

Norse Mythology's English Connection:  
Methodological Notes

Scholars have expended much energy over the question of the origin or ultimate "home" of Norse mythology or specific of its aspects or texts. Long ago Sophus Bugge argued, reasonably skilfully in my opinion, that much of Norse mythology, and indeed of Norse literary culture, derived from Celtic and Germanic Britain, with England the link. More recently, others have added to the evidence. This essay considers the efforts of two of these, Hans Kuhn and Wolfgang Butt.

Kuhn's arguments in this area go back at least to his remarks on "Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten" (1942), a paganism to which he assigned a large amount of syncretism. A likely breeding ground for this syncretism was tenth-century England, specifically the Danelaw, and in subsequent articles Kuhn argued the existence of various aspects of this syncretism, advancing the argument perhaps farthest in his his article, "Rund um die Völuspá" (1971).

As it may be extrapolated from these and other articles, the argument may be divided into four major parts.

- 1) The kenning type sverð-Freyr "man" shows a new and

less awed attitude toward the gods. The first attestation of the kenning type is in Egill Skallagrímsson's Höfuðlausn, according to tradition composed in York during the mid-tenth century.

2) The terms alfaðir and sigfaðir are applied to Odin. They differ fundamentally from the compounds in -föðr (which Kuhn derives from IE \*potis, Gothic faps "lord") and suggest influence of the Christian God. Sigfaðir is attested in Völuspá 55 and Lokasenna 58 (where, however, it is used mockingly). Alfaðir is attested in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 38—a poem with demonstrable connections with England—and in two eleventh-century Icelandic skalds.

3) Kennings of the type farma gaufr for Odin suggest the reinvigoration of the old pagan myth of Odin's self-sacrifice in light of the crucifixion. The gaufr complex must be understood as associated with a more general reinterpretation of Odin in light of the Christian god.

4) A new conception of Valhöll as Odin's splendid hall emerges along with the new Odin and replaces the grim conception of Valhöll as the corpses on the battlefield. The first attestation of Valhöll, with this or any other conception, and of simplex höll, which Kuhn regards as an English loan, is in Eiríksmál, a tenth-century poem also associated with Northumbria; Kuhn accepts the poem as composed there.

The evidence associating Kuhn's perceived innovations in

Norse mythology with mid-tenth-century England are then primarily textual--or, more accurately, text/contextual--; the first attestations of relevant phenomena appear to be assignable to Northumbria around the middle of the tenth century.

By 1971 Kuhn was ready to add the language of the skalds of the Hlaðir jarls and even central cosmological myths to this milieu. He was writing, in the Helmut de Boor Festschrift, on de Boor's seminal contribution to our understanding of the religious language of Völuspá and the skalds of the Hlaðir jarls during the mid-tenth century. Kuhn acknowledged the possibility of innovations in religious language within this circle at this time, but he sought to connect those innovations with his own theory.

Es liegt deshalb nah zu vermuten, dass auch die Neuerungen in der religiösen Sprache auf die de Boor vor 40 Jahren unsere Aufmerksamkeit gelenkt hat, mitsamt dem, was unter ihnen steht, dort drüben ihre erste Entwicklung erfahren haben [Kuhn 1971:7]....

Die Eiríkismál sind das erste zeitlich und räumlich fixierbar Gedicht, das den Walhallglauben bezeugt, daneben aber auch die Vorstellung vom drohenden Weltuntergang und den Mythos von Balders Tod. Sie gehören alle zu den zentralen Themen der Völuspá und ihrer eddischen Trabanten, so dass wir

vom stofflichen her die Eiríksmál wohl als das früheste datierbare Denkmal dieses kreises zählen dürfen [Kuhn 1971:11].

Enormous claims are being made here. How solid is the textual/contextual evidence on which they are based? We may begin by dismissing the validity of Höfuðlausn as the first attestation of kennings of the sverð-Freyr type. Even without the philological evidence that now seems to put the poem in the twelfth century (e.g., Jón Helgason 1969), the existence of the many other head-ransom poems in Old Norse alone makes it clear that we are dealing with a traditional motif whose source value is highly suspect. It is far more likely that the most famous of the older skalds, Egill Skallagrímsson, should have such a story attached to him than that he should have been a model of whom stories were applied to lesser known skalds.

