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Ragnarök Meets Revelations – the Traces of Christian Influence in the Old Norse Poem *Völuspá* (*The Seeress' Prophecy*)

The history of the Scandinavian people coming into contact and eventually converting to Christianity constitutes a notable exception in comparison to other national conversions in Europe. Although it was not until the last four decades of the tenth century that Scandinavian countries officially became Christian,[1] the Scandinavians had already learned much about Christianity as they travelled, traded and raided all over Europe. From the 820s, when the first missionaries were allowed to preach gospel to the Danes,[2] until the year 1000 (or 999),[3] when the Icelandic Althingi established Christianity as the national religion on the island, there was nearly two hundred year period of Norse heathenism coexisting more or less peacefully with Christianity, which gave Christian beliefs an unprecedented chance to permeate the native religion. *Völuspá* (*The Seeress' Prophecy*), the opening poem of the *Poetic Edda*, might be considered an excellent case in point. While it is an essentially heathen poem dealing with key issues of Norse mythology, it nevertheless displays traces of considerable influence of Christian theology and

[1] B. Sawyer, P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800–1500*, Minneapolis 1993, p. 101.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 100.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 103.

moral teaching. It follows, then, that to enable a fuller reading of the poem one needs to be able to recognise those influences and trace down their possible sources.

Völuspá is primarily known from the Codex Regius manuscript of *Edda Saemundar*, or the *Poetic Edda*, which is assumed to have been written in the second half of the 13th c.[4] (perhaps some time around 1270[5]). The 13th century in Iceland was an age of anxiety, political strife and encroaching Norwegian domination, the latter completed by the subjugation of Iceland to Norway in 1262. The loss of political independence triggered an increased interest in the past, which resulted in a bloom of historical writings and saga literature, and which might also have stimulated the interest in the pagan beliefs of old. This "positive interest in the pagan gods"[6] that had been part of the Icelandic culture made it possible for the Eddic lays to be passed down orally for almost three centuries. Committed to memory in long passages, the poetry would have been less susceptible to alterations than the prose. Indeed, twenty-eight stanzas of *Völuspá* along with the passages from other Eddic poems are found interspersed throughout *Gylfagynning* (*The Deluding of Gylfi*), the introductory part of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, dated at 1220–30.[7] Another extant version of the *Völuspá*, one crucial for judging the extent of the Christian influence over it, is contained in *Hauksbók*, one of the few medieval manuscripts with a known author, Haukr Erlendsson, who was helped by two other scribes.[8] It is dated from around 1330 to mid-fourteenth century[9] and it varies substantially from the *Codex Regius* version in that it omits or substitutes certain stanzas or lines. It also includes an additional half-stanza inserted between the penultimate and the final stanza, displaying

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[4] P. Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry. Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse*, trans. P. Schach, S. Lindgrenson, Lincoln 1975, p. 45.

[5] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II: *Mythological Poems*, ed. U. Dronke, Oxford 1997, p. 22.

[6] B. Sawyer, P. Sawyer, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

[7] S. Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, New York 1957, p. 15.

[8] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[9] *Ibidem*.

such distinct Christian overtones as to be regarded by some as "a later interpolation of purely Christian origin".[10]

While nothing certain is known about the poem's time and place of origin, there are details in *Völuspá* that might be helpful in an attempt at establishing these facts. The semantic shift of certain words, certain misunderstood kennings and the possible echoes of *Völuspá* in works whose time of composition is known suggest that the poem most probably originated at some point between mid-tenth[11] and mid-eleventh century.[12] Iceland seems the most plausible birthplace of the poem or of its author. It was there that Christianity peacefully coexisted with heathenism for a century and a half, and even after it became an official state religion, instead of being eradicated heathen practices were still allowed, although in privacy, as evidenced in Ari Thorgilsson's *Book of the Icelanders*. It is therefore not unlikely that the *Völuspá* poet could have had plenty of opportunities to learn about the Christian doctrine. It has been even suggested that the author of *Völuspá* could have been inspired by attending an Easter mass, where he or she could have listened to passages from Genesis and Revelation.[13] Finally, the very imagery of the poem seems to invoke the Icelandic landscape – the völva narrates the birth of the world when "there was no sand nor sea nor cool waves […] / chaos yawned, grass was there nowhere."[14]

The description brings to mind the bare, windswept expanses of the south coast of Iceland with their black volcanic sands.[15] The phrase "sunshine becomes black the next summer"[16] might also have been inspired by vapours and dust obscuring the sun after a volcanic explosion.[17] Iceland was the only place in the Norse-speaking world where such phenomena could be observed.

