea, enveloped in darkness, was all.

*Rigv.* X. 129, 3: Up swelled the firmly founded Ocean. From there arose the sea, from which arose the atmosphere. Heaven and earth expanded from there. Afterwards, everything else holy was born, with a multitude of immortal beings. The earth's substance is consequently water—we meet this concept in many forms in the *Rigveda*. It is not only the material things and the mortal beings that ultimately derived their origin from there. "Son of the Water," *apâm napât* or *âptja* (from *ap* water), is an epithet that belongs even to the foremost gods like Agni, Indra, Yama, and Trita and refers to their direct and indirect origin from this element.

So too in the Iranian documents. The reformation, with its strong trend toward monotheism and a decided moralistic purpose, that the Iranian nature-religion underwent and that was tied to the reformer Zarathustra's name, has of course caused a change even in its cosmology, at the same time as it changed the old gods, partially to heavenly heroes, partially to human patriarchs, and partially to demons. But that water was also regarded among the Iranians as the world's primordial material is not obliterated. The primeval sea Vourukasha, fed by three great source-streams, is still the womb of creation in the reformed doctrine. The Tree of Life, from whose crown the seeds of all vegetation spread over the earth, grew up out of Vourukasha's water,<sup>4</sup> and if this "child of the water" were banished, the world's life would cease. In the reformed religion, *Athwja* is the name of a mythic tribe originally of divine birth. *Athwja* means "water's offspring" and is the same word as the Vedic *âptja*.

According to Norse cosmology, rivers that flow into the gap from the north, from the region called Niflheim (Mist-world), turn to ice and fill the gap with a frozen, mist-enveloped ocean, whose waters become the material of creation.

Greek cosmology agrees with its Indo-European counterparts. It designates the first period of existence with the words Chaos, Night, and Erebus.<sup>5</sup> The original meaning of Chaos (*χάος*) is gap, empty space; the word is related to the Proto-German *ginen*, gap, and with the Old Norse *gjá*, cleft, abyss. Chaos and Ginnungagap express the same notion.<sup>6</sup> The original meaning of Erebus is mist-world (from the Indo-European *\*ragas*, mist, evaporation, water as fog).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Bundehesh* 9, 5 cp. 18, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116 ff.: "Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night; but of Night were born Aether and Day, whom she conceived and bare from union in love with Erebus. And Earth first bare starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods." [Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, 1914.]

<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion, see Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 19. See also Christopher A. Jones, "Early Medieval Chaos" in *Verbal Encounters, Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*. University of Toronto Press, 2005, pg. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, by Calvert Watkins (1985) lists this as: *\*regw-es-*: Darkness. Oldest root from *\*æregw-es-* Greek *Erebus*. The etymology of the word is uncertain.

Erebus and Niflheim express the same notion.<sup>8</sup> Ionic philosophy, which made water the primeval material, rested on ancient faith.

#### 4.

##### The Material of Life.

4) To become the womb of the world, the primeval water had to be fructified. The fructifying element was warmth: *tapas* in *Rigveda*, *hita* in *Gylfaginning*.

*Rigveda* X, 129, 3, 4: "An indiscriminate sea concealed in darkness, in the beginning, was all. The Vast (the living universe) was brought forth from the power of the warmth alone. Then *kâma* (the psychic principle, identical with *eros* in the Greek cosmology) first received existence, and *kâma* was the spirit's original seed."

That water was the material of life in Iranian cosmology is also clear from many lines in the Iranian documents and still attested to in the Persian religious book *Bundehesh*. The concept was well-suited to be an integral part of the reformed religion and therefore was preserved. *Bundehesh* chapter 1, 15 speaks of the void in the universe in which good and evil co-mingled, and of the realms of light and darkness, which lay on either side of the void. That one imagined the realm of darkness as lying north of the empty space and the realm of light south of it, is confirmed by many details and the whole basic outlook. Evil, which was understood both as physical and moralistic in the reformed religion, was essentially represented by darkness and cold in the Iranian nature religion; good was represented by light and warmth. When the evil king Ahriman (Angra Mainyu) wants to attack the good, he comes from the North.<sup>9</sup>

*Vendidad*, Fargard XIX: "From the northern region Angra Mainyu, the murderer, rushed forth, the demon of demons and he said these words to *Druj* (a female demon, witchcraft's author): Rush out and kill Zarathustra!"

