

The Part or the Whole: Cosmology as an Empirical and Analytical Concept

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Abstract

In the study of Old Norse religion, mythology and cosmology are two core concepts frequently used in inter-disciplinary discussions as to the content, changes and spread of the pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia. The article discusses the concept of cosmology in relation to religion and world-view, with examples from picture-stones and from mythological and heroic texts. Cosmology is not a criterion of religion, any more than the occurrence of an explicitly formulated cosmology necessarily implies that the aim in presenting a world-view is exclusively religious. We may be justified in looking closely at a body of material that is to be studied and asking ourselves where its systematicity is formulated: in the researcher's argumentation, in a compiler like Snorri, or in the emic tradition? And not least, which individual narratives in the local tradition are singled out as cosmological? Hybrid forms are rarely identified by studying cosmologies as doctrinal systems. The representation of world-views can take other forms than systematised accounts, but then they are less easily accessible to research.

In a discussion of the concept of cosmology, there may be good reason to ask what motifs in text and image recurring over a long time imply for different interpretations and what their ambivalence means for their analysis today. Then as now, there is a wide range of possibilities when it comes to the interpretation of individual expressions.

The explanatory value of concepts such as cosmology, or for that matter mythology, is sometimes obscure, since the terms are used to capture a particular type of empirical material rather than to answer an analytical question. Cosmology and mythology thus refer to a certain kind of content in narratives rather than to the normal meaning of the term cosmology, i.e. a coherent doctrine of the universe that takes into consideration both the spatial aspects of the word *cosmos* and systematic knowledge, *logos*.

Keywords: Old-Norse religion, pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, picture stones, Völsunga saga, mythology, cosmology, mythic motifs, heroic literature, hybridity

A Worldly or Mythological Rider?

Who is the man riding so proudly on several of the Gotlandic picture stones, often equipped with magnificent weapons and precious clothes? Has he been away raiding, now arriving home a wealthy man? Perhaps it is a dead chieftain approaching the gates of Valhalla and the pleasures of the hall together with the *einherjar*; or is it Odin himself, riding Sleipnir on his way to the battlefield? The motif can also be interpreted as depicting the god of wisdom riding his instrument of magic (*gandr*) during a *seiðr* ceremony and being greeted by a valkyrie, just as Sigurd, slayer of Fafnir, was supported in his quest for knowledge by the wise valkyrie Sigrdrifa.



Figure 1. Picture stone from Stenkyrka Parish (Lillbjärs III), Gotland. Lindqvist 1941 fig. 104, 1942, 122f. Photo: Swedish National Heritage Board, Antiquarian Topographical Archive (ATA).

There have been many interpretations of the human figures, animals, attributes, and symbols occurring on picture stones. It seems obvious that we find ourselves in an aristocratic setting. The picture of the horseman from Alskog, Tjängvide I, together with Ardre VIII, has become a *locus classicus* for what are usually categorized as welcome scenes on picture stones (Nylén 1987). These are probably the two Swedish antiquities that are most frequently reproduced in modern times.

The horse in Figure 1 is admittedly not eight-legged as on certain other picture stones, but the rider seems to be making good speed as he approaches the woman waiting to greet him. His shield is highlighted by its size and its swirling decoration, and on the part of the rider's leg that is projecting we glimpse loose-fitting striped trousers of an unusual kind. The gender of the figure meeting him is in this particular case difficult to determine, but a comparison with other pictures reveals the characteristic hairstyle and the cape; the female figure likewise is wearing striped garments. The horn is naïvely exaggerated in size, and it is gripped by a clumsily executed hand. Rather than walking to meet the horseman, in this picture she seems to be placed on the horse's foreleg, as if she were part of its movement. This suggests that she may perhaps represent something other than a high-born hostess.



Figure 2. The 'valkyrie fragment' from Uppåkra, Skåne. Photo: Historical Museum at Lund University (LUHM).

Part of a bronze figurine found at Uppåkra by a metal detector in the topmost layer of the soil, and therefore without a specific context. It is from roughly the same time as the welcome scenes on the Gotlandic picture stones, executed in a different material but showing a very similar motif.

The triple knots, which are also seen on the ornamental waves at the bottom, are common on picture stones. Their meaning remains obscure. None of the attributes of the figures give the observer any absolute signals as to whether the picture is to be understood in secular or mythological terms. And that perhaps is the intention.

Myths and Truths

When we seek to interpret a picture like this more than a millennium later, one fundamental question is whether the scene shows an isolated event or whether its combination of symbols is supposed to represent a complete system of interwoven beliefs. In either case it could be mythology just as much as history that is the starting point for the events depicted.

It is easy to imagine all the people over the centuries who passed by the picture stones in the Gotlandic landscape and looked at the mounted figure and the woman who is meeting him with the horn of welcome in her hand. Christian or pagan, believer or sceptic, every one of them probably had his or her own interpretation of the stones as a monument and of their motifs. Viewed in their context, some of the stones are monumental, although they are not all gigantic. The figures and symbols must have aroused thoughts and feelings, and some of them could have evoked entire narratives, since the scenes and the sequences of images in several cases fit together in a series. The stones were produced over a long time, 400–1100 CE, and many of them have stood in the landscape (albeit not at their original site) or lain overturned, while others were incorporated into church walls. In several cases they have been part of the cultural landscape down to our own time. The Gotlandic stones communicate a pictorial world that points backwards, to forms and signs that we recognize from Bronze Age rock carvings with their circles and horned animals, while simultaneously displaying motifs testifying to continental influences from Christian and more secular narratives from the Early Middle Ages.

The intellectual context that observers have associated with the picture has varied over the centuries; yet we detect the survival of a world-view, or rather a narrative pattern, that is reproduced despite ideological and religious changes. In this context time must be regarded as an important factor, since both plastic form and motifs were repeated over a long time. This does not necessarily mean that the pictures and narratives were always interpreted in a coherent way, but people must have been able to recognise societal parallels and read existential truths into them; and for this to be possible, certain basic features of the pictorial world must agree with the observer's perception of the world.