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[10] P. Hallberg, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[11] Larrington, 3.

[12] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 60.

[13] J. McKinnell, *Völuspá and the Feast of Easter*, "Alvíssmál" 2008, H. 12, p. 3–28.

[14] Trans. C. Larrington, stanza 3.

[15] P. Hallberg, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[16] Trans. C. Larrington, stanza 41.

[17] P. Hallberg, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

In mythologies across the world it is from the void that the universe emerges. Indeed, the sybilline vision of the völva starts not with the forebodings about the future but with the narration of the past. From the primordial "gap […] of gaping voids"[18] which nourished Ymir, the earth is lifted up by Burr's sons, Odin, Vili and Ve, the "rulers of heaven and earth",[19] who then proceed to create Miðgarðr, the dwelling-place of the humans. The earth flourishes as the sun and the moon come into being; the gods name them and assign them their time of activity in order to "count in years",[20] thus creating time.[21] What follows is a golden age, when both gold and joy are abundant, and so the divine history begins.

It is worth noticing that the account of the creation of the world in *Völuspá* varies significantly from those found in other Eddic poems. For example, *Vafðruðnismal (Vafthrudnir's Sayings)* has it that

> From Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,
> and the mountains from his bones;
> the sky from the skull of the frost-cold giant,
> and the sea from his blood.[22]

The account of *Prose Edda* upholds that description and provides additional details of how Odin and his brothers (all descended from Ymir and the giants) "took Ymir and […] moved him into the middle of Ginnungagap and made from him the world".[23] The creation of the universe as described in *Prose Edda* (*Snorra Edda Sturlusonar*) is a much more complex and elaborate process (or a series of processes, to be more precise) governed by its own logic rather than by a single commanding will. In this respect it is not quite unlike the vision of the world's creation as narrated in Genesis. In fact, the gods arbitrarily dividing night from day and giving them names in stanza 6 might be an echo of Genesis 1,5:

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[18] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 3.

[19] S. Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. J.L. Byock, London 2005, p. 15.

[20] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 6.

[21] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[22] *Vafðruðnismal*, trans. C. Larrington, stanza 21.

[23] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

"He [God] called the light day, and the darkness night. So evening came, and morning came, the first day".[24]

Both *Prose Edda* and *Vafðruðnismal* present a slightly different view on matters of astronomy: the sun, the moon, the night and the day are all endowed with distinct genealogies, and although they are said to have been created by the "sacrosanct gods",[25] they still have a degree of autonomy in their comings and goings.

When it comes to the first people, the *Völuspá* poet also deviates seriously from the earlier Norse myths. In those, the human race was descended either from the first couple that emerged from under Ymir's arms (see *Vafðruðnismal*) or, as the *Rigsðula* poet would have us believe, from Heimdall and the three mortal women of three consecutive generations with whom he slept. In *Völuspá,* however, the first man and woman are sculpted from two pieces of driftwood which the gods endow with life and human qualities. The initials of their names, Askr (Ash Tree) and Embla (Elm or Vine[26]) coincide with Adam and Eve's, which was perhaps more than a coincidence.[27] Because of the material they were carved out of, the first people bring to mind another ash tree that was of pivotal importance to the Norse mythical universe – Yggdrasil, the axis of the nine worlds, on which Odin hung for nine nights in exchange for wisdom.[28] Also, it is on a piece of wood, "the material of man himself",[29] that Askr and Embla's fate is determined by the Norns. One can only be reminded of the biblical couple, whose fate was also shaped by a tree, a tree that was as central to the Garden of Eden as Yggdrasil to the Norse universe.

As the history of the world progresses, the possible Christian influence on *Völuspá* increases. The Æsir's merry game of *tafl* ends with the arrival of three giantesses; they then wage a war against the Vanir,

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[24] The New English Bible, Oxford 1975.

[25] Trans. C. Larrington, stanza 6.