The worst means of physical destruction at his disposal also shows that his realm was imagined to lie in the North. That means was cold. According to *Vendidad*, *Fargard* I, with cold, he makes the country of the Iranian founding fathers, the ancient paradise, into a difficult to inhabit tract, afflicted by a ten-month winter; and with a universal winter, corresponding to the Germanic fimbul-winter, he once came close to destroying the entire world (see below).

From this it follows that the realm of darkness was situated north of the void and the realm of light south of it. The good and the evil that co-mingled there were, when seen from the side of nature, warmth and cold, the latter in connection with snow and ice, i.e. the frozen element.

The Norse cosmology whose main features *Gylfaginning* preserves is in complete agreement with the Iranian cosmology on this point. North of Ginnungagap lies Niflheim, the region of darkness. South of the gap is the realm of light, from which the outpouring warmth meets rime-frost and ice from the north; it blends itself with them, partially melts them, and from the dripping thaw creates *kvikudropar*, the drops of life, from which the oldest organic life came

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<sup>8</sup> Later in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Erebus is located "beneath the earth." Grimm associates Erebus and Niflheim (see *Deutsche Mythologie*, chs. 19 and 25).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in *Bundehesh* 15, 9, when the first man and woman stray and worship the demons, they "went forth and milked a cow's milk, and poured it out towards the northern quarter; through that the demons became more powerful" [E.W. West Tr.].

forth. Warmth, which mixes with the primal water and fructifies it, is also the material of life in the Norse cosmology.

## 5.

### The World-Tree.

5) The *Rigveda* passage mentioned above (X, 129, 4) says that when warmth made its power felt in the primal waters, it brought forth the spirit's original seed. One finds that the concept of the origin of the life of the spirit takes its form from the organic world. Life develops from a seed found in the primal waters fructified by warmth. Is this concept merely a whim of the bard himself, a poetic image used for the occasion, or does it occur in other hymns of the *Rigveda* and bear the characteristics of one espoused among the Indian bards and sacrificial priests?

The latter is the case. The myth of a seed, born in the beginning in the warm primal waters, is found in other hymns and was preserved into the Brahmanic era where it, although changed by time, was transformed into the myth of Brahma's birth. It is this Vedic myth about *Hiranyagarbha*, the golden seed in Chaos, that forms the basis of the later myth about Brahma, who in Chaos deposits a shining embryo from which he himself and with him the world comes forth. The difference between the Vedic concepts and the Brahmanic is that in the former the seed becomes the world-tree, the oldest Indo-European symbol of the universe, while in the latter it becomes a world-egg in which Brahma himself develops and of whose shell he forms the heavens and the earth.

*Rigveda* X, 82, 5-7: "Which was the original seed that was begotten in the water, further back (in time) than the gods lived—the seed, in which all the gods were produced? It was the seed in which all the gods were united, that the water received, the primeval seed that lay alone on the unborn's navel and in which all the world rests."

*Rigveda* X, 121, 1: The first born is *Hiranyagarbha* (the golden seed); v. 7: "when came the great water, which contained all fertility within it, then the gods came to life, from it alone (namely *Hiranyagarbha*)."

The idea of the organic world residing inside a seed and developing from it was inevitably united with the idea that the world had grown out of a seed into an enormous, all-bearing, all-overshadowing, all-fostering and nourishing tree. There are strong reasons to assume that the development of language gave the imagination the first basis to shape this ingenious and beautiful myth.

From the Indo-European root word *bhu*, "to be," "to become" has specifically formed *bhāman*, which at the same time means "life, being and growth" and which returns in Sanskrit in the meaning "life, beings, and the existing world." Here, the expressions for growth and world have sprung from the same root.

May I also point out that the Greek *hylä* on one hand has the meanings "growing tree," "felled tree," "timber," "wood," and on the other hand the related meaning "substance," "matter," from which the physical world is built.