Without Höfuðlausn, kennings of the sverð-Freyr type become the property of the skalds of the Hladir jarls, and it is precisely the relationship of the language of these skalds to England that Kuhn seeks to demonstrate. If, therefore, the argument is to succeed, it must turn on Eiríksmál, and it is indeed on that poem that Kuhn based the most far-ranging statement of his thesis, as we have seen.

Was Eiríksmál composed in Northumbria? And what is its English connection?

Eiríkr bloodaxe did, indeed, reign in York on two short occasions and was deposed in 954; this we have from the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. He was slain in the same year at Stainmore. He may have been, at least off and on, in Northumbria or elsewhere in England between his departure from Norway after the death of Harald fairhair during the 930s and his assumption of the kingdom of York in 948. Furthermore, his father had sent Eiríkr's younger brother, Hákon, to be fostered by Athalstan of England.

Eiríkr seems to have been something of an anomaly in the largely Hiberno-Norse York and was apparently unpopular, as it was the Northumbrians himself who expelled him. It is therefore perhaps unlikely that the opportunities for cultural and religious influence were very extensive.

As for the composition of the poem, Fagrskinna reports that Eiríkr's widow Gunnhildr ordered it composed after his death. In the first place, it is possible that the account in Fagrskinna is false. The poem is openly pagan, and as they are uniformly critical of Gunnhildr, the Christian authors of the Icelandic sources might have concocted the story so as to associate her with a pagan document and thus vilify her. On the other hand, if there is any truth to the portrait these sources paint of Gunnhildr, she may well have requested not just a praise poem but a highly pagan one. Indeed, her nominally Christian husband had been slain by forces with a highly Christian orientation.

In any case, if we accept the account in Fagrskinna, the poem was commissioned by a Dane for a Norwegian, and although the poet's identity is unknown, he evidently was familiar with eddic and skaldic tradition, and the handbooks take him for Norwegian (e.g., Hallvard Lie in KLNM). The account in Fagrskinna itself leaves some doubt as to whether the poem was actually composed in England. In introducing the poem, it states that Gunnhildr commissioned it eptir fall Eiriks--how soon after, we do not know. After quoting the poem, however, the author continues:

Eptir fall Eiriks konungs þvingask Jätmundr  
 konungr Gunnhildi ok sunum Eiriks, finnr þá sök  
 til at Eiríkr herjaði innanlands á ríki konungs.  
 Fór þá Gunnhildr á braut af Englandi með sonum  
 sínum til Danmarkar.... [Fagrskinna, ed. P.A.  
 Munch and C.R. Unger, Christiania, 1847, p. 18]

The collocation of eptir fall Eiriks with the commissioning of the poem and Gunnhildr's flight to Denmark leaves open the possibility that Eiríksmál was composed in Denmark.

There are two additional problems, interrelated and powerful. The first is the absence of anything even remotely similar in contemporary English literature. The second is the presence of something similar in contemporary Norwegian literature. I begin with the second.

Like Eiríksmál, Haraldskvæði is in mixed eddic meters

and offers dialog among mythological creatures, specifically a valkyrie and a raven. The transmission is problematic, but all three of the skalds whose names are associated with the poem are Norwegian, and no evidence links any of them with England. On the other hand, Þjóðolfr's Ynglingatal links him to some extent with Sweden.

Eiríksmál departs from Haraldskvæði in setting the poem in Valhøll and allowing Odin to speak, and these elements are the core of Kuhn's argument. If, however, syncretism in the Danelaw was important to their development, we may wonder at the ease with which the Norwegian skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir adapted and developed them for Eiríkr's brother in Hákonarmál. Again, Hákon had spent much of his childhood in England, but he returned to Norway as a young man. For him there can be no question of Northumbrian syncretism. Syncretism may easily have obtained around him, but it will have been of a specifically English-Norwegian sort, and it is worth noting that he was on good terms with the Hladir jarls. Indeed, most scholars now read the conception of Valhøll expressed in his memorial poem as containing more archaic elements than those of Eiríksmál [e.g. Marold and Wolf], but only von See doubts the usual chronology, and his reversed chronology does not seem to have won universal favor.