[26] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[27] P. Hallberg, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[28] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 40.

another divine race of practitioners of magic who know the secrets of resurrection.[30] That war, "the first in the world",[31] starts only because the Æsir were loath to share their power, which might be regarded as a sign of avarice.[32] Given the Vanir's regenerating powers, a continuation of warfare is pointless and so peace is promptly made between the warring races. The poem then hints at the story (most of which is left out) of how the Æsir hired a giant to fix Asgard's defence wall and how they broke their promise of safe passage when Thor murdered him. In doing so (i.e. breaking an oath and murdering a guest), the gods committed two most grievous offences of the Norse moral code. The theme of the fall from innocence and the end of a golden age is parallel with the biblical fall of man and could be a Christian influence on the poem.[33]

The sense of guilt that makes Odin undertake his never-ending quest for knowledge of how the gods can make amends and repent (about which the völva keeps taunting him throughout the poem: "Do you understand yet, or what more?") may be linked to the Christian notion of guilt.[34] The same may also be said of the fate of Baldr, as the mode of his death resembles an Odinic sacrifice.[35] As we learn from *Baldrs Draumar* (*Baldr's Dreams*), Odin consciously allowed his son's death[36] to happen as he hoped it would serve as a token of expiation for the gods' wrongdoings to enable the rebirth of the world after Ragnarök.[37] Nevertheless, this heathen-oriented reading can be replaced by a more Christian interpretation: Baldr, "the bloodstained sacrifice"[38] is in many respects parallel to Christ, and Loki, who indirectly but intentionally causes his death and

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[30] *Ibidem*, p. 43.

[31] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 21.

[32] U. Dronke, *The War of the Æsir and Vanir in Völuspá*, [in:] *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See*, ed. G.W. Weber, Odense 1988, p. 227.

[33] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many. Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, Rome 1994, p. 123.

[34] U. Dronke, *The War…*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 231.

[36] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

[38] Trans. U. Dronke.

then refuses to weep him out of the underworld,[39] is thought to be assigned the role of Judas.[40] There is no telling which of the two interpretations the poet could have had in mind.

Irrespective of the interpretation of Baldr's death, Ragnarök is coming and the impact it would have on the inhabitants of the earth would vary from race to race. The golden hall of Sindri the dwarf and the beer hall of Brimir the giant and their inhabitants remain unharmed as sites of mirth; the third hall, however, thatched with poisonous snakes dripping venom, is a place where human wrongdoers – specifically, those guilty of murder, perjury and adultery – are "wading in turbid streams".[41] The serpent-thatched hall seems to echo Loki's punishment as described in *Snorra Edda*, yet the theme of water (whether still or running) as a means of tormenting and the types of transgressions punished evoke Rev 21,8:[42] "But as for the […] faithless, and the vile, murderers, fornicators […] and liars of every kind, their lot will be the second death, in the lake that burns with sulphurous flames".[43] Although the punishment of the wicked is a Christian notion, in Christian tradition the punishment takes place *after* the Last Judgement, not before. The only pre-Ragnarök hardship that the Norse mythology (represented by *Snorra Edda* and *Vafðruðnismal*) had in store was Fimbulvetr, or „Mighty Winter".[44]

The idea of humans practicing kinslaying and incest shortly before Ragnarök is also likely borrowed from Revelation 13,7–8 or other Christian teachings,[45] as it is absent from earlier sources of Norse mythology. Many other images of Ragnarök found in *Völuspá* appear to be rooted in the Book of Revelation as the author's main source of inspiration, e.g. Loki breaking free is comparable to Satan doing the same (Rev 20, 7);[46]

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[39] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 68–69.

[40] *The Poetic Edda*, Vol. II..., *op. cit.*, p. 94–95.

[41] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 39.

[42] McKinnell, 123.

[43] The New English Bible, Oxford 1975.

[44] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[45] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many…*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 124.

the image of Heimdall blowing his horn to herald the giants approaching Asgard has its counterpart in the seven angels in Rev 8,6–9;[47] the passage about the dwarves coming out of their underground dwellings could have been modelled on the lines describing the dead rising (Rev 20, 12–13).[48]

The vision of Ragnarök shows a considerable affinity with the Christian thought, and so does the notion of the reborn world. The earth rises again from the sea, green and yielding crops without labour; Baldr, Hodr and Hoenir come back to dwell in "Hropt's walls of triumph"[49] because they are innocent: Baldr is regarded as the most worthy of all the Aesir,[50] Hodr is not guilty of murdering Baldr because his blindness made him, quite literally, Loki's blind tool, and Hoenir's dim wits also acquit him of conscious ill-doing.[51] The "worthy warrior bands", that is, the deserving humans, enjoy eternal bliss in the hall "fairer than the sun, thatched with gold".[52] Those are all images that can be directly related to the Christian notions of afterlife, and are also traceable to the passages in Revelation.[53] The Norse tradition as presented in *Vafðruðnismal* suggested that the reborn world was but another stage in the cosmic cycle of life and death,[54] as next generations of humankind were to be descended from Life and Lifthrasir, the only human couple to survive the Mighty Winter.[55] The Aesir who are to "rule over the possessions of the gods / when Surt's fire is slaked [...]"[56] include Vali and Vidar, as well as Modi and Magni, sons of Thor, who shall also inherit their father's warhammer Mjollnir, "for battle-strength",[57] which implies that the eternal struggle would

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[47] *Ibidem.*

[48] *Ibidem.*

[49] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 62.