Thus, one of *Rigveda*'s bards can ask: "of which wood, of which tree" is the world created.

*Rigv.* X, 81, 4: "Which is the wood, which is the tree whereby earth and heaven are constructed? Ye wise, search in your souls thereafter, on what stood he, who created the worlds!"

6) The world-tree, "the tree of life," grows, according to the *Rigveda* verse cited above, in the midst of the space that the world occupies. This seed lies, as we see, "on the unborn's navel." From there, it shot up, and from there its stem rose vertically through space.

*Rigv.* I, 24, 7: "In the bottomless, Varuna the king with holy power placed the tree's stem upright; downward, its rays (roots) are directed. Among us (mankind), they must be unseen."<sup>10</sup>

Varuna, which many philologists consider to be the same word as *Οὐρανός*,<sup>11</sup> means "the vault of heaven over our heads, but of the space that in all directions —below and enveloper" and is the divine personification of the heavens, not only in its later meaning of above, under the earth and over the earth— surrounds Creation and also exists between earth and the subterranean worlds, which also have their heavens (see below). In Germanic mythology, *himmel* (heaven) has the same extensive meaning. Thus it becomes clear that, to distinguish them from other heavens, the heaven above our heads was called upper heaven (*upphiminn*, *ûfhimil*, *upheofon*). Also by degrees, Varuna especially came to be interpreted as a god of heaven present in the underworld, while during the Brahmanic period he was exclusively regarded as a god of the underworld, the king of the realm of death.

It is thus in the "bottomless" underworld space and into its midst that the Vedic world-tree extends its roots. From there, it grows both upward and downward, in the same degree as Creation is arranged and completed, in order to bear the worlds on its green branches.<sup>12</sup>

In all points, this idea also belongs to Germanic cosmology. The world-tree, Yggdrasil, in the beginning of time, had lain as a seed *fyr mold neðan* (*Völuspá* 2).<sup>13</sup> The Tree has three roots, which shoot down in three directions (*Grímnismál* 31).

Its middlemost root stands over Mimir's well which is located "where Ginnungagap once was" (*þar er forðum var Ginnungagap*, *Gylfaginning* 15),<sup>14</sup> that is to say, in the middle of the primeval space, with Niflheim on one side and the warm region on the other.

7) The Vedic world-tree's roots are likened to radiance or rays. Alfred Ludwig, translator of the *Rigveda*, who in the previously cited passage recognizes a description of the world-tree, has observed this seemingly strange similarity in his commentary.<sup>15</sup> The Norse description of Yggdrasil explains and confirms the expression. *Gylfaginning* has preserved a tradition according to which everything that comes into Urd's well, therefore even the roots of Yggdrasil

<sup>10</sup> Griffith: "Varuna, King, of hallowed might, sustaineth erect the Tree's stem in the baseless region. Its rays, whose root is high above, stream downward. Deep may they sink within us, and be hidden."

<sup>11</sup> Uranos. James Darmesteter confirms this view in *Ormazd et Ahriman*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> As Carla O'Harris has pointed out, the concept of the world-tree survives in Hindu literature as the Asvattha, with its roots in the heavens. *Atharvaveda* V, 4, 3 and XIX, 39, 6 observe: "The Asvattha-tree is the seat of the gods in the third heaven from here." From it, the gods obtain *amrita* (ambrosia). [Maurice Bloomfield tr.]. *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 15 says: "With roots above, branches below, the Asvattha is said to be indestructible; its leaves are the hymns; he who knows this knows the Vedas. Below and above spread its branches, ...its form is not perceived here, neither its end nor its origin nor its existence." [Sri Swami Sivananda tr.] The 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, Jnaneshwar, who wrote an extensive commentary on *Bhagavad Gita*, describes it in great detail: "It is not like other trees ...even if its base is burnt or cut with an axe, it does not get destroyed. ...Whatever things exist in this world are pervaded by this tree. ...This tree has become top-rooted because of Brahman ...This pure Brahman is the top root of this tree....It is the seed of the world tree, the source of mundane existence. ...It is here and beyond, in front and behind, it sees everything but is itself invisible. ...It exists in full consciousness of itself. ...The barks of the tree get peeled off by the stormy winds at the time of world-dissolution, but they appear in tufts at the beginning of an epoch." [M. R. Yardi tr.]

