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Lá gaf Lóðurr

Notes on Vsp. 17–18

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Abstract

This article is part of a series of critical assessments of the ruling scholarly view of Vǫluspá as a poem with roots in, and propelled by a pagan worldview. The present contribution investigates the background of the imagery of strophes 17–18 dealing with the animation of men by the supernatural triad Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr, and the referential load which this background can be brought to bear on our understanding of the poem at large. It is argued that, rather than representing any pagan conception, the picture of the faculties distributed in Vsp. 17–18 draws on medieval notions concerning the influence of the planets on men, which folly, Byrhtferth of Ramsey says, had currency among the pagan ancestors. In the poem, it is argued further, *Hœnir* and *Lóðurr* designate the Morning Star, and Saturn, presented in the poem as the opposite forces of good and bad, whose gifts equips mankind with the power of discernment of right and wrong. Before, man was *ørlǫglauss* 'without fate', now he becomes accountable for his deeds, which explains why the poet in the following strophe confronts us with the picture of the tree (Vsp. 19), introduced already in Vsp. 2 as *mjǫtviðr* 'measure-tree', calling to mind the Scriptural *lignum scientiae mali et boni*, the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. The explanation, of an intrinsic opposition of good and evil, allows us to read the enigmatic words *þá kná Hœnir hlutvið kiósa* (Vsp. 63) as 'now only Hœnir [the good planet] destines/chooses the *hlutvið* 'fates [of men]', evil influences being absent from the newly created world of bliss.

Keywords

Vǫluspá – Old Norse *lá* – ON *mjǫtviðr* – ON *Hœnir* – ON *Lóðurr* – planetary influence – medieval encyclopedic lore – discernment of good and evil – fates of men

* Originally delivered as a paper at the conference on Old Norse religion held in Lund, June 2004, a summary of which appeared in Samplonius 2004.

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Introduction

It is told in strophes 17–18 of Vǫluspá how a triad of æsir find *á landi* two proto-humans—the primogenital couple Askr and Embla—, whom they elevate to an animated state of life by endowing them with various mental and physical faculties. In Codex Regius (Gks 2365 qv.), the main manuscript of our poem, the strophes are as follows:[1]

17 Unz þriár kvómo
ór því liði
ǫflgir ok ástgir
æsir at húsi,
fundo á landi
lítt megandi
Ask ok Emblo
ørlǫglausa.

18 Qnd þau né átto,
óð þau né hǫfðo,
lá né læti
né lito góða;
ǫnd gaf Óðinn,
óð gaf Hœnir,
lá gaf Lóðurr
ok lito góða

The description is syntactically straightforward, but contextually and semantically there are many questions. Óðinn figures prominently in Old Norse myth, but there is no myth linking him to the breath of life—if that is what *ǫnd* is about.[2] Of Hœnir we know little, and of Lóðurr even less. The poet clearly envisages both of them as Óðinn's way-faring companions, which feature may well be ancient, since similar travelling triads of mythological figures are known from 10th-century skaldic poetry. Unfortunately, these early-skaldic allusions tell us nothing about the activity of the gods in our strophes, at least not directly. The question has been discussed by various authors, who have in common that they all tacitly subscribe to what appears to be a firmly established scholarly view: the pagan background of the myth alluded to in

1 Quotations based on Jón Helgason's edition in Nordisk Filologi.

2 Polomé (1969, 268) argues that Óðinn's gift is in keeping with his nature as the sovereign god meting out life-giving power, but such activity is nowhere attested in Old Norse literature.

Vsp. 17–18. The tenability—or non-tenability—of this long-fostered consensus is central to the present investigation, in which arguments will be presented suggesting that the passage represents a product of medieval Christian thinking, rather than, as generally assumed, an ancient pagan Germanic creation myth kept on ice in the poem in the centuries after the conversion.

