

# Thor's Return of the Giant Geirrod's Red-Hot Missile Seen in a Cosmic Context

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## Abstract

Discussion of the specific episode is preceded by a brief presentation of current theory concerning Indo-European myth in its cosmological framework to provide context. In the cosmological view sketched by Michael Witzel in *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*, the hero/young god must engage in a series of feats to create the conditions for human life to flourish. I have suggested that the conditions before the hero's actions in the Indo-European context are envisaged as the extremes: too close; too hot; too dry; and too wet. It is argued that this particular threat is 'too hot' and comes from a giant figure who is one of the old gods, probably identifiable as Odin. When Geirrod throws a red-hot missile at Thor, Thor catches it and kills the giant when he sends it back. The related stories of Thor's visit to Utgarthloki and Thorstein's visit to Geirrod are also treated, and attention is drawn to Welsh and Irish parallels which make an equivalence between thrown weapon and destructive gaze. It is suggested that the story may culminate in the motif of eye as star found separately.

Keywords: *Edda*, giants, Indo-European cosmology, Odin, Old Norse mythology, Thor

In order that the proposed cosmic interpretation of the specific episode of Thor's return of Geirrod's missile can be received and considered, it may be helpful to provide preliminary notes on the whole cosmological approach now available to scholars. In recent years study of Indo-European myth has often followed the well-tried method of working back in time with a linguistic emphasis, such as, for example, M. L. West's *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007). By contrast, the cosmological approach stresses the need to posit the nature of the source society, i.e. its synchronic inter-relationships, as well as hypothesising the diachronic changes that would have occurred to produce the situation in each of the daughter cultures for which evidence becomes available with the advent of writing. As the anthropologist N. J.

Allen made clear (2000, 39–60), the structuring of Indo-European mythology implies that it had its source in a tribal society. Such societies were capable of building and transmitting elaborate cosmologies, and the abundant traces found in the Indo-European daughter cultures indicate that the source culture placed a high value on complex myth and ritual.

The Indo-European situation for myth is comparable to that of language in some respects, but myth probably reaches further back into prehistory than the linguistic material, which is tied rather closely to the first records in any of the related languages (Lyle 2006). The stories of myth, though expressed in language, are conceptual rather than linguistic and so readily cross language boundaries. The fact that the stories take a variety of different forms in different languages is the expected result of the long period that separates the known myths from the point of common origin. It is essential to keep in mind this diachronic factor while exploring the synchronic pattern which forms the initial ‘grammar’ of interconnected components, comparable to linguistic grammar.

An important element in the transmission of myth that differs from that of words is that myth was the verbal part of an integrated cosmology, so the re-creation of a proto-form involves positing the nature of the associated society. Indeed, it seems that myth offers a unique way of accessing knowledge about the root proto-Indo-European society, so supplying a new level of understanding about the genesis of the highly successful modern Western society as well as its other related cultures (Lyle 2012a, b, c). Jaan Puhvel (1981, 159–62) appreciated the possibilities of such an approach some decades ago:

Basic to the new insights is the assumption that Proto-Indo-European culture possessed a structured ideology, a set of beliefs and traditions which served as a charter for social and supernatural organization alike. Names are less important than concepts and functions. [...] I hope I have conveyed some feeling of the great and exciting discoveries that are being made and remain to be made in the areas of Indo-European prehistory and myth. Herein lie the ultimate origins of European civilization, which were only secondarily covered with non-Indo-European overlays of Mediterranean and Near Eastern origin.

By definition, the Indo-European society before written records was an oral one and so had ways of organising the holding and transmission of its cultural knowledge that differed markedly from those used from the time that

writing became dominant. The importance of this point should be stressed, and I suggest that it is impossible to grasp the operation of Indo-European myth fully unless account is taken of the fact that it must have arisen in a completely oral culture. Some factors will be constant for any oral culture with an intricate cosmology such as is found among the Indo-Europeans. The cosmological system will involve a system of correlations that include space and time and social organisation. The daughter cultures may vary widely in the degree to which they retain the correlations on which the system was built.

