THE RAGNARǪK MYTH IN SCANDINAVIA – FINDING, INHERITING, AND BORROWING

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Introduction

This article will discuss the notions of the end of the world associated with pre-Christian Scandinavian religion. More specifically, the focus will be on a topic that has played a huge role in the history of research of this wider subject, namely, the existence of cross-cultural borrowing and influences. In this respect, the motif of 'fire' as a means of destruction in particular will be used to explore this topic. Much of this problematic concerning so-called borrowings is connected to the nature of the sources, and it will, therefore, be necessary to present and discuss the most important sources that are used for our reconstructions of this religion[1] in general, for those that are not specialists in this field. The source situation has important consequences for any sort of reconstruction we propose about the pre-Christian world view, including ideas about the eschatology. After a presentation of the sources, I shall deal (selectively) with the history of research of the eschatology, and the ways in which some important scholars have interpreted the historical roots of the

1 Perhaps we should rather speak of *religions* in the plural, since it is acknowledged by most present-day scholars that there never was a single religious system shared by all the Germanic speaking (i.e., we are not dealing here with the Saami groups living farther north) Scandinavians in the pre-Christian era. See, for instance, DUBOIS, 1999; GUNNELL, 2000; BRINK, 2007; ANDRÉN, 2007; SCHJØDT, 2009; PRICE, 2012. This will have some consequences for the viewpoints of this article, although, for the sake of convenience, the more traditional singular form will be used.

mythological complex surrounding *Ragnarǫk*,[2] as the complex of ideas concerning the destruction of the world is often described. Then *Ragnarǫk* will be discussed with a special focus on the provenience of the various motifs, most notably fire, in order to see whether these motifs should most likely be attributed to influences or if they should rather be seen as indigenous. Basically, this particular section will be more concerned with methodological matters relating to the possibility of reconstructing mythological borrowings.

The Sources

The sources for pre-Christian Scandinavian religion or religions can basically be divided into two categories, which for the sake of simplicity we will call insider sources (created by people practicing the pre-Christian religion) and outsider sources (created by people who did *not* belong to this religion).[3] Since writing was only introduced with the coming of Christianity (tenth to twelfth centuries), we are dealing with an oral culture, where a few were able to read and write runes, but probably so few that we can in no way speak of a literate society.

We do not, therefore, have many insider sources in textual form. But there are some poems with mythological content, the so called "skaldic poems", composed by *skalds* (poets), mostly in order to honor some king or earl or chieftain, and which were transmitted orally and written down much later in sagas, as we shall see below. They were metrically so complex that most modern scholars agree that the form in which we have them in the medieval Icelandic sources most likely closely resembles the original composition. They do not contain much about the end of the world, however, and there is no reason to discuss them further at this point. Another important group of insider sources is the archaeological record, including images on stones and jewelry, from the pre-Christian era. Again, however, there is little to be learned from such material in

2 In the Norse sources, we have two designations, namely *Ragnarøkkr*, meaning *Twilight of the gods* and *Ragnarǫk*, *The fate of the gods*. Which one of the two is the *original* pagan designation has been debated, but will not be discussed in the following. For a discussion, we can refer to BERNHARÐSSON, 2007.

3 More or less detailed accounts of the nature of the sources can be found in most works dealing with Old Norse religion, or pre-Christian Scandinavian religion (the two terms being mostly used synonymously). Of particular interest are CLUNIES ROSS, 1994, pp. 20-33; CLOVER/LINDOW, 1985; BECH et al., 1992. For my own views, see SCHJØDT, 2008, pp. 85-107.

relation to ideas about the end of the world, although archaeology is extremely relevant for the reconstruction of other aspects of pre-Christian religion.