<sup>13</sup> "beneath the earth."

<sup>14</sup> All manuscripts actually read: *þar sem forðum var Ginnungagap* [*Ginnungagap*, *Codex Regius*]. The meaning is essentially the same, however.

<sup>15</sup> "It is not improbable that here we have an analogue to the tree of life." (III, p. 83)

extending downward, has the whitest color, "like the membrane inside an eggshell," and Saxo (see *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 49) likens the world-tree's roots to silver. An Iranian document says that the whole tree was white (see below).<sup>16</sup>

8) The Vedic world-tree bears fruit. The Maruts, a distinct division of the Rigvedic mythology's elves, its wind-elves, beautiful gold-forging youths who travel forth within the air-cleansing storms, shake down its mature fruit (*Rigv.* V, 54, 6, 12).

The Germanic world-tree also bears fruits, *aldin* (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 22).

The purpose of the fruits shaken down by the Maruts is made clear by places such as *Rigv.* II, 41, 15; V, 58, 4; I, 23, 8.<sup>17</sup> There the Maruts are described as assisting in childbirth. The embryo that one of the artisans of nature, Tvashtar or Vibhvan, formed in the mother's womb, is brought into daylight with the Maruts' assistance. In Germanic mythology, the fruits of the world-tree have the same purpose.

*Fjölsvinnsmál* 22: *Út af hans aldni*  
*skal á eld bera*  
*fyr kelisjúkar konur;*  
*utar hverfa*  
*þess þær innar skýli;*  
*sá er hann með mönnum mjötuður.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This may explain why the Tree is invisible to human eyes. In *Völuspá* 19, the Norns are said to drench the tree with *ausinn hvíta auri*, "water blended with white mud." This is supported by *Gylfaginning* 16, which says: "the Norns, who dwell by Urd's well, take water from the well each day, and with it the mud that lies around the well, and pour it over the tree, so that its branches may not rot or decay. This water is so holy that all things which come into contact with it turn as white as the membrane called *skjall* that covers the inside of an eggshell." The word *skjall* is also used of a semi-transparent membrane, stretched over a frame, and used as a window (instead of glass). Snorri may have meant to imply that the Tree is similarly transparent. This further explains two terms for "Mimir's Tree" (*Mímameiður*) found in the poem *Fjölsvinnsmál*: *Veðurglasir* (v.24) and *Aurglasir* (v.28). In *Skáldskaparmál* 42, Snorri identifies *Glasir* ("glassy") as a golden grove growing outside of Asgard. Like *Mímameiður*, *Glasir* may be understood as a name for Yggdrasil. Of *Veðurglasir*, scholar Björn M. Ólsen concludes: "This name seems to be a name of that part of *Mímameiður*, which rises above the earth, and is afflicted by the weather and the winds." Since *aur* means "mud, soil, clay," *Aurglasir* would then designate the subterranean part of the Tree. [I am indebted to Eysteinn Björnsson for this lucid observation].

<sup>17</sup> The first and the last passage cited here invoke the Maruts, as *pūsa-rātayah*. Pushan is said to be their gift. (Abel Bergaigne, *La Religion Vedique*, II, 383). The second passage speaks of the Maruts bringing a ruler, and possibly warriors, "fashioned by a master's hand," to the people.