The three "eddic praise" poems' largest departure from skaldic style is their use of eddic style. Mythological

eddic poems rely on precisely those stylistic features that set off the eddic praise poems: dialogue and mythological characters and settings. What sets the three "eddic praise" poems off from eddic poems is the introduction of actual kings, well-known to the audience-- and, for us, the transmission of poet's names with two of the texts.

Precisely these features are, however, also found in another poem of Þjóðólfr, his Ynglingatal. It mentions kings who become increasingly historical as the poem progresses, and becomes contemporary with Rognvaldr heiðumhæri. Ynglingatal's connections, however, are precisely not with England and the Danelaw, but rather with Sweden and Norway, and, again, Eyvindr seems to have found little trouble in imitating it in his Háleygjatal. The larger context of Eiríksmál, then, seems to point away rather than toward England.

To return to the first of the interrelated problems: all three of the eddic praise poems contain material for which direct English parallels cannot be demonstrated. Indeed, the best evidence for English syncretism--given the lack of textual evidence--is offered by the stone carvings alluding, apparently, to Thor's battle with the Midgard serpent. Precisely this subject was most popular in the earliest skaldic poetry, which we must set in Norway. Thor and his opponent are also on the Altuna stone, and some scholars have put Bragi the Old, the first skald, and one who sang of

Thor's battle with Jörmungandr, in Sweden or even further east, thus reducing the specifically English connection. These poems and stones raise another question: if Odin rose to the all-father in England, why was--as is generally accepted--Thor the most worshipped god there?

The parallels Kuhn thinks may be English are, in fact, not specifically English but generally Christian. Insofar as early Scandinavian Christianity came from England, then, we may look to English syncretism as a breeding ground for Norse mythology; but we must recall that Christianity reached Scandinavia through many conduits. The same objections apply to another argument based primarily on literary-historical evidence, namely that of Wolfgang Butt concerning the Völuspá. This argument is just as charged as those of Kuhn and just as important for the history of Scandinavian mythology.

Butt's contribution appeared in 1969 and is noteworthy because Joseph Harris informs us, in his article on eddic poetry to appear in the Dictionary of the Middle Ages, that Butt argues "convincingly." It is also significant because it offers a specific location for the composition of the Völuspá--the Danelaw--, and a fairly specific date--1001 to 1033. Butt's methodology is purely literary-historical; he believes that he has uncovered specific written sources for Völuspá. These are the homilies of Wulfstan and the poem "The Judgement Day II."

Let us examine the verbal similarities on which Butt bases his argument. The first of these are as follows:

Völuspá

38. Sá l sá hon standa

sólo fiarri,

Náströndo á,

norðr horfa dyrr;

fello eitrdropar

inn um kíðra,

sá er undinn salr

orma hryggjom.

39. Sá hon þar vaða

Þunga straua

menn meinsvara

oc morðvarga,

oc þannz annars glepr

eyraráno;

þar saug Niðhoggr

nái framgengna,

sleit vargr vera--

vitoð er enn, eða hvat?

64. Sal sér hon standa

sólo fegra,

gulli þacpan,

á Gimlé;

þar scola dyggvar

dróttir byggia

De regula canonicorum (Wulfstan)

Ne beon hi æfre manslagan

ne morðwyrhtan ne æwbrecan,

ac healdan heora riht æwa,

þæt is heora mynster.

Ne beon hi wordlogan ne weddlogan

ne ryperas ne reaferas ne hi

ænigum men beodan butan þæt

hi willan þæt man heom beode.

Sermo ad Anglos (Wulfstan)

Her syndan mannslagan 7 mægslagan

7 mæsserbanan 7 mynsterhatan;

7 her syndan mansworan 7

morporwyrhtan; 7 her syndan

myltestran 7 bearnmyrðran 7

fule folegene horingas manege;

7 her syndan wiccan 7 wælcyrrian;

7 her syndan ryperas 7

reaferas 7 woroldstruderas 7,

hrædest is to cwepenne,

mána 7 misdæda ungerim ealre.

Sermo ad populum (Wulfstan)

Þyder sculan manslagan, 7 dider

sculan mansworan; þyder sculan

oc um aldrdaga  
ynda is nióta.

wiccan 7 bearnmyrdan....