As to the outsider sources, all of which are textual, it is obvious that speaking about reliability, their value is much smaller. However, they do tell us much more than any other sources about pre-Christian religion. They can be divided into two groups, namely, on the one hand, sources written by geographical outsiders (people from outside the North), and, on the other hand, historical outsiders (people from the North, but writing long after Christianization). The first group consists mostly of Christians and, to a much lesser extent, Muslims, who in some way or another came into contact with pagan Scandinavians throughout the early Middle Ages and the Viking Age[4]. As is to be expected, these texts are for the most part rather hostile towards the Scandinavians, since the Viking raids were to a high degree seen as pagan attacks on the Christian community. The second group, the historical outsiders also consists of Christians, and by far the largest group are Icelanders from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Most accounts of pagan religion in the North are based on this group of sources. It comprises various kinds of sagas, in which many of the skaldic poems, mentioned above, are quoted, and some historical works of varying reliability. The most important work belonging to this group concerning *Ragnarǫk*, however, was written by the Icelandic chieftain and historian, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). The work is called *Edda*[5] and consists of four parts, among which the relevant part for information about Ragnarǫk is called *Gylfaginning*.[6] This is a long narrative, beginning with the creation of the world from chaos, before recounting important incidents in the mythological history of the gods, followed by a description of 'the fate of the gods' (and of humans and almost all other beings) – and the subsequent renewal, where a new world will rise from the sea, and some of the

4 The Viking Age is usually dated to c. 750-1050 followed by the Middle Ages up to c. 1500.

5 The etymology of the word *Edda* is not certain, see DE VRIES, 1962, p. 93.

6 The word means *the deceiving of Gylfi*, Gylfi being a human king who visits three beings (maybe incarnations of *Óðinn*) and asks them questions about the cosmos and cosmic history. The answers are formed in accordance with the pagan worldview (hence the name *Gylfaginning* – Gylfi is led to believe that the pagan cosmology is true, which is not so, according to the perspective of the Christian author). It should be mentioned that Snorri consistently use the form *ragnarøkkr*, whereas most of the older sources have *ragnarǫk*. Apart from these words, there are also a few others that should probably be seen as semantically synonymous, such as *aldar røk* (the fate of the world) and *aldar rof* (the destruction of the world).

old gods' sons will rule, and even some humans will have survived the destruction of the world.

Snorri quotes extensively from a series of poems that are part of a collection called the *Poetic Edda*,[7] usually divided into two groups, namely mythological poems and heroic poems. Most of them are transmitted in a manuscript known as the *Codex Regius* (stemming probably from around 1270), but since then, other poems similar in content and meter, have also been labelled "Eddic". The discussion about the value of these poems as sources for pre-Christian mythology has been immense, among other things because of uncertainty about their dating (see above note 3), and there is not even agreement about whether they were from the pre-Christian period, and thus whether they are outsider or insider sources.[8]

The sources that are traditionally used for reconstructing the pagan conception of *Ragnarǫk* are thus the following:

- The Eddic poems *Vǫluspá* (stanza 40-51)[9] and *Vafþrúðnismál* (st. 44-53) provide a lot of information, portions of which are more comprehensible than others. Other Eddic poems, such as *Lokasenna*, *Hyndluljóð*, *Grímnismál*, and a few others hint at motifs, stemming from the ideas of *Ragnarǫk*.
- In *Gylfaginning* (chapter 51-53),[10] Snorri quotes many of the relevant stanzas from *Vǫluspá*, but also adds information that we do not know from other sources.

7 The word "Edda" was first applied to Snorri's work, but when a manuscript was found later on containing some of the poems that were quoted by Snorri, they were seen as being much older. Therefore, Snorri's *Edda* is sometimes called *The Younger Edda* and the poetic compilation *The Elder Edda*. Thus, the individual poems are called "Eddic poems".

8 In dealing with *Ragnarǫk*, the most important poem is definitely *Vǫluspá*. Most scholars have traditionally seen it as dating to the time of the conversion to Christianity, but this dating is far from certain. Recently, it has been argued convincingly that we should much rather see it as a poem that, in accordance with what we know about oral poetry, was transmitted and transformed for centuries prior to the written version in the *Codex Regius* (and other versions), to which we have access in the twenty-first century (cf. SIGURÐSSON, 2013).

9 The edition of the Eddic poems used here is NECKEL, 1962. *Vǫluspá* (*The Seeress's Prophecy*), no doubt is the most famous of the Eddic poems (and the most important in relation to the discussion about *Ragnarǫk*), and there has been a huge discussion of its value as a source for pagan religion. For a recent compilation of different views, see TERRY GUNNELL/LASSEN, 2013.

10 The edition of *Gylfaginning* used here is FAULKES, 2005.

- Also a few skaldic poems have minor hints to the incidents that will take place in the end of times.