Central to my argument is the gift of *lá*, the most puzzling of the divinely distributed faculties, and possibly the key to them all. In Old Norse dictionaries and glossaries the word occurs customarily under three or four mutually independent entries, with approximately the following meanings: 1. 'vital warmth', 2. 'hair', 3. 'mien' and, finally, with considerable semantic bandwidth, 4. '(body of) water close to the shore, wave at the shore', which in the basic sense 'liquid' constitutes the base-word of kennings denoting the mead of poetry (often extended to mean 'poem', that is, the poem under recitation).[3]

These meanings have all been suggested for Vsp. 18 *lá*, and been positively viewed at times, though never to the point of making the others vanish from sight. In evaluating them here, two points carry weight: a meaning must be properly attested, and, secondly, it must make sense, preferably in a context not confined to the lines in which the word occurs, ideally shedding light on passages that otherwise would remain obscure.

I will accordingly start with skipping the first three of the above meanings, since the evidence for them is either non-existent, or confined to odd occurrences of uncertain value. The meanings 'vital warmth' and 'mien' are in fact just conjectures, whereas Old Norse *lá* 'hair', although explicitly stated by Snorri once, is contextually weak. This is not to say that this last meaning is impossible, only that, at this initial stage, it seems more rewarding to focus on the lexical cluster represented by ON *lá* 'water close to the shore, liquid etc.', which has the advantage of being amply attested, admittedly in various shades of meanings with internal filiations that are sometimes difficult to determine exactly.

In itself, the approach does not differ much from that of other scholars, many of whom also regard Vsp. 18 *lá* as etymologically identical with Old Norse *lá* '(strip of) water close to the shore' etc. If, however, Vsp. 18 *lá* belongs to this semantic cluster represented by *lá* '(strip of) water close to the shore', what does it represent in the context of our poem? It is here that differences start. Scholars subscribing to this etymological identification all agree that the denotatum of Vsp. 18 *lá* must be 'blood', but opinions differ as to how this supposed meaning can be achieved under the rules of poetic diction.

3 Cf. *Húsdrápa* st. 1 and *Vellekla* st. 2.

lá 'blood'?

If we look at the various arguments advanced by scholars for interpreting Vsp. 18 *lá* 'wave, liquid' as 'blood', three modes of arguing can be distinguished: intuitive, skaldic, metaphoric. The division is not meant to be exhaustive. It is undoubtedly possible to make other distinctions, or group them differently, with other points of focus, but for our purpose it will do. Furthermore, these modes of arguing are not mutually exclusive, scholars switching between them on the fly whenever it suits them, and the sole purpose of the division is to make clear the main strategies used by scholars—deliberately or unconsciously—for assigning Vsp. 18 a meaning 'blood'.

The first category consists of what I call the intuitive approaches, though one could also, and perhaps more appropriately as far as our time is concerned, call them approaches of convenience, since their main characteristic seem to be the absence of any proper justification as to why *lá* would mean 'blood'. The reason appears to be that to its adherents this identification seems evident and self-given, and why bother to account for something that is obvious? One would go amiss, however, in viewing the interpretation 'blood' as something stemming from any modern times complacency, since we find the interpretation already in the Latin translation of Vǫluspá by the Icelandic poet and pastor Stefán Ólafsson (printed by Resenius in 1665), who in the mid-seventeenth century rendered Vsp. 17–18 *lá* as "sanguis" (Faulkes 1977, 10). His translation *sanguis* reflects almost certainly, not an attitude of convenience, but a cultural legacy of medieval times, when blood was seen as the life-giving principle of the body, and traditionally associated with the soul (Chase 2007, 575). The conception probably goes back to Leviticus 17, 14 *anima enim omnis carnis in sanguine est* ('because the soul of all flesh [every living creature] is in the blood'). Stefán's *sanguis* was frowned upon by Guðmundur Andrésson († 1654), whose opinion *calor* ('warmth') appeared posthumously in Resenius' second Vǫluspá edition printed 1673, but the scholarly community at large stuck to Stefán's explanation 'blood', which was accepted without demur by the editors of the seminal Arnamagnaean edition, the third volume of which appeared 1828. This interpretation dominated the field until later that century, when Adolf Noreen launched his etymology of Vsp. 18 *lá* as an alleged cognate of Lat. *Vulcanus*, its meaning being 'vital warmth'. Noreen's alternative explanation soon entered the dictionaries and glossaries, alerting scholars to the fact that the interpretation 'sanguis', long accepted at face-value, lacked all scholarly justification. A first, feeble attempt to provide the identification with something of an argument was made by Hermann Lüning (1859, 591), who glossed Vsp. 18 *lá* as "flüssigkeit, blut" ('liquid, blood'). One puzzles what Lüning actually meant by