<sup>18</sup> This entire verse is difficult and ambiguous. Neither the syntax nor the meaning can be established with certainty: "Its fruit shall on the fire be laid, for laboring women; out then will pass what would in remain, so it is a creator (i.e. "kindling") of mankind. [Benjamin Thorpe tr.]; or "Its fruit is taken and laid upon a fire for women in labour; out then will come that which they carry inside, thus it metes out fate among men." [Eysteinn Björnsson tr.]. The first part of the verse is usually interpreted as referring to a cure for women with uterine problems. The syntax of lines 4-5 is difficult, but the meaning seems to be that something within is forced outside. The meaning of the word *kelisjúkar* is uncertain. If Sophus Bugge's interpretation, "womb-sick" is correct, it may be a synonym of *jóðsjúkar* "child-sick," i.e. "in labor." Bugge's reading *killisjúkar* is supported by the Gothic *kilþei*, "womb." Therefore, this may refer to an illness expelled by the body, but the final line makes that interpretation unlikely. It says that the Tree "metes out fate among men," *mjötuður*, cp. *Metod* (see below). Rydberg suggests that its apples formed the embryos of human beings, their seeds as it were. These were conveyed into the womb and there, upon a creative "fire" (*á eld*), transformed into human embryos. The womb protects the unborn child (*innar skýli*) until its birth (*utar hverfa*). The Tree can be said to "mete out fate among men," if men are literally born from it.



(Compare *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, nos. 95 and 35.)

9) Once the world-order and the world itself were depicted in the form of an enormous tree, it is so natural that the imagination would place birds in its crown symbolizing one or another of the ideas applicable to the life of the world, that one could reasonably expect such a thing in Vedic as well as in Germanic mythology.

A Vedic mystery-hymn (*Rigv.* I, 164) that is a chain of metaphors and circumlocutions speaks of two birds, "united friends," in the world-tree's crown who celebrate their share of immortality and unceasingly praise "the holy assemblies" (of divine powers). "They say that sweet is the fruit in the tree's top—the tree on which all honey-eating birds go to sleep and wake; but the fruit will never be attained by those that know no father." In verse 11, the birds are called eagles.<sup>19</sup>

High in the world-tree's crown the Norse skalds have placed the gold-glittering cock *Viðófnir* (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 24), an eagle (*Grímnismál* 32, *Gylfaginning* 16) and a hawk, *Veðrfölnir*, sitting between the eagle's eyes (*Gylfaginning* 16). In addition to birds, four-footed animals are also found: four harts (*Grímnismál* 33), a squirrel and the goat Heidrun (*Grímnismál* 25). Many of these animals are demonstrably symbolic, like Dain and Dvalin (who represent death and slumber), Eikthrynir (who represents the water reservoir high up in the world-tree, see *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 36) and Heidrun (who represents the mead, pressed from the world-tree's leaves, and drunk by the Einherjar in Valhall.) The skald of the *Rigveda* hymn allows cows to suck milk out of "the beautiful bird's" head and, clad in the "form of the established district of the birds (the world-tree)," they drink water with their feet.<sup>20</sup> By these "cows," earthly trees are obviously meant, earthly vegetation that drink the juices of the world-tree with their feet (roots). "Foot-drinker" is a Vedic epithet for tree.

Of the world-tree's origin, the same skald sings: "Who has seen him that was first born? Who has seen how the one without bones supports the one with bones (i.e. how the empty space bears the world-tree that has branches)?"<sup>21</sup>

While the *Rigveda* bard lets honey-eating birds go to sleep and wake in the world-tree, Norse mythology tells us that a dew which "falls into dales" from the world-tree, is "that which men call honeydew and from which bees find nourishment." (*Gylfaginning* 16).

The lowest branches of the Vedic world-tree spread themselves, like Yggdrasil's, over the fields of bliss in the underworld that belong to King Yama's realm. King Yama is a being of divine birth, who walked death's path first and subsequently found the way to the fields of bliss (*Rigv.* X, 14). There "in the beautifully praised tree, in which Yama drinks together with the gods, there, as the kind master of the house, he cares for our ancient forefathers." (*Rigv.* X, 135, 1). Yggdrasil's lowest branches shade Urd's well where the gods judge and Mimir's realm where Baldur, the *ásmegir*, and the blessed dead have their abodes, where the mead of the underworld is their drink and the morning dew their ambrosia (See *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 52).

In two *Rigveda* hymns, X, 81 and X, 82, the world-tree personified is celebrated under the name "the All-worker" (*viçvakarman*). The All-worker is said to be the water's first embryo

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<sup>19</sup> The reference to v. 11 is erroneous. The birds are mentioned in verses 7 and 20. Nowhere in the hymn is the kind of bird indicated. The idea that they are eagles likely originated with Bergaigne; see *La Religion Vedique*, Vol. III, Part IV, pp. 10-17 [V. Paranjpe tr.].