There is no reason here to go through all the motifs involved, but it will be useful to mention the main aspects of the myth as it is related in the *Gylfaginning* and *Vǫluspá*. This is not to say that these two sources are seen as the most reliable in relation to any pre-Christian worldview, but they are certainly the most extensive, and have played the most crucial role in the history of research, to which we shall return below.

According to Snorri, there are some portents prior to the final destruction. These are natural phenomena, such as coldness, in that there will be three winters without summer in between; this is most likely connected to the fact that the sun and the moon will be swallowed by two wolves. Before that, it is said that there will be three other winters during which wars will be universal, and not just ordinary wars, but conflicts involving brothers who fight against each other, and, although more explicitly stated in *Vǫluspá*, there will be a general breakdown of the moral rules. We also read that the stars will disappear from the sky, and that earthquakes and floods will take place. The battle between the gods and the giants is initiated by the ship Naglfar (which belongs to the giants and is built by the uncut nails of dead men) getting loose, steered by the giant, Loki, who has been bound during the mythic present, but breaks loose in connection with the approaching of *Ragnarǫk*. Furthermore, two monsters, both with their own mythic history, become involved: the World Serpent or Miðgarðsormr (a snake lying all around the inhabited world) and the Fenrisúlfr (the wolf Fenrir, who is so big that his upper jaw touches the sky and the lower jaw the earth). Then some giants, called the sons of Muspell, whom we do not know from other myths, will ride forward led by a fire giant called Surtr. On their way to the battlefield they cross the rainbow bridge, Bifrǫst, which will break a thunder. At that time the guardsman of the gods, Heimdallr, will blow his horn (the Gjallarhorn), and the leader of the gods, Óðinn, will take advice from the wise Mímir. The world tree, Yggdrasill, shudders, and none and nothing is without fear. Then the battles between the individual gods and their opponents follow, in which Óðinn is killed by Fenrir, and is immediately revenged by his son, who kills the wolf, and Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr will kill each other. Other individual clashes are mentioned and, finally, everybody dies. Snorri ends his description by recounting that Surtr will throw fire over the whole world and everything will burn.

Not all of these motifs can be found in *Vǫluspá*, which is rather allusive in its style, but it is not in direct opposition to Snorri's narrative, and it adds a couple of important incidents, namely that, as a kind of warning three roosters will crow, one among the gods, one among the giants, and one in the under-world, and that the earth will sink into the sea, but at the same time fire is all around. The focus here is on the motifs in the sources that have immediate significance for the discussion concerning loans and the transfer of motifs. Thus, there is no reason to be exhaustive here by treating all of the individual pieces of information in the various sources. However, it is worth briefly mentioning a conspicuous piece of information in the poem *Vafþrúðnismál*. In this text it seems that the coldness of *Fimbulvetr* (the mighty winter) is the most important motif in the destruction, connected with the swallowing of the sun, although "Surtr's fire" is also mentioned. As we shall see below, this fact has caused some scholars to believe that coldness and not fire was the direct cause of the final destruction of the earth.

After the destruction, however, we learn from *Gylfaginning*, as well as from *Vǫluspá*, and also indirectly in *Vafþrúðnismál*, that a new world will arise from the sea. Again, *Gylfaginning* is the most informative source in this respect. Snorri tells us that there will be various abodes in which people will live according to their moral standards.[11] Thus, the good will live in a place called Gimlé and another one called Sindri, whereas the *bad guys* will stay in a hall, placed at Nástrǫnd (corpse shore). Here, Snorri quotes a stanza from *Vǫluspá*, although in the poem it is placed before the *Ragnarǫk*-sequence, and apparently has nothing to do with the 'new world'. Snorri then tells us, with reference to *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza 51 and other stanzas, that some of the old gods' sons and a few others, among them Baldr, the innocent god, who was killed because of Loki's trickery (which is why Loki was fettered) will be there. Also a human couple, Líf and Lífþrasir, will survive in a certain forest (*Hoddmímis holt*) and eventually populate the earth anew, and finally we are told that a new sun will be born. *Vǫluspá* (stanza 65) then adds that, after the new world has risen from the sea, a powerful being will come from above,[12]

11 Who these people are, we are not told. Thus, we cannot say whether they are the 'survivors' of *Ragnarǫk* or if they are some new generations of humans.

