MANNAHEIM KINDRED NORSE COSMOLOGY STUDY GUIDE 2019

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INTRODUCTION

The cosmology of Norse mythology has "nine home-worlds" or "nine realms", unified by the world tree Yggdrasil. Mapping the nine worlds escapes precision because the *Poetic Edda* often alludes vaguely. The Norse creation myth tells how everything came into existence in the gap between fire and ice, and how the gods shaped the home-world of humans.

Yggdrasil

A cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasil, lies at the center of the Norse cosmos.
Three roots drink the waters of the home-worlds:

- one in the home-world of the gods, the Æsir, Asgard,
- one in the home-world of the humans, Midgard, and,
- one in the home-world of the dead, Helheim.

Beneath the root in the world of the frost giants is the spring of Mímir, whose waters contain wisdom and understanding.

The root in the Æsir home-world taps the sacred wellspring of fate, the Well of Urðr. The tree is tended by the Norns, who live near it. Each day, they water it with pure water and whiten it with clay from the spring to preserve it. The water falls down to the earth as dew.

Animals continually feed on the tree, threatening it, but its vitality persists evergreen as it heals and nourishes the vibrant aggression of life.[1] On the topmost branch of the tree sits an eagle. The beating of its wings cause the winds in the world of men. At the root of the tree lies a great dragon, Niðhǫggr, gnawing at it continuously, together with other unnamed serpents.[2] The squirrel Ratatoskr carries insults from one to the other. Harts and goats devour the branches and tender shoots.

Creation

In the beginning there was the yawning emptiness of potential power called Ginnungagap whence two regions emerged: First Muspelheim was created in the south, full of fire, light and heat; and then Niflheim in the north, full of arctic waters, mists, and cold.[3] As heat and cold met in Ginnungagap when sparks and smoke from the south and layers of rime poured into it, a living jǫtunn, Ymir, appeared in the melting ice. From his left armpit, the first man and woman were born. From his legs, the frost jötnar were born, making Ymir the progenitor of the jǫtnar. Most sources identify Ymir's oldest son as Þrúðgelmir, who bore Ymir's grandson, Bergelmir. The other jǫtnar are usually unnamed. Ymir fed on the milk of the cow Auðumbla. She licked the blocks of salty ice, releasing Búri.

Búri's son Borr had three sons, the gods Odin, Vili and Vé. The three slew Ymir, and all of the jötnar (giants) except for Bergelmir and his wife, were drowned in the blood of the others.

From Ymir's body, they made the world of humans: his blood the seas and lakes, his flesh the earth, his bones the mountains and his teeth the rocks. From his skull they made the dome of the sky, setting a dwarf at each of the four corners to hold it high above the earth. They protected it from the jötnar with a wall made from Ymir's eyebrows. Next they caused time to exist, and placed the orbs of the sun and moon in chariots which were to circle around the sky. Odin, passing through the world of the jötnar, found two beautiful young giants named Sól and Máni, sun and moon. They were brother and sister, and their father had named them after the beautiful lights in the sky. Odin decreed that Sól and Mani should drive the chariots of the sun and the moon across the sky, and to ensure that their journey was always constant and never slowed, he created two great wolves. These wolves were called Hati and Sköll, and they were placed in the sky to pursue the chariots and devour them if they caught them.

Norse gods

The realm of the Norse gods, the *Æsir*, is called Asgard or the "Court of the Ás". The *Æsir* built it after the home-world of humans, and it contains many halls.[4] Odin's hall, Válaskjálf, is roofed in silver. He can sit within it and view all the worlds at once. Gimli, a hall roofed in gold, to which righteous men are said to go after death, also lies somewhere in Asgard. Valhalla, the hall of the slain, is the feast hall of Odin. Those who died in battle are then raised in the evening to feast in Valhalla. Two important gods, the brother and sister, Freyr and Freyja, are citizens of Asgard but actually exchange-hostages from Vanaheimr. Heimdallr, the gods' warden, dwells beside Bifröst, the rainbow bridge. Each day, the gods ride over Bifröst to their meeting place at the Urðarbrunnr.

Nine home-worlds

The phrase "nine home-worlds" is *Níu Heimar* in Old Norse. Relating to another term *heima* meaning "home" or "homestead", the term *heimr* means a "place of abode" in the sense of a homeland or region, or in a larger sense a world.[5]

The nine home-worlds are not listed in surviving texts, though based on places mentioned in the myths, the most common listing in modern recreations are:

1. Asgard, the home of the *Æsir* ruled by the god Odin
2. Álfheimr/Ljósálfheimr, the home of the Light Elves ("Ljósálfar")
3. Niðavellir/Svartálfaheimr, the home of the Dwarves, who are also synonymous with the Dark Elves ("Dökkálfar") and Black Elves ("Svartálfar")

4. Midgard (Earth), the home of humans
5. Jötunheimr/Útgarðr, the home of the Jötnar (Giants)
6. Vanaheim, the home of the Vanir
7. Niflheim, a world of ice and snow
8. Muspelheim, a world of fire and lava and home of the Jötunn Surtr
9. Hel(heimr), the home of the dishonorable dead, sometimes synonymous with or located within Niflheim and ruled by the goddess Hel

Poetic Edda

In the Poetic Edda, the phrase *Níu Heimar* occurs in the following Old Norse texts.

Völuspá 2

I remember the nine worlds, nine giantesses [who personify each land], the glorious [world tree], Mjötviðr [that unites them], before the ground below [existed].
Níu man ek heima, níu íviðjur, mjötvið mæran, fyr mold neðan.

Vafþrúðnismál 43

I can say truly [about] the secrets from the Jötnar and all the gods, because I have come [traveling] over each world. I came [traveling over each of] the nine worlds, [even to the remotest places in each one], [even] before Niflhel below [where people] from Hel die.
Frá jötna rúnum ok allra goða ek kann segja satt, þvíat hvern hefi ek heim of komit. Níu kom ek heima, fyr Níflhel neðan; hinig deyja ór helju halir.

Prose Edda

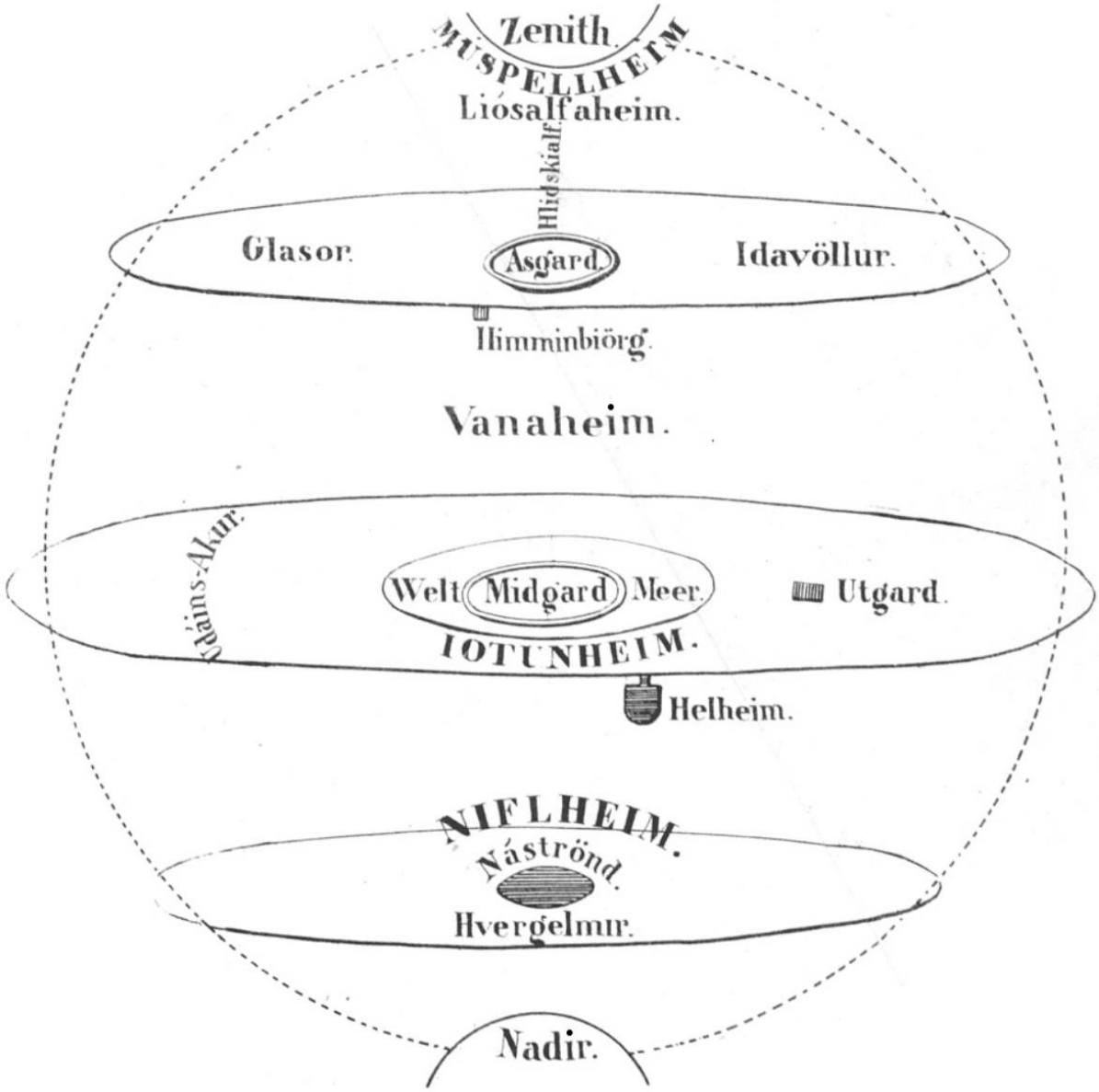
In the Prose Edda, the phrase occurs here.

Gylfaginning 34

[Óðinn] threw Hel [the deity of death] into Niflheimr and gave her authority over the nine worlds.

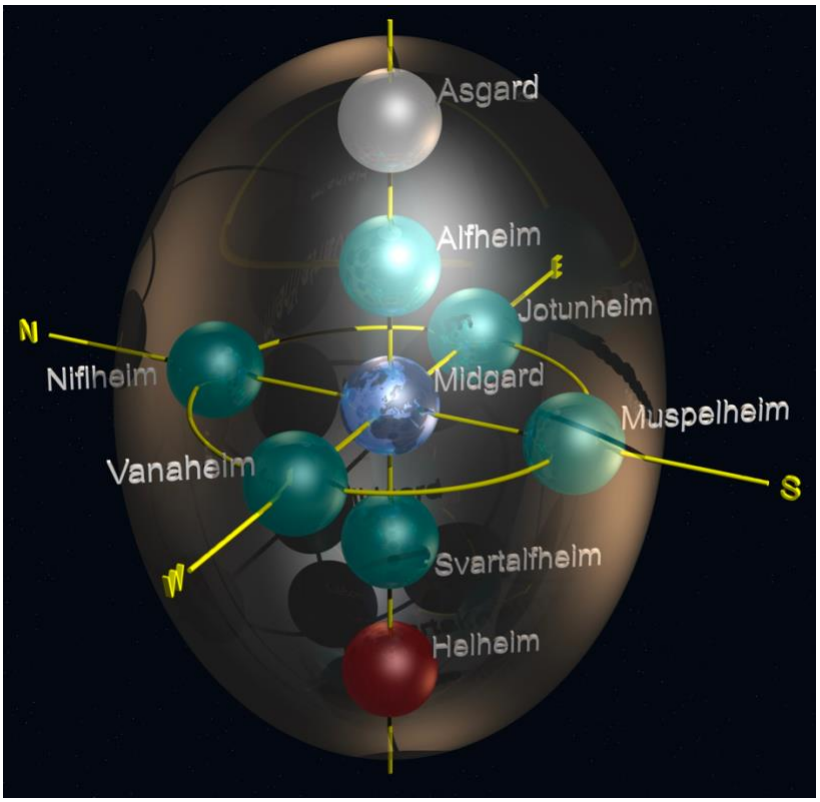
Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum.

Counting the worlds



Cosmos of the nine worlds.

From Henry Wheaton's 1844 *Histoire des peuples du nord, et des Danois et des Normands*



The Nine Worlds (artist's conception)

In the *Poetic Edda*, the poem Alvíssmál has a stanza that lists six worlds, clarifying each "home-world" (heimr) is the realm of a different family of beings. Þórr asks: What is the wind named "in every world" (*heimi hverjum í*)? Álvíss answers:

Alvíssmál 20

It is named "wind" with the Humans.
But "waverer" with [the Æsir] the gods.
[The Vanir] the enchanting-rulers call it "neigher" [making sounds like a horse].
The Jötnar "shrieker" [during deadly arctic storms].
The Álfar "whistler".
In Hel, [the dead] call it "squall" [a sharp increase in wind speed before a rain].
Vindr heitir með mönnum.
en váfuðr með goðum.
kalla gneggjuð ginnregin.
æpi jötnar.
alfar dynfara.
kalla í helju hviðuð.

Thus there are at least six worlds, each being the home-world of a particular family of beings. They can be inferred to correspond to the following place names mentioned elsewhere in the Poetic Edda and Prose Edda.

1. Menn (humans): Miðgarðr.
2. Aesir (gods): Ásgarðr.
3. Vanir (gods): Vanaheimr.
4. Jötnar (giants): Jötunheimr/Útgarðr.
5. Álfar (elves): Álfheimr/Ljósálfheimr.
6. Náir (corpses, the dead): Helheimr.

The home-world of the Dvergar is missing from the above list. Elsewhere, the poem mentions the Dvergar separately from the other families of beings. For example, Alvíssmál 14 lists the Dvergar as distinct from the Álfar. Moreover, the two place names, Álfheimr and Svartálfaheimr, confirm there are two separate heimar or "home-worlds", one for each family. The byname Svartálfar or "Black Elves" refers to the Dvergar,[6] and likewise Svartálfaheimr or the "Home-world of the Black Elves" is the home of the dwarf Brokkr (Skáldskaparmál 46). Alternatively, the home of the Dvergar is called Niðavellir or the "Downward Fields" (Völuspá 37). Thus, these families of beings mentioned in the poem Alvíssmál are identified with seven of the nine home-worlds.[7]

7. Dvergar (dwarves): Niðavellir/Svartálfaheimr.

Seven home-worlds for seven families of beings. The last two of the home-worlds are less certain. Usually, the list adds the primordial realms of the elements of ice and fire, counting them as "home-worlds".[8][9] The place name of the element of ice, Niflheimr, means the arctic "Mist Home-world", suggesting it is one of the "Nine Home-worlds".

8. Primordial element of Ice: Niflheimr.

9. Primordial element of Fire: Múspellsheimr.

Uncertainty

The above identities for the Nine Home-worlds are common. However the relationships between these and other significant realms have resulted in confusion. Precise mapping remains uncertain. For example, Hel is said to be located in Niflheim:[10]

As for Hel, ... Odin sent her down into the realm of mist and darkness, Niflheim. There she rules a kingdom encircled by a high wall and secured by strong gates.

Hel, or at least Niflhel, may be identical with Niflheimr. According to one interpretation of the Prose Edda (Gylfaginning), Niflhel is the lowest level of Hel where the evil dead suffer torment, whereas Niflheimr is the primordial realm of icy mist, yet some early manuscripts consistently confuse these two names.[11]

"The confusion between Niflheim and Nifhel is summed up by variation in the manuscript of Snorri's [Prose] Edda. In describing the fate of the giant master builder of the wall around Asgard, two of the four main sources say Thor bashed the giant's head and sent him to Niflheim, and the other two say Thor sent him to Niflhel."[12]

The primordial Niflheimr and the punishing Niflhel are "equally dreadful" places;[11] it is not clear whether they are identical or distinct.

ASGARD

In Norse religion, **Asgard** (/ˈɑːsgɑːrd, ˈæs-/;[1] Old Norse: *Ásgarðr*; "Enclosure of the *Æsir*"[2]) is one of the Nine Worlds and home to the Æsir tribe of gods. It is surrounded by an incomplete wall attributed to a Hrimthurs riding the stallion Svaðilfari, according to *Gylfaginning*. Odin and his wife, Frigg, are the rulers of Asgard.

Asgard is home to many named locations; the most well-known include Valhalla, where half of all those who die in battle are sent, and Fólkvangr, where the other half go.[3]

Yggdrasil

Attestations

The primary sources regarding Asgard come from the Prose Edda, written in the 13th century by Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson, and the Poetic Edda, compiled in the 13th century from a basis of much older Skaldic poetry.