In a discussion of the concept of cosmology, there may be good cause to look at the implications for different interpretations of motifs in text and image recurring over a long time, and what their ambiguity means for their analysis today. Then as now, there is a wide range of possibilities when it comes to the interpretation of individual images.

The explanatory value of concepts such as cosmology, or for that matter mythology, is sometimes obscure, since the terms are used to capture a particular type of empirical material rather than to answer an analytical question. Cosmology and mythology thus refer to a certain kind of content in narratives, rather than to the normal meaning of the term 'cosmology': a coherent doctrine of the universe that takes into consideration both *cosmos*, with its spatial aspects, and *logos*, or systematic knowledge.

With regard to cosmology, the history of religions has a predominantly structuralist and/or comparative tradition. From the mid-1950s onward the discussion of myths and world-views was dominated by Claude Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists. Myths and cosmologies are undeniably excellent material for anyone who wishes to build an analysis on comparisons, but it is also soon apparent that both mythology and cosmology are used only in the study of some religions, not of others. The explanation for this can be found in the history of ideas.

Cosmology is not a criterion of religion, any more than the occurrence of an explicitly formulated cosmology necessarily implies that the purposes of a world-view are exclusively religious. We may be justified in looking closely at a body of material that is to be studied, and asking ourselves where the systematization is formulated: in the researcher's argumentation, in a compiler like Snorri, or in the emic tradition? And, not least, which individual narratives in the local tradition are being singled out as cosmological? Hybrid forms can rarely be found by studying cosmologies as doctrinal systems. The representation of world-views can take other forms than systematized accounts, but then they are not so easily accessible to research. Two brief examples may be cited, one from anthropology, the other from more text-oriented research, where coherent cosmologies are not expressed in the empirical material in the form of concerted narratives, but where the question of cosmology is crucial for the researcher's analytical conclusions.

In Marcel Griaule's now classic study from West Africa, it is by listening to the informant Ogotomeli's long monologues that the researcher comes to understand how the Dogon people, through buildings, village structure, and landscape, create a picture of society with the human body as the starting point for the metaphors. In describing Islam and the Muslim world-view, the term 'cosmology' is rarely used. Neither the Koran nor the Hadiths present a cosmology in the classic sense, but nor, unlike the Bible, do they recount a detailed cosmogony. On the other hand, one may note how the stories of Muhammad's ascension to heaven are developed in folk poetry from the sparse statements in the normative literature. Here the prophet

travels through hierarchically structured levels of heaven, and through conversation acquires knowledge about things that are otherwise concealed from humans. The examples also show the type of literature from which scholars usually derive their material to produce generalized accounts, and what is described as 'folk belief'.

Religions are not necessarily formulated in terms of systematized doctrine (dogmatics), of an extended description of the spatial order and structure of the universe (cosmology), or of a detailed narrative as to how the world came into existence (cosmogony). This does not mean that they lack ideas as to how the world is constituted; but not all cosmology, as we have seen, is expressed in metanarratives. The zeal to document complete cosmologies is not always found in the people who embrace the beliefs, and they are not always formulated by the people who pass on the traditions. They have been written down by someone else. There is always reason to ask who brought the stories together in a uniform cosmology, and for what reasons. This is true both of the cosmology that we find retold/compiled in medieval West Norse texts, and of the cosmology analytically pieced together by scholars.

In the Norse context we can compare Snorri's systematic account to the Eddic poems, that together give us our knowledge of cosmology in the Viking era and the Early Middle Ages. The latter contribute important elements to the cosmological jigsaw puzzle, but the didactic ambition always has to be reconciled with the scope claimed by the power of the poetry. The *Völuspá* contains only hints about myths such as the death of Balder or Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetry, on which Snorri elaborates in detail. Snorri's account is based on several of the songs in the *Poetic Edda*, with many quotations from them. The two collections yield a picture of a fairly uniform cosmology, although there are also contradictions both within and between the texts. The emphasis in both is on explaining origins and spatial divisions. In the Eddic poems the poets use traditional metrical forms and formulae in question-and-answer duels, which turn out to be an excellent method for compacting cosmological information. Snorri uses partly the same method in the *Gylfaginning* part of his *Edda*, where Gylfi's questions provide a systematic structure. Snorri lets the supposedly Swedish king Gylfi, disguised as the old traveller Gangleri, put questions to the three chieftains sitting in their high seats: High, Just-as-High, and Third. The result is a coherent text. The guest's ignorance allows him to ask one basic question after the other in a long catalogue of queries, which are answered in prose larded with long quotations from the *Poetic Edda*. The answers thus

come from the chieftains, not the gods, although Odin is easily recognizable behind High. His appearance, flanked by two other gods as aspects of himself, is a familiar topos in Norse literature that Snorri here makes use of.

In the case of Norse cosmology, knowledge of the literary background is essential for understanding the whole that Snorri produces out of classificatory units and their mutual relations. Yet we still face a problem. The Eddic poems that present a cosmology were brought together out of a medieval Christian editor's interest in the poetic form, but they give us a hint as to how cosmological elements were used in poetry. The circumstances that governed the content and metre of the versions of the poems that have come down to us, and what the variations on the theme might look like, are things that we can only speculate about.

Here the differences in diction between the collection of poems and Snorri's prose text are crucial. The former documents the skalds' poetry as such with a selection of poems on mythological and heroic themes. Snorri's ambition, by contrast, is to present a coherent whole, in which the cosmology is part of both a historiography and a view of history. Although Snorri is not driven by religious motives, the conflict between the old and the new is for him a central theme. Pre-Christian religion is described as having had a defective understanding of the true nature of things, and in a euhemerist manner the old gods are depicted as chieftains who became objects of a cult. Odin's descendants are said to have spread over Northern Europe to populate Scandinavia. There is no indication that there was any other population there before them (Sami or Finns), although the *Finnir* do play a part later in the account.