12 It is worth noting that this stanza cannot be found in the *Codex Regius* version, but only in the later version, transmitted in a long manuscript, called *Hauksbók*. Even so, it is included in the main text of most editions of the poem.

which is also partly supported by another Eddic poem, *Hyndluljóð* (st. 43f.). Whether this motif is pagan or Christian will be briefly discussed below.

We could add more details in this summary, but those mentioned will be enough for the points to be discussed below. From this, the following list of the main motifs in an attempted diachronic order can be made, taking all the sources into consideration:

1) Moral decline.
2) A mighty winter, probably related to the disappearance (swallowing by a wolf) of the sun.
3) Natural disasters (earthquakes and flooding).
4) The crowing of the roosters.
5) The arrival of the enemies (monsters and giants).
6) Heimdallr blowing his horn.
7) The battle between gods and their antagonists.
8) Destruction by fire.
9) The earth sinking into the sea
10) The new world rising from the sea.
11) The survival of a human couple
12) The different abodes of human beings.
13) The return of the old gods' sons.
14) A 'mighty one' coming from above.

Some Important Points of View[13]

Most scholars have been convinced that this collection of motifs should not be seen as 'original' among the Scandinavians, and so some of the key words in dealing with *Ragnarǫk* have been influences or loans or borrowings from other religions, most notably from Christianity, but also from other religious and mythological traditions.[14] So by far the most often dealt with problem in the

13 Since the main purpose of this article is about influences, heritage, and borrowings, it will not be attempted to go through all books and articles on the subject of *Ragnarǫk*. Instead, I shall stick to some important viewpoints, taking the perspective of influences and the attempts at reconstructing some of the 'original' pagan *Ragnarǫk* myth(s).

14 An exception here is a work by STANLEY MARTIN, 1972. Stanley Martin attempts to argue that the *Ragnarǫk* tradition, with a few exceptions, was genuinely pagan (p. 48) and had its roots in some cyclical rituals from pre-Christian times. The

scholarship concerning Ragnarǫk has been the historical roots of the different motifs, and whether in the pre-Christian period there already was some kind of coherent eschatological myth in Scandinavia.

If not the first, then the most systematic analysis of *Ragnarǫk* was carried out by the Danish folklorist Axel Olrik, who in two books from 1902 and 1914 respectively (translated into German in 1922: *Ragnarök – Die Sagen vom Weltuntergang*), attempted to trace the individual motifs.

After having analyzed the various associated sources, Olrik, in his conclusion, divides the motifs into three groups:

1. those of pagan provenance (noting in parentheses where from they ultimately stem),
2. those of Christian provenience, but already known in the Viking Age.
3. those of Christian provenience, known only from *Vǫluspá* (and Snorri, building on this poem).[15]

According to Olrik, the following motifs belong to the first group:

- The sun is swallowed by a sun wolf (general)
- The mighty winter (Persian)
- The earth sinks into the sea (Celtic)
- The Fenris wolf (general, from the East in particular)
- The snake in the deep (general, from the East in particular)
- The battle of the gods with the death of the king god and his subsequent avenging (Celtic)
- Surtr's fire (Celtic)
- The new generation of gods (Celtic)
- The humans surviving the winter (Persian)

To the second group belong the following motifs:

- The breaking loose of Loki
- The people of Muspell
- The return of Baldr

theory has not been very influential, but should, nevertheless, be taken into consideration.

15 OLRIK, 1902, pp. 289f.

The third group has the following motifs:

- The moral decline of the human race
- The blowing in the Gjalarhorn by Heimdallr
- The darkening of the sun and the disappearance of the stars
- The world fire
- The abodes of the 'good'
- The coming of the 'mighty one'

This line of reasoning which aims at tracing the individual motifs has had a deep impact on most of the research that has been done on *Ragnarǫk*; for instance, the Swedish historian of religion, Anders Hultgård, wrote in an article from 1990:

> The main religio-historical question of whether the pre-Christian Scandinavians possessed a coherent eschatological tradition is difficult to answer solely by referring to medieval Christian doctrine. Descriptions of the whole eschatological process are less prominent in the vernacular religious texts than might be expected with regard to the assumption of a Christian impetus behind the growth of a coherent Ragnarǫk tradition. On the other hand, comparative data from Iranian and Indian religions suggest the existence of an eschatological tradition also among the ancient Germanic peoples, which has been lost but is echoed in the early medieval Ragnarǫk tradition.[16]