Poetic Edda

Völuspá, the first poem of the work, mentions many of the features and characters of Asgard portrayed by Snorri, such as Yggdrasil and Iðavöllr. Asgard is composed of 12 realms including Valhalla, Thrudheim, Breidablik that are ruled by Odin, Thor and Baldr respectively.[4]

Prose Edda

The Prose Edda presents two views regarding Asgard.

In the Prose Edda, Gylfi, King of Sweden before the arrival of the Æsir under Odin, travels to Asgard, questions the three officials shown in the illumination concerning the Æsir, and is beguiled. Note that the officials have one eye, a sign of Odin. One of his attributes is that he can make the false seem true. 18th century Icelandic manuscript.

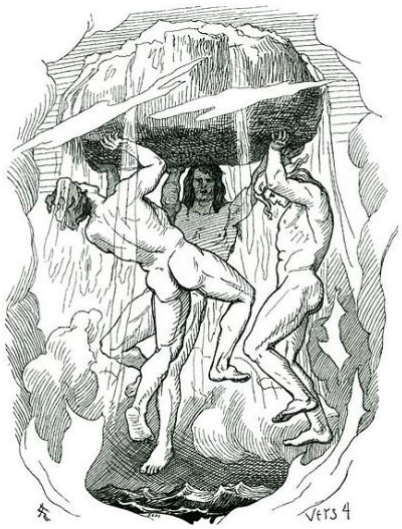
Prologue

In the *Prologue* Snorri offers a euhemerized and Christian-influenced interpretation of the myths and tales of his forefathers. Asgard, he conjectures, is the home of the Æsir (singular Ás) in As-ia, making a folk etymological connection between the three "As-"; that is, the Æsir were "men of Asia", not gods, who moved from Asia to the north and some of which intermarried with the peoples already there. Snorri's interpretation of the 13th century foreshadows 20th-century views of Indo-European migration from the east.

Snorri further writes that Asgard is a land more fertile than any other, blessed also with a great abundance of gold and jewels. Correspondingly, the Æsir excelled beyond all other people in strength, beauty and talent.

Snorri proposes the location of Asgard as Troy, the center of the earth. About it were 12 kingdoms and 12 chiefs. One of them, Múnón, married Priam's daughter, Tróán, and had by her a son, Trór, pronounced Thor in Old Norse. The latter was raised in Thrace. At age 12 he was whiter than ivory, had hair lighter than gold, and could lift 10 bear skins at once. He explored far and wide. His father, Odin, led a migration to the northern lands, where they took wives and had many children, populating the entire north with Aesir. One of the sons of Odin was Yngvi, founder of the Ynglingar, an early royal family of Sweden. These accounts were written 200 years after the Christianization of Iceland.[5]

Gylfaginning



A depiction of the creation of the world by Odin, Vili and Vé. Illustration by Lorenz Frølich.

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri presents the mythological version, taken no doubt from his sources. Icelanders were still being converted at that time. He could not present the myths as part of any current belief. Instead he resorts to a debunking device: Gylfi, king of Sweden before the Æsir, travels to Asgard and finds there a large hall (Valhalla) in Section 2.
Within are three officials (three Aesir Kings), whom Gylfi in the guise of Gangleri is allowed to question about the Asgard and the Æsir. A revelation of the ancient myths follows, but at the end the palace and the people disappear in a clap of thunder and Gylfi finds himself alone on the plain, having been deluded (Section 59).

In Gylfi's delusion, ancient Asgard was ruled by the senior god, the all-father, who had twelve names. He was the ruler of everything and the creator of heaven and earth (Section 3). During a complex creation myth in which the cosmic cow Audhumbla licked Búri free from the ice, the sons of Buri's son, Bor, who were Odin, Vili and Vé, constructed the universe and put Midgard in it as a residence for the first human couple, Ask and Embla, whom they created from driftwood trees in Section 9.[5]

The sons of Bor then constructed Asgard (to be identified with Troy, Snorri insists in section 9) as a home for the Æsir, who were divinities. Odin is identified as the all-father. Asgard is conceived as being on the earth. A rainbow bridge, Bifröst, connects it to heaven (Section 13). In Asgard also is a temple for the 12 gods, Gladsheim, and another for the 12 goddesses, Vingólf. The plain of Idavoll is the centre of Asgard (Section 14).

The gods hold court there every day at the Well of Urd, beneath an ash tree, Yggdrasil, debating the fates of men and gods. The more immediate destinies of men are assigned by the Norns (Section 15). It also states Thor is a god as well.

Long descriptions of the gods follow. Among the more memorable details are the Valkyries, the battle maidens whom Odin sends to allot death or victory to soldiers. Section 37 names 13 Valkyries and states that the source as the Poetic Edda poem *Grímnismál*. Odin's residence is Valhalla, to which he takes those slain in battle, the Einherjar (Section 20). Snorri quips: "There is a huge crowd there, and there will be many more still ...." (Section 39). They amuse themselves every day by fighting each other and then going to drink in the big hall.

Toward the end of the chapter Snorri becomes prophetic, describing Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods. It will begin with three winters of snow, with no summers in between. Wars will follow, then earthquakes and tidal waves. The sky will split open and out will ride the sons of Muspell intent on universal destruction. They will try to enter heaven but Bifröst will break (Section 55). Heimdall will blow his mighty horn Gjöll and the Æsir and Einherjar will ride out to battle. Most of the Æsir will die and Asgard be destroyed. Snorri quotes his own source saying: "The sun will go black, earth sink in the sea, heaven be stripped of its bright stars;...." (Section 56).

Afterwards, the earth rises again from the sea, is fairer than before, and where Asgard used to be a remnant of the Æsir gather, some coming up from Hel, and talk and play chess all day with the golden chessmen of the ancient Æsir, which they find in the grass (Section 58).

Skáldskaparmál

The 10th century Skald Þorbjörn dísarskáld is quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* as stating:
Thor has defended Asgard and Ygg's [Odin's] people [the gods] with strength.[2]

Heimskringla

The first part of the *Heimskringla* is rooted in Norse mythology; as the collection proceeds, fable and fact intermingle, but the accounts become increasingly historically reliable.
The first section tells of the mythological prehistory of the Norwegian royal dynasty, tracing Odin, described here as a mortal man, and his followers from the East, from Asaland and Asgard, its chief city, to their settlement in Scandinavia (more precisely to east-central Sweden, according to Snorri). The subsequent sagas are (with few exceptions) devoted to individual rulers, starting with Halfdan the Black.

Ynglinga Saga

By the time of the *Ynglinga Saga*, Snorri had developed his concept of Asgard further, although the differences might be accounted for by his sources. In the initial stanzas of the poem Asagarth is the capital of Asaland, a section of Asia to the east of the Tana-kvísl or Vana-Kvísl river (kvísl is "fork"), which Snorri explains is the Tanais, or Don River, flowing into the Black Sea. The river divides "Sweden the Great", a concession to the Viking point of view. It is never called that prior to the Vikings (Section 1).

The river lands are occupied by the Vanir and are called Vanaland or Vanaheim. It is unclear what people Snorri thinks the Vanes are, whether the proto-Slavic Venedi or the east Germanic Vandals, who had been in that region at that time for well over 1000 years. He does not say; however, the Germanic names of the characters, such as Njord, Frey and Vanlandi, indicate he had the Vandals in mind.

Odin is the chief of Asagarth. From there he conducts and dispatches military expeditions to all parts of the world. He has the virtue of never losing a battle (Section 2). When he is away, his two brothers, Vili and Vé, rule Asaland from Asagarth.

On the border of Sweden is a mountain range running from northeast to southwest. South of it are the lands of the Turks, where Odin had possessions; thus, the mountains must be the Caucasus Mountains. On the north are the uninhabitable fells, which must be the tundra/taiga country. Apparently the Vikings did not encounter the Urals or the Uralics of the region. Snorri evidences no knowledge of them.

There also is no mention of Troy, which was not far from Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire and militarily beyond the reach of the Vikings. Troy cannot have been Asagarth, Snorri realizes, the reason being that the Æsir in Asaland were unsettled by the military activities of the Romans; that is, of the Byzantine Empire.

As a result, Odin led a section of the Æsir to the north looking for new lands in which to settle. They used the Viking route up the Don and the Volga through Garðaríki, Viking Russia. From there they went to Saxland (Germany) and to the lands of Gylfi in Scandinavia (Section 5). The historical view is mainly fantastical. The Germanics were in Germany and Scandinavia during earliest mention of them in Roman literature, long before the Romans had conquered even Italy. To what extent Snorri's presentation is poetic creation only remains unclear.
Demoted from his position as all-father, or king of the gods, Odin becomes a great sorcerer in the Ynglinga Saga. He can shape-shift, speaks only in verse, and lies so well that everything he says seems true. He strikes enemies blind and deaf but when his own men fight they go berserk and cannot be harmed. He has a ship that can be rolled up like a tablecloth when not used, he relies on two talking ravens to gather intelligence, and he consults the talking head of Mimir for advice (Section 7).

As a man, however, Odin is faced with the necessity to die. He is cremated and his possessions are burned with him so that he can ascend to - where? If Asgard is an earthly place, not there. Snorri says at first it is Valhalla and then adds: "The Swedes now believed that he had gone to the old Asagarth and would live there forever" (Section 9). Finally Snorri resorts to Heaven, even though nothing in Christianity advocates cremation and certainly the burning of possessions avails the Christian nothing.

Etymology

Asgard is derived from Old Norse *āss*, god and *garðr*, enclosure; from Indo-European roots *ansu-* spirit, demon (see cognate ahura; also asura) and *gher-* grasp, enclose (see cognates garden and yard), essentially meaning "garden of gods".[6]

Other spellings

Alternatives Anglicisations: Ásgard, Ásegard, Ásgardr, Asgardr, Ásgarthr, Ásgarth, Asgarth, Esageard, Ásgardhr, Asgaard
Common Swedish and Danish form: Asgård, Aasgaard[*citation needed*]
Norwegian: *Åsgard*, Aasgaard (both also Åsgård)
Icelandic, Faroese: *Ásgarður*

ÁLFHEIM

Alfheim (Old Norse: Álfheimr, "Land Of The Elves" or "Elfland"), also called Ljosalfheim (Ljósálf[a]heimr, "home of the light-elves"), is one of the Nine Worlds and home of the Light Elves in Norse mythology.

In Old Norse texts

Álfheim as an abode of the Elves is mentioned only twice in Old Norse texts.

The eddic poem Grímnismál describes twelve divine dwellings beginning in stanza 5 with:

Ýdalir call they the place where Ull
A hall for himself hath set;
And Álfheim the gods to Frey once gave
As a tooth-gift in ancient times.

A tooth-gift was a gift given to an infant on the cutting of the first tooth.

In the 12th century eddic prose Gylfaginning, Snorri Sturluson relates it as the first of a series of abodes in heaven:

That which is called Álfheim is one, where dwell the peoples called ljósálfar [Light Elves]; but the dökkálfar [Dark Elves] dwell down in the earth, and they are unlike in appearance, but by far more unlike in nature. The Light-elves are fairer to look upon than the sun, but the Dark-elves are blacker than pitch.

The account later, in speaking of a hall in the Highest Heaven called Gimlé that shall survive when heaven and earth have died, explains:

It is said that another heaven is to the southward and upward of this one, and it is called Andlang [Andlangr 'Endlong'] but the third heaven is yet above that, and it is called Vídbláin [Vídbláinn 'Wide-blue'] and in that heaven we think this abode is. But we believe that none but Light-Elves inhabit these mansions now.

It is not indicated whether these heavens are identical to Álfheim or distinct. Some texts read Vindbláin (Vindbláinn 'Wind-blue') instead of Vídbláin.

Modern commentators speculate (or sometimes state as fact) that Álfheim was one of the nine worlds (heima) mentioned in stanza 2 of the eddic poem Völuspá.

NIÐAVELLIR OR SVARTÁLHEIM

In Norse mythology, **Niðavellir** (anglic. as **Nidavellir**; probable compound of O.N. *Nið* - "new moon", "the wane of the moon" (perhaps related to *niðr* - "down") + *Vellir* (pl. of *völlr*) - "fields": *Dark Fields*, *Downward Fields*), also called **Myrkheim** (*Myrkheimr*, O.N. compd. of *myrkr* - "darkness" + *heimr* - "home": *the world of darkness*, *Dark Abode*),[1][2] is the home of the Dwarves. Hreidmar is the king of Niðavellir.[3]

Völuspá

It is mentioned in the Völuspá:
Stóð fyr norðan, / á Niðavöllom / salr úr gulli / Sindra ættar
(Stood to the north, a dark field, Halls of gold, Sindri's tribe,").

One interpretation of the above verse would read like this:

Before you reach the north (Niflheim being the world furthest to the north), A dark dwelling stands (The dwarf world), In halls of gold, Sindri's bloodline lives.

Sindri was a famous dwarf. And ættar means bloodline, or in this case most likely kin or tribe. Niðavellir has often been interpreted as one of the Nine Worlds of Norse legend. The problem is that both Nidavellir and Svartalfheim are mentioned, and it is unclear if the sixth world is a world of dwarfs or one of black elves.

The dwarfs' world is mentioned in the *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson as *Svartálfaheimr*.

MIDGARD

Midgard (an anglicised form of Old Norse Miðgarðr; Old English Middangeard, Swedish and Danish Midgård, Old Saxon Middilgard, Old High German Mittilagart, Gothic Midjun-gards; "middle yard") is the name for Earth (equivalent in meaning to the Greek term οἰκουμένη, "inhabited") inhabited by and known to humans in early Germanic cosmology, and specifically one of the Nine Worlds in Norse mythology.

This name occurs in Old Norse literature as Miðgarðr. In Old Saxon Heliand it appears as Middilgard and in Old High German poem Muspilli it appears as Mittilagart. The Gothic form Midjungards is attested in the Gospel of Luke as a translation of the Greek word οἰκουμένη. The word is present in Old English epic and poetry as Middangeard; later transformed to Middellærd or Mittelerde ("Middle-earth") in Middle English literature.[1]

All these forms are from a Common Germanic *midja-gardaz (*meddila-, *medjan-), a compound of *midja- "middle" and *gardaz "yard, enclosure". In early Germanic cosmology, the term stands alongside world (Old English weorold, Old Saxon werold, Old High German weralt, Old Frisian warld and Old Norse verǫld), from a Common Germanic compound *wira-alđiz, the "age of men".[2]

Old Norse

Midgard is a realm in Norse mythology. It is one of the Nine Worlds—the only one that is completely visible to mankind (the others may intersect with this visible realm but are mostly invisible). Pictured as placed somewhere in the middle of Yggdrasil, Midgard is between the land of Niflheim—the land of ice—to the north and Muspelheim—the land of fire—to the south.[3] Midgard is surrounded by a world of water, or ocean, that is impassable. The ocean is inhabited by the great sea serpent Jörmungandr (Miðgarðsormr), who is so huge that he encircles the world entirely, grasping his own tail. The concept is similar to that of the Ouroboros. Midgard was also connected to Asgard, the home of the gods, by the Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, guarded by Heimdallr.

In Norse mythology, Miðgarðr became applied to the wall around the world that the gods constructed from the eyebrows of the giant Ymir as a defense against the Jotuns who lived in Jotunheim, east of Manheimr, the "home of men", a word used to refer to the entire world. The gods slew the giant Ymir, the first created being, and put his body into the central void of the universe, creating the world out of his body: his flesh constituting the land, his blood the oceans, his bones the mountains, his teeth the cliffs, his hairs the trees, and his brains the clouds. Aurgelmir's skull was held by four dwarfs, Nordri, Sudri, Austri, and Vestri, who

represent the four points on the compass and became the dome of heaven. The sun, moon, and stars were said to be scattered sparks in the skull.

According to the Eddas, Midgard will be destroyed at Ragnarök, the battle at the end of the world. Jörmungandr will arise from the ocean, poisoning the land and sea with his venom and causing the sea to rear up and lash against the land. The final battle will take place on the plane of Vígríðr, following which Midgard and almost all life on it will be destroyed, with the earth sinking into the sea, only to rise again, fertile and green when the cycle repeats and the creation begins again.