### **The treatment of sovereignty**

The traces of the posited early society in the literate records emphasise kingship and, indeed, the mythology seems to be what Jan Assmann (2008, 61) has called a cratogony – an expression of power and the means to hold it. However, the presentation of kingship has been partially subverted in the Old Norse case. A central kingship is found in all the Indo-European branches, but its story is normally one of succession, with the power, after creation has been fully achieved, lying with the youngest generation, as is seen most explicitly in the Greek tradition found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Zeus replaces Cronus (West 1988, 6–17). The major difference brought about at some point in the diachronic development from the Indo-European root to the Old Norse position is that power has been taken back from the last generation and placed in the generation before it, in the person of Odin.

The Old Norse material is remarkable in having a rather well-defined group of gods, but the group is skewed by this development. It lacks the young king as king, although it is Thor that is the young god who can be equated with the kings Zeus, Lug, and Indra. The equation does not lie in common attributes, although some may be present, but in the unique position within a structure (Lyle 2014, 43f.) which is that of the most powerful of the young gods. The Old Norse material also lacks the young queen as queen, although it is Freyja who is the young goddess who can be equated with the unique queen represented by Hera, Mebh, and Śri in the Greek, Irish, and Indian traditions. At an earlier stage of development, of which there is no direct record, it can be assumed, if the general Indo-European evidence be allowed to carry weight, that the figures found historically with the names Thor and Freyja were king and queen. A story about Frigg having Odin's brothers, Vé and Vili, as lovers during the absence of her husband seems to exemplify the transfer of power back from the youngest generation

to the preceding one. The story is alluded to in *Lokasenna* 26 (Larrington 2014, 85), where Loki accuses Frigg of being man-mad and of lying with Vé and Vili, and it is told in full in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga* 3 (Finlay and Faulkes 2016). When Odin was away from his kingdom, it was ruled by his two brothers, Vé and Vili, and when he had been absent so long that it was assumed he would never come back, Vé and Vili divided the kingdom between them and both married Odin's wife, Frigg. When Odin eventually returned, he took back Frigg as his wife. The comparable narrative of one female and three consorts is the conception story that results in the birth of the young king with his triple nature that can be traced in Irish, Welsh, and Greek/Egyptian traditions in the figures of Lug and Llew in the *Dindsenchas* and the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*, and in the figure of Horus/Zeus in Plutarch's *Of Isis and Osiris* (Bek-Pedersen 2006, 331f.; Lyle 2012a, 61ff., 77). In the Old Norse account, however, while the sexual encounters are retained, the conception and birth are lacking. No young king is born, and Odin remains in power.

### **The functional triad based on age grades and the tenfold family of gods**

The three brothers, Vé, Odin, and Vili, are probable representatives of the three functions that Georges Dumézil claimed existed in Indo-European ideology: 1) the sacred; 2) physical force; and 3) fertility and prosperity (Littleton 1982). I suggest that the first and last of these correspond to Tyr and Njörd. Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 1, 16 n.4) argued rightly that Dumézil's early claim that the functions were directly tied to the social classes of priests, warriors, and cultivators was invalid since these social classes would not have existed at the period of Indo-European unity. However, a direct link with the life stages of old age, youth, and maturity would have been possible at this period. Kim McCone (1986; 1987) proposed replacing the social classes in the Dumézilian functional theory with age grades, like those found among East African pastoralists, and I have explored the idea further (Lyle 1997). Since age-grading is still current (see Bernardi 1985), recent anthropological studies throw light on the way it operates and provide a valuable resource for those who would like to grasp its implications for the Indo-European case.

It is proposed that Dumézil's general insight about the functional triad is valid, but that the total system is much more complex than the one he outlined, having ten distinct components represented by gods, two females and eight males (Lyle 2012a). There is no difficulty in identifying the two

dominant females in the Old Norse pantheon as the old goddess Frigg and the young goddess Freyja (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007). Of the eight proposed males, six are validated by the place-name evidence – the old gods Tyr, Odin, and Njörd and the young gods, Thor, Ull, and Frey (Brink 2007, 108, 116ff., 124f.) – while another two young gods, Baldr and Loki, are prominent in narrative. Any proposed instance of the functional triad in Dumézil's scheme must be re-examined in the light of the positions of the various elements in the more inclusive tenfold scheme. In particular, it can be noted that the set of statues of Odin, Thor, and Frey in the Uppsala temple in the Latin account by Adam of Bremen of c. 1075 CE (Tschan 1959, 207f.) is not a functional triad but treats Thor as a king and not as a simple representative of physical force (Lyle 2004, 12–19; Lyle 2018b).