<sup>20</sup> *Rigv.* I, 164, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Rigv.* I, 164, 4.

that which was born in the beginning, a reference to the golden-seed spoken of above which is the water's first embryo, and the bard inquires upon what he who supports the worlds stands. The world-tree is also personified in *Rigv.* X, 121, which celebrates the golden seed. For the bards, the world-tree represents an unknown god, the god *Who?* (*Ka*), whose arms are the four points of the compass and who overshadows the snow-capped mountains and the ocean. He is "the vast, by which the heavens remain secure and the earth steadfast, and who standing in the midst of creation, from there measures space."

When one considers that the world-tree is a symbol of the ordered universe and that even the divine powers lie hidden in its golden seed, one already sees how close this bard, when he thus personifies it, stands to the pantheism that later develops during the Brahmanic period and which receives a kind of dogmatic stamp.<sup>22</sup>

10) The myth of the world-tree is the same for the Iranian and the *Rigveda* Aryans. They possessed it fully formed while they still were a single people, and the information that the Iranian documents leave us concerning it complement that which is reported in *Rigveda*. The Iranian world-tree is called *Gaokerena* and *Homa*. The latter designation, when applied to a tree, can best be translated as mead-tree (see below). It grew up out of the middle of the underworld sea *Vourukasha* ("the broad-beached") and occupies the center of the created world.<sup>23</sup> It is white in color (*Pahlavi Vendidad* XX); as is its mead-juice. What the *Rigveda* and Norse mythology relate about the color of its roots is applicable to the entire tree and its juice and fits well with the common conception that the world-tree, in the form of a tree, is colorless and invisible to mortal eyes. It is alone in its class. "I, Ahuramazda, bring forth healing herbs in many myriads and of its kind only *Gaokerena*, *Homa* is white." (*Pahlavi Vendidad* XX). A hundred thousand kinds of plants have arisen from the world-tree's seed and it bears all types of fruits simultaneously.<sup>24</sup> Its juice is white mead-juice, the heavenly type of Homa-juice, which grants immortality to him who receives it. (Compare the birds in the Vedic world-tree that eat of its fruits and with another bird placed there that celebrates his share of immortality). For this reason, the dead, when they enter into new life should receive a drink of the world-tree's sap.

The myth of the world-tree's immortalizing mead is rediscovered in Germanic mythology. From the mead that is pressed out of the world-tree's leaves and is symbolized by the milk of the goat, Heidrun, that grazes on the world-tree, the Einherjar in Valhall gather the strength of immortal life. The *ásmegir*, Lif and Lifthrasir, survive on Yggdrasil's morning dew during the ages of the world.<sup>25</sup> Baldur, when he descends into the underworld, is greeted there with the drink of "clear strengths."<sup>26</sup> In the underworld, the blessed dead receive a new and higher life through the same "clear strengths" collected from the well, out of which the world-tree sucks its life's juices. (See *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 72).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> [Rydberg's footnote]: In our Old Norse poetry, there is a place where the world-tree is personified, namely as *Mjötuðr*, "Destiny," "Measurer." In the Low German evangelic poem *Heliand* the same word is used in the form *Metod* for God, and *Metod* is also employed thus in Old English sermons. What is only a sporadic expression without consequence in the Norse poetry becomes the same creative thought in the Indian mythology, during its later Brahmanic period.

<sup>23</sup> *Bundehesh*, ch. 18, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Bundehesh*, ch. 18, 9.

<sup>25</sup> See *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 53.

<sup>26</sup> *skírar veigar*, *Baldurs Draumar* 7.

<sup>27</sup> [Rydberg's footnote]: Perhaps *Grímnismál* 33 alludes to this when the bard allows *Dain* and *Dvalin* (symbols of death and sleep) to feed on Yggdrasil's shoots.

