

How Elvish were the *Álfar*?

Terry Gunnell
(University of Iceland)

It might be argued that a number of the misconceptions encountered in the field of Old Nordic religious studies today go back to the pioneering work of the Grimm brothers (and especially that of Jakob Grimm) which laid the foundations for much of the research work later undertaken in both Old Nordic studies and Folkloristics. One of the most influential features of Jakob Grimm's work was the attractive idea that there had been one early Germanic 'religion' which was known throughout the Germanic countries in pre-Christian times, an idea that, of course, was rooted in a particular political agenda which had powerful implications for its own time. Another recurring idea in the Grimms' work on mythology and religion was the conviction that the folk beliefs of their time were directly connected to the pagan beliefs of the past. Both ideas went on to be adopted by many later scholars, and can be still seen in many overviews of Old Nordic mythology or religion which attempt to produce a single overall picture, or an overreaching structure. The problem is that, as modern research in folkloristics, archaeology and the workings of the oral tradition have all underlined, both of these ideas are seriously flawed. They need redressing.

As anyone with any knowledge of archaeology or Nordic and Celtic folklore knows, the idea that there was ever one basic Nordic religion, or one Nordic mythology accepted and known by all of those living across the Nordic (and even Germanic) world is patently absurd. Religious ideas and beliefs in these areas have always varied by time and place, by fashion, by cultural and social environment, and by the general demands of society. Snorri's suggestion that Óðinn was the accepted leader of the Nordic pantheon is seriously questioned by place name evidence in Norway and Sweden, and by the simple facts that Freyr is called Freyr ('Lord'); that Þórr has pride of place amongst the gods in both Uppsala (Adam of Bremen) and Mære (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: I, 317); and that Óðinn is totally unmentioned in *Landnámabók*. The idea that there was one idea of the world being created from Ymir (given in *Ym.* st. 21 and *Gylfaginning* ch. VII-VIII) seems conflicted by the statement in *Vsp.* st. 4 that the earth rose from the sea (deftly avoided by Snorri). As John McKinnell has effectively demonstrated in *Both One and Many* (1994), there were clearly several different images of Loki over time, and a variety of different accounts about Þórr's fishing trip (some of which ended with him killing the serpent long before Ragnarök). The range of conflicting myths that must have been in existence within the wonderful multicultural gathering of peoples that settled in Iceland in the late ninth century is particularly evident in Snorri's desperate attempts to construct one image of Nordic cosmology in the *Prose Edda*, and in the words of the Icelandic editor of the Sigurðr poems in the *Codex Regius* as he attempts to explain how Sigurðr died (*Frá dauða Sigurðar*). Written history wants facts. The oral culture, on the other hand, is and has always been happy with variation which is the name of the game in folkloristics.

It is quite clear that if *Snorra Edda* had been written in northern Norway or south-eastern Sweden, it would have been a very different work. It is also quite

possible that the worldview reflected in different Eddic poems is very different. (Compare, for example, *Grm.* to *Vsp.* or *Skm.*) Putting all of these poems together to try to recreate a single cosmology is a questionable process. As both Neil Price and Thomas DuBois have argued, it is time we ceased using *Snorra Edda* as a starting point for neat structural analyses of a set Nordic cosmology (where whole ideas are sometimes based on a single reference) and start thinking instead of broad, ever-changing 'belief systems' (see Price 2002: 26 and 54-55; and DuBois 1999: 7-8; and 10-12; on the untrustworthiness of Snorri, see Hall 2004: 53 and Jón Hnefíll Aðalsteinsson 1988: 129 and 131-132).