this juxtaposition. Are we to understand that, since 'water, liquid' and 'blood' are both liquids, one can stand for the other? If so, the idea is flawed. Even if liquid and blood share a feature *liquid*, they have greatly different connotations, and they cannot, therefore, be regarded as mutually exchangeable entities. The strict distinction between 'blood', on the one hand, and 'liquid', on the other, can also be gathered from kennings like *sárlá* (literally 'wound-liquid') for 'blood', in view of the fact that in Old Norse poetic diction the referenced denotatum (here 'blood') must not to be entirely expressed already in the base-word (here *lá* 'liquid') of the description. Whatever Lüning's intention was, he was apparently not sure about it, as can be gathered from the question-mark he added to it, as was later also done by Ferdinand Detter (1895) and others. Finnur Jónsson (1932, 5), in contrast, resolutely skipped the question-mark, and enriched Lüning's minimal sequence with a link *livsvæsken*, making it a tripartite "væske, livsvæsken, blodet" ('liquid, life-liquid, blood'). Finnur's acceptance helped the explanation 'blood' to maintain its dominance, which naturally only increased after Edgar Polomé (1969) showed Noreen's etymology 'vital warmth' to be untenable, based as it was on a conjectured Old-Germanic prototype of which there is no trace in any Germanic language. Finnur's tripartite sequence recurs verbatim in Hermann Pálsson's English commentary (Hermann Pálsson 1996, 69), where *lá* is being defined as: " 'water close to the shore' here extended to 'liquid, life's liquid, blood' ". Even so, Hermann, like Lüning, Detter and others before him, cautiously added a question-mark to it in the glossary.

These marginal, yet recurring misgivings make it remarkable that, throughout the last centuries, the interpretation 'blood', for all its lack of semantic justification, never lost much ground. The apparent readiness to accept it may, attitudes of convenience aside, be due to, on the one hand, our omnipresent Christian background (blood being the origin of Christian salvation, as ritualized at the Eucharist), and, on the other, the influence of the skalds, who regularly use words for liquid as base-words of kennings for blood. Suggestions have indeed been made to view Vsp. 18 *lá* as an elliptic kenning for 'blood'. Scholars have referred to Eyvindr skáldaspillir's phrase *umðu oddláar í Óðins veðri* (Hákonarmál 8) in this connection, the subject *oddlá* of which they view as a blood-kenning 'sword-liquid' (Fulk 2012, 183). As Gabriel Turville-Petre (1964, 143) put it "*lá* is used for 'sea', 'water', and the kenning *oddlá* (spear-water) means 'blood'. The old interpretation of the word [*lá*] in the Vǫluspá, based on this usage is perhaps nearest to the truth . . .". Unfortunately, elliptic kennings are conceivable only in poetry of a distinctly skaldic nature—which Vǫluspá is not—, and to allot to Vsp. 18 *lá* a meaning 'blood' we need an additional qualifier (Gering 1927, 21). In the absence of any such qualifier, Turville-Petre turns

to Snorri's story in Gylfaginning, while simultaneously siding with Holtsmark (1950, 20) in ascribing *lá* in Vsp. 17–18 inherently metaphoric overtones: "It [i.e. *lá*] would then imply 'blood' and the other liquids of the body, corresponding with the sap of the trees from which men were made". The word *other* calls for attention, since it tacitly classifies blood as a 'liquid of the body', thus casually introducing again the suggestive sequence 'liquid, life's liquid, blood', the tenability of which as an argument is doubtful. In addition, the Gylfaginning version contains neither the word *lá*, nor any clause matching the phrases 'liquids of the body' or 'sap of the trees' on which Turville-Petre's arguing rests. If, as commonly believed., Snorri were paraphrasing the strophes Vsp. 17–18 as we have them, and if, additionally, the association of *lá* with blood were indeed as obvious and natural as some scholars maintain, his silence on this point would be remarkable. Was Snorri hesitant about the meaning of *lá* in Vsp. 17–18? Or was the word missing from the version of the strophes he was drawing on? These questions make it ill-advised to use the Gylfaginning text for ascribing Vsp. 17–18 *lá* a meaning 'blood', and also bring up the problem of how the relation between these texts must be judged, something I will return to shortly.