11) The Iranian world-tree is threatened by enemies, as is the Germanic, and in the Iranian myth, as in the Germanic, it is the tree's roots that are vulnerable to constant attack. The greatest and the worst monster that Ahriman, "the demons' demon," created is a lizard-shaped poisonous dragon that is found "in the water's abyss" by the foot of the tree and during the course of centuries unceasingly seeks to attack its roots, which nevertheless are defended by fish-shaped beings that Ahuramazda created.<sup>28</sup> From time to time another demon, Apaosha, in the form of a black horse comes down into Vourukasha to diminish the water and cause the tree to wither.<sup>29</sup> In Germanic mythology, it is the dragon Nidhögg, hostile to life, and besides him other monsters that attack Yggdrasil's roots, among them one Móinn, whose name also designates a horse (*Grímnismál* 34, 35; *Snorra Edda* II, 487, 571).<sup>30</sup>

12) Among the Iranians, as among the Germanic and the *Rigveda* Indo-Europeans, the world-tree had significance for the production of new human generations. Above its crown, Gaokerena-Homa, which stands with its roots in the source-sea Vourukasha, has a heavenly reservoir, Anhita, whose fluid cleanses man's seed and woman's womb, as it pours through the tree's branches, and makes them fertile with fresh, well-formed embryos, and provides milk to their newborn, (*Frawardin Yasht* I, 4-8).

The Islamic writer Shahrastani<sup>31</sup> tells of a Persian tradition that obviously stands in connection with this. God, says the tradition, placed the religion's founder Zarathustra's soul inside a tree that he allowed to grow up to heaven's highest heights. The juice of this tree contains sperm that Zarathustra's father received to drink, after which Zarathustra became a fetus inside his mother. —Another Persian tradition also says that the mead-juice in the world-tree gave origin to him. A Norse tale related in *Völsungasaga* 2 says that a queen could not bear children until she ate an apple that Frigg sent her from Valhall, over which the world-tree of course spreads its fruit-laden branches (*Fjölsvinnsímál* 22).

## 6.

### The Three Underworld Springs.

13) In Norse mythology there are three well-known world-wells: Hvergelmir, the northerly; Mimir's well, the middlemost; and Urd's well, the southerly. The roots of the world-tree extend up out of these waters.<sup>32</sup>

All three contain juices necessary to the world-tree, but Mimir's well, the middlemost, has special properties: In its depths originates the wonderful mead that the gods covet, which grants them power to perform great works. The mead contains creative force, wisdom, and ecstasy.

<sup>28</sup> *Bundehesh*, ch. 18, 2-6.

<sup>29</sup> See *Khorda Avesta, Yasht* 8: *Tishtar Yasht*; *Bundehesh* 7, 3-6.

<sup>30</sup> Although not found in modern editions of Snorri's *Edda*, Anthony Faulkes confirms *Móinn* as the name of a horse in *Edda Snorra Sturluson* I-III, Hafnia [SnE 1848-87 II, 487], which seems to have followed the U manuscript, *Codex Upsalensis*. See Anthony Faulkes' *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Skáldskaparmál* 2: Glossary and Index of Names, 1998, p. 492.

<sup>31</sup> Mahommed al-Shahrastani (1076 or 1086-1153), Arab theologian, whose chief work is the *Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nilal*, an account of religious and philosophical sects.

<sup>32</sup> Regarding the spatial relationship of these wells, see *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, nos. 56, 65, and 93.

In *Rigveda*, mead is partially designated by *madhu* (the same word as mead), partially, and most often, by *soma* (the same word as the Iranian *homa* mentioned above), and partially with the compound *somamadhu*, and once with *amrita*, which is thought to be the same word as ambrosia. *Madhu* carries the dual meanings of mead and honey, designating a drink made with or containing honey among the *Rigveda*-Aryans, as well as among the Teutons. This further elucidates the common concept among the Teutons and their Asiatic relatives of the world-tree as a mead-tree, a *homa*-tree, that bears fruit on which "honey-eating" birds feed and that causes morning dew, which is honey-dew, to "drop in dales."