Butt believes that the two halls of strophes 38 and 64 belong together, on the basis of the obvious verbal parallels. They reflect, then, the Christian heaven and hell, and a catalogue of sinners accompanies the picture of hell. The several parallel passages from Wulfstan's homilies also present a catalogue of sinners in connection with a description of hell at the end of the world. The three sorts of sinners in Völuspá 39 are to be found, he argues, among the many more sorts Wulfstan enumerates, and precise verbal echoes rule out, in Butt's opinion, any possibility that the similarities are the result of chance. menn meinsvara corresponds to mansworan; the poetic hapax legomenon mordvargr imitates mordwyrhta, arguably a term limited to Wulfstan; and the circumlocution of 39:5-6 is necessary because Norse has no suitable etymon for æbreca.

To this we may begin with a textual objection. Even if we allow the juxtaposition of the halls in strophes 38 and 64, we are left in the Regius version of the poem with two additional halls in strophe 37. These also share verbal parallels with strophes 38 and 64: á Nidavøllom, á Okólni, Náströndo á, á Gimlé; ör gulli, gulli þacpan. In Regius, at least, all three halls seem to be associated with the "sinners" of strophe 39 (one for each hall?), which makes less persuasive the equation of the halls of strophes 38 and

64.

Even if we are to disqualify strophe 37 for not occurring in both major manuscripts, I do not find the verbal parallels compelling. While it is true that an adjective \*meinsvarr is nowhere else attested in Norse, and that the related nouns (e.g., meinsvari) may be loans from Old English religious prose, the hypothetical Old English original is a noun, not an adjective. The compound is composed of perfectly good Norse components: compare meinstafir in Lokasenna 28 and the kenning Gauta eidsvari in Þorsdrápa 8. Finnur Jónsson (Lexicon Poeticum, s.v.) reads eidsvari as an adjective "those bound by oath," and the compound seems a direct antonym to meinsvari. Oaths were important in ancient Norse culture and particularly in myth and religion--note that the old sky god Týr finds his only role in the extant mythology in making good a bad oath, and that Ullr is primarily associated with oaths sworn on a certain ring--, and I remain unconvinced that we need a concrete source to explain the appearance of the term in Völuspá.

The parallel between mansworan and menn meinsvara is, even so, the most compelling of the three alleged parallels. mordvargr "murder-warg" and mordwyrhta "murder-doer" are simply not the same, although they look similar. The Norse word is a technical term in the legal language, referring to a true murderer (one who kills in secret).. The Old English word has a similar meaning, but its associations, as Beth-

erum puts it, "are all with witchcraft" (1971:310). (An attempt to render mordwyrhta etymologically into Norse would yield \*morb-yrkir; the second component is unknown in literary Old Norse, although it may be attested in the dative singular on the eighth-century Eggjum rune stone.) So much for the direct parallels. For pann es annars eyrar-runo glepr, we are asked to postulate the model of Old English æbreca. Even if we accept that the unclear Norse sentence means "adulteror" ("the one who seduces another's true love"), there is a difference in number--æbreca is plural, pann singular. Indeed, all the nouns in Wulfstan's catalogues are plural. If the Völuspá poet imitates a catalogue here, he does so in a highly idiosyncratic way.

Butt's argument here, then, is based on the general similarity of a catalogue of sinners (a beloved form in the Middle Ages), two questionable verbal parallels, and a possible translation. Butt argues that the juxtaposition of the catalogue of sinners with the end of the world is somehow unusual, but that is hardly the case. One of the points of the Judgement day is the punishment of the wicked, so sinners play a large role in Christian eschatology. Old English has, in fact, another poem with a short catalogue of sinners at the end of the world: "Christ III," 1609-1612a.

Here is what the Völuspá passage also contains--material without parallel in Wulfstan.

- 1) Hell and heaven as halls.

- 2) The placenames Nāströnd and Gimlé and their attributes.
- 3) The notion that the doomed vada punga straua "wade through heavy streams."
- 4) Nidhoggr sucking corpses and the wolf devouring men-- apparently a typical Norse mythological collocation of wolf and serpent.

A basic problem seems to me to inform Butt's method. Once we accept that Völuspá reflects notions from Christianity, we may look everywhere, or so it seems to me, for specific models. Missionaries had been in Scandinavia for some time by the early eleventh century (Butt's dating of the text), and the millenium must have been on the minds of many men.