It may have been these shortcomings of the conventional interpretations of Vsp. 17–18 *lá* as 'blood' that made Anne Holtsmark advance the idea of *lá* as 'wave'. Not literally, though, as a body of water, but figuratively, as a metaphor for 'pulse'. This idea surfaces first in her 1950 Vǫluspá *forelesningar*, where she writes (Holtsmark 1950, 20) "det er vel blodet i pulserende rytme som menes; sml. bølgene som slår mot stranden i rytmisk pulserende bevegelse".[4] The poet, she says, was comparing the rhythmic sound of waves breaking on the shore to the beating of the blood as it pulses through the body. Attractive as this may sound, the idea is difficult to maintain. To start with, the idea of the circulation of the blood on which the interpretation rests was unknown in the Middle Ages, and did not appear to physicians until the early 17th century.[5] Moreover, if the poet meant *lá* to be understood as a metaphor, we might reasonably expect a verb or additional noun to be guiding us to this figure. There is nothing of this, however, *lá* occurring on its own, as a solitary entity in accusative position, void of metaphoric overtones or additional qualifiers to modify the denotatum. One-word forms can admittedly involve a transference of meaning also per se, but in that case the connection of the referencing word to the referenced concept should be obvious, or well-established in daily speech,

4 Holtsmark may have got the idea from Jöran Sahlgren's metaphoric (as distinct from skaldic) interpretation of *oddlá* in str.8 of Hákonarmal (Sahlgren 1927, 71).

5 The idea was formulated first by William Harvey in his 1628 oration *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalium* (Francoforti, G. Fitzer).

neither of which holds for Holtsmark's interpretation 'pulse'. For all its richness of pun and veiled allusions, the diction of Vǫluspá is basically *konkret og saklig*, as Holtsmark (1964, 63) herself points out, with little room for simile and metaphor. The interpretation did not gain any support until 1989, when Ursula Dronke adopted it in her translation of Vǫluspá handed out at the First Germania Latina Conference in Groningen (Netherlands).[6] Eight years later Dronke (1997, 124) took the idea further by merging Holtsmark's 'pulse' with Turville-Petre's intuitive interpretation, referenced above, of blood as the liquid of the body, with added to it a feature 'film, skin' drawn from her reading of *lá* in lausavísa 8 of Kormákssaga. It made her arrive at an over-arching, but rather unconvincing description of *lá* as: "a film of flesh or moist-covering pulsing with the stream of blood", with which, in her scenario, "Lóðurr clothes the wooden bodies of Askr or Embla". Vésteinn Ólason (2013) called this solution unnecessary complicated, and I can only agree.

To this, finally, leading over to the next section, comes the following, extraneous observation: medieval encyclopaedic tradition dealing with alleged pre-Christian superstitions lists among the planetary influences humans formerly believed to be exposed to, both 'blood' and 'liquid, moisture', but keeps them strictly apart, as two distinctly different entities, without any sign of semantic transferences of the kind 'liquid, life's liquid, blood' suggested by Finnur and others. Blood is blood, not liquid or moisture, or vice-versa.

Now, what does the above survey tell us? While I would not go as far as claiming a meaning blood for Vsp. 17–18 *lá* to be utterly impossible, it is clear that none of the conventional interpretations evaluated above compels us to believe that Vsp. 17–18 *lá* must stand for 'blood', to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Under these circumstances, it may be permitted to consider possible alternatives, one of which will be looked at below.

lá 'liquid'?