The myths of the Indo-Europeans evidently come down to us from the pre-Axial-Age 'religion' which is distinct from the moral religion of the books (see, for example, Bellah and Joas 2012) with which it coexisted after the emergence of the latter. In the primary cosmology that survived in fragmentary form the gods were imagined in analogy with the human experience of social relationships. On the basis of the revision of the trifunctional theory it can be said that this experience would have included connections through age grades, but the principal place among the relationships in oral society was taken by the family. As James Cox observes, '[I]ndigenous religious beliefs, rituals and social practices focus on ancestors and hence have an overwhelming emphasis on kinship relations' (2012, 11).

Considering what is known about the Indo-European gods in kinship terms, it is quite apparent that they are presented as a family consisting of members of several generations. Since our information is incomplete, there is room for debate on the precise kinship structure, but I have proposed that the divine kinship network consisted of four generations, three being those of the old gods, and the final one being that of the young gods, with the pivotal places in each of the four generations being taken in Greek tradition by Ge, Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus (Lyle 2012a, 61; 2017, 344–47). Old Norse tradition has a sequence of three birth levels, with the generation of the giantess Bestla being followed by that of Odin (*Gylfaginning* 6f., Faulkes 1995, 11), and that generation being followed by the generation of Odin's sons. A hypothetical Old Norse formulation which takes account of succession as in the Greek case would have the giantess Bestla in the first generation, and the Aesir, Tyr, and Odin in the second and third generations, with the dominant Odin coming last, having displaced his predecessor. The young gods in the fourth generation, including Thor, could not have come into

existence without the old gods, but it is argued that they were obliged to subdue their predecessors to create conditions tolerable for living. It is this conflict, in which the young king of the gods, the proto-Thor figure, plays a major part, that is apparently remembered in the story of Thor's fight with the giant, Geirrod.

### **Thor's return of Geirrod's missile**

The story of Thor's encounter with Geirrod is told by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson in the *Prose Edda*. This early thirteenth-century work is divided after a prologue into three parts called *Gylfaginning* (the tricking of Gylfi), *Skáldskaparmál* (the language of poetry), and *Hattatal* (list of verse forms), of which the first two contain the narratives drawn on here. The present discussion also draws on an anonymous Icelandic narrative of the fourteenth century, *Þorsteins Þátr Bæjarmagns*, where the god Thor is represented by a human equivalent, Thorstein Mansion-Might. The full complex containing these Geirrod stories and other related narratives has been the subject of a recent detailed study by Declan Taggart (2017). A separate episode concerning the giant Thiassi which is told in *Skáldskaparmál* 56–57 is also drawn on here in the allusion to it in *Harbardzljod* (Harbard's Song) from the *Poetic Edda*, which stems from the period before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in 1000 CE.

The episode of Thor's return of the giant Geirrod's red-hot missile is found in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda* (Faulkes 1995, 82f.). Setting it in a cosmic context is potentially illuminating both for Old Norse mythology and for the broader Indo-European field of study. The episode, as will be shown below, occurs as part of a sequence, which can be understood as a cosmological one dealing with a phase of creation. We can turn for background to Michael Witzel's wide-ranging book on *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*. Witzel emphasises story lines in an interesting way (2012, 64–65), and one such line is when the young cosmic hero, who is Indra in the Indian context, removes the obstacles to establishing a world fit for human habitation. Witzel gives two instances that are relevant to this study: the propping up of heaven and the releasing of waters through the defeat of a dragon/serpent. He notes that after the emergence of Heaven and Earth, 'there is a need to separate the two by propping up Heaven' (77), a cosmic event that was commemorated annually in India and Nepal by the erection of a pillar during a festival (134f.). Witzel continues the cosmic narrative as follows (77f., cf. 149):

After the separation of Heaven and Earth, other actions are necessary to turn the young world into a livable space (*oikumene*). [... The old gods are depicted] as monsters who have to be slain or at least subdued [...]. Most prominent in these fights is the slaying of the primordial dragon by the Great Hero [...].