JÖTUNHEIM

Jötunheimr (or **Jǫtunheimr** in Old Norse orthography; often anglicized as **Jotunheim**) is the homeland of the Jötnar, the giants in Norse mythology

Giant Skrymir and Thor
by Louis Huard

Legend

From Jötunheimr, the giants menace the humans in Midgard and the gods in Asgard. The river Ifing (Old Norse, *Ífingr*) separates Asgard, the realm of the gods, from Jötunheimr, the land of giants. Gastropnir, the protection wall to the home of Menglad, and Þrymheimr, home of Þjazi, were both located in Jötunheimr, which was ruled by King Thrym. Glæsisvellir was a location in Jötunheimr, where lived the giant Gudmund, father of Höfund. Utgard was a stronghold surrounding the land of the giants.[1]

Territories

Gastropnir

The protection wall for the dwelling of Menglöð[2]:80, lover of the human Svipdagr.

Mímir's Well

Located under the second root of the world tree Yggdrasil in Jötunheim, guarded by the jötunn Mímir. The well is the source of Mímir's wisdom. Odin, wanting to possess great wisdom, journeys through the land of the giants to acquire it.

Þrymheimr

Often anglicized as **Thrymheim**, it was the home of the jötunn Þjazi (anglicized as **Thiazi**). Þjazi once tricked Loki into aiding him on kidnapping Iðunn, the goddess who grants magic apples of youth to gods. This act would be the cause of Þjazi's death.

Útgarðar

Útgarðar (often anglicized as **Utgard**) is the capital of Jotunheim, serving as the stronghold of the giants. Útgarða-Loki, also known as Skrýmir, rules the place. The god Thor challenged him, only to get fooled by the trickster giant who then disappeared.

Vimur River

The river where the giantess Gjálp tried to drown Thor.[2] I

In Norse mythology, the **Vimur** is the largest of the Elivagar rivers that were formed at the beginning of the world.

In Skáldskaparmál 18, part of the Norse Edda written by Snorri Sturluson, the Vimur river is mentioned in the tale of Thor and Geirrod. Thor needed to cross the Vimur on his way to Geirrod's abode. The force of the river threatened to sweep Thor away. Geirrod's daughter, Gjalp, tried to drown them by urinating in the river causing it to rapidly overflow. Thor hurled a rock into the river, effectively stopping the flow. This, together with the help of a rowan tree, allowed Thor to cross the river.

VANAHEIM

In Norse mythology, Vanaheimr (Old Norse for "home of the Vanir"[1]) is one of the Nine Worlds and home of the Vanir, a group of gods associated with fertility, wisdom, and the ability to see the future.

Vanaheimr is attested in the Poetic Edda; compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional sources, and the Prose Edda and (in euhemerized form) Heimskringla; both written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson. In the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda, Vanaheimr is described as the location where the Van god Njörðr was raised. In Norse cosmology, Vanaheimr is considered one of the Nine Worlds.

Attestations

Vanaheimr is mentioned a single time in the Poetic Edda; in a stanza of the poem Vafþrúðnismál. In Vafþrúðnismál, Gagnráðr (the god Odin in disguise) engages in a game of wits with the jötunn Vafþrúðnir. Gagnráðr asks Vafþrúðnir whence the Van god Njörðr came, for, though he rules over many hofs and hörgrs, Njörðr was not raised among the Æsir. Vafþrúðnir responds that Njörðr was created in Vanaheimr by "wise powers" and references that Njörðr was exchanged as a hostage during the Æsir-Vanir War. In addition, Vafþrúðnir comments that, when the world ends (Ragnarök), Njörðr will return to the "wise Vanir" (Bellows here anglicizes Vanir to Wanes):

Benjamin Thorpe translation:

In Vanaheim wise powers him created,
and to the gods a hostage gave.
At the world's dissolution,
he will return to the wise Vanir.[2]

Henry Adams Bellows translation:

In the home of the Wanes did the wise ones create him,
And gave him as a pledge to the gods;
At the fall of the world shall he far once more
Home to the Wanes so wise.[3]

In chapter 23 of the Prose Edda book Gylfaginning, the enthroned figure of High says that Njörðr was raised in Vanaheimr, but was later sent as a hostage to the Æsir.[4]

The Heimskringla book Ynglinga saga records an euhemerized account of the origins of Norse mythology. In chapter 1, "Van Home or the Home of the Vanir" is described as located around the Don River (which Snorri writes was once called "Tana Fork" or "Vana Fork").[5] Chapter 4 describes the Æsir-Vanir War, noting that during a hostage exchange, the Æsir sent the god Hœnir to Vanaheim and there he was immediately made chieftain.[6] In chapter 15, the king Sveigðir is recorded as having married a woman named Vana in "Vanaland", located in Sweden. The two produced a child, who they named Vanlandi (meaning "Man from the Land of the Vanir"[7]).[8]

Note: the Don River is in Russia and is the 5th longest river in Europe.

Theories

In a stanza of the Poetic Edda poem Völuspá, an unnamed völva mentions the existence of "nine worlds." These worlds are nowhere specifically listed in sequence, but are generally assumed to include Vanaheimr. Henry Adams Bellows considers the other eight to be Asgard, Álfheimr, Midgard, Jötunheimr, Svartálfaheimr, Niflheim, Múspellsheimr, and possibly Niðavellir.[9]

Hilda Ellis Davidson comments that exactly where Vanaheim is among the Nine Worlds isn't clear, since "the chief gods Freyr and Njord with a number of others, are represented along with the Æsir in Asgard, but it seems probable that it was in the underworld." Davidson notes a connection between the Vanir and "the land-spirits who dwelt in mounds and hills and in water [...].[10]

Rudolf Simek claims that Snorri "unquestionably" invented the name Vanaheimr as a Vanir counterpart to Asgard, but does not mention the Vafþrúðnismál reference.[11]

NIFLHEIM

Niflheim or **Niflheimr** ("World of Mist",[1] literally "Home of Mist") is one of the Nine Worlds and is a location in Norse mythology which sometimes overlaps with the notions of Niflhel and Hel. The name *Niflheimr* only appears in two extant sources: *Gylfaginning* and the much-debated *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*.

Niflheim was primarily a realm of primordial ice and cold, with the frozen rivers of Élivágar and the well of Hvergelmir, from which come all the rivers.[2]

Gömul - One of the rivers that flow from the spring Hvergelmir in Niflheimr into the abode of the gods.

Geirvimul - One of the rivers that flow from the spring Hvergelmir in Niflheimr into the abode of the gods.

According to *Gylfaginning*, Niflheim was the second of the two primordial realms to emenate out of Ginnungagap, the other one being Muspelheim, the realm of fire. Between these two realms of cold and heat, creation began when its waters mixed with the heat of Muspelheim to form a "creating steam". Later, it became the abode of Hel, a goddess daughter of Loki, and the afterlife for her subjects, those who did not die a heroic or notable death.

Etymology

Nifl ("mist";[3] whence the Icelandic *nifl*) is a cognate to the Anglo-Saxon *Nifol* ("dark"),[4] (Middle) Dutch *nevel* and Old High German *nebul* ("fog").

Gylfaginning

In *Gylfaginning* by Snorri Sturluson, Gylfi, the king of ancient Scandinavia, receives an education in Norse mythology from Odin in the guise of three men. Gylfi learns from Odin (as *Jafnhárr*) that Niflheimr was the first world to be created after Muspelheim:

It was many ages before the earth was shaped that the Mist-World [Niflheimr] was made; and midmost within it lies the well that is called Hvergelmir, from which spring the rivers called Svöl, Gunnthrá, Fjörm, Fimbulthul, Slídr and Hríd, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víd, Leiptr; Gjöll is hard by Hel-gates.[5]

Odin (as *Þriði*) further tells Gylfi that it was when the ice from Niflheimr met the flames from Muspelheimr that creation began and Ymir was formed:

Just as cold arose out of Niflheim, and all terrible things, so also all that looked toward Múspellheim became hot and glowing; but Ginnungagap was as mild as windless air, and when the breath of heat met the rime, so that it melted and dripped, life was quickened from the yeast-drops, by the power of that which sent the heat, and became a man's form. And that man is named Ymir, but the Rime-Giants call him Aurgelmir; ...[6]

In relation to the world tree Yggdrasill, *Jafnhárr* (Odin) tells Gylfi that Jötunheimr is located under the second root, where Ginnungagap (*Yawning Void*) once was:
The Ash is greatest of all trees and best: its limbs spread out over all the world and stand above heaven. Three roots of the tree uphold it and stand exceeding broad: one is among the Æsir; another among the Rime-Giants, in that place where aforetime was the Yawning Void; the third stands over Niflheim, and under that root is Hvergelmir, and Nídhöggr gnaws the root from below.[7]

Gylfi is furthermore informed that when Loki had engendered Hel, she was cast into Niflheimr by Odin:

Hel he cast into Niflheim, and gave to her power over nine worlds, to apportion all abodes among those that were sent to her: that is, men dead of sickness or of old age. She has great possessions there; her walls are exceeding high and her gates great.[8]

Hel thus became the mistress of the world of those dead in disease and old age. This is the only instance in which Niflheim and Hel are equated (the Poetic Edda mentions Hel but doesn't say anything about Niflheim). However, there is some confusion in the different versions of the manuscript, with some of them saying Niflheim where others say Niflhel (the lowest level of Hel). Thus in the passage about the last destination of the *jötunn* who was killed by Thor after he had built Asgard:

Now that the Æsir saw surely that the hill-giant was come thither, they did not regard their oaths reverently, but called on Thor, who came as quickly. And straightway the hammer Mjöllnir was raised aloft; he paid the wright's wage, and not with the sun and the moon. Nay, he even denied him dwelling in Jötunheim, and struck but the one first blow, so that his skull was burst into small crumbs, and sent him down below under Niflhel [Niflheim].[9]

Hrafnagaldr Óðins

In *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*, there is a brief mention of Niflheimr as a location in the North, towards which the sun (Alfr's illuminator) chased the night as it rose:

Riso raknar,	The powers rose,
rann álfraudull,	the Alfs' illuminator
nordr at niflheim	northwards before Niflheim
nióla sótti;	chased the night.
upp nam ár Giöll	Up Argjöll ran
Úlfrúnar nidr,	Ulfrun's son,
hornþytvalldr	the mighty hornblower,
Himinbiarga.[10]	of heaven's heights.[11]

See also: Niflhel

Niflhel ("Misty Hel"; *Nifel* meaning *fog*) is a location in Norse mythology which appears in the eddic poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Baldrs draumar*, and also in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*. According to Snorri Sturluson's work, Niflhel could be interpreted as the lowest level of Hel, but Niflhel and sometimes Hel are conflated with the concept of Niflheim, a term which originates with Sturluson.

Prose Edda

Gylfaginning

In *Gylfaginning* by Snorri Sturluson, Gylfi, the old king of Scandinavia, receives an education in Norse mythology from Odin himself in the guise of three men. Gylfi learns from Odin (as *Þriði*) that Odin gave the first man his spirit, and that the spirits of just men will live forever in Gimlé, whereas those of evil men will live forever in Niflhel:

> " The greatest of all is this: that he made man, and gave him the spirit, which shall live and never perish, though the flesh-frame rot to mould, or burn to ashes; and all men shall live, such as are just in action, and be with himself in the place called Gimlé. But evil men go to Hel and thence down to the Misty Hel; and that is down in the ninth world."[1] "

Poetic Edda

Vafþrúðnismál

In *Vafþrúðnismál*, Odin has wagered his head in a contest of wits with the giant (jotun) Vafþrúðnir. Odin asks Vafþrúðnir whether he can tell all the secrets of the gods and giants, and Vafþrúðnir answers that he can do so since he has been to all the nine worlds, including Niflhel:

Vafþrúðnir kvað:	Vafthruthnir spake:
43. "Frá jötna rúnum	43. "Of the runes of the gods
ok allra goða	and the giants' race
ek kann segja satt,	The truth indeed can I tell,
því at hvern hef ek	(For to every world have I won;)
heim of komit;	To nine worlds came I,
níu kom ek heima	to Niflhel beneath,
fyr Niflhel neðan;	The home where
hinig deyja ór helju halir."[2]	dead men dwell."[3]

Baldrs draumar

Though not a part of the Codex Regius, in the poem *Baldrs draumar*, Odin makes a visit to Niflhel himself in order to enquire about the bad dreams of his son Baldr:

Upp reis Óðinn,	2. Then Othin rose,
alda gautr,	the enchanter old,
ok hann á Sleipni	And the saddle he laid
söðul of lagði;	on Sleipnir's back;
reið hann niðr þaðan	Thence rode he down
niflheljar til;	to Niflhel deep,
mætti hann hvelpi,	And the hound he met
þeim er ór helju kom.[4]	that came from hell.[5]

MUSPELHEIM

In Norse mythology, Muspelheim (Old Norse: Múspellsheimr), also called Muspell (Old Norse: Múspell), is a realm of fire.

The etymology of "Muspelheim" is uncertain, but may come from Mund-spilli, "world-destroyers", "wreck of the world".[1][2]

Muspelheim is described as a hot and glowing land of fire, home to the fire giants, and guarded by Surtr, with his flaming sword. It is featured in both the creation and destruction stories of Norse myth.

According to the Prose Edda, A great time before the earth was made, Niflheim existed.

Inside Niflheim was a well called Hvergelmer, from this well flowed numerous streams known as the Elivog. Their names were Svol, Gunnthro, Form, Finbul, Thul, Slid and Hrid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leipt and Gjoll.[4]

After a time these streams had traveled far from their source at Niflehim. So far that the venom that flowed within them hardened and turned to ice. When this ice eventually settled, rain rose up from it, and froze into rime. This ice then began to layer itself over the primordial void, Ginungagap. This made the northern portion of Ginungagap thick with ice, and storms begin to form within.

However, in the southern region of Ginungagap glowing sparks were flying out of Muspelheim. When the heat and sparks from Muspelheim met the ice, it began to melt.

These sparks would go onto create the Sun, Moon, and stars[5], and the drops would form the primeval being Ymir. "by the might of him who sent the heat, the drops quickened into life and took the likeness of a man, who got the name Ymer. But the Frost giants call him Aurgelmer"[4]

The Prose Edda section Gylfaginning foretells that the sons of Muspell will break the Bifröst bridge as part of the events of Ragnarök:

In the midst of this clash and din the heavens are rent in twain, and the sons of Muspell come riding through the opening. Surtr rides first, and before him and after him flames burning fire. He has a very good sword, which shines brighter than the sun. As they ride over Bifrost it breaks to pieces, as has before been stated. The sons of Muspel direct their course to the plain which is called Vigrid.... The sons of Muspel have there effulgent bands alone by themselves.

HEL(HIEM)

"Odin Rides to Hel" (1908) by W. G. Collingwood.

In Norse mythology, **Hel** (occasionally **Helheim** in secondary sources), the location, shares a name with Hel, a being who rules over the location. In late Icelandic sources, varying descriptions of Hel are given and various figures are described as being buried with items that will facilitate their journey to Hel after their death. In the *Poetic Edda*, Brynhildr's trip to Hel after her death is described and Odin, while alive, also visits Hel upon his horse Sleipnir. In Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, Baldr goes to Hel on his death and subsequently Hermóðr uses Sleipnir to attempt to retrieve him.

Etymology

The Old Norse feminine proper noun *Hel* is identical to the name of the entity that presides over the realm, Old Norse *Hel*. The word has cognates in all branches of the Germanic languages, including Old English *hell* (and thus Modern English *hell*), Old Frisian *helle*, Old Saxon *hellia*, Old High German *hella*, and Gothic *halja*. All forms ultimately derive from the reconstructed Proto-Germanic feminine noun **xaljō* ('concealed place, the underworld'). In turn, the Proto-Germanic form derives from the o-grade form of the Proto-Indo-European root **kel-*, **kol-*: 'to cover, conceal, save'.[1]

The term is etymologically related to Modern English *hall* and therefore also *Valhalla*, an afterlife 'hall of the slain' in Norse Mythology. *Hall* and its numerous Germanic cognates derive from Proto-Germanic **hallō* 'covered place, hall', from Proto-Indo-European **kol-*.[2]

Related early Germanic terms and concepts include Proto-Germanic **xalja-rūnō(n)*, a feminine compound noun, and **xalja-wītjan*, a neutral compound noun. This form is reconstructed from the Latinized Gothic plural noun **haliurunnae* (attested by Jordanes; according to philologist Vladimir Orel, meaning 'witches'), Old English *helle-rúne* ('sorceress, necromancer', according to Orel), and Old High German *helli-rūna* 'magic'. The compound is composed of two elements: **xaljō* (**haljō*) and **rūnō*, the Proto-Germanic precursor to Modern English *rune*.[3] The second

element in the Gothic *haliurunnae* may however instead be an agent noun from the verb *rinnan* ("to run, go"), which would make its literal meaning "one who travels to the netherworld".[4][5] Proto-Germanic **xalja-wītjan* (or **halja-wītjan*) is reconstructed from Old Norse *hel-víti* 'hell', Old English *helle-wíte* 'hell-torment, hell', Old Saxon *helli-wīti* 'hell', and the Middle High German feminine noun *helle-wīze*. The compound is a compound of **xaljō* (discussed above) and **wītjan* (reconstructed from forms such as Old English *witt* 'right mind, wits', Old Saxon *gewit* 'understanding', and Gothic *un-witi* 'foolishness, understanding').[6]

Poetic Edda

In reference to Hel, in the poem *Völuspá*, a völva states that Hel will play an important role in Ragnarök. The Völva states that a crowing "sooty-red cock from the halls of Hel" is one of three cocks that will signal one of the beginning events of Ragnarök. The other two are Fjalar in Jotunheim and Gullunkambi in Valhalla.[7]

In *Grímnismál* stanza 31, Hel is listed as existing beneath one of the three roots of the world tree Yggdrasil. One of the other two leads to the frost jötnar and the third to Mankind. In *Guðrúnarkviða I*, as Herborg tells of her grief in having prepared funeral arrangements for various members of her family, her children and her husbands, described it as "arranging their journey to Hel".[8]

In the short poem *Helreið Brynhildar*, Hel is directly referenced as a location in the title, translating to "Brynhild's Hel-Ride". While riding along a road on the border of Hel in a lavish cart (the cart her corpse was burnt within), Brynhildr encounters a dead giantess at a burial mound belonging to her. This results in a heated exchange, during which Brynhildr tells of her life.