When read today Snorri's *Edda* seems like an encounter between on the one hand the Christian cosmology, with its creation story – expressed in terms of the continental learning that Snorri had mastered (Holtmark 1964; Faulkes 1983; Clunies Ross 1987; Simek 1990, 189ff.), on the other a desire for a systematic presentation of a pre-Christian mythology in which cosmographic parameters are fundamental. With regard to the language of Snorri's *Edda*, Anne Holtmark writes that it 'belongs to spiritual language and is accompanied by associations with the true faith, thereby emphasizing the contrast between it and the old custom [*forn siðr*]' (Holtmark 1964, 7; English translation by CR). Yet Snorri's historiography bears the stamp of a notion of cultural distinctiveness; when he retells the stories of the old gods for his Christian contemporaries, he highlights what is specifically Norse. However, he gives them a continental origin, since the *Æsir* are said to have immigrated from Troy. The North thereby acquires a mythology

of antiquarian dignity comparable with classical mythology. In this story Odin is a kind of ur-chieftain, ancestor of the Yngling dynasty, rather than a god. 'When the Æsir are interpreted as historical persons, they are placed on the same historical level as Aeneas, and the kingdoms they found are on the same level as Rome', as Karl G. Johansson and Mats Malm write in the introduction to their translation of Snorri's *Edda*. Just as much as a document about the myths of Norse religion before the encounter with Christianity, Snorri's account is a symptom of the learned ideal of his time. Unlike the *Poetic Edda*, his work remained known throughout the medieval and early modern period. The Gothicist historians of the seventeenth century thus had a founder for their own discipline, who soon acquired iconic status.

Describe or Explain

Academic terms are sensitive to fluctuation. Some are over-used for periods, while others fall into oblivion. Others may be used to a limited extent in one discipline, but are introduced into another as innovations. This is not to say that cosmology has been dismissed as a concept in the history of religions, but a certain decline can be observed. For colleagues in archaeology, the term seems to be easier to associate with spatial dimensions in find contexts and with individual artefacts. The ideological ballast accompanying cosmology is less noticeable than in the history of religions.

When Geo Widengren and Olof Pettersson in the 1970s published their phenomenological surveys of the history of religions, cosmology was one basis for comparing different religions; but neither in Mark C. Taylor's collection *Critical Terms in Religious Studies* (1998) nor in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon's *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000) do we find the headword 'cosmology'. Nor does comparison any longer seem to be the most relevant analytical method. The Copenhagen volume *Secular theories on Religion* (Rothstein & Jensen 2000) contains some scattered references to cosmology, but they lack any great analytical weight in relation to the space devoted to mythology and ritual. This is not to say that the content usually covered by 'cosmology' in discussions among historians of religion is passé. On the contrary: other and to some extent new concepts are used to designate the forms of expression used by humans to show how they envisage the world. Historians of religion today more often use such terms as 'world-view', 'ideology', 'mentality', 'life-world', 'symbolic universe' or 'world system' to capture holistic aspects of people's thoughts and beliefs.

This change is far from being exclusively concerned with the term 'cosmology'; it should be viewed in association with a more general transformation in Scandinavian research on the history of religions over the last twenty years. The focus has shifted – in both historical and contemporary studies – from abstractions and comparisons of large units towards more actor-oriented analyses, influenced by sociology, anthropology, and the history of mentalities. The formerly so significant comparative studies, in which cosmology was a cornerstone, have to a large extent been replaced by more contextually based concepts. Since Foucault it has been difficult to work with excessively large hegemonic units; and the critique of structuralism (not merely on the part of post-structuralism) has held up multidimensionality as an important aspect of religion, a phenomenon that cannot be studied without a societal context and visible actors.

Like cosmology, these newer concepts are in some sense linked to narratives about figures and symbols, with sufficient flexibility to convey both banal and sophisticated stories, depending on the sender, the recipient, and the situation. Here perhaps one of postmodernism's favourite words might be just as relevant: the grand narrative (*grand récit*), a metanarrative that stakes out boundaries and illuminates conflicts, and that offers an overall framework within which events and experiences can be interpreted. This narrative is not necessarily believed in all its details, but it formulates fundamental truths.

Yet another complicating factor is that cosmology is used alternately as an empirical and an analytical term. Both aspects are interesting, but they must be kept separate. In most cases when historians of religion use the term, it has been analytically retrieved from different sources and pieced together at the desk. The scholar proceeds from implicit preconditions and from an assurance that it is possible to reach a meaning that is far from explicit expressions. Now a desk is by no means a bad place for analytical work, but we should not forget that cohesive entities are not always to be found in the material. The empirical matter of history of religions is usually contradictory.

For the historian of religion, cosmology is at once a taken-for-granted concept and a perplexing one. It implies some idea of a whole, a kind of coherent narrative that explains the state and development of the world. The question is where such a whole is formulated, in what form and by whom. The relationship of the parts to the empirical material builds up the whole, or should we rather say the presupposed whole, but the problem of why a whole is formulated remains.

Compared to myths – narratives of the gods, and of powers that transcend everyday human experience and act in a time that is infinitely distant yet easily transposed to the narrator's and the listener's own time – cosmology implies some form of a coherent whole which explains how different parts of the universe fit together, and which is identical or comparable to that of the people handing down the tradition. A myth or mythic element can be identified through a theme, a fragment, or a minimum unit of the myth (a mytheme, as Claude Lévi-Strauss called it in his quest for universal categories of thought) which occurs on repeated occasions and which is sufficiently complex to be interesting for its own sake (Lindow 1985). Cosmology is a broader concept than myth and is also less directly linked to religion in the conventional sense; a cosmology can easily be based on a wholly non-religious understanding of the world and its structure.

