

NAMES IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL LAY VOLUSPÁ

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In the old Icelandic literature, there are two works which have the title of Edda, the one in verse, the other in prose. The Poetic or Elder Edda consists of thirty-nine poems, which were collected by Saemund Sigfusson, surnamed the Learned, toward the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century. Some scholars maintain that Saemund merely transcribed the Eddaic poems from Runic manuscripts. The most probable conjecture seems to be that he collected them from oral tradition.

The Eddaic poems may be classified as follows: 1) The Mythic-cosmogonic poems; 2) The Mythic-~~etic~~ologic poems; 3) The Ethic poems; 4) The Mythological poems; 5) The Mythic-heroic poems; 6) The Miscellaneous poems. All the poems have internal evidence that entitles them to the claim of a much higher antiquity than the eleventh century.

The Mythic-cosmogonic poems are the Voluspá, the Vafthrúdnismál, and the Grímnismál. The Völu, or Völo-spá - a compound word - signifying The Song of the Prophets - appears to be the oldest. It is a kind of Sybilline lay. It contains the whole system of

Scandinavian mythology - the creation, the origin of man, how evil and death were brought into the world - and concludes by a prediction of the destruction and renovation of the universe, and a description of the future abodes of bliss and misery.

The idea of creation is founded on the doctrine of an eternal supreme Essence, regulating primordial matter, and producing the mundane deities to whom this being entrusted the formation of the visible universe.

The poem Völuspá begins by a description of chaos. The matter already existed, but without order and without life. The coarser particles of matter were concentrated in the nebulous sphere, Niflheim, and the more etherealized particles in the luminous sphere Muspellheim, and the latter by working on the former produced a gigantic being, Ymir.

Ár var alda,	þat er Ymir byggði:
vara sandr né saer	né svalar unnir,
iqrð fannz aeva	né upphiminn,
gap var ginnunga,	en gras hvergi. <sup>1</sup>
.....	
Old was the age	when Ymir lived;
Sea nor sand	nor cool waves there were;
Earth had not been,	nor heaven above,
But yawning gap,	and grass nowhere.

Like the German god Twisto, the Scandinavian giant reproduced creatures from himself alone: a son and daughter were born. They were giants.

When the cold vapours had been resolved into drops, there was formed out of them the cow named Audhumla. Four streams of milk ran from her teats, and thus she fed the giant Ymir. The cow supported herself by licking the stones that were covered with salt and frost, and licked Bur into being. Bur had a son, Bör, who took for wife Besla, the daughter of the giant Bölthorn. And they had three sons, Odinn, Hoenir, and Lodurr; it is the belief that Odinn, with his brothers, rules both heaven and earth, and that Odinn is his true name, and that he is the most mighty of all the gods. Odinn and his brothers killed Ymir, and created the world from his body.

One day, as Odinn and his brothers were walking along the sea-beach, they created a man and a woman. Odinn infused into them life and spirit; the second (Hoenir) endowed them with reason and the power of motion; the third (Lodurr) gave them speech and features, hearing and vision. The man they called Askr, "Ash," and the woman Embla, "Elm." From Askr and Embla descended the whole human race.

The earth on which men live was conceived of as a central enclosure, Midgardr, surrounded by the sea, in which the cosmic serpent Midgardsormr lies.

Then Odinn and his brothers built in the middle of the Midgardr the city called Asgardr, where the gods dwell. Asgardr can be

reached by the bridge of rainbow, Bifröst, "Coloured Way." In Asgarðr is a place called Hlidskjálf, "Gate Tower," and when Óðinn is seated there on his throne he sees over the whole world, discerns all the actions of man, and comprehends whatever he contemplates. His wife is Frigga, the daughter of Fjörgyn, and they and their offspring form the race that are called Aesir, a race that dwells in Asgarðr and the regions around it. Óðinn may justly be called All-father, for he is the father of all.

The universe is supported by a great ash tree, Yggdrasill, "Horse of Yggr." The roots of the tree Yggdrasill grow through every world of living and dead. It is watered from a well, where Urðr, "Destiny," decides the fates of men. Meadlike dew falls on the earth from its branches. The tree also suffers: a dragon, Nidhöggr, "Malicious one," gnaws at the roots. In the branches an eagle sits. A squirrel runs up and down the tree stirring up strife. This world is not imagined as lasting forever. The cyclic concept of history is found in Norse mythology. There is a conflict at the end of the world, Ragnarök, "Doom of the Gods," when monsters break loose and overwhelm gods and men. The earth sinks into the sea. But a new earth rises, and the gods return to a hallowed peace.

Many passages in the Völuspá are obscure. Most scholars would probably agree that the poem was composed in Iceland. The poet's background was pagan, but his thoughts were coloured by Christian legends of the end of the world. He probably worked about A.D.1000

Finn Magnussen supposes that the gods, Odinn and his brothers, are symbolical expressions for light, air, and fire, which by operating on the matter gradually produced the visible universe, and finally by acting on vegetable substances transformed them into animated beings, Askr and Embla (Eddalaeren, vol.2, p.63). Finn Magnussen's opinion is that the cow licking the salt stones, by which a being more noble than Ymir was produced, can mean nothing else than the emerging of a portion of land from the sea; and after stating that this being was called Bur and his son Bör, Finn Magnussen states that in his opinion it was intended to signify the first mountain-chain which ~~emerged~~ from the waters in the same region where the first land made its appearance. This mountain-chain is probably the Caucasus, called by the Persians Borz (the genitive of the Old Norse form Borr).

We should be inclined to conjecture that the Scandinavians may have regarded Odinn as a real mundane deity. The problem which they had to solve was the origin of the universe.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitatsbuchhandlung, 1914), p. 1. 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, ;937).