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THE NATURE OF MYTHIC TIME

Religions of the world experience and encode time in various ways: as a linear progression, as a never-ending set of cycles, as a process of degeneration, and so forth. We are most used to a linear system, since it characterizes the Judeo-Christian tradition, which sees a clear progression from the creation of the world through a long present leading to a last time, a day of judgment; an end of history. Similarly, our science gives us increasing detail concerning the origin of the entire universe. We live in the long aftermath of the big boom and the origin of our solar system, and we know that in due course our sun will die. In a cyclical system, however, such a linear progression repeats itself endlessly; each end is followed by a new beginning. Determining the time system of Scandinavian mythology presents special challenges because many of the sources were recorded by Christians, whose notion of time was linear and whose notion of history called for an essentially clear chronology. This is especially so of Snorri Sturluson, whose Edda is the clearest and most appealing account of the mythology to modern readers. It must not be forgotten that Snorri was also a historian, the author or compiler of a history of the Norwegian kings (Heimskringla) arranged wholly chronologically. The other great overview of the mythology is the eddic poem *Völuspá*. Although nearly all scholars agree that it dates from the pagan period, most would assign it to late paganism, and Christian influence seems apparent. Even so, *Völuspá* seems to show traces of a cyclic arrangement of time as well as a linear arrangement.

Furthermore, the various myths present direct contradictions of relative chronology. Such contradiction is, however, characteristic of myth, which has its own rules. Within Scandinavian mythology, these rules appear to suggest a fairly consistent ordering of events within a given narrative, but no requirement whatever that events within the mythology as a whole can be fit into a precise order. Examples will be cited below, but anyone who confronts the primary sources or even a summary of the mythology will easily identify others.

MYTHIC PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The mythology as a whole may be divided into events that take place in the past, present, and future, an idea that is expressed in the meanings of the names of the norms Urd ("Became" or "Happened"), Verdandi ("Becoming" or "Happening"), and Skuld, ("Is-to-be" or "Will-happen"). However, it is convenient to make further distinctions.

The distant past would involve the period before the creation of the universe. At that time there was only Ginnunga gap, the vast void of potency and potential, and perhaps also the *Élivágar*, mysterious waters from which life was to emerge. We must assign Ymir to this distant past, and also his hermaphroditic generation of the races of giants. Similarly, Bur, the first of the gods, existed at this time.

The focus of the near past would be the creation of the cosmos, from the body of Ymir according to most sources. The precondition for forming the cosmos was the killing of

Ymir by the sons of Bur, so we may say that the movement from the distant past to the near past encompasses a move from a stasis between the two major groups of gods to a state of enmity. During this near past the gods also enabled the reckoning of time by assigning stations to the heavenly bodies (Völuspá, st. 5), and they similarly enabled culture by creating tools (Völuspá, st. 7). They created the races of dwarfs and humans. Finally, I would assign the incorporation of the vanir and of Loki into the aesir as the final events of the near past.

With the completion of these incorporations, the mythological world looks as it does in most of the myths. Snorri's catalog of the gods in *Gylfaginning* includes the vanir and Loki, and also Baldr, whose death is yet to come. I would call this state the mythological present, the time when most of the myths take place. Although it hardly matters whether a given myth of the mythological present occurs before or after some other myth, certain events do seem to have to precede or follow others. For example, when in *Skáldskaparmál* the gods wish to appease Skadi for the killing of her father Thjazi, they offer her a choice of husband among the gods, letting her select based on an observation of just their lower legs. She chooses what she thinks are Baldr's but ends up with old Njörd. According to the reasoning of this narrative, then, Njörd's marriage to Skadi preceded the death of Baldr. However, Frey's marriage to Gerd appears to have followed Baldr's death. In *Skirnismál*, st. 21, Skirnir offers the giantess Gerd "the ring which was burned with the young son of Odin," and this can only be Draupnir. If it was burned with the son of Odin, Baldr must already be dead, and Frey and Gerd's marriage has yet even to be arranged, much less consummated after the nine nights that must intervene after the arrangement is made. I think Snorri must have had this sequence of events in mind when he wrote *Gylfaginning*, for in the catalog of gods he says that Njörd is married to Skadi, but he does not say that Frey is married to Gerd. And following this chronology, we might assume that Baldr was, in Snorri's mind, already dead when the gods visited Aegir at the very beginning of *Skáldskaparmál* for he includes Gerd in the guest list. However, we must take care with such assumptions. In the case of this guest list, for example, Baldr is indeed absent, but Nanna is present. Either she did not after all cast herself on Baldr's funeral pyre, as Snorri says she did in *Gylfaginning*, or the chronology will not hold. Such inconsistencies are, let me stress, not causes for worry. They are in the nature of mythology.