Without making too much of the distinction between myth and cosmology, the latter can be said to refer to an understanding of a particular world order as the basic structure and topography that make the myth comprehensible and charge it with meaning. In the example of the poetic mead, the relationship of the powers of chaos to the Æsir is fundamental, not just their opposition in a duality but also their part in a reciprocal dependence. This does not mean that the description can be used as the basis for an exact map. The cosmos may have its topography, but narratives about the cosmos exist to conjure up images and ideas, not as a guide to be followed. The woman holding out the horn to the horseman thus has cosmic dimensions. The strength in the form of common sense and poetry that can be derived from her mead is rooted in both myth and cosmology, without these concepts having to be separated. In the same way, although mostly less explicitly, a cosmology provides a grid over rituals and spatial depictions. It presupposes or confirms a world-view and a social order. A cosmology is the backdrop against which actions are performed.

The concept of cosmology, especially Norse cosmology, cannot be used without an analytical link to one or another of the three aspects below. It is not possible to consider cosmology independently, without a contextual connection to other forms of expression.

First of all, cosmology always has a connection to myth and narrative, that is to say, a necessary bond to concrete expressions and manifestations of the ideas contained. Myth is always in some sense linked to narratives – although not exclusively in the form of text. But when expressions such as pictures, spatial configuration, plastic figures or actions are interpreted as being connected to a myth, it is because we suspect a mythological meaning

in the representation; this is in distinction to symbols, which can be linked to a particular divinity. The symbol can be loaded with meaning, like the hammer of Thor (Staecker 1999), but this does not mean that every hammer-shaped pendant we find is necessarily linked to the Thor of the mythic narratives, who carries his hammer Miöllnir along on his adventures. It may instead be a protective Thor, one associated with fertility and good harvests, and connected with unrecorded narratives; or a general assurance that the form and the metal gave protection and strengthened the bearer, without the involvement of any character from the world of story. There is naturally a link here with rituals, with actions in a more general sense, as well as with spatial configuration, corporeality and gestures, but for reasons of source criticism the written evidence occupies a special position. For certain motifs the pictures are close to the texts, but in the Norse material they are relatively rare compared to examples from classical and Near Eastern antiquity. In that sense we are prisoners of the texts. It is impossible to imagine a cosmology that does not depict: it is narrative, but it need not necessarily have text as a medium. Andrén (2004) and Zachrisson (2004) cite examples of how traces in landscape and settlement can be connected to texts that have become classic reference points for Norse cosmology, while Hedeager (2004) analyses pictorial representation in archaeology.

Both forms – texts and images – are concerned with the link of cosmology to narrative. It is rare for a cosmology to merely provide a topographical description in a given form; often the explanation for why things look the way they do occurs in a particular way. Cosmology always reflects the movement that is also found in the myth through events that are interlinked. Rather than being a collection of dogmatic theses, mythologies and cosmologies express direction, change, consequences, and overall logical associations, not just isolated scenes or points in a course of events.

Most stories about the structure of the world include a wish to draw boundaries and establish order. With few exceptions, a basic theme in many cosmologies is boundary drawing and a desire to define ‘in’ and ‘out’. Narrative allows us to explain positions in the universe.

Secondly, cosmology is closely connected to ideology: the more fragile the source material, the harder it becomes to distinguish between religion and ideology. In the tales of Sigurd, the references to the old religion provide a heroic legitimacy, as Sigurd step by step emerges as a full-fledged hero in accordance with the qualifications required by a warrior ideology (Bagge 1991; Herschend 1997; Price 2002). In the *Völsunga saga* and the Eddic poems about Sigurd, we do not find any cosmological accounts. Here we

have instead a norm system that is not primarily determined by a specific religion, but which in a given context can acquire its legitimacy from a particular religion.

Thirdly, cosmology is linked to historiography. Although many cosmologies begin long ago, 'at the dawn of time', the time and the context within which the cosmology is formulated are almost always present. A cosmology therefore almost always constitutes a point of conflict. This is an important premise if we are to be able to understand how Snorri formulates a self-definition with a different cosmology as a contrast; in his case it is pre-Christian versus Christian, but not with any missionary zeal. The old religion was based on lack of understanding, and in the Prologue to his Edda Snorri writes about how pre-Christian people understood creation: 'But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created out of some material' (Prologue 2).¹

In the Icelandic sagas we find the same conflicts between old and new, admittedly with references to the change of religion, but above all with a contrast between the old custom (*forn siðr*) and the new. The Eddic poems, on the other hand, seem to have been preserved and handed down without Christianization or other ideological changes having been deliberately added to the surface level of the texts. Christian influence can nevertheless be detected in motifs and themes. Yet there is obviously a considerable difference in the source material between on the one hand Snorri's *Edda* and the saga texts, whose explicit aim is to write history and create a handbook for poets, on the other hand the Eddic poetry, which plunges more or less directly into the world of gods and heroes. In the Eddic poems it is the narrative, not the chronological course of events, that is important.

The Greek term *mythos* refers to a story or something that is spoken aloud, and thus originally meant roughly the same thing as the Norse term *saga*. The Greek term, however, soon took on a connotation of value judgement. For Herodotus myth was an 'improbable story'; for Plato and Aristotle, the contrast – not to say the dichotomy – between *mythos* and *logos* was fundamental (Lincoln 1993). Although *logos* also originally means 'word', in time (with the pre-Socratics and above all the later Athenian philosophers) it acquired connotations of argument; *logos* became the model for structured knowledge, and the contrast with the myths or old wives' tales arose as part of this semantic change. Medieval Christian, Judaic, and even

1 Alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni.

Muslim theology was heavily influenced by Aristotelian rationalism. Not surprisingly, mythology was not a term they adopted to describe their own beliefs. The faith that the theologians wanted to present was portrayed as a consequence of certain reasoning. Theology thus became identified with *doxa*, while mythology became an instrument for describing pagan religion in the past and present.