Following on from Witzel's position and taking a hard look at what the hero had to face, it seemed to me that all that was there before the young gods was the old gods embodying the cosmic levels, and that the hero is seen to defeat these cosmic gods by force or guile (Lyle 2015a).

The cosmic gods are those of the vertical levels, and it is necessary to envisage the universe as articulated in a particular way to make statements about it which may then be subjected to scrutiny. Of course, the main scheme of a system, which runs from a top above the dwelling place of people on earth to a bottom below it, is found in Old Norse tradition in relation to the world tree, Yggdrasill, which has an eagle at the summit and a serpent, Nidhogg, at its base (*Gylfaginning* 14–17, Faulkes 1995, 17ff.). However, this threefold system does not appear to entirely reflect the Indo-European situation since, in the Indian case, the upper part of the system is envisaged as consisting of a heaven at the top and a realm between earth and heaven. In accordance with this, the cosmic levels can be taken to be heaven, sky, earth, and sea (Lyle 2012a, 56, 98f.; 2015a), of which only earth, the primal goddess, is female.

In the as-yet-unordered universe the cosmic gods present threats which I have argued are probably to be regarded as embodying respectively the extreme conditions: too close; too hot; too dry; and too wet (Lyle 2015a; 2018a, 127–30). Of these Witzel's discussion relates to the 'too close' in the propping up of heaven and the 'too dry' in the releasing of the waters through the defeat of the dragon/serpent. The 'too hot' condition appears to relate to the contest of Geirrod and Thor discussed here. The 'too wet' condition, not treated in India but discernible in Old Norse tradition in Thor's contest with the Midgarth serpent, relates to a water monster, which has the capacity to drown the earth but is forced to remain in its own water-world (Lyle 2015b, 6–10). Thor's contest with the Midgarth serpent occurs as an independent story in the *Prose Edda* and elsewhere (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1986), but its indirect representation in the account of Thor's visit to the giant Utgarthloki forms part of a series that can be understood as reflecting cosmic levels.

The story of Thor's visit to Utgarthloki is told in the *Gylfaginning* section of the *Prose Edda* 46–48 (Faulkes 1995, 41–46). In the giant's hall Thor

and his companions are presented with challenges which relate to an eating contest, foot races, drinking liquid from a horn, an attempt to lift a cat, and a wrestling match with an old woman. The fifth of these is an extra, but the other four can be placed roughly in correspondence with the cosmic levels through Utgarthloki's explanations, taken with the parallel episode in the hall of the giant Geirrod recounted in *Skáldskaparmál* 18 (Faulkes 1995, 81ff.). Utgarthloki explains that the winners of the first two contests who defeated Thor's companions, Loki and Thialfi, were Fire<sup>1</sup> and Thought. He also reveals to Thor that, although Thor's efforts had been made to appear feeble, he had actually produced an ebb tide by his drinking from the horn and had affected the stability of the world by partially lifting the cat, which was in reality the world serpent. Utgarthloki was mocking the visiting gods through his deceptions, and John Lindow (2000, 179–83) has proposed that he stands in the place of Odin, who is displaying his mental superiority over Thor.

When Thor visits Geirrod's hall, there is no equivalent to the world serpent (the 'too wet' threat from the old gods). There are, however, elements that can be placed in a relationship with the propping up of the heaven (too close), destruction by a fiery object (too hot), and, in a reverse image, the release of water from the female earth (too dry). In a preamble in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 18; Faulkes 1995, 81f.), it is explained that Loki had been captured by the giants and, to gain his freedom, had agreed to bring Thor into the land of the giants without his hammer, Miöllnir, or his belt of strength. Thor is accordingly meant to be in a vulnerable state and at the mercy of the giants. However, before the travellers arrive at their destination, Thor has been given three objects by the helpful giantess, Grid: her staff, a belt of strength, and a pair of gauntlets. He saves himself from being crushed against the roof of a giant dwelling by pushing Grid's staff up into the rafters, and from destruction by a fiery object by using her gloves. The belt of strength helps him to cross a river in flood. The river is being swollen by a giantess urinating into it, and Thor hurls a stone to dam it at its source (as he says), stopping up the vagina. Since a potential reading of the Indo-European release of the waters from the serpent has the hero pluck his weapon from her vagina,<sup>2</sup> this is where

1 Rosemary Power comments (1985, 164) that in this story version 'the fire-game is absent, unless some vestige remains in an eating contest between Loki and an opponent who is the personification of fire'.