The observation that Vsp. 18 *lá* is best identified with the well-attested Old Norse *lá* '(stretch of) water at the shore, wave at the shore, liquid' etc., and the concomitant difficulty, discussed above, of allotting this *lá* a meaning 'blood'

6 Dronke's 1989 translation runs as follows: (Vsp. 17) Until three came / out of that company / mighty and loving / Æsir to the house. / They found ashore / scant of force / Ash and Embla / without destiny. // (Vsp. 18) Breath they had not / brain they had not / pulse nor voice / nor wholesome hues. / Breath Óðinn gave / brain Hœnir gave / pulse Lóðurr gave / and wholesome hues.

under the rules of poetic diction, raises the question whether a meaning 'liquid' (as distinct from 'blood') makes sense in the context of the strophes. To my mind, the key to a proper understanding of Vsp. 17–18 has been provided already more than a century ago in a little article published by the Norwegian scholar Hjalmar Falk in Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie. Falk (1891, 272) pointed out that the distribution of faculties in Vsp. 17–18 was reminiscent of a passage in Notker of Sankt Gall's († 1022) Old High German translation of Remigius of Auxerre's († 908) commentary on *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by the 5th-century author Martianus Capella.[7] In Notker's text (King 1979, 24), reference is being made to a *former* belief [my italics] according to which people thought that they had *bluot fóne marte, gesprâchi fóne mercurio, heili fóne iove, lázi fóne saturno* 'blood from Mars, speech from Mercury, health from Jupiter, tardiness from Saturn'. Falk (1891, 273) compared ON *lá* to OHG *bluot*, ON *litu góða* [acc.pl.] to OHG *heili*, and regarded Saturn's gift, *lázi* (translated by him as "bilding, gestalt; benehmen, gebahren") as formally cognate with Vsp. 18 *læti*—failing to notice the different vowel lengths.[8] However, Falk's failure to win support was probably not so much due to this etymological flaw—which seems to have gone unnoticed—, as to a scholarly reluctance, as widespread then as it is now, to allow for Christian imagery as an intrinsic part of the Vǫluspá poet's inventory. In his particular case, the hesitation may have been boosted by the words with which Falk (1891, 273) concluded (part of) his excursus: *Alligevel tør jeg ikke bygge synderlig herpa*. Comments like that are little helpful in getting people on your side.

Even so, Falk was on the right track, as he probably would have noticed, had he decided to pursue the idea further. That Falk refrained from doing so, may, apart from his own personal misgivings, have had to do with the circumstance that Remigius' commentary, which he thought to have constituted Notker's main source, had not yet been critically edited at the time. That Notker used Remigius of Auxerre as his prime source has since been confirmed by Sonja Glauch (2000, 374), who also showed that, just like many other medieval writers, Notker occasionally interpolated his *Vorlage* with texts drawn from elsewhere. As it turned out, the passage about the alleged influence of the planets

7 Martianus Capella managed to preserve part of the former status of the gods of Antiquity by transforming them into mere allegoric manifestations of art and philosophy, thus directing them to a niche of survival acceptable to the now Christian literati, who saw themselves confronted with references to them by the poets of Antiquity, whose works continued to be used for the instruction of rhetoric skill. What mattered was taking the sting out of them, which was what Martianus achieved.

8 In OHG *lazi* 'tardiness' the stem-vowel is short, in Old Norse *læti* long.

on humans had been derived, not from Remigius, but from Bede's *De temporibus liber*, which text in turn had come directly from Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum* (III, 4). In this last work, presumably the ultimate source of Notker's passage, we find the following text about the influences exercised by the planets on humans:

> Proinde autem gentiles ex his septem stellis nomina dierum dederunt, eo quod per eosdem aliquid sibi effici extimarent, dicentes habere ex aere ignem, ex Sole spiritum, ex Luna corpus, ex Mercurio linguam et sapientiam, ex Venere uoluptatem, ex Marte feruorem, ex Ioue temperantiam, ex Saturno tarditatem. Talis quippe extitit gentilium stultitia, qui sibi finxerunt tam ridiculosa figmenta.
>
> And the heathen gave names to the days from the seven stars because they thought that some influence was active upon themselves through the same [stars], saying that they had fire from the air, *spiritus* from Sol, *corpus* from Luna, *lingua* and *sapientia* from Mercury, *voluptas* from Venus, *fervor* from Mars, *temperantia* from Jupiter, and *tarditas* from Saturn. Such indeed was the folly of the heathen who created for themselves [*sibi*] such ridiculous imaginations.