The second problem, also highly relevant to the argument that will be made in the following article, is seen in the way in which scholars of Old Nordic belief have regularly tended to work from the top down, applying modern concepts to those of earlier times. For many, it is hard to drop the idea (based largely on later folk beliefs influenced in part by Church propaganda) that the *jötnar* must all be malignant, ugly and stupid like the trolls of Nordic folklore that replaced them in later times. *Dvergar* are commonly depicted as being bearded and small; *valkyrjur* ride horses in armour as part of a kind of operatic wild hunt; and the Old Nordic *álfar* are seen as being 'elvish', something underlined by the way in which they regularly appear in English indices under the heading of 'elves'. As I mean to show in the following, the original *álfar* in fact seem to have had very little to do with elves as most people saw them before *The Lord of the Rings* came to be written. Furthermore, it seems clear that the extant early Nordic sources point to a range of different understandings of *álfar* which varied over time and in accordance with the worldviews of the writers, something that is of course not surprising when the heart of belief in the original *álfar* seems to have centred in Sweden rather than in England or Iceland (where most written sources originated). The sources also indicate quite clearly a gradual development (largely under the influences of the Church and translations of French romances like *Tristrams saga* [see RS I, 174], and *Möttuls saga* [see [RS I, 259]]) whereby the *álfar* gradually began to be blended with the early *landvættir* that existed in the popular consciousness of those living in the Nordic countries.

The following pages will involve a brief presentation of several key features that need to be considered in any discussion of how the scribes, poets and storytellers of the Nordic countries originally conceived the *álfar*. Some of the arguments presented echo those recently made by Alaric Hall in his fine thesis on *The Meanings of Elf and Elves in Medieval England* (2004). Others, however, represent different approaches or concentrate on different information.

It is evident that in early twelfth century Iceland, at least, there was still a clear difference in concept in people's minds between nature spirits and *álfar*. This can be seen, for example, in *Ulfjótsslög* and *Landnámabók* which say nothing about *álfar*, but make clear reference to both *landvættir* (in the sense of nature spirits: see especially S 329-330 in *Lmb.*) and *bergbúar* (S 329) and the beliefs that some people (mainly in the west of Iceland) believed that they *dæi í hólana* or into mountains like Helgafell and Mælifell (S 85, S 110 and S 197). The absence of any mention of *álfar* in the sense of nature spirits can also be seen in *Piðranda þátr ok Þórháls* (1987: 2254-2255), which refers to *kvikvendi* living in *hólar*; and in *Íslensk hómiliubók* in *Hauksbók* (1892-6: 167), which talks again of *land vættir* when discussing those beings that received food

in piles of rock or under flats in return for their support of farms. The account of Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *niðstöng* activities in *Egils saga* (ÍF IV, 163-172) mentions *landvættir þær, er land þetta byggva*, and also (in two verses uttered earlier by Egill which Almqvist sees as originally being associated with this act) a more godlike being referred to as a *landáss* and *landálfr* (Almqvist 1965: 89-93; and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 153-157).

It seems that it was only in later times that *álfar* started becoming associated with rocks and *hólar* by Icelanders (see *Kormáks saga*, in ÍF VIII, 288; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, in FN II, 390-391; and *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns* [in RS VI, 220]; cf. *The Saga of Tristram ok Ísönd* in RS I, 174), *Kormáks saga*'s reference to a special blood-sacrifice to the *álfar* in a *hóll* as a means of getting assistance with a cure for injury probably representing an earlier stage in the transition of beliefs from active worship or sacrifice to folk belief (cf. the account in *Hauksbók* mentioned above). By the time of *Grettis saga Ásmundssonar* (ÍF VII, 204), *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (FN II, 474) and *Sigurðar saga þögla* (RS III, 111), the transition seems to be near complete, *álfar* being placed alongside *óvættir*, like *moldbúar*, *ffandur*, *bergrisar*, *nornir* and *tröll*.¹ Similar uses are found in romances like the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísönd* (RS I, 174), *Móttuls saga* (RS I, 259), *Elis saga ok Rósamundu* (RS IV, 62 and 128) and *Samsons saga fagra* (RS III, 384), and other *fornaldarsögur* like *Norna-Gests þáttur* (FN II, 390-391), *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (FN II, 390-391), and *Hrólfs saga kraka* (FN I, 25-27) as well as *Þiðriks saga* (1905-1911: 319), where the *álfar* are beginning to take on their later internationally folkloric 'elvish' form, slipping through solid walls, stealing children, luring innocent young men and women off safe moral pathways, and having problems with child-bearing. None of these later works make any mention of practical worship or sacrifice.