In a world-view it is important to define who is 'outside'; this means not just giants and demonic forces, but also other contemporary and historical cultures (Simek 1990, 189ff.). In Snorri's references to Odin's origin in ancient Troy, the world is divided into three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Snorri is perfectly aware that Troy is in Asia Minor, and here already we suspect a kind of Orientalism with ideas about distant realms of bliss, ideas that were nourished in Europe as early as the Middle Ages: 'The middle of the world is there too; and just as the earth there is more beautiful and better in all respects than in other places, so too mankind there was most honoured with all blessings, wisdom and strength, beauty and every kind of skill' (Prologue 3).²

Who Peoples a Cosmology? The Vertical Paradigm

My own research on Norse religion has moved rather far from the stories of the gods, the classic myths about Odin and Thor and their roaring adventures. It has become more concerned with the 'lower mythology', as early twentieth-century scholars could still describe it. Although researchers today usually avoid such expressions, the vertical paradigm, with its explicit hierarchy of mythological beings, is seldom far away in reviews and surveys. Yet the sources do not seem to indicate any simple relationship between higher and lower beings.

The place of the 'lower' beings in the cosmology, and their implications for its structure, are not automatically given. Similarly, we have to ask where mortals have their place. Cosmologies establish boundaries between the divine and the human, and we are justified in asking questions about whose interest was served by any such identifiable distinction. It was after all human beings who constructed and passed on the cosmologies.

In most Norse myths the conditions for human life are a background issue; we glimpse them, however, in accounts of Ragnarok, and Snorri cites

² Þar er ok mið veröldin; ok svá sem þar er jörðin fegri ok betri at öllum kostum en í öðrum stöðum, svá var ok mannfólkit þar mest tignat af öllum giptum, spekinni ok aflinu, fegrðinni ok alls kostar kunnustu.

Völuspá 45:

Bræðr munu berjask	Brother will fight brother
ok at þonom verðask,	and be his slayer,
muno systrungar	brother and sister will violate
sifjum spilla.	the bond of kinship;
Hart er með höldum,	hard it is in the world,
hórdómr mikill,	there is much adultery,
skeggjöld, skálmöld,	axe-age, sword-age,
skildir ro klofnir,	shields are cleft asunder.
vindöld, vargjöld,	Wind-age, wolf-age,
áðr verold steypisk.	before the world plunges headlong.

The stanza emphasizes concepts such as kin and honour (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, 187) and also takes a more existential angle on living in the time of the wolf, but it says nothing of the relationships between human beings and the higher powers. The accounts would be acceptable to pagans and Christians alike. There is nothing to suggest that the destruction of the world has been caused by human sin. This is the only stanza in the *Völuspá* with a direct here-and-now feeling. Otherwise events take place in the past and the future, or in a more idealized human world.

As we read the rest of the myth of the end of the world, a number of beings appear which cannot easily be categorized as either higher or lower. This applies above all to the destructive forces that act as foci of conflict in the world of the gods and simultaneously cause the destruction of the world of men. The relationship, and the boundary, between Loki, Garm, and Fenrir is vague. In the story of Ragnarok they function as giants of some kind and evidently represent purely natural forces or natural disasters. Their transformations suggest a great narrative flexibility in these characters.

Folke Ström, in a study from 1948, *Den egna kraftens män*, sought to demonstrate what he thought to be non-religious motives for moral stances in Norse mythology.³ Ström's study is interesting, not because it tries to draw

3 In the introduction to his study, Ström writes: 'A known variant of refusal is represented by a category that is fairly well demarcated from other groups, about which it is said that its representatives relied solely on their own might and main (*mátt sinn ok megin*). These men, according to the tradition, refused to bow down to the old gods without necessarily having taken the step over to the Christian faith.' (1948, 5.) Later he continues: 'The crucial criterion [for faith in God] is the attitude of the believer. If we look at this, we find basically the same reverence, worship, and pious reticence characterizing the relationship to the nameless collective of *landvættir*, *alfar*, and *disir* as the relationship to Odin, Thor, and Frey.' (1948, 8f.)

boundaries between religion and non-religion, but because it can be used to argue for an extended concept of religion, one which allows room for the 'lower' figures of mythology as well as for abstract and philosophical concepts. Ström is on the trail of something important, which can change our picture of Norse religion. It is easy to fall into a pattern and start describing non-Christian religion according to some kind of catechism, foregrounding articles of belief rather than the narrative features in the presentation of the religion. With the latter approach, Norse religion becomes larger than mythology and cosmology. This broader understanding of narrative dimensions makes it easier to connect them to religious practice. Rituals need not necessarily be interpreted as configured by or referring to myths in the sense of narratives, but as manifestations of a moral universe. They seal social alliances and power relations.

Invocation and Appeal

In Snorri and in the *Poetic Edda* the cosmological and cosmogonic accounts are dominated by the male gods and their exploits, while other beings and giants are reduced to opponents. Here we can note a certain discrepancy between address and narrative. When superhuman powers are depicted as actively participating in people's lives and are referred to by direct address, it is other characters than those of the higher mythology that are called upon. It is not unusual for collectives to be depicted as powerful, but they lack named individual characters. In *Völsapáttir* it is the *monir* who are the recipients of the house cult; in the healing prayer on the runic stick from Ribe, it is the nine *noeðær* who can drive disease from the body (Moltke 1976, 395ff.; Snædal 1994, 18f.); the *disir* are invoked in childbirth in *Oddrúnargrátr*; and the formalized invocation that the poet places in Sigrdrifa's mouth seems to indicate which inhabitants of the universe are significant when the valkyrie calls for the attention of the gods and powers:

Heill dagr, heilir dags synir,	Hail to the day! Hail to the sons of day!
heil nótt oc nipt!	Hail to night and her kin!
óreiðom augom lítið	With gracious eyes
ocr þinig,	may you look upon us.
oc gefit sitiondom sigr!	and give victory to those sitting here!