Alongside this enumeration of planetary influences in Isidore's *De natura rerum* and derivative texts, we find another, slightly different list in the *Etymologiae* (V 30.8), composed by the same author:

> Proinde autem ex his septem stellis nomina dierum gentiles dederunt, eo quod per eosdem aliquid sibi effici existimarent, dicentes habere a Sole spiritum, a Luna corpus, a Mercurio ingenium et linguam, a Venere voluptatem, a Marte sanguinem, a Iove temperantiam, a Saturno humorem. Talis quippe extitit gentilium stultitia, qui sibi finxerunt tam ridiculosa figmenta.
>
> LINDSAY 1911

> And the heathen gave names to the days from the seven stars because they thought that some influence was active upon themselves through the same [stars], saying that they had *spiritus* from Sol, *corpus* from Luna, *lingua* and *sapientia* (eloquence) from Mercury, *voluptas* from Venus, *sanguis* from Mars, *temperantia* from Jupiter, and *humor* (the humors) from Saturn. Such indeed was the folly of the heathen who created for themselves such ridiculous imaginations.
>
> TR. BREHAUT 1912, 176

The *Etymologiae* passage is near-identical with the corresponding text in *De natura rerum*, the difference being that *sanguis* has been substituted for *fervor*, *humor* for *tarditas*, and *ingenium* for *sapientia*. This textual variance recurs in the writings of Bede, Remigius of Auxerre, Hrabanus Maurus, and others, and it is no exaggeration to say that Isidore's work gave rise to two slightly different, yet intimately related medieval redactions concerning the influences on humans, which, it was thought, people in their innocence had formerly been attributing to the planets. The planetary influences in Isidore's *De natura rerum* recur, with *verbum* substituted for *lingua*, in Book VIII of Bede's *De temporum ratione* [DTR] written AD 725 (Jones 1943, 196). On earlier occasion, in *De temporibus liber* [DTL] dating from 703, Bede had followed the *Etymologiae*, in which Mars was associated with *sanguis*, Mercury with *ingenium et lingua* (Jones 1943, 296). The influences listed in Bede's *De temporum ratione* are identical with those mentioned by Hrabanus Maurus († 856), in whose work the assumed stellar influences occur as part of a teacher-pupil dialogue, a widespread medieval medium for discussing questions of a scientific nature, and one of the conduits along which encyclopaedic and theological data could flow into popular lore.[9]

In the *Etymologiae*, the faculties appear to be slightly less abstract than in *De natura rerum*, the result, perhaps, of the work's more popular scope. As a gift, Isidore's *humor* may have been perceived as somehow related to the four cardinal fluids or *humors* that were thought to govern man's physical and mental constitution: *Etym.* IV 5,7: *Ex his quattor humoribus reguntur sani, ex ipsis laeduntur infirmi* ('According to these four humours the well are governed, and from them the diseases of the infirm arise'). It should also be noticed that Isidore was no independent mind. Nor did he pretend to be one. His aim, it seems, was to compile in succinct form what had been developed by his predecessors, and make it consonant with Christian doctrine. One of the sources he is known to have used was a collection of notes on Virgil's *Aeneids* compiled by Servius, who shortly after 400 CE had organized the various commentaries on the *Aeneids* by the order of the text. In a comment on *Aeneid* XI,51 we find the following note:

9 *Hrabani Mauri Opera omnia* (Migne PL 107), 682: [Magister:] Existimabant se habere a Sole spiritum, a Luna corpus, a Marte fervorem, a Mercurio sapientiam et verbum, a Jove temperantiam, a Venere voluptatem, a Saturno tarditatem. Et ob hoc tanto errori se dederunt, eligentes potius servire creaturae quam Creatori.

('[Teacher:] They believed that they had *spiritus* from the sun, *corpus* from the moon, *fervor* from Mars, *sapientia* and *verbum* from Mercury, *temperantia* from Jupiter, *voluptas* from Venus, and *tarditas* from Saturn. And for that reason, they had committed themselves to the folly of serving creatures rather than the Creator').