The idea of making sacrifices to *álfar* (something generally quite different to the approach usually taken to the more lowly *landvættir* [see nonetheless the aforementioned account in *Hauksbók*]) is, of course, supported by Sighvatr Þórðarson's often quoted reference in *Austrfaravísur* (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: II, 137) to the Swedish woman in 'Gautland' who said she would not let him and his companions into her abode because her household was conducting a private *álfablót* in the late autumn (not at *jól*, as Ström argues: 1985: 91 and 177). Similar ideas might be reflected in the *Flateyjarbók* (1945: II, 74-78) account of the offerings made by people to the grave mound of Ólafur Guðröðarson Geirstaðaálfr, who gains this latter by-name only after his death, when people started making sacrifices to him for *ár*. These activities find parallels in the account in *Ynglingasaga* (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: I, 23-25) of how Freyr received offerings in his grave *tíð árs ok friðar*; and

¹ It might be noted that the locally based beliefs from Snæfellsnes about *álfræk* given in *Bárðar saga* (ÍF XIII, 111); *Eyrbyggja* (ÍF IV, 10); and *Landnámabók* (S 85) come from the same area where we find beliefs about forefathers 'dying into' hills and mountains (see above). On one side, they reflect commonly encountered later Nordic beliefs whereby urine and faeces were sometimes put on anchor ropes to dissuade water spirits from climbing into fishing boats; or eyes were washed in urine to break supernaturally created illusions. On another side, they might be seen to be part of an older local belief connected with the forefathers 'becoming' *álfar* or local gods, and the need to keep 'their' areas unsoiled, to ensure their continuing presence.

perhaps also Rimbert's comment about how the Swedes of Birka started worshipping a dead king as a god (see Rimbert 1986: 54).

The idea of active worship of figures known as *álfar* (admittedly only supported by the above references) certainly suggests that a number of people saw these beings as having the power to influence the world around them, almost like gods. As several scholars have noted, this idea is supported by a range of other early sources, and most particularly the Eddic poems which, far from regarding them as mere *landvættir*, regularly place the *álfar* alongside the *æsir* and *jötnar*. As is well known, *Háv.* st. 159; *Grm.* st. 4, *Skm.* st. 7, and *Ls.* sts. 2, 13 and 30 all make use of the oral formula *ása ok álfa*. Other poems place the *álfar* alongside the *æsir* in lists, as in *Háv.* sts. 143 and 160; *Skm.* sts. 17-18 (*Hvat er þat álfa/ né ása sona/ né vis[s]a vana*); *Þrk.* st. 7 and *Vsp.* st. 48 (*Hvat er með ásom? / Hvat er með álfom?* in both); and *Sd.* 18; (*þær ro með ásom,/ þær ro með álfom/ sumar með vísom vönom*). In *Háv.* st. 159, the *álfar* are clearly listed among the *tívar*.