As regards the halls, point 1) above, we may note that iconography frequently or usually portrayed heaven as a building or even a town and used a gate or portico as its symbol, and that vision literature often locates a hall or building in hell. Again, I take an example from "Christ III" (1603b-1606a), where hell is described in the context of the end of the world.

Bið susla hus  
 open ond oðeawed, aðlongum ongean,  
 ðæt sceolon fyllan firengeorne men  
 sweartum sawlum.

A few lines later hell is called mordorhusa mæst "greatest of murder-houses" (1624a) and dreamleas hus "joyless house" (1627b). Here we may note in passing that iconography can have been involved in the reformation of Valhøll as a vast hall,<sup>as</sup> postulated by Kuhn, and that such iconography cannot be localized to Northumbria and England.

In vision literature, heaven and hell are usually separated by a river. Although it usually has a bridge over it--the narrow path of souls--there are visions in which sinners wade through the river: Boniface mentioned such a case in a letter of 717, and the German vision of Wethnus (*De visionibus Wethni*) repeats it. Nidhöggr's sucking of corpses and the wolf's tearing of them is not so distant from the basic image of hell as devouring the souls of the evil; here note the iconographic feature of the maw of hell as a large monster's mouth, spitting flame and with great sharp teeth.

We now turn to Butt's other parallel passages.

Völuspá

Secundum Marcum (Wulfstan)

|                        |                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 45. Broedr muno beriaz | Nis se man of life pe               |
| oc at bonum verðaz,    | mæge oððe cunni swa yfel            |
| muno systrungar        | hit asecgan swa hit sceal geweordan |
| sifiom spilla;         | on þam deoflican timan. Ne byrhð    |
| hart er i heimi,       | ponne bordor oðrum hwilan           |
| hórdómr mikill,        | ne fæder his bearne ne bearn his    |
| sceggöld, scálmöld,    | ægenum fæder ne gesibb gesibban     |

scildir ro klofnir,      Þe ma þe fremdan...  
 vindöld, vargöld,  
 aðr veröld steypiz;  
 mun engi maðr  
 þófróm Þyrma.

Butt stresses the moral or ethical nature of the two passages, a nature he finds common in Old English but lacking in other Germanic literature when kinsmen kill kinsmen; and he adds the philological observation that the usage of spilla, the compound hórdómr, and the annarr construction appear to have been influenced by Old English. Lines 45:5-12 seem to Butt to display only a general stylistic similarity with the following passage from Wulfstan--a kind of breathless quality.

And þeodscypas winnað 7 sacað heom betweonan  
 foran to þam timan þe þis sceal geweorpan. Eac  
 sceal aspringan wide 7 side sacu 7 clacu, hol 7  
 hetu 7 rypera reaflac, herre 7 hunger, bryne 7  
 blodgyte 7 styrnlice styrnlice styrunga, stric 7  
 steorfa 7 fela ungelimpa.

We may pass over the alleged similarities between Völuspá's hart er í heimi and Wulfstan; they are not compelling, and indeed Butt makes little of them.

The first question, if we accept Christian influence on Völuspá 45:1-4, is whether Wulfstan offers the best possible

model. The answer, of course, is no. The Old High German *Muspilli* seems just as close: dar ni mac denne mak andremo helfan vora demo Muspilli "there and then no kinsman can help another, before that *Muspilli*." Looking for specific analogues in Germanic languages, however, is quite unnecessary. If the ultimate source is Christian, one need look no further than the Bible. Mark 13:12 tells us that "brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death." Wulfstan was surely not the only person in northern Europe to paraphrase this passage in a sermon.

As regards the philological arguments, they are potentially persuasive but customarily subtle. Butt's reading of spilla as "kill," a common usage of Old English spillan, is based on Snorri's interpretation of the passage, which may have been influenced by Mark 13:12. Stefan Einarsson and Einar Ol. Sveinsson argued in 1948 whether hórdóm was Norwegian or Icelandic, and Magnus Mår Lårusson shows that there may be native usage at work here too. I am prepared to accept the annarr construction as a possible sign of Old English influence, but it is only one phrase. There is also ample philological evidence putting the poem far from the Danelaw; of the many examples, let me cite Hugo Pipping, who found arguments to locate the poem in Uppsala, whence it was, according to him, transported to Iceland via Hedeby and Norway.