We notice here that Hultgård introduces the issue of coherence. We shall, however, return to that below, concentrating here on the question of influences. Much later, in a forthcoming book chapter, Hultgård has explicitly divided the scholars' perspectives into three groups, 1) A composite group of diverse origins, 2) The Indo-European approach, and 3) A myth under Christian influence (being the most popular in more recent times).[17]

Although Olrik's division is about the origin of the various motifs, and Hultgård's is an attempt to classify scholarly approaches, the threefold division of both authors seems to be related from a classificatory perspective. Hultgård's composite group of scholars would then view most motifs as belonging to Olrik's second group of motifs (Christian motifs, but well known in the Viking Age), whereas his second group (the Indo-European approach)

16 HULTGÅRD, 1990, pp. 355f.
17 HULTGÅRD, 2019.

would view most motifs as belonging to Olrik's first group (the pagan motifs), and Hultgård's third group would relate to Olrik's third group; most motifs would be seen as due to Christian influence.

In the following I am not going to argue against these view-points of Olrik and Hultgård (and many others) as such – quite on the contrary I believe that influences from all these areas have to be taken into consideration in tracing the various motifs, although of course, the details in Olrik's division could well be discussed. But as Hultgård states, "the problem of foreign influences appears rather complicated"[18] – and maybe it is not only a matter of the complications involved in tracing these influences from the three areas, he mentions, but just as much what we actually mean by "foreign influences". In a recent anthology on *The Seeress's Prophecy*, *The Nordic Apocalypse* from 2013, we meet in many of the articles similar ideas regarding influences. The focus here, however, is mainly on *Vǫluspá*, which is compared to mainly Christian notions and parallels from the *Sibylline Oracles*. So, the problem here is somewhat different from the typical history of religion perspective, since it is focussed on a single source, the dating of which is quite complicated, but traditionally believed to be around the year AD 1000, the year when the Icelanders decided to become Christians. But still, since *Vǫluspá* is one of our main sources, it does have serious consequences if this poem cannot be taken into consideration when attempting to reconstruct the pagan mythology, not least in relation to the role played by fire in *Ragnarǫk*.

However, foreign influences are identifiable in all religions as far back as they can be traced. Except perhaps for some small hunter-gatherer cultures a very long time ago, all cultures have communicated with other cultures, and communication will also inevitably mean influences, i.e., transfer of cultural traits. In the North, therefore, we know for certain from archaeological evidence that, ever since the Bronze Age, a rather extensive system of interrelations and communication between Scandinavia and other parts of Europe was in operation, based mainly on trading.[19] But that would certainly also involve, at least a possibility of, the exchange of ideas, including those of a religious character. Thus, without denying the value of the notion of influences, it probably should involve further theoretical considerations than is usually done. We shall come back to that later.

18 HULTGÅRD, 1990, p. 354.
19 E.g., KAUL, 2004.

If we return briefly to Olrik, we notice that basically there were two ways from which the motifs within the *Ragnarǫk* myth could be explained: either as common and general observations of nature, or as influences from somewhere else. And if some motif was not part of the natural surroundings in a certain culture, we should probably see it as a borrowing from outside. Although I have no doubt that both these issues, natural phenomena and borrowings, are important for much mythic thinking, this view should, nevertheless, be challenged, for which we shall use the example of fire.

Fire as Part of the Ragnarǫk Tradition

Now, turning to fire as a means of destruction, Olrik saw it as a borrowing from Christianity, because in the Mediterranean area observations of nature would naturally induce an idea of heat and fire as a destructive factor, whereas in the North this would not be 'natural'.[20] However, Olrik acknowledged the part played by Surtr, a fire giant (*Vǫluspá* 52, *Vafþrúðnismál* 50), but argues that it is only in *the Seeress's Prophecy* (and by Snorri, of course) that Surtr will destroy the world by fire, whereas in *Vafþrúðnismál*, he is only said to have burned the abodes of the gods, as was customary in war and conflicts in the Viking Age.

Therefore, it was also Olrik's theory that the main factor in the North would be coldness, which would be in accordance with the natural surroundings. This would make it reasonable that a human couple, Líf and Lífþrasir, could survive in a forest, creating some kind of shelter, whereas it would not have any protective function if the world was burning. This latter point no doubt is true, but it is doubtful whether such a kind of logic is applicable to mythic thinking. In the world of mythology anything can happen, so why not also this kind of rescue from a fire?

