

NAMES IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL LAY GRÍMNIS-MÁL

Hilda Radzin

St. John's University
Jamaica, New York

Icelandic poetry preserved in manuscripts can be divided into the Eddaic and the Skaldic poetry. The Eddaic poems have mostly free alliteration. Most of the Eddaic poetry is preserved in a manuscript now called Elder Edda or Poetic Edda. This manuscript was written in Iceland c. A. D. 1270. Its poems are several centuries older, mostly of heathen times. These poems may be divided into mythological and heroic poems. The mythological poems contain stories about heathen gods, words of wisdom, and descriptions of the world.

Skaldic poetry was often made in praise of the chieftains of Norway and other Scandinavian lands. The Skaldic verse forms were first devised in Norway in the ninth century. They differ from the Eddaic forms.

A mythology, when regarded irrespective of the manner in which it may have been understood by those who first reduced it into a system, is obviously susceptible of any interpretation that a writer may choose to give it. Hence we may have historical, ethnological, astronomical, physical, and psychological or ethical

explanations of most mythological systems.

It is obvious that, when a myth was intended to convey an esoteric as well as an exoteric doctrine, the former would generally be grounded on the never-ending strife of those antagonistic principles which pervade alike the material and the ideal universe, the realms of nature and the manifestations of human intelligence. Men who were sufficiently enlightened to reduce the popular belief in elementary deities into a rational system, would be forcibly struck by the antagonism between light and darkness, summer and winter, good and evil. Hence we may assume that most myths contain both physical and psychological doctrines. It may also be taken for granted that the sages and philosophers of civilized nations, that are known to have possessed a competent knowledge of astronomy, clothed the truth of that science in popular myths, and that we are consequently warranted in making use of the astronomical method for the explanation of such myths, especially for those of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Indians, and other Asiatic nations; and although we will not deny that several of the Scandinavian myths may have a remote Asiatic origin, and have been handed down to the Pontiff-chieftains by oral tradition, and may, therefore, contain astronomical truth, still we should not venture to attribute to these primitive peoples such a familiar acquaintance with the laws of nature as the astronomical explanation of their mythological system would necessarily imply.

In proceeding to offer a few brief observations on the most interesting names of Grímnis-mál, we shall, therefore, chiefly regard the myths under a physical and psychological point of view, occasionally giving some of Finn Magnussen's astronomical explanations.

Most of the Eddaic poems about gods give mythological information, often in dialogue form, and are therefore also didactic. The common element is that the god Odin is supposed to be the narrator of these poems. But the Odin we meet is strangely composite, being the highest god, the god of poetry and runes, and also a down-to-earth man of the world.

In the lay Grímnis-mál we meet the god Odin in relation to mankind. Odin is visiting his foster son, King Geirrøð, but in disguise because he wants to find out the truth of the rumor that Geirrøð is too stingy to feed his own retainers. The rumor appears to be confirmed when the king lets Odin sit without food for eight days between two hot fires. Only the king's son Agnar gives him drink from a horn. This strange situation is in reality only a framework for a long recital by Odin of mythological information on the dwellings of the gods, on Valhalla and life there, on the ash Yggdrasil, and on all his own names. At last he reveals himself as the dreadful one. In a prose postscript it is told that Geirrøð stumbled on his own sword and was followed as king by his son Agnar, who ruled the land for many years.

The poem Grimnis-mál contains some information of Old Norse cosmology. The earth on which men live was conceived of as a central enclosure, Miðgarðr, surrounded by the sea, in which is the cosmic serpent Miðgarðsormr. Within Miðgarðr is the realm of gods, Asgarðr, reached by the bridge of the rainbow, Bifröst, "Coloured Way." Utgarðr, "Outer Realm," is the home of the giants. It lies far to the east. Sometimes it is said to be in the north, which is the direction also of Hel, the world of the dead. The universe is supported by a great ash tree, Yggdrasil, the "Horse of Yggr." The axle pin on which the heavens revolve is the Pole Star. The roots of the tree Yggdrasil grow through every world of living and dead. It is watered from a sacred well at its foot, where Urðr, "Destiny," decides the fates of men. Life-giving dew falls on the earth from its branches. The tree also suffers: a winged dragon Niðhöggr, "Malicious dragon," gnaws at the roots; in the branches an eagle sits; and a squirrel runs up and down the tree stirring up strife between the eagle and the dragon.