Heilir æsir, heilar ásynior,	Hail to the Æsir! Hail to the goddesses!
heil síá in fiolnýta fold!	Hail to the mighty, fecund earth!

mál oc manvit gefit	Eloquence and native wit may you give
ocr mærom tveim	to us two famous ones
oc læcnishendr, meðan lifom!	and healing hands while we live!
<i>(Sigrdrifumál 3f.)</i>	

This address functions not just as a plea for help but also as an identification of the inhabitants of the universe. It is an invocation of a kind that is also common in skaldic poetry. Sigrdrifa's invocation can be compared to the very similar appeal in the *Völuspá*, where beings of sacred origin and Heimdall's descendants are asked to listen:

Hlióðs bið ec allar	Attention I ask
helgar kindir,	from all the sacred people,
meiri oc minni,	greater and lesser,
mögo Heimdalar;	the offspring of Heimdall.



Figure 3. Detail of a picture stone from Hangvars Parish, Austers, Gotland. Photo: ATA.

It is difficult to determine whether this depicts a dragon killer in the heroic spirit of the Sigurd story or Beowulf, or a struggle against the mythic powers of chaos; similarly, whether the picture is to be regarded as part of a longer narrative (hinting at preceding and following scenes), or as serving a decorative purpose using a popular motif.

In its form and its compact content, the *Poetic Edda* reflects the oral tradition to a greater extent than Snorri's *Edda*. Readers today suspect a different emphasis.

To exemplify some of this discussion, and to draw attention to certain groups of texts that are often overlooked in the discussion of cosmology and mythology, I would like to focus on certain themes from the Sigurd cycle as they are presented in the legendary *Völsunga saga* and in the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda* (Raudvere 1998; 2004; 2009).⁴ The latter are usually contrasted

⁴ A longer version of this article can be found in Raudvere 2004.

with the mythological songs, among which the *Völuspá* tends to be held up as specifically cosmological – or perhaps rather cosmogonic, since it describes the creation of the universe, its decay and destruction, in 66 verses. Earlier scholarship took it for granted that the heroic songs were based on historical events which had become the stuff of legend; even today the distinction between historical legends and myths is not always maintained.

In the *Völuspá* we find the chief argument that cosmology in an empirical sense was a meaning-bearing category in Norse literature. In its first third, the poem, in the variant that has come down to us today, deals with the different phases of creation and then immediately moves forward to the tale of Ragnarok. Little space is devoted to life between these poles, the creation and the end of the world; unless we interpret the start of Ragnarok, the hints about the first stages of a collapse, as something that thirteenth-century Christian Icelanders could identify with their own times. Otherwise it is obvious that *Völuspá* deals with themes beyond human experience. The speaking seeress, the *völva*, asserts her authority and her insights by reference to her descent from the giants and thus has access to memories from the time before creation itself. An emphasis on the invocation in the first two verses conjures up an image of a rather sophisticated Norse perception of time, linked directly to the construction of the cosmos with its inhabitants and worlds. These higher and lower sons of Heimdall thus have to encounter giants (*bursar*), who lived long before their own world and time existed. The first two verses run:

Hlióðs bið ec allar	Attention I ask
helgar kindir,	from all the sacred people,
meiri oc minni,	greater and lesser,
mōgo Heimdalar;	the offspring of Heimdall.
vildo, at ec, Valfōðr,	Father of the Slain,
vel fyrtelia	you wished that I should declare
forn spioll fira,	the ancient histories of men and gods,
þau er fremst um man.	those which I remember from the first.

Ec man iotna,	I, born of giants,
ár um borna,	remember very early
þá er forom mic	those who nurtured
fœdda hōfðo;	me then;
nío man ec heima,	I remember nine worlds,
nío íviði,	I remember nine giant women,

miotvið mæran	the mighty Measuring Tree
fyr mold neðan.	down below the earth.

There are more examples from the *Poetic Edda*, where the poems deal with attempts to hold together the elements that we associate with cosmology – *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Rígsþula*, and several others – with a clearly didactic tone. *Vafþrúðnismál* depicts a duel of knowledge between Odin and the giant Vafthrudnir, where in verse 43, following descriptions of the world of the gods, the contestants arrive at the question of the identity of the other primary powers:

Vafðrúðnir quad:	Vafthrudnir said:
Frá iotna rúnom	Of the secrets of the giants
oc allra goða	and of all the gods,
ec kann segia satt,	I can tell truly,
þvíat hvern hefi ec	for I have been
heim um komit;	into every world;
nío kom ec heima	nine worlds I have travelled
fyr Nifelhel neðan,	through to Mist-hell,
hinig deyia ór helio halir.	there men die down out of hell.

Grímnismál is also structured around the quest for knowledge of the universe, and through Odin's monologues we obtain a detailed mythological topography in which gods and other mythological figures are given named residences. The poems also include condensed variants for example of the creation myth, and in verses 40–41 we read:

Ór Ymis holdi	From Ymir's flesh
var iorð um scöpuð,	the earth was made,
enn ór sveita sær,	and from his blood, the sea,
biorg ór beinom,	mountains from his bones,
baðmr ór hári,	trees from his hair,
enn ór hausi himin.	and from his skull, the sky.
Enn ór hans brám	And from his eyelashes
gerðo blíð regin	the cheerful gods
miðgarð manna sonom:	made earth in the middle for men;
enn ór hans heila	and from his brain
vóro þau in harðmóðgo	were the hard-tempered clouds

scý ǫll um sǫpuð. all made.

This can be compared to the fact that *Völuspá* only mentions Ymir in passing in verse 3:

Ár var alda, Young were the years
þat er Ymir bygði, when Ymir made his settlement,

Here Ymir is the subject, the active one. Snorri, on the other hand, follows *Grímnismál* and gives a detailed account of the cosmogony, when the giant's body is used to build up the universe (*Gylfaginning* 5ff.).⁵ Drawing maps of the universe on the basis of the Eddic poems is, as we have seen, doomed to failure, although many attempts have been made. What unites these poems is their sophisticated poetic form and reasonably consistent content.