Anyway, if we look at all the motifs in the sources, we will see that there are apparently three direct actions at work in the final destruction, namely, coldness (as seems to be the case in *Vafþrúðnismál*), the sinking of the earth into the sea, and fire. Which one is the 'original'? And do we have to choose?

These three ideas are not presented in the same sources, except for Snorri who mentions the *Fimbulvetr* as a kind of prelude to *Ragnarok* itself; fire is

20 Olrik, 1914, pp. 195-198.

only presented as the direct cause in *Vǫluspá* and by Snorri, building on this poem. Since both these sources are late (Snorri for sure, and *Vǫluspá* probably, at least in regard to some stanzas, whereas some may go back to a pagan oral tradition), it seems immediately that there is a good reason to accept that some kind of Christian influence was at work. Whereas the destruction by coldness is mostly on its own – and as just stated it is mentioned by Snorri as one of the events prefiguring the final destruction – the combination of a destruction by fire *and* water is found at many places outside the North.[21] The very idea of the world being flooded and/or sinking into the sea, is certainly on par with the natural surroundings of much of the North, particularly Denmark and the Frisian coasts – whereas the idea is not as 'natural' farther north in Scandinavia, in Norway and Sweden. But what about fire? If we accept the premise that ideas of the world's destruction are either based in the observation of nature, or are brought in from somewhere else, where such observations are possible, the destruction by fire must be influenced from outside the North, in particular from Christianity.[22] However this premise may not hold true.

The very phenomenon of fire is of course known by all early cultures and certainly not only from natural fires caused by heat and by lightning strikes. In order to find the natural causes for the fear of fire as a means of destruction, we may just as well think of the volcanoes, which in the North, however, are known only in Iceland, but not in mainland Scandinavia. But the sources, as was stated, actually are, for the most part, from Iceland, and it is not hard to imagine the impression that volcanic eruptions must have left on the Icelanders in the period in which many of the sources were written down, and earlier, of course. This experience, therefore, would probably be just as forceful as any imported ideas from areas where the climate was much warmer.

But, as is also mentioned by Olrik, the idea of fire as a basic means of destruction in war could be much more decisive.[23] Thus, we know from the

21 OLRIK, 1914, pp. 210-219 and 259f.

22 IBID., p. 258. Although Olrik is not to be seen as a 'nature mythologist' in the tradition of Friedrich Max Müller, it seems that some sort of 'nature mythology' is important for his theoretical approach in general (not only concerning *Ragnarǫk*). It is worth noticing, however, that Olrik clearly prefers the idea of loans and borrowings. According to him, the world fire originated in India, from where it was borrowed by the Greeks, the Persians, and even Jews and Christians (p. 219). So even if such cultures could have developed the idea of a world fire according to their natural surroundings, Olrik argues for the spread of the idea from a certain center (India), and thus clearly accepts a diffusionist framework.

23 IBID., 1914, p. 198.

Viking Age and earlier that battles between chieftains and petty kings would often involve the burning of the halls of the opponents. A large number of sagas mention how this or that chieftain burns in another chieftain and his whole retinue, which is the ultimate destruction of that chieftain, perhaps also in a symbolic way.[24] And these sort of destructive fires in war situations were of course known from many places all over the world.

What I aim at here is simply to state that the means of fire for destruction cannot depend, at least not solely, on influences. Societies in which people live in wooden houses will by necessity have experienced the devastating consequences of fire, whether this comes from lightning, volcanoes or human agency. This means that the argument that fire as a means of destruction is not something that is 'natural' for Scandinavians is simply not true; when fire is able to destroy a farm, a village or a whole town, the idea that the end of the world will be due to fire seems quite 'natural'. This does not mean, of course, that influences from Christianity, or even Iranian mythology, cannot be involved. As mentioned, this is quite likely, but it would, in my opinion, be very naïve to argue that influences would be the only source for such a mythic idea as fire.

From Where Do the Eschatological Ideas Stem?