In *Baldrs draumar*, Odin rides to the edge of Hel to investigate nightmares that Baldr has had. He uses a spell to bring to life the corpse of a Völva. Odin introduces himself under a false name and pretense and asks for information from the völva relating to Baldr's dreams. The völva reluctantly proceeds to produce prophecies regarding the events of Ragnarök.

The poem gives some information regarding the geographic location of Hel in parallel to the description in the Prose Edda, which may be related to the fact that it was not included in the Codex Regius but is instead a later addition.[8] Niflhel is mentioned as being just outside Hel. The bloody Garmr makes an appearance, encountering Odin on Odin's ride to Hel. Odin continues down the road and approaches Hel, which is described as the "high hall of Hel."[8] There he proceeds to the grave of the Völva near the eastern doors where the descriptions of Hel end.

Prose Edda

In the *Prose Edda*, more detailed information is given about the location, including a detailed account of a venture to the region after the death of the god Baldr. Snorri's descriptions of Hel in the *Prose Edda* are not corroborated outside *Baldrs draumar*, which does not appear in the original Codex Regius but is a later addition often included with modern editions of the *Poetic Edda*.

Gylfaginning

In the book *Gylfaginning*, Hel is introduced in chapter 3 as a location where "evil men" go upon death, and into Niflhel. The chapter further details that Hel is in the ninth of the Nine Worlds.[9] In chapter 34, Hel, the being is introduced. Snorri writes that Hel was cast down into Hel by Odin who "made her ruler over Nine Worlds". Snorri further writes that there Hel is located in Niflheim. Here it is related that she could give out lodging and items to those sent to her that have died of disease or old age. A very large dwelling is described as existing in Niflheim owned by Hel with huge walls and gates. The hall is called - or inside of this huge hall there is a hall belonging to Hel called - Éljúðnir. Within this hall, Hel is described as having a servant, a slave and various possessions.[10]

At the end of chapter 49, the death of Baldr and Nanna is described. Hermóðr, described as Baldr's brother in this source, sets out for Hel on horseback to retrieve the deceased Baldr.[11] To enter Hel, Hermóðr rides for nine nights through "valleys so deep and dark that he saw nothing" until he arrives at the river Gjöll ("Noisy") and the Gjöll bridge. The bridge is described as having a roof made of shining gold. Hermóðr then proceeds to cross it. Hermóðr encounters Móðguð, who is the guard of the bridge ("Furious Battler").[11]

Móðguð speaks to Hermóðr and comments that the bridge echoes beneath him more than the entire party of five people who had just passed. This is a reference to Baldr, Nanna and those that were burnt in their funeral pyre passing over the bridge on death. Móðguð also says that the dead in Hel appear as a different color than the living and tells him that to get to Hel he must go "down and to the North" where he would find the Road to Hel.[11]

Continuing along the Road to Hel, Hermóðr encounters the Gates of Hel. Hermóðr remounts, spurs Sleipnir, and the two bound far over it. Hermóðr proceeds further beyond the gates for some distance before arriving at the hall, dismounting and entering. There Hermóðr sees Baldr sitting in a "seat of honor" and Hermóðr spends a night in Hel. The following day, Hermóðr presses Hel, the being, to allow Baldr to leave. Hel gives him an offer and then Baldr leads him out of the hall. Baldr then gives Hermóðr various gifts from Nanna and himself to bring from Hel

to the living Æsir. Hermóðr then retraces his path back to the land of the living. Hel's offer fails and in chapter 50, Loki is blamed for Baldr remaining in Hel.[11]

In chapter 53, Hel is mentioned a final time in the *Prose Edda*.[12] Here, Höðr and Baldr are mentioned as returning from Hel in a post-Ragnarök world:

Því næst koma þar Baldr ok Höðr frá Heljar, setjask þá allir samt ok talask við ok minnask á rúnar sínar ok ræða of tíðindi þau er fyrrum höfðu verit, of Miðgarðsorm ok um Fenrisúlf. - Eysteinn Björnsson's edition	"After that Baldr shall come thither, and Hödr, from Hel; then all shall sit down together and hold speech with one another, and call to mind their secret wisdom, and speak of those happenings which have been before: of the Midgard Serpent and of Fenris-Wolf." - Brodeur's translation

Gesta Danorum

Book I of *Gesta Danorum* contains an account of what has often been interpreted as a trip to Hel. While having dinner, King Hadingus is visited by a woman bearing stalks of hemlock who asks him if he knows where such fresh herbs grow in winter. Hadingus wants to know; so the woman muffles him with her cloak, pulls him into the ground, and they vanish. Saxo reasons that the gods wished for Hadingus to visit in the flesh where he will go when he dies.[13]

The two penetrate a dark and misty cloud, and then continue along a path worn from heavy use over the ages. The two see men wearing rich-looking robes, and nobles wearing purple. Passing them, they finally reach sunny regions where the herbs the woman presented Hadingus grow.[13]

Hadingus and the woman continue until they arrived at a river of blue-black water that is fast-moving, full of rapids, and filled with various weapons. They cross the bridge, and see two "strongly-matched" armies meeting. Hadingus asks the woman about their identity, and she responds that they are men that have met their death by sword, and that they present an everlasting display of their destruction while attempting to equal the activity of their past lives.[13]

Moving forward, the two encounter a wall that they cannot find a way over. The woman attempts to leap over it, but despite her slender and wrinkled body, cannot. The woman removes the head of a cock that she was carrying and throws it over the wall. The bird immediately crows; it has returned to life. Hadingus returns to his wife, and foils a threat by pirates.[13]

Theories

Hilda Ellis Davidson, writing on Snorri's unique description of Hel in his Prose Edda, states that "it seems likely that Snorri's account of the underworld is chiefly his own work" and that the idea that the dead entering Hel who have died of sickness and old age may have been an attempt on Snorri's part to reconcile the tradition with his description of Valhalla, citing that "the one detailed account of Hel" that Snorri gives is that of Baldr entering Hel without dying of old age or sickness. Davidson writes that Snorri was potentially using a "rich source" unknown to us for his description of Hel, though it may not have told him very much about the location beyond that it was a hall and that Snorri's description of Hel may at times be influenced by Christian teachings about the after-life.[14]

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

GINNUNGAGAP (PRIMODIAL VOID)

In Norse mythology, **Ginnungagap** ("gaping abyss", "yawning void") is the primordial void, mentioned in the Gylfaginning, the Eddaic text recording Norse cosmogony.

Etymology

Ginnunga- is usually interpreted as deriving from a verb meaning "gape" or "yawn", but no such word occurs in Old Norse except in verse 3 of the Eddic poem "Vǫluspá", "gap var ginnunga", which may be a play on the term. In her edition of the poem, Ursula Dronke suggested it was borrowed from Old High German *ginunga*, as the term Múspell is believed to have been borrowed from Old High German.[1] An alternative etymology links the *ginn-* prefix with that found in terms with a sacral meaning, such as *ginn-heilagr*, *ginn-regin* (both referring to the gods) and *ginn-runa* (referring to the runes), thus interpreting *Ginnungagap* as signifying a "magical (and creative) power-filled space".[2]

Creation myth

Ginnungagap appears as the primordial void in the Norse creation account. The *Gylfaginning* states:

Ginnungagap, the Yawning Void ... which faced toward the northern quarter, became filled with heaviness, and masses of ice and rime, and from within, drizzling rain and gusts; but the southern part of the Yawning Void was lighted by those sparks and glowing masses which flew out of Múspellheim[3]

In the northern part of Ginnungagap lay the intense cold of Niflheim, and in the southern part lay the equally intense heat of Muspelheim. The cosmogonic process began when the effulgence of the two met in the middle of Ginnungagap.

Geographic rationalization

Scandinavian cartographers from the early 15th century attempted to localise or identify Ginnungagap as a real geographic location from which the creation myth derived. A fragment from a 15th-century (pre-Columbus) Old Norse encyclopedic text entitled *Gripla* (Little Compendium) places Ginnungagap between Greenland and Vinland:

Now is to be told what lies opposite Greenland, out from the bay, which was before named: Furdustrandir hight a land; there are so strong frosts that it is not habitable, so far as one knows; south from thence is Helluland, which is called Skrellingsland; from thence it is not far to Vinland the Good, which some think goes out from Africa; between Vinland and Greenland is

Ginnungagap, which flows from the sea called Mare oceanum, and surrounds the whole earth.[4]

A scholion in a 15th-century manuscript of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* similarly refers to *Ghimmendegop* as the Norse word for the abyss in the far north.[5]

Later, the 17th-century Icelandic bishop Guðbrandur Thorlaksson also used the name *Ginnungegap* to refer to a narrow body of water, possibly the Davis Strait, separating the southern tip of Greenland from *Estotelandia, pars America extrema*, probably Baffin Island.[6]

HVERGELMIR (SOURCE OF RIVERS)

In Norse mythology, **Hvergelmir** (Old Norse "bubbling boiling spring"[1]) is a major spring.

Hvergelmir is attested in the *Poetic Edda*, compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional sources, and the *Prose Edda*, written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson. In the *Poetic Edda*, Hvergelmir is mentioned in a single stanza, which details that it is the location where liquid from the antlers of the stag Eikþyrnir flow, and that the spring, "whence all waters rise", is the source of numerous rivers.[2] The *Prose Edda* repeats this information and adds that the spring is located in Niflheim, that it is one of the three major springs at the primary roots of the cosmic tree Yggdrasil (the other two are Urðarbrunnr and Mímisbrunnr), and that within the spring are a vast amount of snakes and the dragon Níðhöggr.

Attestations

Hvergelmir is attested in the following works:

Poetic Edda

Hvergelmir receives a single mention in the *Poetic Edda*, found in the poem *Grímnismál*:

Eikthyrnir the hart is called,
that stands o'er Odin's hall,
and bites from Lærad's branches;
from his horns fall drops into Hvergelmir,
whence all waters rise:[2]

This stanza is followed by three stanzas consisting mainly of the names of 42 rivers. Some of these rivers lead to the dwelling of the gods (such as Gömul and Geirvimul), while at least two (Gjöll and Leipt), reach to Hel.[2]

Prose Edda

Hvergelmir is mentioned several times in the *Prose Edda*. In *Gylfaginning*, Just-as-High explains that the spring Hvergelmir is located in the foggy realm of Niflheim: "It was many ages before the earth was created that Niflheim was made, and in its midst lies a spring called Hvergelmir, and from it flows the rivers called Svol, Gunnthra, Fiorm, Fimbulthul, Slidr and Hrid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leiptr; Gioll is next to Hell-gates."[3]

Later in *Gylfaginning*, Just-as-High describes the central tree Yggdrasil. Just-as-High says that three roots of the tree support it and "extend very, very far" and that the third of these three roots extends over Niflheim. Beneath this root, says Just-as-High, is the spring Hvergelmir, and that the base of the root is gnawed on by the dragon Níðhöggr.[4] Additionally, High says that

Hvergelmir contains not only Níðhöggr but also so many snakes that "no tongue can enumerate them".[5]
The spring is mentioned a third time in *Gylfaginning* where High recounts its source: the stag Eikþyrnir stands on top of the afterlife hall Valhalla feeding branches of Yggdrasil, and from the stag's antlers drips great amounts of liquid down into Hvergelmir. High tallies 26 rivers here.[6]
Hvergelmir is mentioned a final time in the *Prose Edda* where Third discusses the unpleasantries of Náströnd. Third notes that Hvergelmir yet worse than the venom-filled Náströnd because—by way of quoting a portion of a stanza from the *Poetic Edda* poem *Völuspá*—"There Nidhogg torments the bodies of the dead".[7]

Hvergelmir (Encyclopedia Mythica)

"Seething cauldron." A well in Niflheimr which is fed by the exudation that falls from the horns of the hart Eikþyrnir and which in turn feeds several major rivers. *Grímnismál* lists these rivers as: Síð and Víð, Sækin and Eikin, Svöl and Gunnþró, Fjörm and Fimbulþul, Rín and Rennandi, Gípul and Göpul, Gömul and Geirvimul, that flow through the fields of the gods; Þyn and Vín, Þöll and Höll, Gráð and Gunnþorin. Vína is one, another Vegsvinn, and a third Þjóðnuma; Nyt and Nöt, Nönn and Hrönn, Slíðr and Hríð, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víð and Ván, Vönd and Strönd, Gjöll and Leiftr; these (two) fall near to men, but fall hence to Hel.

Snorri Sturluson virtually quotes stanzas 27-28 in *Gylfaginning* 39, though not consecutively. He has the character of Hárr say, "those rivers are called thus: Síð, Víð, Sækin, Ekin, Svöl, Gunnþró, Fjörm, Fimbulþul, Gípul, Göpul, Gömul, Geirvimul. Those fall about the abodes of the gods; these are also recorded: Þyn, Vín, Þöll, Gunnþráin, Nyt, Nöt, Nönn, Hrönn, Vína, Vegsvínn, and Þjódnuma."

Earlier in *Gylfaginning* 4, he names the rivers that flow from Hvergelmir as Svöl, Gunnþrá, Fjörm, Fimbulþul, Slíðr and Hríð, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víð, and Leiftr. These appear to be the Élivágar.

Snorri adds that Níðhöggr and uncountable other serpents inhabit Hvergelmir. He also says that one of the three roots of Yggdrasil stands over Niflheimr, and that under that root is Hvergelmir.

The spelling of the names of the rivers vary greatly in the manuscripts and editions.

ÉLIVÁGAR (ICE WAVES)

In Norse mythology, **Élivágar** (*Ice Waves*) are rivers that existed in Ginnungagap at the beginning of the world.

The Prose Edda relates:

The streams called Ice-waves, those which were so long come from the fountain-heads that the yeasty venom upon them had hardened like the slag that runs out of the fire,-these then became ice; and when the ice halted and ceased to run, then it froze over above. But the drizzling rain that rose from the venom congealed to rime, and the rime increased, frost over frost, each over the other, even into Ginnungagap, the Yawning Void. *Gylfaginning* 5.[1]

The eleven rivers traditionally associated with the Élivágar include the Svöl, Gunnthrá, Fjörm, Fimbulthul, Slidr, Hríd, Sylgr, Ylgr, Víd, Leiptr and Gjöll (which flows closest to the gate of Hel and is spanned by the bridge Gjallarbrú), although many other additional rivers are mentioned by name in both Eddas.

The Élivágar also figure in the origin of Ymir, the first giant. According to *Vafthrúdnismál*, Ymir was formed from the poison that dripped from the rivers.

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri expands upon this notion considerably. As quoted above, when the venomous yeast from the Élivágar froze to ice and overspread its banks it fell as rain through the mild air of Ginnungagap. The rime, infused with the cold of Niflheim from which the Élivágar find their source in the wellspring Hvergelmir, began to fill the void. It then combined with the life-giving fire and heat of Muspelheim, melting and dripping and giving form to Ymir, progenitor of the rime giants or frost giants.