Butt's third parallel is between numerous passages in Völuspá associated with Ragnarøk and corresponding passages in "The Judgement Day II" (Be domes dæge), an expanded translation of the De die iudicii by Bede or Alcuin, undertaken probably in the late tenth century.

| The Judgment Day II   | Völuspá  |
|---|--|
| <p>99 Eall eorðe bifad,<br/>eac swa þa duna<br/>drosad and hreosad,<br/>and beorða lieldu<br/>bugad and myltad,<br/>and se egeslice sweg<br/>ungeryðre sæ<br/>eall marra mod<br/>miclum gedrefed.<br/>Eal bið eac upheofon<br/>swæst and gesworcen,<br/>swiðe gefuxsæd,<br/>deære and dimhtw,<br/>and droolma swæart.</p> | <p>52,5-6 gríðtbiörg gnata,<br/>enn gífr rata,</p>   |
| <p>107 þonne stedelesse<br/>steorran hreosad,</p>   | <p>57,2 sígr fold í mar</p>  |
| <p>108 and seo sunne forswyrod<br/>sona on morgen,<br/>ne se mona næfd<br/>nanre nihte wiht,<br/>þæt he þære nihte<br/>genipu mæge fleagan.</p>   | <p>41,5-7 svort verða aðsleir<br/>of sumor eptir,<br/>veðr öll völdin -<br/>57,1-4 Sól tær sarta,<br/>sígr fold í mar,<br/>hverfa af himni<br/>heidar stírnor;</p> |
| <p>145 Ufo:an eall þis<br/>eac byð gefyllid<br/>eall uplic lyft<br/>ættrenum líge.<br/>Færd fyr ofer eall,</p>  | <p>57,7-8 loier hár hiti<br/>við himin stíðfun.</p>  |
| <p>162 þær beoð þearfan<br/>and þeodcýningas,<br/>earn and eadig,<br/>ealle beoð afæred;</p>  | <p>47,5-8 hraðaz allir</p>   |
| <p>þær hæfd ane lage,<br/>earn and se welega,<br/>fordon hi habbað ege<br/>ealle ætsornna.<br/>Ðæt rede flod<br/>ræscot fyro<br/>and biterlice<br/>bærud ða earnun sæða,<br/>and heora heortan<br/>horxlíce wyrmas,<br/>synscýðigra,<br/>coorfað and síttad.</p>  | <p>á heivegom,</p>   |
| <p>211 and hy wælgemmas<br/>wyrmas síttad<br/>and heora þan gnagað<br/>bryniðan tuxlum.</p>   | <p>7-8 áðr Surtar þann<br/>sefi of geyppir.</p>  |
|   | <p>39,7-8 þær saug Níðhoggr<br/>nái framengna,<br/>aleit vargr vera -</p>  |
| <p>The Judgment Day II<br/>107-109</p>  | <p>Völuspá<br/>5,6-10</p>  |
| <p>þonne stedelesse<br/>steorran hreosad<br/>and seo sunne forswyrod<br/>sona on morgen,<br/>ne se mona næfd<br/>nanre nihte wiht,</p>  | <p>að þat nó vissi,<br/>hvar hon saki átti,<br/>stírnor þat nó vissi,<br/>hvarþær stadi átti,<br/>máni þat nó vissi,<br/>hvat hann magus átti.</p>                 |

"The Judgement Day II" is preserved only in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 201, a manuscript from Worcester or perhaps York, containing important minor verse, some legal materials, the Old English Appolonius of Tyre--and homilies of Wulfstan. The manuscript evidence therefore places the poem in or near the Danelaw and associates it <sup>with</sup> Wulfstan, and Butt believes that if the Völuspá poet did not actually know the poem itself, he had heard something like it in a sermon of Wulfstan.

Are the parallels compelling? Please note that Butt has cut sections of the Old English poem, those which bear no relationship to Völuspá, and that the order of events in "The Judgement Day II" differs from that in Völuspá. Apocalypse was a popular subject in the Middle Ages, and one need not look far to find other verbal parallels to Völuspá.

The passages Butt singles out from Völuspá include the following motifs, in the order in which they appear in Völuspá.