Similarly, we may think of events as occurring relatively early or relatively late in the mythological present. An example of a relatively early event would be the acquisition of the mead of poetry. The mead was in the first place created as a result of the conclusion of hostilities between aesir and vanir and is a token of the incorporation of the two groups. It is one of Odin's most powerful weapons in the ongoing struggle with the jötnar. Similarly, the construction of the wall around the stronghold of the gods, told most fully in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, is a story of the early mythological present. It explains not only how a wall gets built around Valhöll (which is mentioned in several myths, e.g., Odin's interaction with Hrungnir and Loki's rescue of Idun), but also how Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, is created. Here again, strict chronological consistency is lacking, for the account of the acquisition of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* implies the existence of the wall (the gods put the kettles for it in the enclosure), but the incorporation of the aesir and vanir, which is the precondition for the mead, occurred in the near past. Another story of the early mythological present would

be Odin's sending of Hel to the underworld and the Midgard serpent to the outer waters of the ocean, as well as the binding of the wolf Fenrir, when Týr lost his hand. In the mythological present Hel presides over the underworld, Thor fishes up the Midgard serpent in offshore waters, and Týr is without his hand, while Fenrir awaits the end of the world.

Odin's myths tend toward the early part of the mythic present: Already mentioned are the mead of poetry, war and peace with the vanir, oath of blood- brotherhood with Loki, and disposition of Loki's children. In addition there is Odin's self-sacrifice, which gained him much of the rest of the wisdom he uses in the mythological present. Odin myths in the mythological present would include in particular the stories of his visits with the giant Vafthrúdnir and the human king Geirröd, in each of which wisdom plays an important role.

Nearly all of the Thor myths take place in the undifferentiated mythic present. These include, besides his fishing up of the Midgard serpent, his encounters with Hrungrnir, Hymir, and Geirröd.

Some events must be fairly late in the mythological present, and the foremost of these is the death of Baldr. As the first death among the gods, it changed all the terms of the game. Even if it did not make Ragnarök inevitable, it made it possible, for now the death of any and therefore of all the gods is a possibility. If we follow the Baldr story in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, we see that Odin's strategy of swearing blood-brotherhood with Loki has failed, for it was Loki who brought about Baldr's death. The gods now bind Loki, and like his sons the wolf Fenrir and the Midgard serpent, he awaits Ragnarök, the end of the world and the final period in the mythology. Many of the events in the mythic present look forward to Ragnarök: the failed oath of blood-brotherhood, the binding of evil creatures, and the gathering of einherjar, the chosen warriors of Odin, at Valhöll.

The mythic future also has two stages. In the near future is Ragnarök, when the power of the gods over the jötnar characteristic of the mythic present will be reversed. Surt will lead the forces of chaos against the gods, who will fall. The creative activities of the near past will be undone: Time reckoning will fail as the sun and moon are swallowed and the heavens destroyed, and the entire cosmos will be consumed by flames and water. Each of the major gods will die in individual combat with a giant adversary, but Odin, at least, will be avenged, by his son Vidar, and this vengeance constitutes a bridge to the distant future, the period after Ragnarök when the second-generation gods Vidar and Váli, Magni and Módi, and, perhaps most important, Baldr and Höd, victim and killer, will inhabit the renewed earth. They will possess the cultural property of their ancestors in the form of oral traditions about them as well as in the concrete form of the gaming pieces *Völuspá*, st. 61, says they will find in the grass. This paradise will be fertile and devoid of jötnar.

As I have thus outlined it, the overall chronology of Scandinavian mythology is neatly symmetrical. The early present looks back to the near past, just as the later present looks forward directly to the near future. The creative work of the near past is undone in the near future, but the vicious relationship between gods and jötnar, which enabled the creation of the cosmos and led to its destruction, is gone in the distant future, just as it was not present in the distant past. But there has still been a progression: In the distant past there was no cosmos, but in the distant future there is a green world with birds and fertile fields. The course of the mythology has indeed led to a better world.

CYCLICAL TIME

Völuspá, st. 4, states that the creating gods lifted up the earth, and the poem is silent on the killing of Ymir. These facts could imply that when the earth arose from the sea after Ragnarök later in the poem, there was a cyclical notion at work. In other words, the cosmos might be formed and reformed on multiple occasions by rising from the sea. This notion, which accords with the theories of Mircea Eliade as expressed, for example, in his *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, has been expressed most clearly by Jens Peter Schjødt in his 1981 article, "Völuspá –cyklisk tidsopfattelse i gammelnordisk religion," *Danske studier* 76 (1981): 91-95. Schjødt points especially to the last stanza of Völuspá, which refers to the arrival of a dragon and the sinking of the sibyl. In the best treatment of time in Norse mythology, that of Margaret Clunies Ross in volume 1 of her *Prolonged Echoes*, especially chapter 7, Clunies Ross accepts the possibility of underlying traces of cyclic time but offers a linear progression very similar to the one I have outlined here, the differences being that I split the mythic present into periods of early, undifferentiated, and late, and also that I demonstrate the symmetries of the chronology and their implications.