Elsewhere, *Gylfaginning* says that, "So many serpents are in Hvergelmir with Nídhögg that no tongue can tell them." These serpents are presumably the source of the venom or poison referred to in the myth.

A reference to the river Leiptr appears in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, where the Valkyrie Sigrún puts a curse on her brother Dagr for having murdered her husband Helgi Hundingsbane despite his having sworn a holy oath of allegiance to Helgi on the "bright water of Leiptr" (*ljósa Leiftrar vatni*):

"Þik skyli allir eiðar bíta, þeir er Helga hafðir unna at inu ljósa Leiftrar vatni ok at úrsvölum Unnarsteini."[2]	"Now may every oath thee bite That with Helgi sworn thou hast, By the water bright of Leipt,

And the ice-cold stone of Uth."[3]

GJÖLL (RIVER)

Gjöll (Old Norse **Gjǫll**) is the river that separates the living from the dead in Norse mythology. It is one of the eleven rivers traditionally associated with the Élivágar, rivers that existed in Ginnungagap at the beginning of the world.

According to Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, Gjöll originates from the wellspring Hvergelmir in Niflheim, flowing through Ginnungagap, and thence into the worlds of existence. Gjöll is the river that flows closest to the gate of the underworld. Within the Norse mythology, the dead must cross the Gjallarbrú, the bridge over Gjöll, to reach Hel. The bridge, which was guarded by Móðguðr, was crossed by Hermóðr during his quest to retrieve Baldr from the land of the dead.[1]

In *Gylfaginning*, Gjöll is one of eleven rivers that rise from Hvergelmir. In the following chapter, these are called the Élivágar and are said to have flowed in Ginnungagap in promordial times.[2] Gjöll has a parallel with similar mythological rivers from Indo-European cultures such as the Greek Styx.

Gjöll is also the name of the boulder to which the monstrous wolf Fenrir is bound.[3] The word has been translated "noisy".[4]

GJALLARBRÚ (GJÖLL BRIDGE)

Gjallarbrú (literally "Gjöll Bridge") is a bridge in Norse mythology which spans the river Gjöll in the underworld. It must be crossed in order to reach Hel.

According to *Gylfaginning* it is described as a covered bridge, "thatched with glittering gold". It figures most prominently in the story of Baldr, specifically when Hermód is sent to retrieve the fallen god from the land of the dead. When Hermód arrived at the bridge he was challenged by the giant maiden Módgud who demanded that he state his name and business before allowing him to pass.[1]

BIFRÖST (RAINBOW BRIDGE)

In Norse mythology, **Bifröst** or sometimes **Bilröst** or **Bivrost**) is a burning rainbow bridge that reaches between Midgard (Earth) and Asgard, the realm of the gods. The bridge is attested as *Bilröst* in the *Poetic Edda*; compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional sources, and as *Bifröst* in the *Prose Edda*; written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson, and in the poetry of skalds. Both the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* alternately refer to the bridge as **Ásbrú** (Old Norse "Æsir's bridge").[2]

According to the *Prose Edda*, the bridge ends in heaven at Himinbjörg, the residence of the god Heimdallr, who guards it from the jötnar. The bridge's destruction during Ragnarök by the forces of Muspell is foretold. Scholars have proposed that the bridge may have originally represented the Milky Way and have noted parallels between the bridge and another bridge in Norse mythology, Gjallarbrú.

Etymology

Scholar Andy Orchard posits that *Bifröst* may mean "shimmering path." He notes that the first element of *Bilröst*—*bil* (meaning "a moment")—"suggests the fleeting nature of the rainbow," which he connects to the first element of *Bifröst*—the Old Norse verb *bifa* (meaning "to shimmer" or "to shake")—noting that the element evokes notions of the "lustrous sheen" of the bridge.[3] Austrian Germanist Rudolf Simek says that *Bifröst* either means "the swaying road to heaven" (also citing *bifa*) or, if *Bilröst* is the original form of the two (which Simek says is likely), "the fleetingly glimpsed rainbow" (possibly connected to *bil*, perhaps meaning "moment, weak point").[4]

Thor wades through rivers while the rest of the æsir ride across Bifröst (1895)

by Lorenz Frølich.

Attestations

Two poems in the *Poetic Edda* and two books in the *Prose Edda* provide information about the bridge:

Poetic Edda

In the *Poetic Edda*, the bridge is mentioned in the poems *Grímnismál* and *Fáfnismál*, where it is referred to as *Bilröst*. In one of two stanzas in the poem *Grímnismál* that mentions the bridge, Grímnir (the god Odin in disguise) provides the young Agnarr with cosmological knowledge, including that Bilröst is the best of bridges.[5] Later in *Grímnismál*, Grímnir notes that Asbrú "burns all with flames" and that, every day, the god Thor wades through the waters of Körmt and Örmt and the two Kerlaugar:

Benjamin Thorpe translation:	Henry Adams Bellows translation:
Körmt and Ormt, and the Kerlaugs twain:	Kormt and Ormt and the Kerlaugs twain
these Thor must wade	Shall Thor each day wade through,
each day, when he to council goes	(When dooms to give he forth shall go
at Yggdrasil's ash;	To the ash-tree Yggdrasil;)
for as the As-bridge is all on fire,	For heaven's bridge burns all in flame,
the holy waters boil.[6]	And the sacred waters seethe.[7]

In *Fáfnismál*, the dying wyrm Fafnir tells the hero Sigurd that, during the events of Ragnarök, bearing spears, gods will meet at Óskópnir. From there, the gods will cross Bilröst, which will break apart as they cross over it, causing their horses to dredge through an immense river.[8]

Bifröst appears in the background as the gods do battle in *Battle of the Doomed Gods* (1882) by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine.

Bifröst is shattered in *The twilight of the gods* (1920) by Willy Pogany.

Prose Edda

The bridge is mentioned in the *Prose Edda* books *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, where it is referred to as *Bifröst*. In chapter 13 of *Gylfaginning*, Gangleri (King Gylfi in disguise) asks the enthroned figure of High what way exists between heaven and earth. Laughing, High replies that the question isn't an intelligent one, and goes on to explain that the gods built a bridge from heaven and earth. He incredulously asks Gangleri if he has not heard the story before. High says that Gangleri must have seen it, and notes that Gangleri may call it a rainbow. High says that the bridge consists of three colors, has great strength, "and is built with art and skill to a greater extent than other constructions."[9]

High notes that, although the bridge is strong, it will break when "Muspell's lads" attempt to cross it, and their horses will have to make do with swimming over "great rivers." Gangleri says that it doesn't seem that the gods "built the bridge in good faith if it is liable to break, considering that they can do as they please." High responds that the gods do not deserve blame for the breaking of the bridge, for "there is nothing in this world that will be secure when Muspell's sons attack."[9]

In chapter 15 of *Gylfaginning*, Just-As-High says that Bifröst is also called *Asbrú*, and that every day the gods ride their horses across it (with the exception of Thor, who instead wades through the boiling waters of the rivers Körmt and Örmt) to reach Urðarbrunnr, a holy well where the gods have their court. As a reference, Just-As-High quotes the second of the two stanzas in *Grímnismál* that mention the bridge (see above). Gangleri asks if fire burns over Bifröst. High says that the red in the bridge is burning fire, and, without it, the frost jotnar and mountain jotnar would "go up into heaven" if anyone who wanted could cross Bifröst. High adds that, in heaven, "there are many beautiful places" and that "everywhere there has divine protection around it."[10]

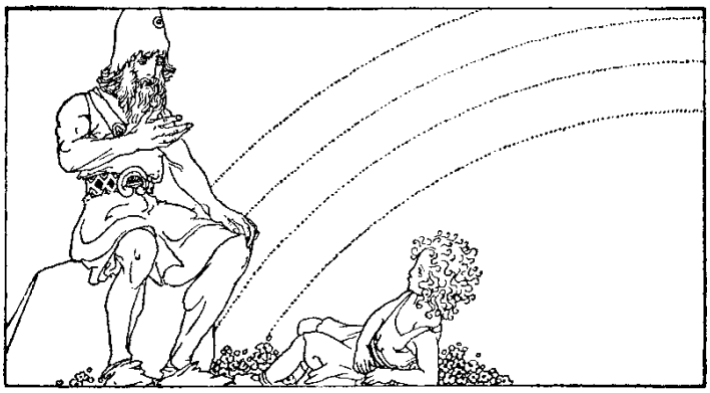
In chapter 17, High tells Gangleri that the location of Himinbjörg "stands at the edge of heaven where Bifrost reaches heaven."[11] While describing the god Heimdallr in chapter 27, High says

that Heimdallr lives in Himinbjörg by Bifröst, and guards the bridge from mountain jotnar while sitting at the edge of heaven.[12] In chapter 34, High quotes the first of the two *Grímnismál* stanzas that mention the bridge.[13] In chapter 51, High foretells the events of Ragnarök. High says that, during Ragnarök, the sky will split open, and from the split will ride forth the "sons of Muspell". When the "sons of Muspell" ride over Bifröst it will break, "as was said above."[14]
In the *Prose Edda* book *Skáldskaparmál*, the bridge receives a single mention. In chapter 16, a work by the 10th century skald Úlfr Uggason is provided, where Bifröst is referred to as "the powers' way."[15]

Theories

In his translation of the *Prose Edda*, Henry Adams Bellows comments that the *Grímnismál* stanza mentioning Thor and the bridge stanza may mean that "Thor has to go on foot in the last days of the destruction, when the bridge is burning. Another interpretation, however, is that when Thor leaves the heavens (i.e., when a thunder-storm is over) the rainbow-bridge becomes hot in the sun."[7]

John Lindow points to a parallel between Bifröst, which he notes is "a bridge between earth and heaven, or earth and the world of the gods", and the bridge Gjallarbrú, "a bridge between earth and the underworld, or earth and the world of the dead."[16] Several scholars have proposed that Bifröst may represent the Milky Way.[17]



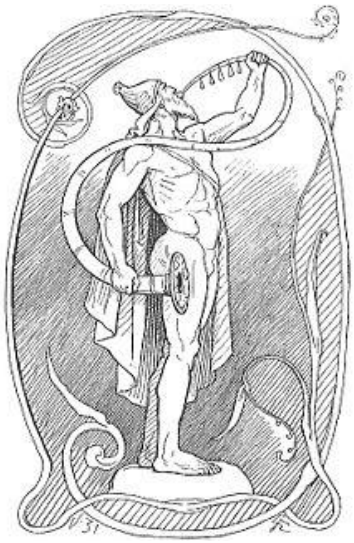
Bifröst in the background, Heimdallr explains to a young Hnoss how all things came to be (1920) by Willy Pogany.

GJALLARHORN (HEIMDALL / MIMIR)

In Norse mythology, **Gjallarhorn** (Old Norse: [ˈgjalrhorn],[1] "yelling horn"[2] or "the loud sounding horn"[3]) is a horn associated with the god Heimdallr and the wise being Mímir.

Gjallarhorn is attested in the *Poetic Edda*, compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional material, and the *Prose Edda*, written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson.

Bronze horn from 899-700 B.C. Påarp, Sweden.



Heimdallr blows into Gjallarhorn in an 1895 illustration by Lorenz Frølich

Attestations

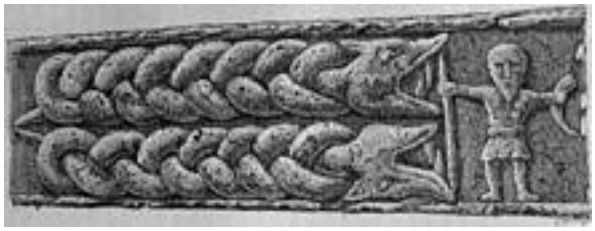
Gjallarhorn is attested once by name in the *Poetic Edda* while it receives three mentions in the *Prose Edda*:

Prose Edda

In the *Prose Edda*, Gjallarhorn is mentioned thrice, and all three mentions occur in *Gylfaginning*. In chapter 14, the enthroned figure Just-As-High tells the disguised Gangleri about the cosmological tree Yggdrasil. Just-As-High says that one of the three roots of Yggdrasil reaches to the well Mímisbrunnr, which belongs to Mímir, and contains much wisdom and intelligence. Using Gjallarhorn, Heimdallr drinks from the well and thus is himself wise.[4]

In chapter 25 of *Gylfaginning*, High tells Gangleri about Heimdallr. High mentions that Heimdallr is the owner of the "trumpet" (see footnote) Gjallarhorn and that "its blast can be heard in all worlds".[5] In chapter 51, High foretells the events of Ragnarök. After the enemies of the gods will gather at the plain Vígríðr, Heimdallr will stand and mightily blow into Gjallarhorn. The gods will awake and assemble together at the thing.[6]

Archaeological record

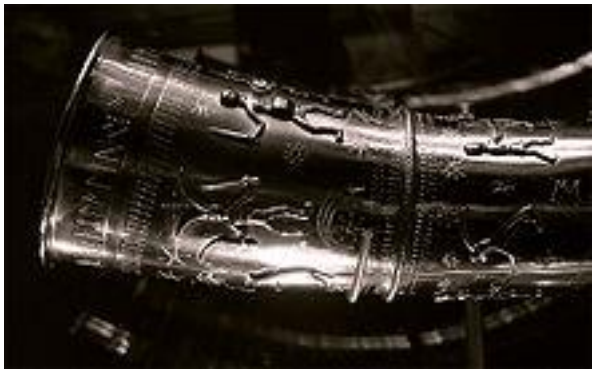


The Gosforth Cross panel often held to depict Heimdallr with Gjallarhorn

A figure holding a large horn to his lips and clasping a sword on his hip appears on a stone cross from the Isle of Man. Some scholars have theorized that this figure is a depiction of Heimdallr with Gjallarhorn.[7]

A 9th or 10th century Gosforth Cross in Cumbria, England depicts a figure holding a horn and a sword standing defiantly before two open-mouthed beasts. This figure has been oft theorized as depicting Heimdallr with Gjallarhorn.[8]

Theories and interpretations



Detail of a copy of one of the two Golden Horns of Gallehus

Scholar Rudolf Simek comments that the use of a horn as both a musical instrument and a drinking vessel is not particularly odd, and that the concept is also employed with tales of the legendary Old French hero Roland's horn, Olifant. Simek notes that the horn is among the most ancient of Germanic musical instruments, along with lurs, and, citing archaeological finds (such as the 5th century Golden Horns of Gallehus from Denmark), comments that there appears to have been sacral horns kept purely for religious purposes among the Germanic people; understood as earthly versions of Heimdallr's Gjallarhorn, reaching back to the early Germanic Iron Age.[9]

NÍÐHÖGGR (WORLD SERPENT)

Níðhǫggr gnaws the roots of Yggdrasill in this illustration from a 17th-century Icelandic manuscript.

In Norse mythology, **Níðhöggr** (*Malice Striker*, traditionally also spelled **Níðhǫggr**, often anglicized **Nidhogg**[1]) is a dragon/serpent who gnaws at a root of the world tree, Yggdrasil. In historical Viking society, níð was a term for a social stigma implying the loss of honor and the status of a villain. Thus, its name might refer to its role as a horrific monster or in its action of chewing the corpses of the inhabitants of Náströnd: those guilty of murder, adultery, and oath-breaking, which Norse society considered among the worst possible crimes. Níðhöggr nibbles on Yggdrasil's toes (roots)

Orthography

In the standardized Old Norse orthography, the name is spelled *Níðhǫggr*, but the letter *ǫ* is frequently replaced with the Modern Icelandic *ö* for reasons of familiarity or technical expediency.

The name can be represented in English texts with *i* for *í*; *th*, *d* or (rarely) *dh* for *ð*; *o* for *ǫ* and optionally without *r* as in Modern Scandinavian reflexes. The Modern Icelandic form *Níðhöggur* is also sometimes seen, with special characters or similarly anglicized. The Danish forms *Nidhug* and *Nidhøg* can also be encountered; or Norwegian *Nidhogg* and Swedish *Nidhögg*.

Prose Edda

According to the *Gylfaginning* part of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, Níðhǫggr is a being which gnaws one of the three roots of Yggdrasill. It is sometimes believed that the roots are trapping the beast from the world. This root is placed over Niflheimr and Níðhǫggr gnaws it from beneath. The same source also says that "[t]he squirrel called Ratatoskr runs up and down the length of the Ash, bearing envious words between the eagle and Nídhǫggr [the snake]."[2]
In the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda* Snorri specifies Níðhǫggr as a serpent in a list of names of such creatures:

These are names for serpents: dragon, Fafnir, Jormungand, adder, Nidhogg, snake, viper, Goin, Moin, Grafvitnir, Grabak, Ofnir, Svafnir, masked one.[3]
Snorri's knowledge of Níðhǫggr seems to come from two of the Eddic poems: *Grímnismál* and *Völuspá*.