As Ström (1985: 199), Schjødtt (1991: 306-307), Ellis Davidson (1988: 105 and 173) and most recently Hall (2004: 35-53) and Ármann Jakobsson (2006) have all underlined, several Eddic poems seem to use the word *álfar* to refer specifically to the *vanir* gods, particularly *Ls.* sts. 2, 13 and 30 (the talk of *ása ok álfa,/ er hér inni ero*, which gave basis to the introductory prose statement *Mart var þar ása ok álfa*); *Háv.* st. 159; and *Grm.*, all of which refer to the *álfar* but make no use of the word *vanir* in lists of beings (in spite of their apparent knowledge of the *vanir* gods' presence). This applies especially to *Lok.* and *Grm.*. The same idea might also conceivably lie behind *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 39, which notes that men can be compared to *æsir*, *jötnar* and *álfar*. It might also be seen in Egill's verses uttered in connection with the *niðstöng* where the possibly interchangeable words *landáss* and *landálfr* are deliberately used for single godlike beings, the first being listed alongside Freyr and Njörðr (*ÍF* IV, 163-165; Almqvist 1965: 89-93; and Jón Hnefíll Aðalsteinsson 1999: 153-157, where the suggestion is made that the *landálfr* is actually Freyr). Connections between the *vanir* and the *álfar* are, of course, underlined still further by the statement in *Grm.* st. 5 that Freyr received Álfheimr as *tannfé*; as well as in the implicit connections between Freyr, his 'servant'/ alter-ego Skírnir and the sun (known as *álfröðull* in *Vm.* st. 47, and *Skm.* st. 4); in the associations between the *vanir* and whiteness (cf. the description of Heimdallr in *Þrm.* st. 15); and in the earlier mentioned parallels between the grave mound worship of Freyr and Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr. These connections were clearly well-noted by J. R. R. Tolkien who seems to have gone out of his way to underline the idea for his ur-mythology that 'Ingwë' was 'the most high lord of all the Elvish race. He... sits at the feet of the Powers and all Elves revere his name... The Vanyar were his people; they are the Fair Elves...' (Tolkien 1977: 52-53). In Tolkien's elvish, 'Vanyar' means 'the fair', something which, knowing Tolkien's approach, might well be meant to reflect the Indo-European word *albh** meaning 'white' or brightness, cf. OE *Elfscýne* (see Hall 2004, 56-57; and 71-76).²

² It might also be worth remembering that despite their prevalence in early sources, the Eddic *álfar* are never mentioned by name, unlike the *æsir*, the *jötnar*, the *dvergjar* and the *valkyrjur*. It seems to be expected that we know who they are. This, to my mind, adds further support for the idea that they were seen as being synonymous with the *vanir*.

Things are nonetheless not as easy as they might seem. As noted above, it should come as no surprise that different Eddic poems seem to originate in – and reflect – slightly different belief systems: For example, it is questionable whether *Skm.* originated in an area where Óðinn was seen as the highest god, in spite of the reference to Draupnir in sts. 21–22, and the slightly dubious mention of Freyr illegally sitting in Óðinn's seat in the prose introduction. Some of the Eddic poems make it clear that, unlike the performers of the recorded *Lok.* and *Grm.*, their creators seem to have seen the *álfar* as having been an individual divine race, different to both the *vanir* and the *æsir*, since they mention all three as existing alongside each other as equals: see *Sd.* st. 18 and *Skm.* sts. 17–18 (both mentioning *visir vanir* and *álfar*); *Alv.* (throughout), *Vm.* (which talks of Njörðr returning to the *visir vanir* [st. 39] but also mentions the *álfröðull*); *Þrm.* (which mentions first *æsir* and *álfar* alone as divine powers in st. 7, then in st. 15 describes Heimdallr as one of the *vanir*); and *Vsp.* (which talks of the war between the *æsir* and *vanir* in st. 24, but later refers only to *æsir* and *álfar* (st. 48/51, a strophe which, interestingly enough, appears in the Codex Regius directly before the mention of Freyr's later foe at Ragnarök, Surtr).

Alongside all of the above, we have *Völundarkviða* which, as several scholars have noted (see for example McKinnell 1990: 3; and Ármann Jakobsson 2006) seems to originate in yet another different belief system to the other Eddic poems (not least because of its mention of swan-maidens, which are referred to in the prose as *valkyrior*). Here the word *álfr* (used to describe Völundr by the narrator and by Niðuðr in st. 10 [*álfa lióðir*] sts 13 and 32 [*visi álfa*]) seems first and foremost to refer to 'otherness' rather than holiness or direct 'elvishness', but especially the kind of dangerous, supernatural 'otherness' that was commonly connected to the *Sami* or *Finnar* in both saga times and in later folklore. There is no reference to either divine powers (over and above that of flight) or any of the qualities normally associated with the idea of the early *landvættir*.