TIME AND SPACE

Clunies-Ross also discusses the relationship between time and space that characterized the structural analyses of Eleazar Melitinskij, "Scandinavian Mythology as a System", *The Journal of Structural Anthropology* 1 (1973): 43-58, and 2 (1974): 57-78, and Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Assessment of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). Both these authors sought to distinguish the vertical from the horizontal axes, the first manifesting itself in the world tree linking heaven and the underworld, and the second, in the disk of the earth on which Asgard, Midgard, and the worlds of the giants are located. Meletinskij argued that cosmogony and eschatology were distinguished by the axes and that this distinction had a chronological aspect. Hastrup described the difference as one of reversibility: Events on the vertical axis were "irreversible," for they were fated; those on the horizontal axis were "reversible" in that the balance between gods and giants was so close. Both Clunies Ross and Jens Peter Schjødt, "Horizontale und vertikale Achsen in der vorchristlichen skandinavischen Kosmologie," in *Old Norse and Finnish Cultic Religions and Place Names*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, *Scripta Instituti Donneri Aboensis*, 13 (Åbo, Finland: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), 35-57, disagreed. Schjødt takes on the notion of the "eschatological" or "irreversible" nature of the vertical axis and argues that it has cyclical aspects. Clunies Ross argues that events on the horizontal axis (those that for the most part fall into the mythic present are hardly reversible even in Hastrup's model, for they contribute directly to eschatology

MYTH, NARRATIVE, LANGUAGE

The situation is further complicated by two other factors. The first is the "immanence" of the mythology: The entire system is implicit in any of its details, and a myth is equally

present in a kenning or an allusive skaldic poem from the pagan period, and neither of these requires any kind of chronology but, instead, implies a kind of simultaneity of myth. The second is a linguistic after-effect and may be presented here by discussing stanza 28 of Lokasenna. Frigg has just admonished Loki.

You know, if here I had in Ægir's hall
A son like Baldr
Away you would never get from the sons of the Aesir,
And you would be struck down in anger.

Loki's response is a boast about his role in the slaying of Baldr. The second half of stanza 28 goes literally as follows.

I arrange it, that you never see
Baldr afterwards ride up to the hall anymore.

Most translators render the first three words as something like "I am responsible," and indeed the present tense of the verb might be understood that way. Conceivably it might also be read literally as a progressive: "I am arranging," that is, I'm taking care of that right now. But in medieval Icelandic the simple present tense also is used for the future, so Loki may be saying "I will arrange it." And although the word is quite clear in the one manuscript retaining the poem, the difference between present and past tense is just the vowel, and some editors have chosen to print the past tense rather than the present tense. In other words, when Loki was insulting all the gods, he had killed Baldr, was planning it, or would take care of it later.

The same linguistic fact complicates our understanding of other texts. In *Völuspá*, for example, the seeress who speaks the poem says in one manuscript that she saw various events connected with Ragnarök (in the other she says she uses the present tense, as one would expect of a vision of the mythic future, as the frame of the poem implies. But around stanza 44 she begins to use the present tense. Is she situated toward the onset of Ragnarök?

MYTH AND HISTORY

For the Christians of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, the gods would have had a place in historical time both through their euhemerization and through their presence in some of the lives of the saints translated from Latin into Icelandic. According to the notion of the euhemerization that prevailed in medieval Iceland, the gods were originally human beings who had emigrated from the Middle East [Tyrkland] to Scandinavia long ago. They would have left their homeland at some point during the Roman Empire, which can be reckoned to around 100 B.C.E. Both Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus associate the legendary king Fródi, grandson of Frey according to Snorri, with the peace that occurred when Christ was on the earth. And the translated lives of the saints put the Norse gods (in place of Jupiter, Mars, Diana, and other Roman gods' in the time and space of early Christianity – even if they are only for the most part envisioned in these texts as idols animated by demons.

It is furthermore possible-perhaps likely that Ragnarök was seen by at least some Christians as the demise not only of the pagan gods but of the belief worship of them. Their day would have preceded that of Christ, and it had and perhaps well-deserved end. Certainly the famous stanza 65H of Völuspá, found in the late-fourteenth-century redaction of the text, supports such a possibility, for it mentions the coming to power of "the powerful one, high, he who rules all." Whoever created this verse appears to have considered the world he and his fellow Christians lived in to be the new world that Ragnarök. The conversion to Christianity seems to have been envisioned while it was happening as a struggle between Thor and Christ. Thor and gods thus exited history at about the time Christ entered it in the north, that is, in the tenth and eleventh centuries.