So, where do the eschatological ideas stem from? According to what was just said about fire (and many of the other motifs enumerated above could be analyzed in much the same way), the question is probably not the right one to ask, at least not without some degree of qualification. The comparison of motifs from two (or several) religions or mythologies will inevitably bring forward both similarities and differences. And, in order to argue for influences from culture A to culture B, two prerequisites are necessary: 1) the similarities have to be of a certain kind and sufficiently detailed, so that we can rule out independent configurations based on similar experiences from similar natural, economic, ecological, social, etc. structures.[25] And 2) further, of course, we must be able to argue for the possibility of some kind of historical connections. This second prerequisite, as was also argued by Hultgård, is certainly at hand: Christianity, Judaism, Persian religion, and many other religions influenced

24 SUNDQVIST, 2016, pp. 307-311.

25 This problem has been discussed in much greater detail in SCHJØDT, 2017.

each other mutually in the Levant, and also some mythic elements from a common Indo-European heritage must be taken into consideration, so that borrowing as well as heritage would be quite possible, and have no doubt taken place. However, the first prerequisite – the ruling out of independent developments and origins – seems to be somewhat harder to argue, when it comes to the *Ragnarǫk* myth. In the mythic language, we hear several times of "Surtr's flame", meaning fire, but we do not get any details except that it seems to be a metaphor for the destruction, but, as mentioned, it appears to be much more connected to the battle between gods and giants than to natural phenomena. So, if we go through the sources – perhaps excepting Snorri, but including *Vǫluspá* – our impression is rather that the role played by fire in war and battle is the real origin of the motif – and not natural fire, caused by either lightning or volcanoes.

Anyway, there is no doubt that fire does play an important role in the sources that we have for pre-Christian Scandinavian eschatology, but we do not hear that it will fall from the sky, and – again with the Christian Snorri as the exception – that it will burn the whole world, as should be expected, if there were any influences from the *Book of Revelation*, or some other eschatological tradition from the eastern Mediterranean. So, according to what was just said about similarities and differences, it appears that the similarities are quite modest and do not involve more complex structures. They could, therefore, easily be seen as common ideas held by all cultures that have experienced the destructive power of fire. The differences are much more conspicuous: Whereas the Mediterranean ideas are mostly based on heavenly fire, and thus more or less inspired by natural phenomena, the Nordic ideas seem to be much more based on war experiences, and thus social phenomena. Again, that does not rule out that at some time during the Middle Ages ideas about the pagan *Ragnarǫk* became influenced by Christian notions, mainly from the *Book of Revelation*, as seems to be the case with Snorri. But there is nothing to suggest that the ideas of a destructive fire, playing an important role in *Ragnarǫk* are influenced from anywhere, but rather that they are originated simply in the experiences of war between two armies ending up with the burning down of fortresses or towns: the destruction of the social world seems to be the model for the destruction of the cosmic world. From a methodological perspective, there is no doubt, in my opinion, that many more details would be needed in order to argue otherwise.

These considerations can lead to another related question: Did pagan Scandinavians have a coherent narrative about the end of the world, before there were any influences from Christianity? This was addressed by Hultgård as we saw above, and in the forthcoming book chapter mentioned earlier, he concludes with regards to Ragnarǫk that there most likely existed such a coherent version, ultimately derived from Indo-European, Persian in particular, myths. Accordingly, it should not be seen as neither Christian inspired nor as a composite myth, and therefore, many of the motifs, enumerated by Olrik, in his second and third group, should rather be seen as pagan. The myth as we have it will rather likely, according to Hultgård, go back to an Indo-European heritage and has, therefore, been transmitted orally through millennia.

The main problem here seems to be the notion of coherence. Hultgård, in the quote above, is very reluctant, when it comes to the significance of a Christian impetus "behind the growth of a coherent Ragnarǫk tradition". But the question is whether there ever was such a coherent *Ragnarǫk* tradition, whether or not influenced by borrowings from Christian tradition. It is true that the story line we read in *Gylfaginning*, summarized above, appears rather coherent, but whether or not we can render probable that some of the motifs have direct parallels within the Christian framework, it is not very likely that Snorri, writing in the thirteenth century, more than two hundred years after the official conversion to Christianity, could avoid using his knowledge about these ideas. The point here is that, although we can probably never *prove* that this or that motif is either Christian or pagan, it is likely, beforehand, that Christian motifs did play a part in a thirteenth century rendering of the myth.