2 Lyle 2012a, 106–11. It is in keeping with this interpretation that Margaret Clunies Ross (2002, 187) comments that the physical appearance of Miöllnir is 'unmistakably phallic'.

a narrative reversal may come in. If the cosmic encounters are taken in order of the levels of the universe, this incident comes third, and Thor would have been without his hammer in the first two encounters since he has not yet obtained it. In the third episode, in the proposed primary form of the narrative, he both releases the waters and obtains his distinctive weapon. When it comes to the fourth encounter, told at *Gylfaginning* 48 (Faulkes 1995, 46f.), Thor wields Miöllnir when engaged in contest with the Midgarth serpent. It appears that the fore-story about Loki can be understood as a development to explain why Thor does not have his hammer. This element would not have required explanation in a narrative in which Miöllnir was not yet in his possession.

The fanciful treatment in the *Utgathaloki* case appears to be secondary to the Geirrod narrative and to have been adapted to give roles to Thor's companions Loki and Thialfi in the first two feats where they are defeated by the challengers, who turn out to be Fire and Thought. The relevant parallels are shown below.

<i>Utgathaloki</i>	<i>Geirrod (plus fourth independent story)</i>
Eating contest (versus Fire)	Propping up roof with staff
Races (versus Thought)	Returning glowing metal with iron gloves
Drinking from horn (ebb tide)	Stopping flow of river with belt of strength
Lifting cat (world serpent)	Subduing world serpent with Miöllnir

In another account of a visit to Geirrod's realm in *Dorsteins Þáttr Bæjarmagns*, Thorstein receives the dwarf gift of a pebble with a pointer to activate it,<sup>3</sup> which he uses in the encounter with Geirrod. With these objects Thorstein produces flame and sets fire to the building, and finishes by killing Geirrod by hurling them through his eyes. His activity is treated as a game until its fatal outcome for the giant king (Pálsson and Edwards 1968, 126f., 136f.).

Similarly, in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 18, Faulkes 1995, 82f.), Geirrod invites Thor into his hall for games. There are fires burning throughout the length of the hall and, when Thor comes opposite Geirrod, Geirrod takes up a red-hot piece of iron with some tongs and hurls it at him, with the evident intention of destroying him. However, Thor has Grid's gift of iron gloves and is able to catch the glowing metal and hurl it back at Geirrod. The giant takes refuge behind a pillar, but the metal goes right through it and kills him.

3 Jacqueline Simpson (1966, 6f.) points out the similarity to a Thor's hammer and spike used in charming.

Whereas Thorstein in the *thattr* has weapons in the form of a pebble and pointer in his possession, Thor has nothing until he catches the thrown object that was meant to kill him. It is a core feature of this narrative cluster (not present in the *thattr*) that it is an act of retaliation that causes the death or injury of the giant. The *thattr*, however, does include a motif not in the *Prose Edda* account which resonates with comparable tales in the Irish context. The giant in the *thattr* is killed in a specific way – by objects penetrating his eyes.

In the Celtic context the attack may take the form of the giant's destructive gaze instead of a weapon.<sup>4</sup> In either case a destructive force is returned. In the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* Ysbaddaden Chief Giant has an eye which has such destructive power that it is normally kept covered. At the culminating point of this story, when the eyelid is raised, the giant throws a spear at Culhwch, which the young hero catches and throws back so that it goes into the giant's eye and comes out at the nape of his neck (Davies 2007, 194). The equivalence of gaze and weapon seems clear in this case. In the Irish *Second Battle of Moytura* Lug sends a sling stone into Balor's destructive eye which carries the eye through his head and turns around its destructive force so that it falls on his own army (Gray 1982, 61). There is no mention of heat in this account, but later Irish folktales speak of the threat that Balor will burn up Ireland with his eye unless a spear is thrown into it as soon as it is uncovered (Curtin 1894, 293, 311; Lyle 2018a, 129).