In the same way as these poems, others, such as *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*, also present cosmological information. The arguments and abuse exchanged by the gods in the former end with a scene where the other Æsir stand united against Loki and his insults. The last verses and the concluding prose mark the positions as they have been established on the eve of Ragnarok, as the destruction of the world is described in *Völuspá*: 'And after that Loki hid in the waterfall of Franangr, disguised as a salmon. There the Æsir caught him. He was bound with the guts of his son Nari. But his son Narfi changed into a wolf.'⁶ It is not surprising that structuralists have found their material in mythologies and cosmologies rather than in rituals, which (outside their ideal forms) are always attended by deviations of chance and context.

The spatial and geographical points of orientation in the Norse cosmologies consist of compass points on the vertical axis, especially dwellings connected with individual divinities. The accounts are structured around places and genealogies, and contain descriptions of the homes of the Æsir, the Vanir, giants and elves – which of course is not unique to the Norse myths. The earth is inhabited by people and animals somewhere close to the gods' Asgard, but the Norse poems do not seem to show any interest in a place of punishment or a land of bliss.

5 A variant on the theme can be read in *Vafþrúðnismál* 21:

Ór Ymis holdi var iorð um sǫpuð,
enn ór beinom biorg,
himinn ór hausi ins hrímkalda iotuns,
enn ór sveita síor.

6 Enn eptir þetta falz Loki í Fránangrsforsí í lax líki. Þar tóco æsir hann. Hann var bundinn með þǫrmom sonar Nara. Enn Narfi, sonr hans, varð at vargi.

Despite changes in ideology/religion and despite social upheaval, the poems depict an established narrative pattern and recurrent symbols. They evidently functioned as tools for the human imagination, and told stories of glory and honour, of status and potential for change, tales of heroes and powers of obscure origin, but they did not necessarily represent a mythology in the conventional sense. It is perhaps among the broader metanarratives that themes concerning a long-term perspective should be sought.

The Man on a Horse

The choice of themes from the Sigurd cycle can be justified by its connection to mythology, at least as regards the genealogy of the hero, his characteristics and attributes when parallels are drawn between him and Odin (Raudvere 2009). But the modus of the expressions is not the same as those conventionally described as mythological narratives. The stories about Sigurd do not contain explicit narratives concerning the creation of the world or the order of the universe. The cosmology is interwoven with the story and mostly cannot be separated from ideology and historiography. A social order is explained and defended indirectly through the moral ideals that emerge.⁷ This applies in particular to the stories of Sigurd's youth, when the two cornerstones of his status as a hero are manifested: he is a Volsung by birth, and he demonstrates through his acts that he is a hero. There are signals in the texts which make us aware at an early stage that Sigurd is a complete hero. The Sigurd story represents a way of telling stories about the past in which mythical and historical time are difficult to distinguish from each other, but where the cosmology as an expression of ideology and world order is clear. Several of the turning points in the story would be inconceivable or unreasonable without divine intervention, powerful characters act in a way that would be impossible without the influence of higher powers, and there are plenty of figures who belong in mythology, such as dragons, berserks, and avenging women in the guise of wolves.

The *Völsunga saga* takes place during a time ranging from an ancestor, called the son of Odin, to the fall of the Burgundian kingdom, and is set in continental Europe. As a legendary saga or 'saga of ancient times' (*for-naldarsaga*) it is by definition a fantastic story of a bygone age, but it claims

⁷ In an essay about *Íslendingabók* and myths, John Lindow argues that we should search for myths and mythic elements in order to 'seek new ways to ask how Icelanders made sense of themselves, of their identity and their society, within the wider geographic and historical world in which they lived' (1997, 463).

to be factual with regard to events in the recent past (Lassen 2009). Unlike the Icelandic family sagas, where the gods and other beings are only addressed or are the objects of prayers and rituals, in the legendary sagas the supernatural characters take part in the action. The first half of the *Völsunga saga* deals with the development of the young hero Sigurd: his background, his trials and his successes. The *Völsunga saga* shows no obvious interest in explicit religious beliefs. It is relationships among people that are at the centre, and thus also moral issues of honour. The *Völsunga saga* emphasizes Sigurd's genealogical ties to Odin in his capacity as a member of the Volsung family. His distinguished pedigree and his place in the social hierarchy are stressed from the outset, in that certain qualities are ascribed to him: 'All say one thing about him: that none was his match in conduct and size.'⁸ Later in the same chapter we read that "Sigurd must be counted the foremost in strength and accomplishments, in zeal and valor' (ch. 13).⁹

The *Völsunga saga* is a complex story, operating on many levels. All the beings that move on different planes, both social and cosmological, hint at a cosmology greater than the world of the gods. In addition, Odin travels around the human world in disguise. We meet a dwarf in the shape of a pike, who refers to the Norns when he is about to explain why he has this appearance, and who claims to be Odin's son; we meet warriors who appear in the guise of wolves; there is an enchanted ring and many examples of divinatory and superhuman knowledge. Gudrun's true dreams – she too is said to have piercing eyes – are mentioned as something taken for granted, needing no logical explanation. This saga of ancient times is a blend of mythic elements and passages claiming to be factual history. The mythic features occur no doubt in large measure for reasons of narrative technique, and are not primarily expressions of what is conventionally meant by religious beliefs. But it is interesting to note that the references to Odin and characters closely connected to him appear when the text wants to affirm the social order and a hero's qualities and exploits. The parallels between Odin and Sigurd include their shared eagerness to acquire knowledge outside the world that is given to them (Raudvere 2003). Sigurd's insight goes back to Odin through his meeting with the valkyrie Sigdrifa. As chieftains, both have the horse and sword as attributes. Their superior knowledge is linked to birds as informants, and for both of them their chief accomplishment is the slaying of a monster. Myths and cosmologies are not true because people literally believe them, but because such stories – regarded as wholes and

8 *fra honum segia allir eitt. at vm ath ferð ok voxt var engi hans maki.*

9 *er hann hefir haft um hvern mann fram annarra í norðr alf.*

not just in their fantastic details – tell truths about society, about the place of human beings in history, about ideologies and morals. That is why many such stories survive a change of religion.