Later in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri includes Níðhǫggr in a list of various terms and names for swords.[4]

Poetic Edda

The poem *Grímnismál* identifies a number of beings which live in Yggdrasill. The tree suffers great hardship from all the creatures which live on it. The poem identifies Níðhǫggr as tearing at the tree from beneath and also mentions Ratatoskr as carrying messages between Níðhǫggr and the eagle who lives at the top of the tree. Snorri Sturluson often quotes Grímnismál and clearly used it as his source for this information.

The poem *Völuspá* mentions Níðhöggr/Níðhǫggr twice. The first instance is in its description of Náströnd.

Eysteinn Björnsson's edition

Sal sá hon standa
sólu fjarri
Náströndu á,
norðr horfa dyrr.
Fellu eitrdropar
inn um ljóra,
sá er undinn salr
orma hryggjum.
Sá hon þar vaða
þunga strauma
menn meinsvara
ok morðvarga
ok þanns annars glepr
eyrarúnu.
Þar saug Niðhöggr
nái framgengna,
sleit vargr vera—
vituð ér enn, eða hvat ?

Bellows' translation

A hall I saw,
far from the sun,
On Nastrond it stands,
and the doors face north,
Venom drops
through the smoke-vent down,
For around the walls
do serpents wind.
I there saw wading
through rivers wild
treacherous men
and murderers too,
And workers of ill
with the wives of men;
There Nithhogg sucked
the blood of the slain,
And the wolf tore men;
would you know yet more?

Dronke's translation

A hall she saw standing
remote from the sun
on Dead Body Shore.
Its door looks north.
There fell drops of venom
in through the roof vent.
That hall is woven
of serpents' spines.
She saw there wading
onerous streams
men perjured
and wolfish murderers
and the one who seduces
another's close-trusted wife.
There Malice Striker sucked
corpses of the dead,
the wolf tore men.
Do you still seek to know? And what?

Níðhöggr/Níðhǫggr is also mentioned at the end of *Völuspá*, where he is identified as a dragon and a serpent.

Eysteinn Björnsson's edition

Þar kømr inn dimmi
dreki fljúgandi,
naðr fránn, neðan
frá Niðafjöllum.
Berr sér í fjöðrum
—flýgr völl yfir—
Níðhöggr nái—
nú mun hon søkkvask.

Bellows' translation

From below the dragon
dark comes forth,
Nithhogg flying
from Nithafjoll;
The bodies of men
on his wings he bears,
The serpent bright:
but now must I sink.

Dronke's translation

There comes the shadowy
dragon flying,
glittering serpent, up
from Dark of the Moon Hills.
He carries in his pinions
—he flies over the field—
Malice Striker, corpses.
Now will she sink.

The context and meaning of this stanza are disputed. The most prevalent opinion is that the arrival of Níðhǫggr heralds Ragnarök and thus that the poem ends on a tone of ominous warning. It could be however, as the prevalent themes of Norse mythology are those of change and renewal, that this could be a 'redemption' of the serpent, 'shedding' the corpses and beginning life anew, much like a macabre Phoenix.

Níðhǫggr is not mentioned elsewhere in any ancient source.

DÖKKÁLFAR & LJÓSÁLFAR

Elfplay (1866) by August Malmström

In Norse mythology, **Dökkálfar** (Old Norse: *Døkkálfar* "Dark Elves"; singular *Døkkálfr*) and **Ljósálfar** (Old Norse for "Light Elves", singular **Ljósálfr**) are two contrasting types of elves; the former dwell within the earth and are most swarthy, while the latter live in Álfheimr, and are "fairer than the sun to look at". Álfheimr, or Elf-Land, was known as the place of residence for the elves, specifically the light elves.[1] The Dökkálfar and the Ljósálfar are attested in the *Prose Edda*, written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson and in the late Old Norse poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*. Sturluson, born in 1179, was a prominent Icelandic chieftan and poet.[2]

Sturluson is known for being a wealthy figure of authority.[3] Snorri was a human paradox. In his work "Snorra Saga Sturlusonar: A Short Biography of Snorri Sturluson," Kevin Wanner explains, "For his own contemporaries Snorri no doubt was the powerful chieftain known for his munificence as well as his avarice…a ruthless intriguer whom it was dangerous to have as one's adversary."[4] Scholars have produced theories about the origin and implications of the dualistic concept.

Attestations

Prose Edda

As described by Anders Andren, the Prose Edda is a "systematic survey of old Norse mythology in a handbook for skalds.[5]Originally called simply Edda, this work consisted of two manuscripts containing skaldic poetry that describe Norse mythology, religion, and Scandinavian history. In her article Edda, Kimberly Lin further explains that the Prose Edda, "has been most highly prized for the songs and poems that record an incredible array of mythology, heroes, and battles.[6] In the *Prose Edda*, the Dökkálfar and the Ljósálfar are attested in chapter 17 of the book *Gylfaginning*. In the chapter, Gangleri (the king Gylfi in disguise) asks the enthroned figure of

High what other "chief centres" there are in the heavens outside of the spring Urðarbrunnr. Gangleri responds that there are many fine places in heaven, including a place called Álfheimr (Old Norse 'Elf Home' or 'Elf World'). High says that the Ljósálfar live in Álfheimr, while the Dökkálfar dwell underground and look—and particularly behave—quite unlike the Ljósálfar. High describes the Ljósálfar as "fairer than the sun to look at", while the Dökkálfar are "blacker than pitch".[7][8]

As chapter 17 continues, Gangleri asks what will protect the beautiful hall of Gimlé, previously described as "the southernmost end of heaven", when the fires of Surtr "burn heaven and earth" (Ragnarök). High responds that there are in fact other heavens. The first called Andlàngr, he says, is "south of and above this heaven of ours" and "we believe" Gimlé is located in the third heaven "still further above that one", Víðbláinn. High adds that "we believe it is only light-elves who inhabit these places for the time being".[8][9]

Hrafnagaldr Óðins

There occurs an additional mention of the *dökkálfar* in the late Old Norse poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins* ('Odin's Raven-galdr'), stanza 25.[10]

Theories and interpretations

As the concept is only recorded in *Gylfaginning* and the late poem *Hrafnagaldr Óðins*, it is unclear whether the distinction between the two types of elves originated with Snorri, or if he was merely recounting a concept already developed.

Question of Christian influence

The sub-classification perhaps resulted from Christian influence, by way of importation of the concept of good and evil and angels of light and darkness. Anne Holtsmark aired this view,[a] though with some reservation, since "good vs. evil" dualism is not confined to Christian thinking.[b] Aside from some additional observations to encourage the hypothesis,[c] Holtsmark has been credited with demonstrating that Snorri borrowed from Christian writings, specifically that "Snorri's description of Víðbláinn [the third heaven populated by light-elves] was almost certainly influenced by (and possibly based on) the account of the angels in the *Elucidarius*."[14][d]

Dissenters of the view that elves were a later invention, such as Rudolf Simek and Gabriel Turville-Petre, feel rather that "dark" and "light" aspects of the same beings not inherently unlikely, death and fertility cults often being closely related.[15][16]

Dwarfs

Since the *Prose Edda* describes the *dökkálfar* as being subterranean dwellers, they may be dwarves under another name, in the opinion of a number of scholars such as John Lindow.[17][18]

The *Prose Edda* also uniquely mentions the *svartálfar* ('black elves'),[18] but there are reasons to believe these also refer to merely dwarves.[e]
Consequently, Lindow and other commentators have remarked that there may not have been any distinction intended between dark-elves and black-elves by those who coined and used those terms.[f] Lotte Motz's paper on elves commingles, and hence equates "dark-elves" and "black-elves" from the outset.[20]

Grimm's trinity

Jacob Grimm[21] surmised that the proto-elf (*ursprünglich*) was probably a "light-colored, white, good spirit" while the dwarfs may have been conceived as "black spirits" by relative comparison. But the "two classes of creatures were getting confounded," and there arose a need to coin the term "light-elf" (***ljósálfar***, or ***hvítálfar*** — "white elves")[22] to refer to the "elves proper". This was counterpart to the "dark-elf" (***dökkálfar***, or ***svartálfar*** — "black elves").[23][g]

Preferring it over duality, Grimm postulated three kinds of elves (*liosálfar*, *dockálfar*, *svartálfar*) present in Norse mythology.[24]

But Grimm's "tripartite division" (as Shippey calls it) faced "trouble" in Snorri's statement that dark-elves were pitch-black, as this would lead to the "first reduction" that "dark-elves = black-elves." As a solution, Grimm "pronounce[es] Snorri's statement fallacious," and hypothesizes that "dark elves" were not really 'dark' but rather 'dingy' or 'pale'.[21][25] And while conceding that "such a Trilogy still [lacks] decisive proof,"[26] draws parallels from the white, brown and black subterranean in Pomeranian legend,[26] and the white, pale, and black troops of spirits come to claim souls in the tale of *Solomon and Marcolf*.[26][27]

SVARTÁLFAR

In Norse mythology, **svartálfar** (O.N. "black elves", "swarthy elves", sing. **svartálfr**), also called **myrkálfar** ("dark elves", "dusky elves", "murky elves", sing. **myrkálfr**),[1][2] are beings who dwell in **Svartalfheim** (*Svartálf[a]heimr*, "home of the black-elves").[3] Both the svartálfar and Svartálfaheimr are primarily attested in the *Prose Edda*, written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson. Scholars have noted that the svartálfar appear to be synonymous with the dwarfs and potentially also the dökkálfar ("dark elves"). As dwarfs, the home of the svartálfar could possibly be another description for *Niðavellir* ("dark fields").

Attestations

The *svartálfar* are almost only attested in the *Prose Edda* (the word does appear in *Ektors saga ok kappa hans*, but is presumably borrowed from the *Prose Edda*).[4] The *svartálfar* mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* 35 are the Sons of Ivaldi, whom Loki engages to craft replacement hair for Sif, wife of the god Thor, after Loki mischievously sheared off her golden tresses.[5] Ivaldi is often glossed as being a dwarf.[6]

Svartálfaheimr ("world of black-elves") appears in the *Prose Edda* twice,[3][7] in each case as the place where certain dwarfs can be found to be living:[8] In *Gylfaginning* 33, the "world of black-elves" is where the dwarfs are sought by the gods to craft the fetter Gleipnir to bind the wolf Fenrir.[9] And in *Skáldskaparmál,* 39, the "world of black-elves" is where Loki encounters the dwarf Andvari.[10]

Theories and interpretations

Scholars have commented that, as both attestations mentioning the beings and location appear to refer to dwarfs, *svartálfr* and *dwarf* may simply be synonyms for the same concept.[11]

Scholar John Lindow comments that whether the dökkálfar and the svartálfar were considered the same at the time of the writing of the *Prose Edda* is also unclear.[12]

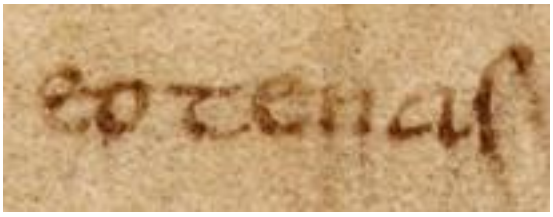
JÖTNAR (GIANTS)

In Norse mythology, a **jötunn** (/ˈjɔːtʊn/;[1] plural **jötnar**) is a type of entity contrasted with gods and other figures, such as dwarfs and elves. The entities are themselves ambiguously defined, variously referred to by several other terms, including **risi**, **thurs**, and *troll*.

Although the term *giant* is sometimes used to gloss the word *jötunn* and its apparent synonyms in some translations and academic texts, jötnar are not necessarily notably large and may be described as exceedingly beautiful or as alarmingly grotesque.[2] Some deities, such as Skaði and Gerðr, are themselves described as jötnar, and various well-attested deities, such as Odin, are descendants of the jötnar.

Norse myth traces the origin of the jötnar to the proto-being Ymir, a result of growth of asexual reproduction from the entity's body. Ymir is later killed, his body dismembered to create the world, and the jötnar survive this event by way of sailing through a flood of Ymir's blood. The jötnar dwell in Jötunheimr. In later Scandinavian folklore, the ambiguity surrounding the entities gives way to negative portrayals.

Etymology



"eotenas," as they were called by the anonymous author of the *Beowulf*

Old Norse *jötunn* (also *jǫtunn*, see Old Norse orthography) and Old English *eóten* developed from the Proto-Germanic masculine noun **etunaz*.[3] Philologist Vladimir Orel says that semantic connections between **etunaz* with Proto-Germanic **etanan* makes a relation between the two nouns likely.[3] Proto-Germanic **etanan* is reconstructed from Old Norse *etall* 'consuming', Old English *etol* 'voracious, gluttonous', and Old High German *filu-ezzal* 'greedy'.[3] Old Norse *risi* and Old High German *riso* derive from the Proto-Germanic masculine noun **wrisjon*. Orel observes that the Old Saxon adjective *wrisi-līke* 'enormous' is likely also connected.[4]

Old Norse *þurs*, Old English *ðyrs*, and Old High German *duris* 'devil, evil spirit' derive from the Proto-Germanic masculine noun **þur(i)saz*, itself derived form Proto-Germanic **þurēnan*, which is etymologically connected to Sanskrit *turá-* 'strong, powerful, rich'.[5] For discussion regarding Old Norse *troll* and its development, see troll. Several terms are used specifically to

refer to female entities that fall into this category, including *íviðja* (plural *íviðjur*) and *gýgr* (plural *gýgjar*).

Attestations

The jötnar are frequently attested throughout the Old Norse record. For example, in a stanza of *Völuspá hin skamma* (found in the poem *Hyndluljóð*), a variety of origins are provided: völvas are descended from Viðòlfr, all seers from Vilmeiðr, all charm-workers from Svarthöfði, and all jötnar descend from Ymir.[6]

Additional Information

Giants and Freia

A **Jötunn**, some times anglicized as **Jotun** (pronounced yōtən[1]), plural: **jötnar** or **Jotnar**, is a giant in Norse mythology, a member of a race of nature spirits with superhuman strength, described as standing in opposition to the races of Æsir and Vanir, although they frequently mingled with or were even married to these. Their otherworldly homeland is Jötunheimr, one of the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, separated from Midgard, the world of humans, by high mountains or dense forests. Other place names are also associated with them, including Niflheimr, Útgarðar and Járnviðr. In some legends and myths they are described as having the same height as humans.

In later Scandinavian folklore, the nature spirit called Troll (deriving from the term for 'magic') takes over many of the functions of the more ancient concept of Jötunn.

The mountain range of southern Norway is likewise called in Norwegian Jotunheimen or the Jotunheim Mountains.

Etymology

In Old Norse, they were called **jötnar** (sing. *jötunn*), or **risar** (sing. *risi*), in particular *bergrisar*, or **þursar** (sing. *þurs*), in particular *hrímþursar* ('rime-giant'). A giantess could also be known as a *gýgr*.

Jötunn (Proto-Germanic **etunaz*) might have the same root as "eat" (Proto-Germanic *etan) and accordingly had the original meaning of "glutton" or "man-eater", probably in the sense of personifying chaos, the destructive forces of nature.[2] Following the same logic, *þurs*[3] might be derivative of "thirst" or "blood-thirst." *Risi*[4] is probably akin to "rise," and so means "towering person" (akin to German *Riese*, Dutch *reus*, archaic Swedish *rese*, giant). The word "jotun" survives in modern Norwegian as giant (though more commonly called trolls), and has evolved into *jätte* and *jætte* in modern Swedish and Danish. In modern Icelandic *jötunn* has kept its original meaning. In Old English, the cognate to *jötunn* are *eoten*, whence modern English *ettin*. Old English also has the cognate *þyrs* of the same meaning. [1]

A Finnish sea monster and possible god of war was called Tursas which may be related to the word *þurs*.

The Saami languages, also Finnic, have in their mythology *jiettanas*, which were man-eating people with several wives. They could be captured and eaten by humans, and their stomachs were filled with gold and silver. Whether or not this word came from Germanic languages is unknown.

The Viking rune Þ, called Thurs (from Proto-Germanic **Þurisaz*), later evolved into the letter Þ.

In Scandinavian folklore, the Norwegian name Tusse for a kind of Troll or Nisse, derives from Old Norse Þurs.