This, however, is not to say that there was no eschatological myth in the pre-Christian religion, but as just mentioned, the question is whether it was coherent, and basically what is meant by the term "coherent". As mentioned above in note 1, it is not very likely that the Scandinavians in the pagan period had a common mythology in the sense that everybody in this vast area of Germanic speaking Scandinavia recounted the individual myths in more or less exactly the same way. By analogy, we must assume that myths were transformed over time and from one geographical area to another, which does not mean, however, that there were no common ideas in operation.[26] But it means that we will look in vain for some 'original' myth, not least since we do not

26 I have used the notion "discourse" to designate some overarching frameworks, outside which it was not possible to speak about gods and other mythic phenomena, see SCHJØDT, 2013.

even have clear ideas of what "original" means: Is the original *Ragnarǫk* myth the story, as rendered by Snorri, when it was told for the first time, or do we allow for some minor differences – something added or something omitted? Or is it when a Christian told or read the narrative that is unfolded in the *Book of Revelation* or when an old sage or chieftain somewhere in the deeper human past told a story in which the main gods were not Óðinn and Þórr, but gods with very different names and probably different characteristics? So, the question as what was the original version does not really make sense at all, if we do not qualify it.

Although Olrik, and to a certain extent also Hultgård were aiming at reconstructing the pagan myth of *Ragnarǫk* by subtracting those traits which were not considered as 'original', this seems to be an impossible enterprise for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is in general very difficult, and maybe impossible, to decide whether a certain motif, unless it is rather complex in its structure, should be seen as having been borrowed, or whether it could be what Olrik termed "general"; secondly, the very notion of "original" is so floating that it should probably be avoided: We can be certain that the religion in Scandinavia in the ninth century was not exactly the same as in the seventh century, although, of course, there was also most likely much continuity. So again: Is the original pagan myth the one told in the seventh or the ninth century? Under such conditions, it will be hard to speak of a coherent myth: on the one hand, it is easy to imagine some story line being relatively stable with various motifs constituting a kind of prelude to the cataclysm, then the destruction of nature and the fight between cosmic and chaotic forces, followed by the arising of a new world. But, on the other hand, we should hardly expect that, for instance, fire and water would have played the same role in all versions or that the individual motifs would be identical all over the Scandinavian area. The use of these elements would partly be dependent on the natural surroundings which differed significantly from one area to the next in Scandinavia and Iceland, and partly on tradition and influences from outside, which no doubt also differed, the South being more exposed to such influences than the far North.

This is more in accordance with the idea of a composite myth, some elements going far back to a common Indo-European past, and some being influenced by medieval Christian ideas, which are in turn borrowed from somewhere else also. Also observations of nature, however, might have played

an important role (for instance the volcanic eruption AD 536/7);[27] and finally also developments within the social world might be reflected somewhat in the myths. In general, therefore, I would suggest that whether or not there was a coherent eschatological myth long before any influences from Christianity, and which motifs were part of it, we will never know for certain. What we *could* know for certain, however, is that myths in oral societies change from time to time and from one area to the next, and often probably from one person to the next, depending on social position, and so on. This changing nature of oral narratives is a fact that was established more than fifty years ago by, among others, Parry and Lord.[28] This does not mean that the existence of a coherent storyline in a pre-Christian oral myth can be ruled out completely, but at least we should ask whether, or perhaps rather in which way, such myths are ever coherent. We cannot give an answer to that question here, but basically it can be suggested that the coherence of myths in oral cultures is different from those that are put in writing.

When we look at the *Ragnarǫk* myth in Snorri's *Edda*, we notice that he attempts to put all the various motifs into one coherent narrative. *Vǫluspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, on the other hand, differ on important points, probably exactly because they were transmitted orally through centuries, whereas Snorri's *Edda* was created as a written piece of art and strongly influenced by medieval European traditions and ideals, at least when it comes to form. My suggestion, therefore, that I will never be able to prove, of course, is that there never existed a pure and coherent Nordic myth in pre-Christian times, because, as mentioned, myths are always influenced from somewhere, and they are seldom coherent compared to modern standards of narrative coherence. Rather, I am clearly in favor of what by Hultgård was called the "composite theory", because in a sense all myths are composite products. That is the case for the Christian, for the Persian, and the Nordic/Germanic cases alike: The myths in these cultures are due partly to indigenous creativity, among other things inspired by the natural surroundings, and partly to influences from cultures that were once foreign, but could later on become assimilated.

27 This has been forcefully argued by GRÄSLUND/PRICE, 2012.
28 See for instance LORD, 1960.

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