The three world-wells are found again as the three soma-wells, "the Somas," as they are called in *Rigv.* IX, 46, 2. In *Rigv.* V, 29, 8, they are spoken of as three soma-pools. In *Rigv.* VIII, 7, 10, they are likened to cisterns and bear distinct names. The middlemost one, it says, is a wisdom well. In *Rigv.* IX, 108, 9, they are compared to casks of which one is "middle-lying." Their trinity is mentioned in many places; soma is the "threefold" (*tridhātu*); it has "three dwelling places," IX, 103, 2<sup>33</sup> and flows down from three high plains, VII, 37, 1.<sup>34</sup>

Two of the Somas contain "surging waters," which reminds us of the name of the northern world-well in *Grímnismál* 26: *Hvergelmir*, "roaring kettle." The statement appears in *Rigv.* X, 27, 23: "two of the three convey 'surging water.'"<sup>35</sup> The third is spoken of in *Rigv.* VII, 47 as the well *Id*, the "richest in mead," containing a "hundredfold cleansing," possessing "divine nature," and becoming a pleasure of the gods and goddesses.<sup>36</sup> The similarity with Mimir's well here is striking.

14) These holy "waters" are gathering places for the Apsarases, the water-dises and swan-maidens of Iranian mythology. In Urd's well swim the swans that are the parents of all swans.<sup>37</sup> *Rigv.* IX, 46, 2 says that the somas are "as adorned as a bride possessed of a rich dowry." In Germanic mythology as well, at least two of the wells are described as beautiful: Mimir's and Urd's, and at least one of them is adorned with a sevenfold gold-trim (*Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 49).

15) In Iranian mythology, likewise, the world-wells are three. Most often only Vourukasha is mentioned as the great subterranean water reservoir; but the name Vourukasha has a twofold meaning, designating one of the three wells—the central and foremost well—and again all three. Thus, in *Vendidad*, *Fargard* 5, Vourukasha is identified with "the three *Hvápa*," around which all the trees that Ahuramazda created were said to grow in the most luxurious kingdom. *Bundehesh* still knows that Vourukasha is connected with two other springs or wells. When it enumerates "the seas or lakes, that the holy writing (i.e. the *Avesta*) calls wells," it says that among them are found two that are "united with Vourukasha" (ch. 22).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Rigv.* IX, 103, 2: "three seats for rest", cp. VIII, 83, 5 "Of this, moreover, purified, set in three places, procreant, Drink Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman" [Ralph T. H. Griffith tr.].

<sup>34</sup> The source of this is unclear. Alfred Ludwig uses the term *den dreifach gemischten soma*; Karl Geldner, *dem dreirückigen Soma*; and Griffith, "mighty Soma, thrice-mixed."

<sup>35</sup> Griffith, "Three warm the earth while holding stores of water, and two of these convey the murmuring moisture."; Ludwig, *drei brennen die erde dem waszer folgend, zwei [von disen] führen [auch] murmelndes waszer*.

<sup>36</sup> Verse 1: Ludwig, *Ihr Ápas, dise eure welle der Id*, "You Ápas, this your wave of Id"; Griffith, "O waters, that wave of pure refreshment"; Geldner, *Ihr gewässer, eure Woge*, "You water, your wave"; Verse 3: Griffith, "all-purifying"; Ludwig, *hundertfache reinigung*, "a hundred-fold cleansing"; Geldner, *Durch hundert Filter laufend*, "run through one hundred filters."

<sup>37</sup> *Gylfaginning* 17.

<sup>38</sup> In his translation of *Bundahis-Bahman Yast*, E. W. West notes that "the term *farâkû-kard*, 'wide-formed,' is a free Pahlavi translation of Avestan *vouru-kasha*, 'wide-shored,' or 'having wide abysses,' applied to the boundless ocean"

The myths about the world-tree and its three subterranean springs, as one learns from the above, have their origin in the Proto-Indo-European era, not only in their general features but also in their intriguing details. Myths that captivate the imagination are preserved best through the centuries. This simple truth has been overlooked, but it is a psychological axiom.

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(note to Chap. VII, 6). In chapter 22, Lake Kêkast in Âtarô-pâtakân and Lake Frazdân in Sagastân are connected with "the wide-formed ocean" (i.e. Vourukasha). [*Pahlavi Texts*: Part I and II, edited by Edward William West].