Norse Giants

The first living being formed in the primeval chaos known as Ginnungagap was a giant of monumental size, called Ymir. When he slept a giant son and a giantess daughter grew from his armpits, and his two feet procreated and gave birth to a monster with six heads. Supposedly, these three beings gave rise to the race of *hrímþursar* (*rime giants* or *frost giants*), who populated Niflheim, the world of mist, chill and ice. The gods instead claim their origin from a certain Búri. When the giant Ymir subsequently was slain by Odin, Vili and Vé (the grandsons of Búri), his blood (i.e. water) deluged Niflheim and killed all of the giants, apart from one known as Bergelmir and his spouse, who then repopulated their kind.

Character Of The Giants

The giants represent the forces of the primeval chaos and of the untamed, destructive nature. Their defeats by the hands of the gods represent the triumph of culture over nature, albeit at the cost of eternal vigilance. Heimdallr perpetually watches the Bifröst bridge from Asgard to Midgard, and Thor being too heavy to cross the Bifrost Bridge often ventures into Jötunheimr to get to Midgard, slaying as many of the giants as he is able on the way.

As a collective, giants are often attributed a hideous appearance – claws, fangs, and deformed features, apart from a generally hideous size. Some of them may even have many heads, such as Thrivaldi who had nine of them, or an overall non-humanoid shape; so were Jörmungandr and Fenrir, two of the children of Loki, viewed as giants. With bad looks comes a weak intellect; the Eddas more than once liken their temper to that of children.

Yet when giants are named and more closely described, they are often given the opposite characteristics. Unbelievably old, they carry wisdom from bygone times. It is the giants Mímir and Vafþrúðnir Odin seeks out to gain this pro-cosmic knowledge. Many of the gods' spouses are giants. Njörðr is married to Skaði, Gerðr becomes the consort of Freyr, Odin gains the love of Gunnlöð, and even Thor, the great slayer of their kind, breeds with Járnsaxa, mother of Magni. As such, they appear as minor gods themselves, which can also be said about the sea giant Ægir, far more connected to the gods than to the other giants occupying Jotunheim. None of these fear light, and in comfort their homes do not differ greatly from those of the gods.

Ragnarök And The Fire Giants

Main article: Ragnarök

A certain class of giants were the *fire giants*, said to reside in Muspelheim, the world of heat and fire, ruled by the fire giant Surtr ("the black one") and his queen Sinmore. Logi, the incarnation of fire, was another of their kind. The main role of the fire giants in Norse mythology is to wreak the final destruction of the world by setting fire to the world tree Yggdrasil at the end of Ragnarök, when the giants of Jotunheim and the forces of Hel shall launch an attack on the gods, and kill all but a few of them. During Ragnarök, the fire giants (or Muspeli) ride on great horses and burn Midgard killing all the people, some of the gods, and all the fire giants themselves except a man and a woman set by Odin in a great forest that did not burn down.

Note: The original Rime-Giants (Frost Giants) were wiped out by Odin, Vili and Ve when they flooded the earth with Ymir's blood.

EVENTS WITHIN JÖTUNHEIMR

How Menglöð Was Won

Svipdagr was given a task by his stepmother to woo the maiden Menglöð. He summoned his mother, Gróa, a völva in life, to seek her advice on how to woo the maiden Menglöð. Gróa cast a series of charms to protect him on his quest. Upon arriving at Jötunheim, Svipdagr is blocked by a castle gate guarded by the jötunn **Fjölsviðr**,[2] who dismisses him before asking for his name. Svipdagr, giving a false name, answers a series of questions, in which he learned about the castle, its residents, and its environments. Svipdagr learns that the gate will only open up to one person: Svipdagr. The gates opens when he reveals his identity, where he is met by his expected lover, Menglöð.

How Thor Killed Geirröd

The popular myth of how Thor killed the jötunn Geirröd has many variations, but all of them are caused by the trickster god Loki. Donning a suit of falcon feathers, Loki paid a visit to the jötunn's castle. When Geirröd saw the falcon, he knew right away that it was not a real falcon. Locked in a cage and starving, Loki revealed his identity. Geirröd released him on the condition that he bring Thor without his hammer to his castle. Loki readily agreed.

Back in Asgard, Loki openly discussed the giant's eagerness to meet Thor to introduce his two beautiful daughters[2], Gjálp and Greip. Simple-minded Thor couldn't resist the temptation of meeting beautiful maidens. He agreed to Loki's suggestion of leaving his hammer behind. On the way to the castle, Thor and Loki had to stay overnight with a gentle giantess, Gríðr, who warned Thor of the danger Geirröd possessed. The giantess lent him her belt and her magic staff.

Seeing the giantess Gjálp causing the water on Vimur river to rise, Thor used the magic staff to escape drowning, and then threw a rock at the giantess who fled. Thor and Loki arrived at the castle, where he was placed in a room with one chair. Weary from the travel, he sat down and closed his eyes. All at once, Thor was closing in on the ceiling. He thrust Gríðr's staff against the roof beam and pushed down. With the heavy weight and force of their guest, the giantess sisters, Gjálp and Greip, were crushed to death[2].

Thor, displeased with everything that had happened, went to confront Geirröd. The giant raised his hand and threw a hot lump of iron at the thunder god. Using the iron gloves lent to him by Gríðr, Thor caught the hot iron and threw it back at the giant who hid behind a pillar. The hot ball went straight into the pillar, into the head of Geirröd, and finally rested deep into the earth.

How Thor Lost His Hammer

Thrym's Wedding-feast by W.G. Collingwood

Thor, the god of thunder and storm, once lost his hammer, Mjölnir. With the loss of the mighty weapon, the only absolute defense of the Aesir against the giants, Asgard would be in much danger. Thor's angered shouts were heard by the trickster god, Loki, who knew that he must help this time. Thor and Loki sought out Freyja, a beautiful goddess, to borrow her suit of falcon feathers[3]:1. Putting on the feathered coat, Loki flew to Jötunheim.

Loki met the king of the jötnar, Þrymr (often anglicized as **Thrym**), who had admitted to the theft of Thor's hammer. Mjölnir was hidden deep beneath the earth.[4] Loki flew back to Asgard and relayed the information to Thor. The gods convened a meeting to discuss how to get back the hammer. Heimdallr offered the solution to their problem. Thor was to be dressed in bridal clothes and meet Þrymr as Freyja.

Upon hearing that Freyja was on her way, Þrymr ordered a grand feast in her honor[5]:48. Seeing his bride consume large servings of food after food, Thrym was astounded by the fact. Loki reasoned "she" had not eaten or drunk for eight days due to her anxiety in meeting him. Elated, Thrym reached over to kiss his bride, but seeing the glaring eyes of Thor through the thin veil, he withdrew in disappointment. Loki explained that "Freyja" had not slept for eight nights in her excitement to come to Jötunheim[2][3]. Wanting the marriage to be done quickly, Thrym ordered for Mjölnir to be brought to his bride. Once Mjölnir was placed on his lap, Thor grabbed the hammer by its handle and slew every jötunn in sight.

How Útgarða-Loki Outwitted Thor

"I am the giant Skrymir" (1902) by Elmer Boyd Smith.

The tale of how Thor was outwitted by the giant Útgarða-Loki (often anglicized as **Utgard-Loki**) was one of the best known myths of Norse mythology. Thor, wanting to go to Utgard, the stronghold of the jötunn, traveled with Asgard's trickster god, Loki. Utgard was guarded by Útgarða-Loki, a known master of trickery[6]:0.

Thor and Loki were traveling to Jötunheimr, accompanied by Þjálfi (anglicized as **Thialfi**) and his sister, Röskva. They arrived to a vast forest and continued their journey through the woods until dark. The four seek shelter for the night and discover an immense building. Finding shelter in a side room, they experience earthquakes through the night. The earthquakes cause all four to be fearful, except Thor, who grips his hammer in defense. The building turns out to be the huge glove of Skrýmir, who has been snoring throughout the night, causing what seemed to be earthquakes. The next night, all four sleep beneath an oak tree near Skrýmir in fear.[7]

Thor wakes up in the middle of the night, and a series of events occur where Thor twice attempts to destroy the sleeping Skrýmir with his hammer. Skrýmir awakes after each attempt, only to say that he detected an acorn falling on his head or that he wonders if bits of tree from the branches above have fallen on top of him. The second attempt awakes Skrýmir. Skrýmir gives them advice; if they are going to be cocky at the castle of Útgarðr it would be better for them to turn back now, for Útgarða-Loki's men there won't put up with it. Skrýmir throws his knapsack onto his back and abruptly goes into the forest and "there is no report that the Æsir expressed hope for a happy reunion".[8]

The four travelers continue their journey until midday. They find themselves facing a massive castle in an open area. The castle is so tall that they must bend their heads back to their spines to see above it. At the entrance to the castle is a shut gate, and Thor finds that he cannot open it. Struggling, all four squeeze through the bars of the gate, and continue to a large hall. Inside the great hall are two benches, where many generally large people sit on two benches. The four see Útgarða-Loki, the king of the castle, sitting.[9]

Útgarða-Loki says that no visitors are allowed to stay unless they can perform a feat. Loki, standing in the rear of the party, is the first to speak, claiming that he can eat faster than anyone. Loki competes with a being named Logi to consume a trencher full of meat but loses. Útgarða-Loki asks what feat the "young man" can perform, referring to Þjálfi. Þjálfi says that he will attempt to run a race against anyone Útgarða-Loki chooses. Útgarða-Loki says that this would be a fine feat yet that Þjálfi had better be good at running, for he is about to be put to the test. Útgarða-Loki and the group go outside to a level-grounded course.[10]

At the course, Útgarða-Loki calls for a small figure by the name of Hugi to compete with Þjálfi. The first race begins and Þjálfi runs, but Hugi runs to the end of the course and then back again to meet Þjálfi. Útgarða-Loki comments to Þjálfi that he will have to run faster than that, yet notes that he has never seen anyone who has come to his hall run faster than that. Þjálfi and Hugi run a second race. Þjálfi loses by an arrow-shot. Útgarða-Loki comments that Þjálfi has again ran a fine race but that he has no confidence that Þjálfi will be able to win a third. A third race between the two commences and Þjálfi again loses to Hugi. Everyone agrees that the contest between Þjálfi and Hugi has been decided.[11]

Thor agrees to compete in a drinking contest but after three immense gulps fails. Thor agrees to lift a large, gray cat in the hall but finds that it arches his back no matter what he does, and that he can only raise a single paw. Thor demands to fight someone in the hall, but the inhabitants say doing so would be demeaning, considering Thor's weakness. Útgarða-Loki then calls for his nurse Elli, an old woman. The two wrestle but the harder Thor struggles the more difficult the battle becomes. Thor is finally brought down to a single knee. Útgarða-Loki said to Thor that fighting anyone else would be pointless. Now late at night, Útgarða-Loki shows the group to their rooms and they are treated with hospitality.[12]

The next morning the group gets dressed and prepares to leave the keep. Útgarða-Loki appears, has his servants prepare a table, and they all merrily eat and drink. As they leave, Útgarða-Loki asks Thor how he thought he fared in the contests. Thor says that he is unable to say he did well, noting that he is particularly annoyed that Útgarða-Loki will now speak negatively about him. Útgarða-Loki, once the group has left his keep, points out that he hopes that they never return to it, for if he had an inkling of what he was dealing with he would never have allowed the group to enter in the first place. Útgarða-Loki reveals that all was not what it seemed to the group. Útgarða-Loki was in fact the immense Skrýmir, and that if the three blows Thor

attempted to land had hit their mark, the first would have killed Skrýmir. In reality, Thor's blows were so powerful that they had resulted in three square valleys.[13]

The contests, too, were an illusion. Útgarða-Loki reveals that Loki had actually competed against wildfire itself (*Logi*, Old Norse "flame"), Þjálfi had raced against thought (*Hugi*, Old Norse "thought"), Thor's drinking horn had actually reached to the ocean and with his drinks he lowered the ocean level (resulting in tides). The cat that Thor attempted to lift was in actuality the world serpent, Jörmungandr, and everyone was terrified when Thor was able to lift the paw of this "cat", for Thor had actually held the great serpent up to the sky. The old woman Thor wrestled was in fact old age (*Elli*, Old Norse "old age"), and there is no one that old age cannot bring down. Útgarða-Loki tells Thor that it would be better for "both sides" if they did not meet again. Upon hearing this, Thor takes hold of his hammer and swings it at Útgarða-Loki but he is gone and so is his castle. Only a wide landscape remains.[14]

The Abduction of Iðunn

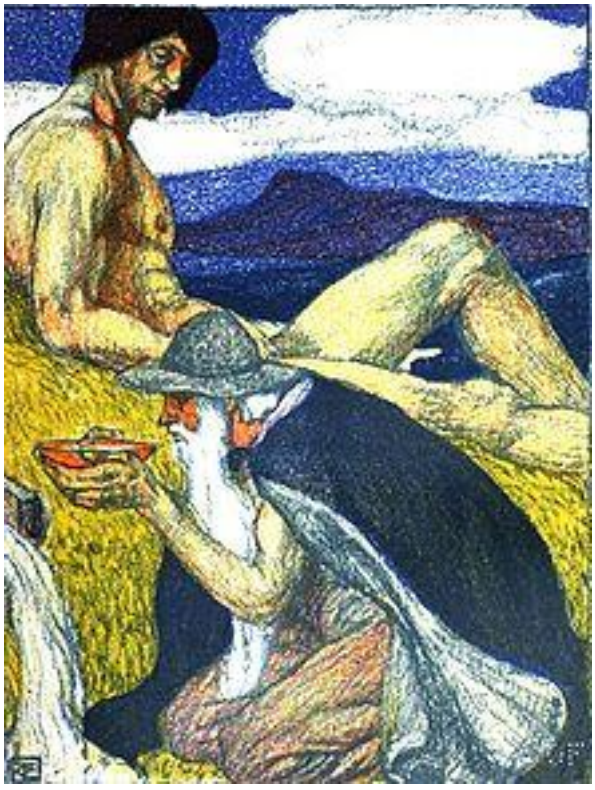
Idunn and the Apples of Youth by George Percy Jacomb-Hood.

Unlike the Greek gods, the gods of Norse mythology were prone to aging. One day, the jötnar Þjazi, disguised as an eagle[5], swooped down and tricked Loki into bringing him Iðunn, the goddess who supplied magic apples to the gods and goddesses to stay young, in exchange for his life. Fearful of what the ancient giant would do to him, Loki agreed to the bargain.
As soon as Loki reached Asgard, he went straight to the orchard tended by Iðunn and her husband, Bragi[2]. He spun a lie of having found some apples in Midgard that looked the same as

hers. Urging her to bring her own basket of apples to compare the two fruits, they departed for the world. When they crossed Bifrost, Þjazi swooped down and carried Iðunn away. The giant had locked her up in the highest tower in Þrymheimr. The gods and goddesses started aging. Summoning a meeting where every god was present except for Loki, the gods knew that Loki was up to no good. Upon finding the trickster god, he was ordered by Odin to bring back Iðunn and her apples or his life would be forfeited.

Fleeing in terror, Loki sought out Freyja to borrow her suit of falcon feathers. Loki flew to Þrymheimr, where he found Iðunn alone and unguarded. Loki turned the goddess and her basket of apples into a nut and held her in his claws. At this time, Þjazi, in his eagle disguise, was following them. Odin, who saw everything, immediately ordered the gods to build a bonfire at the gates of Asgard. When Þjazi reached the walls, his body caught on fire, and he fell to the ground. The gods slew him with no mercy. Releasing Iðunn from the spell, the gods and goddesses were once again youthful.

The Loss of Odin's Eye



Odin drinking the well's water while Mimir looks on
(by Robert Engels (1866–1926) [de].

Mimir was an ancient being, notorious for his unparalleled wisdom. His dwelling was Mímisbrunnr ("Mímir's well"), a sacred well situated under one of the roots of the tree

Yggdrasil in Jötunheim[2]. Odin, wanting to gain immense knowledge and wisdom, consulted all living beings. He ventured to the land of the giants and asked for a drink from the well. Mimir, knowing the value of the water, refused unless Odin offered one of his eyes. The chief god was ready to pay any price for the wisdom he desired, and so he agreed to the deal and sacrificed his eye. The eye was then placed in Mímisbrunnr.