[50] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[51] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many…*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[52] Trans. C. Larrington, stanza 64.

[53] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many…*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[54] S. Nordal, *Three Essays on Völuspá*, trans. B.S. Benedikz, J.S. McKinnell, "Saga-Book" 1970–71, Vol. 18, p. 121.

[55] S. Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[56] Trans. U. Dronke, stanza 51.

[57] Trans. U. Dronke.

continue.[58] The theme of cyclic recurrence does appear in *Völuspá* – the earth reemerges from the water after Ragnarök, the Aesir meet again on the Idavoll plain, and the *tafl* boards of the long-gone golden age are found in the grass of the reborn world – but it is likely of secondary importance in comparison with the more Christian-oriented reading.

The *Völuspá* poet consistently employs highly allusive, enigmatic diction throughout the poem, assuming that his audience is well acquainted with the mythological subjects he is touching upon. Of the ample stock of myths and legends he chooses the ones that best suit his vision, mixing them freely with the tenets of the new religion. Unlike Christianity, the Norse faith was a complex system of beliefs without any fixed dogmas or a central doctrinal authority – it grew organically as generations of poets enriched it with new tales and altered the old ones.[59] The poet's reasons for inserting so many Christian elements into an otherwise heathen poem[60] could have been many. It was proposed by some critics that the author of *Völuspá* meant his work as a sacred text, a gospel of Norse heathenism that would arrange the many and varied tales, myths and legends into one coherent whole, using the fresh new ideas to refine and perfect the shortcomings of old beliefs.[61] Given the poem's suggested date of origin and the popular belief of that time that the world would come to an end around the year 1000, *Völuspá* might also serve as a warning that the Christian Doomsday was not a part of the eternal cycle but the ultimate end of all things – in this way it could exhort those still clinging to the old faith to take the last chance to convert and be granted life everlasting.[62]

The Christian tradition plays a powerful role in the imagery and philosophical framework of *Völuspá.* While its roots are dipped in the wells of Norse mythology, its branches reach out to the new, promising beliefs. In its complex vision the poem attempts to bridge the gap

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[58] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many…*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

[59] S. Nordal, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[60] *Ibidem*, p. 107.

[61] *Ibidem*, p. 132.

[62] *Ibidem*, p. 135.

between the two religions, the past and the future. The reader, standing on the heathen ground, must be able to see the other side to be able to cross that bridge.

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Streszczenie

Ragnarök a Apokalipsa – ślady chrześcijańskich wpływów w staronordyckim poemacie *Völuspá* (*Wieszczba Wölwy*)

Völuspá (pol. *Wieszczba Wölwy*, przeł. A. Załuska-Strömberg) otwiera *Eddę poetycką*, jeden z utworów założycielskich średniowiecznej literatury islandzkiej i jedno z podstawowych źródeł mitologii nordyckiej. Została spisana w XIII w. w podobnym celu co *Edda prozatorska* oraz sagi – miała zachować dawne islandzkie wierzenia i tradycje dla potomności, unikając przekłamań i uprzedzeń chrześcijańskich skrybów. Mimo to *Völuspá* w wielu miejscach znacząco różni się od innych poematów eddyckich – dochodzi w niej do zmian lub reinterpretacji postaci, miejsc i zdarzeń znanych z uważanych za starsze od niej utworów *Vafðruðnismal* czy *Havamal*. W *Völuspie* pojawiają się również imiona i wydarzenia niespotykane nigdzie indziej w mitologii nordyckiej, za to wykazujące duże podobieństwo do tropów biblijnych – szczególnie w opisach stworzenia świata, pierwszych ludzi czy wizji ragnaröku, które wielu badaczy uważa za zaczerpnięte z Księgi Rodzaju oraz Apokalipsy. Sposób przedstawienia dziejów świata oraz losów bogów i ludzi po ragnaröku także wskazuje na silny wpływ myśli chrześcijańskiej. W artykule rozważane są możliwe przyczyny inspiracji autora *Völuspy* chrześcijaństwem – poemat mógł powstać jako swoista biblia nordyckiego pogaństwa, służąca (lub nie) do przerzucenia mostu między starymi i nowymi wierzeniami, a w obliczu eschatologicznych nastrojów końca X wieku – być może również jako narzędzie do nawracania Islandczyków przed Sądem Ostatecznym.

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