> superis autem debemus omnia donec vivimus, ideo quia, ut dicunt physici, cum nasci coeperimus, sortimur a Sole *spiritum*, a Luna *corpus*, a Marte *sanguinem*, a Mercurio *ingenium*, a Iove *honorum desiderium*, a Venere *cupiditates*, a Saturno *humorem*: quae omnia singulis reddere videntur extincti
>
> THILO AND HAGEN 1884, 482

> To the *superi*, however, we owe everything during our lives, for the reason that we, as the *physici* tell us, at the moment of birth receive *spiritus* from the Sun, *corpus* from the Moon, blood from Mars, *ingenium* from Mercur, ambition from Jove, lust from Venus, *humor* from Saturn, all of which they [i.e. people in general = *we all*] are deemed to give back one by one after death.
>
> MY TRANSLATION

The use of the present tense for describing pagan practices suggests the passage to derive from the fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus, whose commentary Servius is known to have used. If so, the notion of planetary influences articulated in the *Etymologiae*, hence of *humor* as a product of planetary influence, had currency no later than the second half of the fourth century CE. What matters here is the similarity of Saturn's *humor* 'liquid' with Lóðurr's *lá*, in Vsp. 17–18, with the same meaning. Attention deserves the vernacular rendering of Isidore's passage in the Old English *Enchiridion* composed by Byrhtferth of Ramsey in the early-eleventh century, which roughly matches the time in which *Vǫluspá* is thought to have been made.

> Hig wendon, ure yldran, þæt hig hæfdon gast of þære sunnan 7 lichaman of þam monan 7 andgit of Mercurio 7 of Venere lust 7 blod of Marte 7 gemetgunge of Iove 7 wætan of Saturno. Swilc wæs hvilon ealdra witan ungewitt: Gode lof þæt iunge þæne dwolscipe forhicgað.
>
> Our ancestors believed that they received spirit from the sun and body from the moon, and understanding from Mercury and libido from Venus, blood from Mars, temperance from Jove, and *wæta* [liquid, moisture] from Saturn. Such was once the folly of the ancient wisemen, praise be to God that the young reject that error.
>
> TR. BASED ON CRAWFORD 1966, 57

Byrhtferth follows the text of the *Etymologiae* (V 30.8) on the whole faithfully, though not without adaptations, such as when he attributes to Mercury just

a single gift, *andgit*, instead of the two, *ingenium et lingua*, listed by Isidore and Bede. Relevant in the context of our investigation is the fact that in the *Enchiridion* the superstition (Isidore *stultitia* 'folly') is attributed, not to the gentiles (Isidore: *gentiles*), but to *ure yldran* 'our ancestors', which shows that in Anglo-Saxon England the passage was being understood as retrospectively alluding to notions current among Byrhtferth's forefathers, the pagan Anglo-Saxons. Which obviously raises the question, whether something similar may not lie at the bottom of the imagery of Vsp. 17–18, in the sense that our poet, to describe the bestowal of mental and/or physical faculties on primordial man, based himself on the same, or very similar notion concerning the superstition of the pre-Christian ancestors. It will be noticed that in the medieval encyclopaedic tradition the references were not to the gods of Antiquity, but to the planets bearing their names. The difference is not great, though, since the influences attributed to these celestial bodies derived, now from classical myth, now from astronomical considerations (Cumont 1960, 66).[10] Already Cicero ascribed the planets divine properties on account of their seemingly independent movements.

Are we to infer, then, that the three æsir depicted in Vsp. 18 exert their powers as planets, rather than, as Snorri has it, gods who, walking along the beach, create humans out of driftwood? We are, indeed. What makes the point is *þriár*, which in both manuscripts (R and H) introduces the coming of the Æsir to the scene. The word has given headaches to generations of scholars, who were at a loss as how to reconcile this feminine plural form with the masculine gender of the *æsir* in the next line, where the latter are called *ǫflgir* and *ástgir*. To explain the discrepancy, scholars have argued that the three *þursa meyjar* of Vsp. 8 were still on the scribe's mind, with the variant adduced by Dronke (1997), that the scribe was anticipating the impending arrival of the norns in Vsp. 20. There is, however, no need for assuming an absent-minded scribe in