Cosmology as a Space for Imagination

Unlike *Völuspá*, the *Völsunga saga* does not offer a complete cosmology, in the sense that in the former the entire narrative circles around an account of a mythological or cosmological structure. But nor is it merely a heroic tale, with fantastic and entertaining yarns; the text of the saga offers clear references to cosmology, ideology, and norm systems that legitimate or censure the actor's deeds and choices. The cosmology can be said to function both as a hub for the narrative and as a framework outside which it cannot move. The world-view expressed here, on the other hand, is not explicitly pagan or Christian – it is not even necessarily religious at all. The narrative aspect of the cosmologies is therefore an important part of the continuity argument, whether the stories should be regarded as something more than tales of the gods, perhaps more of a moral universe. The narrative – mythical, heroic, or historical – then becomes a framework that is filled with content and offers scope for the imagination.

The *Völsunga saga* presents Norse mythology through subtexts and hints about the dramatic events taking place on the surface of the text. Thus, when he comes riding on his picture stone, the horseman is Odin – Sigurd – the chieftain/king – and the observer. The depiction thus offers every observer an opportunity to become immersed in the pictorial chain of events. Whatever the intention of the person who erected the stone, the horseman has become a stereotype, initially connected to a specific story, mythological or historical, which could provide detailed explanations as to the identity of the man and the woman, their attributes and their decorations. In our own day, however, he has ridden into our imagination, beyond absolute interpretation.

Fantasy – not in the sense of old wives' tales or other things with no relation to reality, but of human freedom and imagination, and part of the realities that people create – is the driving force in the continuity that we detect in the Sigurd narratives: dreams of prosperity, power, or wisdom. From this perspective, both the people who lived in Gotland and the figures on the stones are parts of a landscape that the storytellers were able to use for many different kinds of tales. The *Völsunga saga* does not actually contribute any new elements to the large jigsaw puzzle that is Norse my-

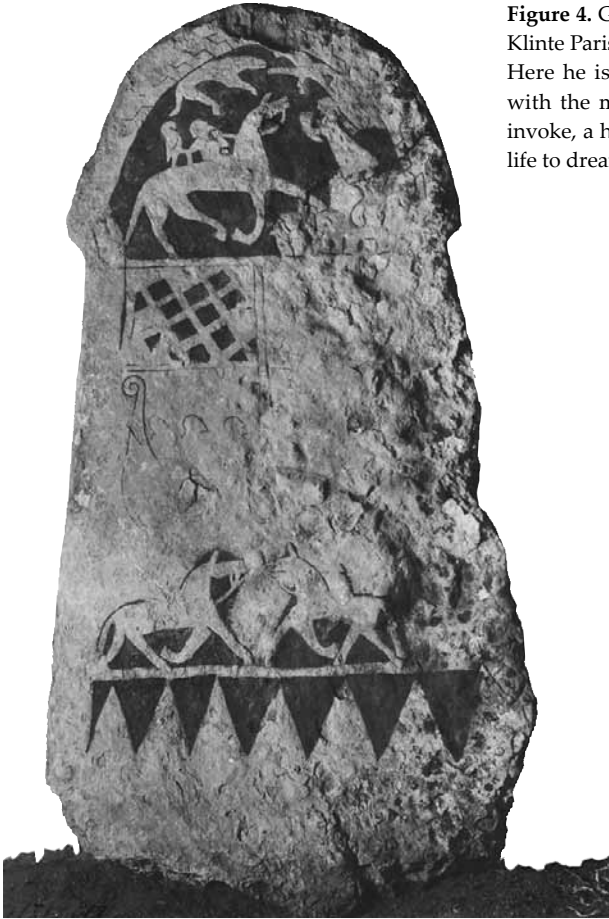


Figure 4. Gotlandic picture stone from Klinte Parish, Klinteby. Photo: ATA. Here he is back again, the horseman with the many dimensions: a god to invoke, a hero to celebrate in stories, a life to dream of.

thology; rather, it offers a key to understanding how cosmological elements could be used in different kinds of narrative and thus survive as motifs over long periods. The context for the story of Sigurd must have changed all the time, but not just in dramatic terms such as a change of religion. The actual circumstances in which stories were told must have given scope for countless versions, emphases, and individual interpretations. The legendary sagas and the heroic lays resemble the archaeological evidence in that they carry reminiscences of cosmology. Just as artefacts, settlement, and spatial organization bear traces of stories about the basic structures of the universe and its power relations, the story of Sigurd gives us present-day readers

a hint of the cosmic hierarchies that for a long time governed societal and human ideals – so powerfully that they survived a change of religion.

The fragment of the myth obviously has a narrative core, which scholars of literature would call fable and motif, offering opportunities for the narrator and the exegete and simultaneously setting boundaries. It is this core that allows us to identify a specific myth. Depending on the question, the sequence can be considered in its context or from a comparative perspective. The broader the comparison, the greater the weight of the narrative theme. There is a patent risk that an analysis based on these observable similarities will ascribe similar beliefs to the people who passed on the myth, and that the myth fragment will be interpreted in a moral system that is forever given. But why should collectives be in agreement about everyday interpretations? In most societies, different social groups also have access to different forms of expression. Mythic and/or cosmological units are therefore expressed in different ways and with differing emphasis, depending on who is speaking.

Like the metal fragment of the ‘valkyrie’ from Uppåkra, where we see only faint traces of her decorated skirt, sherds of myths and cosmology are retold in text, image, and spatial configuration – the myth fragment that gives us a hint as to the narrative context within which we can place the sherd. The state of our sources is such that to arrive at any coherent narratives we must rely in large measure on texts. The pictures suggest the possibility of variations. These traces from bygone times thus require us to use our imagination if we are to see the breadth of a story rather than a dogmatic content.

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