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1) <u>Völuspá</u> 5:5-10 | chaos of heavenly bodies                               |
| 2) <u>Völuspá</u> 39:7-8 | dragon and wolf devour corpses                         |
| 3) <u>Völuspá</u> 41:5-7 | sun turns black, woeful<br>weather                     |
| 4) <u>Völuspá</u> 47:5-6 | all (men?) fear  |
| 5) <u>Völuspá</u> 52:5-6 | earthquake   |
| 6) <u>Völuspá</u> 57:1-4 | sun turns black; earth sinks<br>into sea; stars vanish |

7) Völuspá 57:7-8 flames lick the heavens

These motifs are everywhere in apocalyptic tradition. Many of the motifs Völuspá assigns to Ragnarøk are to be found in the Bible's Revelation-- not to mention the apocrypha. Revelation 6:12-17, for example, tells of an earthquake, the blackening of the sun and moon, the falling of the stars, the moving of mountains, and men's fear--an often stressed feature in apocalyptic literature. These are repeated at various points in John's revelation, which also offers, in ch. 12, "one who is to rule all the nations," a clear analogue, as every student of Völuspá knows, to str. 65(H). The chapter also offers the ubiquitous dragon of eschatological tradition, who perhaps appears as one or more of Völuspá's dragons.

In Revelation and in the Christian Judgement Day traditions more generally, angels do battle with devils, a clear analogue to the last battle at Ragnarøk. This motif is missing from "The Judgement Day II," which focuses on men's reactions to the end. Völuspá pays far less attention to that aspect of the story.

My complaint is more with Butt's method than with his conclusion. It seems impossible to me to pinpoint textual models for Völuspá's vision of the end, given the widespread popularity of apocalyptic traditions throughout the Middle Ages. If the Völuspá poet may for other reasons plausibly be located in the Danelaw ca. 1000, then

he cannot have composed his poem outside the influence of Wulfstan's eschatological preaching and perhaps also "The Judgement Day II." But if the poet's dates and location constitute the question, the alleged textual parallels cannot provide a convincing answer. He could have heard Wulfstan preaching about the judgement day--but he could have heard him in London, before 1002, and he might have heard another preacher, equally eloquent, in Norway or Iceland. Íslendingabók, Hungrvaka, and Kristni saga mention several bishops who were in Iceland around the millenium, and it is difficult to believe that they did not use conceptions of the judgement day to impress their would-be converts or in sermons for the devout.

In searching for textual evidence, we may overlook other, less traceable evidence. Norsemen certainly will have seen iconography of the judgement day in many places, and presumably some will have learned what the images meant and the grand story that went with them. This could have happened anywhere, and the kind of syncretism in which Völuspá developed could just possibly have obtained only in a single poet's sensibility.

From my reading of these two scholars' methodology, I conclude that we cannot on the basis of their arguments prove at least part of what they set out to prove: the central importance of the geographical entity England, and particularly the Danelaw, in the formation of our extant Norse

mythology. I would by no means deny England that importance, but I understand the process perhaps somewhat differently. What both Kuhn and Butt perceived was the influence of Christianity. I take it as a given that Norse mythology cannot be interpreted outside of Christian influence, which may have been massive. This influence probably ranged from reforming old myths in Christian forms, probably by emphasizing certain aspects of the "original, pagan" myths, as Kuhn argued, through assimilation of Christian modes of expression, as Butt argued, to outright imitation of Christian forms, perhaps to mock. But seeking for specific geographic locations for the actual operation of this influence is almost certainly a lost cause. Christianity was by its nature an international religion, with a portable international language and portable culture. "Skaldic" culture, too, if I may use the term for the literary and religious culture of some Scandinavians during the ninth and tenth centuries, was also relatively portable. The two cultures had ample opportunities to meet and doubtless did so in an enormous number of contexts. A viking could perhaps be prime-signed in England, see Christian iconography in France, and have exempla retold to him while at sea. A priest might be born in England, educated in France, posted to Germany, and meet vikings in any of these places or at sea.

If, however, we speak of English Christianity, instead of Christianity in England, we are on the right track.

Archaeological and textual evidence point increasingly to an important Christian presence in Norway during the tenth century, and the importance of the English church in Norway is well documented. The kind of syncretism Kuhn and Butt describe probably did obtain, but it can have obtained as easily in Norway as in England, or even in Norwegian colonies. What demands our attention is not where it took place, but how and why.

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