Yet another level of meaning running alongside all of the above is that found in the various histories of the early Norwegian kings, in which Álfheimr is not a mythical site,³ but rather a land ruled by Swedes (or at least non-Norwegians), situated south-east of where Oslo is today, and north of Göteborg, between the rivers Gautelfr (Gotälven) and Raumelfr (Glåma): see *Ynglinga saga* (Snorri Sturluson 1941–1951, I, 79); *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, in *FN* II, 133; and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *FN* II, 185–186. In those accounts where Álfheimr is mentioned (in a period prior to the birth of Haraldr hárfagri), Swedish territory to the south of Raumaríki is seen as beginning with the contested area of Vingulmörk (around Oslo), and continuing south into Álfheimr (cf. the town Alvheim north of Göteborg, in present-day Bohuslän, but also running east into Dalsland). It might be noted that while this wooded low-land territory would still have been relatively wet at this time (containing a number of *álv/elfr* or rivers), it is also the area that contained the greatest concentration of Bronze Age rock carvings related to agricultural fertility, including human figures, boats and sun images (and a great deal of so-called *álvkvarnar*, or cup-marks carved into rocks which were still used for local offerings in later times: see, for example, Hygen and

³ Admittedly there is nothing in *Grm* to suggest that the reference to Álfheimr being inherited by Freyr – forefather of Swedish kings – should not be meant to refer to a geographically known area that was annexed by the Ynglingar in their move west.

Bengtsson 2000 and Davidson 1964: 107). There can be little doubt that the people in the early medieval period knew of these images, and that the sites around them (often closely associated with Bronze Age grave-mounds) retained an element of sacredness or at least mysticism, just as they did in later times. There is good reason to believe that when Sighvatr encountered an *álfablót* on his way through 'Gautland', he was in an area close to Álfheimr, or an area where these *álfar* were well known.

Álfheimr, however, was more than just a simple place name. Historical sagas suggest that it drew its name from that of a regal forefather named *Álfr konungr inn gamli*, who, according to *Hversu Noregr byggðist* (FN II, 144-145; from *Flateyjarbók*), headed the pedigree on the maternal side of Haraldur *hárfagri*'s line, while his father's people are said to go back to Óðinn (here said to be the father of Freyr). This choice of mythological forefathers can be no coincidence. The importance of the name *Álfr* is, of course, also seen in the fact that it is used as a prefix not only in the names of *Álfr*'s descendants, but also those of a number of Anglo-Saxon kings and prominent Icelanders in later times. The first *Álfr* is thus said to be father of *Álfgeir*/ *Alfarin* and grandfather of *Gandálfr*/ *Álfr*, who *réd fyrir Álfheimr*. *Alfarin*/ *Álfgeir*'s daughter is the famous *Álfhildr*, first wife of Guðröðr Hálfðanarson and accredited mother of Ólafur Geirstaðaálfr (and sometimes Ragnar *loðbrók*): see Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: I, 79 and 87; *Þáttur Ólafs Geirstaðaálfs* in *Flateyjarbók* 1945: II, 74-78; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* [FN II, 185-186]; and *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* (FN II, 133) which, in addition to providing similar genealogical information, directly connects the people or rulers of this area to the supernatural *álfar*, underlining at the same time their fairness:

... þat er kunnigt í öllum fornum sögum um um það folk er Álfar hétu, en þat var miklu friðara en engi önnur mannkind á Norðurlöndum, því at allt foreldri Álfhildar, móður hans [Ragnars *loðbrókar*], ok allr ættbálkr var kominn frá Álfi gamla. Þat voru þá kallaðar Álfa ættir.