It is characteristic of the set of events at the cosmic level that the old gods are brought under control rather than being totally annihilated. The Old Norse story of the retaliation involving the cosmic god's eye does not appear to be brought to a conclusion with cosmic consequences. Geirrod is simply killed outright. However, if we take the incident of the objects thrown by Thorstein penetrating Geirrod's eyes and the story of the eyes of Balor and Ysbaddaden being driven through the backs of their heads, we can sketch a possible cosmic scenario. The destructive fiery object that was the giant's eye might be propelled into the distance and become a harmless star. This possible outcome receives support from the episode that Thor recalls in a speech in *Hárbarðsljóð* which is a flyting between Thor and Odin, who is disguised as Harbard:

I killed Thiazi, the powerful-minded giant,  
I threw up the eyes of Allvaldi's son  
into the bright heaven;

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4 On the destructive power of the gaze in the Celtic context see further Borsje 2012.

they are the greatest sign of my deeds,  
those which since all men can see.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth recalling that there are two scales in operation in these stories. Some of the feats are enclosed within a smaller-scale building which can be placed in correspondence with the larger-scale universe. In another context Terry Gunnell (2005) has pointed out the equivalence of the human hall to the cosmos. When the Geirrod story ends with the partial destruction of the building as well as the killing of the giant, it is told in this contained form appropriate to the living quarters of humans and giants. The continuation of the story to end with the establishment of a star or stars could be seen as an opening out of the narrative into the cosmic dimension. It can be noted that Thor's contest with the world serpent also places him in a constructed environment when he fishes for the serpent from a giant's boat. Equivalent Celtic and Greek stories treating Fergus and Perseus/Herakles operate at the cosmic level and have the hero enter into the water-world to combat the water monster (Nagy 2018, 36f.; Lyle 2015b, 7–10). There may be a trace of this feature in a version known to Snorri in which the serpent is cut down by Miöllnir 'by the sea-bed' (Faulkes 1995, 47).

## Conclusion

In exploring the regional distribution of evidence on the Old Norse gods, Gunnell speculates that 'there probably was an individual body of mythology which originally centred on Þórr', and that it would have been natural that 'this mythology would also have included some explanation of the origin of the world and mankind, in terms relating to Þórr'. He goes on to ask, 'If that was the case, what has happened to that myth?' As shown in the present discussion, it can be argued that one Thor cosmogonic myth, a set of combats with the old gods, is discernible in well-known stories in the *Prose Edda* and elsewhere.

In throwing back Geirrod's glowing metal, Thor apparently saves the world from its burning heat. In his book on Thor Taggart (2017) explores the idea that the weapon might have been lightning in accordance with a perception of Thor as god of thunder, but he finally discards this interpretation. It should be noted as a factor to be kept in mind that the weapon is not actually Thor's but belongs to his antagonist; Thor merely returns it. This

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5 *Hárbarðsljóð* 19 (Larrington 2014, 68). This feat is ascribed to Odin in the *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* 56f.; Faulkes 1987, 61).

threat from burning heat has still to be explored fully in the Indo-European context, but the initial concept was perhaps that of a primeval sun which had to be brought under control by distancing it from the earth to the point where it was diminished into a star. This would have left the way open to the later appearance of a different sun as it has been known to humans.

It seems that fragmented parts of the initial cosmic ideas have been retained in Old Norse stories which include an element of entertainment. If they are given the context of worship, the series of episodes to which this belongs could be expressed in some such words as:

Hail to Thor, who propped up the heaven and hurled the burning star far away; who unstopped the waters of the world river and subdued the great sea serpent.

Of course, not all features of the Old Norse stories call for cosmological explanation, since there is clearly plenty of scope in them for creative development, but the Geirrod series does seem to correspond to a sequence in a creation story, and it appears to be the fullest statement of the sequence throughout the Indo-European world.

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