The explanation of Yggdrasil myth has given rise to conflicting theories. According to Finn Magnussen's Mythological Lexicon, Yggdrasil is the symbol of universal nature. One of its roots springs from the subterranean source of matter, runs up through the earth, which it supports, and issuing out of the celestial mountain in the world's centre, called Asgard, Caucasus, Borz, spreads its branches over the celestial regions and over the

entire universe. The leaves of the branches are the clouds; their buds are the stars. The eagle is the symbol of the air. The squirrel signifies hailstones and snow. Another root springs in the warm south over the ethereal Urdar fountain. The third root takes its rise in the cold regions of the north, over the source of the ocean. Niðhöggr, and the other dragons that gnaw the roots of the mundane tree, are the volcanic and other torrents that are striving to destroy the earth's foundations.

The Grimnis-mál contains, among other matters, a description of twelve habitations of celestial deities. These celestial mansions are regarded by Finn Magnusen in his "Specimen Calendarii," in the third volume of the Eddalaeren as the twelve signs of the Zodiac. The deity Ullur has the celestial mansion Ydalir, corresponding to the "Sagittarius" sign of the Zodiac. Finn Magnusen thinks the name Ullur may be derived from the word ull; German Wolle; Anglo-Saxon wull; English wool.

The name of the second celestial mansion is Alfheimr. It is the dwelling place of the deity Frey, corresponding to the "Capricornus" sign of the Zodiac, in which the sun enters on December 23. The name Alfr is equivalent with Elf, English meaning: Elves of Light and Darkness. Finn Magnusen explains Frey, the name of the deity who was the symbol of the sun - to mean the "Seminator," from the Old Norse word frió; Swedish and Danish frø, meaning "seed."

The third celestial mansion is Valaskjálf. It is the dwelling place of the deity Vali, corresponding to the "Aquarius" sign of the Zodiac, in which the sun enters on January 22. The name Vala is probably derived from the word val; German Wahl, meaning "choice." The Old Norse word skjálf has the meaning "shelf." The Grímnis-mál designates Valaskjálf as the third mansion, Sökkvabekkr ("Pisces") as the fourth, in the order that Finn Magnusen has arranged them, though we doubt whether he is warranted in making Ydalir the first, and Alfheim the second mansion. The fourth, fifth, and sixth strophes of the Grímnis-mál are as follows:

4 Land er heilakt, er ek liggia sé
 ásom ok álfom naer
 en i Þrúðheimi skal Þórr vera,
 unz um riufaz regin.

5 Ýdalir heita, þar er Ullr hefir
 sér um gprva sali.
 Álfheim Frey gáfo i árdaga
 tivar at tanuféi.

6 Boer er sá inn Þriði, er blið regin
 silfri Þokþo sali;
 Válskiálf heitir, er vélti sér
 áss i árdaga.

4 The land is holy that I see before me
 near the Aesir and Elves
 but the Trudheim shall Thor remain
 until the gods perish.

5 Ydalir it is called, where Ullr has
 built him a hall.

In the beginning Alfheim was given to Frey
 when he was cutting his teeth.

6 The third habitation is that where the blithe gods
 roofed the halls with silver;

It is called Valaskjalf, which was chosen by the god
 (Ás) in the beginning (of the world).²

Several passages in the Eddas indicate that Valaskjalf is here meant for Valhalla; the god who chose it can therefore be no other than Odin. Finn Magnusen, however, assigns Valaskjalf to Odin's son Vali, we presume because Valaskjalf might be made to signify "Vali's shelf." Finn Magnusen makes Ydalir the first mansion, and Alfheim the second, though we might conjecture with the same degree of plausibility that Trudheim is designated as the first habitation, the second being either Ydalir or Alfheim, probably the former. By assigning the second mansion to Frey, Finn Magnusen makes the Sun-god correspond to winter solstice, when the sun is, as it were, annually born, and may, therefore, be represented as an infant cutting its teeth. Heimdall corresponds

to the summer solstice.

Should Finn Magnusen's interpretation be correct, Grímnis-mál may be regarded as a mythic-uranographic poem.

Hilda Radzin
St. John's University
Jamaica, New York

NOTES

¹ Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1914), p. 56. The most important manuscript of the Poetic Edda is in Codex Regius, MS. No. 2365 quarto in the Old Royal Collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, 1937).

² The translation is mine.