See also

- Geirröd - a giant who tried to kill Thor.
- Iðunn - a goddess who supplied the magic apples that kept the gods young.
- Jötunn - In Norse mythology, giant whose otherworldly homeland is Jötunheimr.
- Jotunheimen - the name of a large mountain range in Norway. The name Jotunheimen was first popularized by Aasmund Olafson Vinje, who spent much time in the area in the 1860s.
- Svipdagr - the human who wooed and won Menglöð.
- Thor - the god of thunder and storms. He wields a hammer called Mjölnir.
- Þrymheimr - In Norse mythology, the abode of Þjazi, located in Jötunheimr.
- Útgarða-Loki - In Norse mythology, ruler of the castle Útgarðr in Jötunheimr. He was the one who humiliated and defeated Thor, the god of thunder and storm.

THE GIANT YMIR

Ymir suckles at the udder of Auðumbla as she licks Búri out of the ice in a painting by Nicolai Abildgaard, 1790

In Norse mythology, **Ymir** (/ˈiːmɪər/),[1] **Aurgelmir**, **Brimir**, or **Bláinn** is the ancestor of all jötnar. Ymir is attested in the *Poetic Edda*, compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional material, in the *Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century, and in the poetry of skalds. Taken together, several stanzas from four poems collected in the *Poetic Edda* refer to Ymir as a primeval being who was born from venom that dripped from the icy rivers Élivágar and lived in the grassless void of Ginnungagap. Ymir birthed a male and female from the pits of his arms, and his legs together begat a six-headed being. The gods Odin, Vili and Vé fashioned the Earth (elsewhere personified as a goddess; Jörð) from his flesh, from his blood the ocean, from his bones the mountains, from his hair the trees, from his brains the clouds, from his skull the heavens, and from his eyebrows the middle realm in which mankind lives, Midgard. In addition, one stanza relates that the dwarfs were given life by the gods from Ymir's flesh and blood (or the Earth and sea).

In the *Prose Edda*, a narrative is provided that draws from, adds to, and differs from the accounts in the *Poetic Edda*. According to the *Prose Edda*, after Ymir was formed from the elemental drops, so too was Auðumbla, a primeval cow, whose milk Ymir fed from. The *Prose Edda* also states that three gods killed Ymir; the brothers Odin, Vili and Vé, and details that, upon Ymir's death, his blood caused an immense flood. Scholars have debated as to what extent Snorri's account of Ymir is an attempt to synthesize a coherent narrative for the purpose of the *Prose Edda* and to what extent Snorri drew from traditional material outside of the corpus that he cites. By way of historical linguistics and comparative mythology, scholars have linked Ymir to Tuisto, the Proto-Germanic being attested by Tacitus in his 1st century AD work *Germania* and have identified Ymir as an echo of a primordial being reconstructed in Proto-Indo-European mythology.

Poetic Edda

Ymir is mentioned in four poems in the *Poetic Edda*; *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, and *Hyndluljóð*. In *Völuspá*, in which an undead völva imparts knowledge in the god Odin, references are twice made to Ymir. In the first instance, the third stanza of the poem, Ymir is mentioned by name:

Benjamin Thorpe translation:	Henry Adams Bellows translation:
There was in times of old, where Ymir dwelt, nor sand nor sea, nor gelid waves; earth existed not, nor heaven above, 'twas a chaotic chasm, and grass nowhere.[2]	"Of old was the age when Ymir lived; Sea nor cool waves nor sand there were; Earth had not been, nor heaven above, But a yawning gap, and grass nowhere."[3]

In the above translations the name of the location Ginnungagap is translated as "chaotic chasm" (Thorpe) and "yawning gap" (Bellows). Later in the poem, a few other references are apparently made to Ymir as *Brimir* and *Bláinn* (here anglicized as *Blain*):

Then went all the powers to their judgement-seats, the all-holy gods, and thereon held council, who should of the dwarfs race create, from the sea-giant's blood and livid bones.[4]	"Then sought the gods their assembly-seats, The holy ones, and council held, To find who should raise the race of dwarfs Out of Brimir's blood and the legs of Blain."[5]

In this stanza Thorpe has treated *Brimir* (Old Norse "the bloody moisture") and *Blain* (Old Norse, disputed) as common nouns. Brimir and Blain are usually held to be proper names that refer to Ymir, as in Bellows's translation.[5]

In the poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, the (disguised) god Odin engages the wise jötunn Vafþrúðnir in a game of wits. Odin asks Vafþrúðnir to tell him, if Vafþrúðnir's knowledge is sufficient, the answer to a variety of questions. In the first of which that refers to Ymir, Odin asks from where first came the Earth and the sky. The jötunn responds with a creation account involving Ymir:

From Ymir's flesh the earth was formed, and from his bones the hills, the heaven from the skull of that ice-cold giant, and from his blood the sea.[6]	"Out of Ymir's flesh was fashioned the earth, And the mountains were made of his bones; The sky from the frost cold giant's skull, And the ocean out of his blood."[7]

As the verbal battle continues, a few more exchanges directly refer to or may allude to Ymir. Odin asks what ancient jötun is the eldest of "Ymir's kin", and Vafþrúðnir responds that long,

long ago it was Bergelmir, who was Þrúðgelmir's son and Aurgelmir's grandson. In the next stanza Odin asks where Aurgelmir came from so long ago, to which Vafþrúðnir responds that venom dropped from Élivágar, and that these drops grew until they became a jötunn, and from this being descends the jötnar. Finally, Odin asks how this being begat children, as he did not know the company of a female jötunn, to which Vafþrúðnir responds that from beneath the ancient jötunn's armpits together a girl and a boy grew, and his feet together produced a six-headed jötunn.[8]

In the poem *Grímnismál*, the god Odin (disguised as Grímnir) imparts in the young Agnarr cosmological knowledge. In one stanza, Odin mentions Ymir as he recalls the fashioning of the world from his body:

Of Ymir's flesh was earth created,
of his blood the sea,
of his bones the hills,
of his hair trees and plants,
of his skull the heaven;
and of his brows the gentle powers
formed Midgard for the sons of men;
but of his brain
the heavy clouds are all created.[9]

"Out of Ymir's flesh was fashioned the earth,
And the ocean out of his blood;
Of his bones the hills, of his hair the trees,
Of his skull the heavens high."
"Mithgarth the gods from his eyebrows made,
And set for the sons of men;
And out of his brain the baleful clouds
They made to move on high."[10]

In a stanza of *Völuspá hin skamma* (found in the poem *Hyndluljóð*), Ymir receives one more mention. According to the stanza, völvas are descended from Viðòlfr, all seers from Vilmeiðr, all charm-workers from Svarthöfði, and all jötnar descend from Ymir.[11]

Prose Edda

Ymir is mentioned in two books of the *Prose Edda*; *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*. Ymir is first mentioned in chapter 5 of the prior, in which High, Just-As-High, and Third tell Gangleri (the disguised mythical king Gylfi) about how all things came to be. The trio explain that the first world to exist was Muspell, a glowing, fiery southern region consisting of flames, uninhabitable by non-natives. After "many ages" Niflheimr was made, and within it lies a spring, Hvergelmir, from which flows eleven rivers.[12]

Gangleri asks the three what things were like before mankind. High continues that these icy rivers, which are called Élivágar, ran so far from their spring source that the poisonous matter that flows with them became hard "like the clinker that comes from a furnace"—it turned to ice. And so, when this ice came to a halt and stopped flowing, the vapor that rose up from the poison went in the same direction and froze to rime. This rime increased, layer upon layer, across Ginnungagap.[13]

Just-As-High adds that the northern part of Ginnungagap was heavy with ice and rime, and vapor and blowing came inward from this. Yet the southern part of Ginunngagap was clear on account of the sparks and molten flecks flying from Muspell. Third assesses that "just as from Niflheim there was coldness and all things grim, so what was facing close to Muspell was hot and bright, but Ginunngagap was as mild as a windless sky". Third adds that when the rime and hot air met, it thawed and dripped, and the liquid intensely dropped. This liquid fell into the shape of a man, and so he was named *Ymir* and known among the jötnar as *Aurgelmir*, all of which descend from him. In support of these two names, Third quotes a stanza each from *Völuspá hin skamma* and *Vafþrúðnismál*.[13]

Gangleri asks how generations grew from Ymir, how other beings came into existence, and if Ymir was considered a god. High says that Ymir was by no means considered a god, and says that "he was evil and all his descendants". High explains that Ymir is the ancestor of all jötnar (specifically hrimthursar), and that it is said that when Ymir slept, he sweated, and from his left arm and right arm grew a male and a female, and his left leg produced a son with his right leg, and from them came generations.[14]

Ymir is attacked by the brothers Odin, Vili, and Vé in an illustration by Lorenz Frølich.

Gangleri asks where Ymir lived and what sustained him. High explains that the drips next produced a cow named Auðumbla. From her teats flowed four rivers of milk, and from it fed Ymir. Gangleri asks what the cow fed from, and High responds that the cow licked salty rime-

stones. The first day Auðumbla licked the rime stones it uncovered that evening the hair of a man. The second day it uncovered his head. The third day a man was uncovered from the ice. This man was named *Búri*, and was large, powerful, and beautiful to behold. Búri had a son, *Borr*, who married a jötunn, Bestla, the daughter of Bölþorn. The two had three sons; Odin, Vili, and Vé. High adds that "Odin and his brothers must be the rulers of heaven and earth; it is our opinion that this must be what he is called. This is the name of one who is the greatest and most glorious that we know, and you would well to agree to call him that too".[14]

High relates that Odin, Vili, and Vé killed Ymir, and his body produced so much blood from his wounds that within it drowned all the jötnar but two, Bergelmir, who, on a *lúðr* with his (unnamed) wife, survived and repopulated the jötnar.[14]

Gangleri asks what, if High, Just-As-High, and Third believe the trio to be gods, what the three did then. High says that the trio took the body into the middle of Ginnungagap and from his flesh fashioned the Earth, from his blood the sea and lakes, from his bones rocks, scree and stones his teeth, molars, and bones. Just-As-High adds that from his gushing wounds they created the sea that surrounds the Earth. Third says that the trio took his skull and placed it above the Earth and from it made the sky. They placed the sky above the earth, and, to hold up the sky, they placed four dwarfs—Norðri, Suðri, Austri and Vestri—at its four corners. The trio took the molten particles and sparks that flew from Muspell and "they fixed all the lights, some in the sky, some moved in a wandering course beneath the sky, but they appointed them positions and ordained their courses". Third cites a stanza from *Völuspá* in support, stating that by ways of these sky lights days and years were reckoned and counted, and that the stanza reflects that the cosmological bodies did not know their places prior to the creation of earth.[15]

Gangleri comments that what he has just heard is remarkable, as the construction is both immense and made with great skill, and asks how the earth was arranged. High replies that the world is circular, and around it lies the depths of the sea. Along the shore the gods gave land to the jötnar. However, on the inner side on earth they made a fortification against the hostility of the jötnar out of Ymir's eyelashes. This fortification they called Midgard. Further, they took Ymir's brains and threw them skyward, and from them made clouds. Another two stanzas from *Völuspá* are cited in support.[16]

Later in *Gylfaginning* High explains the origin of the dwarfs. High says that after Asgard had been built, and the gods assembled on their thrones and held their things. There they "discussed where the dwarfs had been generated from in the soil and down in the earth like maggots in flesh. The dwarfs had taken shape first and acquired life in the flesh of Ymir and were then maggots, but by decision of the gods they became conscious with intelligence and had the shape of men though they live in the earth and in rocks". Stanzas from *Völuspá* consisting of dwarf names are then provided to show the lineage of the dwarfs.[17]

In the book *Skáldskaparmál* poetic means of referring to the sky are provided, some of which relate to the narrative in *Gylfaginning* involving Ymir, including "Ymir's skull" and "jötunn's skull", or "burden of the dwarfs" or "helmet of Vestri and Austri, Sudri, Nordri". A portion of a work by the 11th century skald Arnórr jarlaskáld is also provided, which refers to the sky as "Ymir's old skull".[18] Later in *Skáldskaparmál* poetic terms for the earth are provided, including "Ymir's flesh", followed by a section for poetic terms for "sea", which provides a portion of a work by the skald Ormr Barreyjarskald where the sea is referred to as "Ymir's blood".[19]

Both the names *Aurgelmir* and *Ymir* appear in a list of jötnar in the Nafnaþulur section of *Skáldskaparmál*.[20]

Lost sources

As *Gylfaginning* presents a cohesive narrative that both quotes stanzas from various poems found in the *Poetic Edda* (as outlined above) as well as contains unique information without a provided source (such as Auðumbla), scholars have debated to what extent Snorri had access to outside sources that no longer survive and to what extent he synthesized a narrative from the material he had access to.[21]

Regarding the situation, scholar Gabriel Turville-Petre comments (1964) that "at the beginning, according to Snorri's text of the poem, there was nothing but a void, although according to other texts, the giant Ymir existed already then. Considering how Ymir (Aurgelmir) was said to have taken shape, both Snorri and the *Vafþrúðnismál*, we may think that Snorri followed the better version of Vǫluspá" and, regarding Snorri's account of the cosmogenesis in general, that "from these sketches of the poetic sources from which he chiefly drew it is obvious that Snorri described several incidents which cannot be traced to them, at least in their extant forms". Turville-Petre cites Snorri's account of Auðumbla as a prime example, noting Indo-European parallels (Persian and Vedic) and parallels in the Egyptian goddess Hathor.[22]

Scholar Hilda Ellis Davidson (1964) comments that "the original form of the creation myth in the north is not easy to determine. Snorri knew of at least three separate accounts".[23]

Tuisto, parallels, and Proto-Indo-European religion

In the 1st century AD, Roman historian Tacitus writes in his ethnographic work *Germania* that the Germanic peoples sing songs about a primeval god who was born of the Earth named Tuisto, and that he was the progenitor of the Germanic peoples. *Tuisto* is the Latinized form of a Proto-Germanic theonym that is a matter of some debate. By way of historical linguistics some scholars have linked *Tuisto* to the Proto-Germanic theonym **Tiwaz*, while other scholars

have argued that the name refers to a "two-fold" or hermaphroditic being (compare Old Swedish *tvistra*, meaning "separate"). The latter etymology has led scholars to a connection to Ymir on both linguistic and mythical grounds.[23]

By way of historical linguistics and comparative mythology, scholars have linked Ymir to other primordial, sometimes hermaphroditic or twin beings in other Indo-European mythologies and have reconstructed elements of a Proto-Indo-European cosmological dissection. Citing Ymir as a prime example, scholars J. P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams comment that "the [Proto-Indo-European] cosmogonic myth is centered on the dismemberment of a divine being—either anthropomorphic or bovine—and the creation of the universe out of its various elements". Further examples cited include the climactic ending of the Old Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge* where a bull is dissected that makes up the Irish geography, and apparently Christianized forms of the myth found in the Old Russian *Poem of the Dove Book* (Голубиная книга), the Frisian *Frisian Code of Emsig*, and Irish manuscript BM MS 4783, folio 7a. Other examples given include Ovid's 1st century BC to 1st century AD Latin *Metamorphoses* description of the god Atlas's beard and hair becoming forests, his bones becoming stone, his hands mountain ridges, and so forth; the 9th century AD Middle Persian *Škend Gumānīg Wizār*, wherein the malevolent being Kūnī's skin becomes the sky, from his flesh comes the earth, his bones the mountains, and from his hair comes plants; and the 10th century BC Old Indic *Purusha sukta* from the *Rig Veda*, which describes how the primeval man Purusha was dissected; from his eye comes the sun, from his mouth fire, from his breath wind, from his feet the earth, and so on. Among surviving sources, Adams and Mallory summarize that "the most frequent correlations, or better, derivations, are the following: Flesh = Earth, Bone = Stone, Blood = Water (the sea, etc.), Eyes = Sun, Mind = Moon, Brain = Cloud, Head = Heaven, Breath = Wind".[24]

Adams and Mallory write that "In both cosmogonic myth and the foundation element of it, one of the central aspects is the notion of sacrifice (of a brother, giant, bovine, etc.). The relationship between sacrifice and cosmogony was not solely that of a primordial event but the entire act of sacrifice among the Indo-Europeans might be seen as a re-creation of the universe where elements were being continuously recycled. [. . .] Sacrifice thus represents a creative re-enactment of the initial cosmic dismemberment of a victim and it helps return the material stuff to the world".[25]

Other

Hilda Ellis Davidson further links accounts of the jötunn Þjazi's eyes flung into the heavens by Odin and the frozen toe of Aurvandil tossed into the sky by the god Thor, the eyes in the prior case becoming stars and the toe in the latter case becoming a star known as "Aurvandil's Toe". Davidson comments that "these myths are evidently connected with names of constellations, but the strange reference to a frozen toe suggests that there is some connexion with the creation legion of the giant that emerged from the ice".[26]