Everything about these accounts suggests that the people of this area seem to have seen themselves – or at least their rulers – as going back to 'Álfr', and that the name itself carried a degree of sacredness. Obvious parallels can be seen with other personal names based on the names of favourite deities like Þórólfr or Freyðis, something that points to a key difference between the words *dis* and *álfr*, the former being a group description while the latter seems to be based on a name. (Hall, it might be noted, follows Turville-Petre in seeing the *disir* as being a female equivalent of the *álfar*: see Turville-Petre 1964: 231 and Hali 2004: 37-39 and 196.) The 'name' *Álfr*, however, might itself have roots in a descriptive euphemism like 'Týr', 'Freyr' or 'Óðinn', here describing the bright qualities of the god as a means of avoiding direct naming (see also Hall 2004: 36 and 45; and Kuhn 1978: 272).

I have deliberately avoided discussing Snorri Sturluson's famous account of *ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar* and his implied connections between the *álfar* and the *dvergar* in *Gylfaginning* ch. 17 and 34, and *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 46 for the simple reason that most scholars nowadays see this account as being spurious, based to a large extent on the image of angels given in *Elucidarius* (itself a translation from Latin: see, for example, the discussion in Hall 2004: 33-34; on the question of *dvergar* parallels, see

further Motz 1973-4 in particular). No sources are found for such a division in types of *álfar* in any of Snorri's known sources. In part, it echoes the Church's deliberate attempt in the Middle Ages to equate all popular nature spirits with demons or fallen angels (an idea reflected in numerous *exempla*-based folk legends found all over the Nordic area).

However, as a number of scholars have suggested, it might also be another example of Snorri trying to make a whole picture out of the conflicting views of the *álfar* which occur in different sources, some of which seem to connect the *álfar* with death and grave cults (as in the statement in *Háv.* st. 142, that Dáinn was the leader of the *álfar* and in the earlier noted account of Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr); while others seem stress their beauty, their brightness, and their connection to the sun (see, for example, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* noted above; and the references to *Ælfscýne* and the *álfröðull*). Rejecting De Vries' suggestion (1956: I, 257-260) that the worship of the *álfar* should simply be seen as a death or forefather cult, Ström (1985: 198-199), Schjødtt (1991: 306-307); Simek (1993: 25-26) and Steinsland: 248 (2005: 338 and 345) have all underlined that associations with forefather worship need not rule out connections with brightness or fertility. Indeed both elements are clearly involved in the accounts of the worship of Freyr's and Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr's grave mounds, which find parallels in ancestor worship in many other societies, and also the ways in which the Nordic farm guardian spirits such as the *gardvord*, *haugtusse* or *rudningskari* (who received offerings on their grave-mounds up into the early twentieth century) were seen as protecting all aspects of farm life (see, for example, Shetelig 1911; and the *Gulapingslög* which suggests this practice was well known in medieval Norway: see *Gulatingslovi* 1981: 44). This makes sense, at least for some of the early understandings of the *álfar* as deities, whether they are seen as being *vanir* or separate entities.

All in all, the source material available to us underlines that we should be highly wary about ever referring to the earlier manifestations of the *álfar* as 'elves' unless we use the term in the Tolkien sense of the word whereby they represent a form of godlike entity associated with the land. Tolkien, of course, was making a deliberate attempt to wrest the original *álfar* away from latter-day Faëriedom (see Tolkien 1988, and especially 1988: 31, which underlines his view that with regard to the stories of the *vanir* and others, myth and history often blended). At the same time, however, we should be very wary about taking all the various early references to the *álfar* as referring to one and the same concept, over and above the idea that they are clearly powerful 'others' with the potential to harm at a distance (hence the later idea of the 'elf-shot'). As I have shown here, everything about these references suggests that they stem from a variety of different belief systems originating in different times and different environments, something that does not rule out the fact that all of these different beliefs could have lived side by side in multicultural settlement Iceland before they gradually blended into the latter-day Icelandic *álfar* and *huldufólk* (cf. the Nordic *huldre*; *undirjordiske*, and *álvar*), a process that can be seen occurring in works created from the late thirteenth century onwards.

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(Limited to save space. Anyone wishing for the whole bibliography can contact the author at terry@hi.is)

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