10 One may be surprised to find Jupiter associated with moderation, but the *temperantia* consistently attributed to the planet was, with an explanation inherited from Antiquity (cf. Rackham 1951, 236, Cicero, *De natura deorum* II, 119, and Pliny, *Naturalis historia* II, 6), believed to stem from Jupiter's intermediate position between, on the one hand, the cold Saturn and, on the other, the hot planet Mars. *Iuppiter frigore Saturni et ardore Martis hinc inde temperatur*, says Bede (DTR VIII, Jones 1943, 196), who explains the spiritual wisdom attributed to Mercury in similar vein as the result of the planet's vicinity to the sun (DTR VIII, Jones 1943, 196): *Mercurius perpetuo circa solem discurrendo, quasi inexhausta sapientiae luce radiari putabatur*. Explanations of this kind were apparently commonplace, cf. Remigius (Lutz 1962, 91): *quia cum sole gradiens quodam modo inexhausta luce sapientiae radiatur* ('because moving along with the sun he somehow [or: to some extent] reflects the inexhaustible light of spiritual wisdom').

order to account for the alleged grammatical anomaly, since in all probability no such anomaly exists. The feminine plural *þriár* makes good sense once we take it as alluding to Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr in their stellar capacities. In Old Norse the planets (*stjǫrnur*) were regarded as of feminine gender, as can be seen from a description of the planetary constellations in the manuscript AM 624, 4to, where it is said that *Þar yfir stendr hin goda Iupiter. Hun* [sic] *er yfer Mars* . . . (AÍ III, 29). The observation is important, since Old Norse adjectives are governed, not by the natural gender of the antecedent pronouns, but by the grammatical gender of the predicate nouns which they define, as for instance in sentences like *Hún var drengr góðr* and *Hún var læknir góðr*. If, therefore, we take *þriár*, not as a corruption of **þrír*, as commonly assumed by commentators past and present, but as a reference to *þriár* [*stiǫrnur*], with the accompanying noun unexpressed but understood, all hindrance for linking the word to the following *ǫflgir ok ástgir æsir* disappears.

The above interpretation raises two questions. First, does the other terminology used in our strophes Vsp. 17–18 chime with the influences attributed to the planets in medieval tradition? And if so, how does such planetary interpretation relate to what we know of Old Norse culture in a wider perspective. These two questions will be evaluated below.

The use of *gefa* in Vsp. 18, which one might think to speak against a planetary background of the said kind, derives support from the tradition listed in AM 624, 4to, where the same verb is being used when the sun is said to give *rísuligt kjǫt ok hold*[11]('well-developed, good-looking flesh [i.e. of physical appearance]' (AÍ III, 31–32). The phrase leaves it no doubt that *gefa*, apart from meaning 'handing over something [to some-one]', can also be used causatively, in the sense 'being responsible for, causing, making that, seeing to [something], etc.', with the syntactical subject [c.q. the sun] being the agent responsible for the result expressed by the syntactical object [here, *rísuligt kjǫt ok hold*]. So, the use of *gefa* lends support to the idea of a planetary background, once we are willing to take the verb in the same causative sense as displayed in the above example of codex AM 624, 4to. The manuscript is admittedly rather late (fifteenth century), but its content according to James Marchand (1976, 108) in many respects a fair specimen of religious beliefs current among the medieval populace.

Same story for the phrase *koma at húsi*, the noun *hús* of which has long posed a problem because of the existence of a house prior to the animation/arrival of the first couple of humans. Meyer (1891, 89) and Bugge (1867, 3) argued *hús* to have been used proleptically, as a reference to the envisaged,

11 Manuscript: *reisugt kiot ok holld*.

but not yet accomplished abode in which the freshly animated couple was to dwell. In modified form, this explanation was reiterated defended by Bernhard Kummer (1961, 59), who, on the strength of Vsp. 4 *salr*, suggested that *hús* alluded to Miðgarðr at large, as the enclosed dwelling-place that was about to be populated by man. The interpretation, in recent times articulated by Clunies Ross (1989, 280) and Dronke (1997, 122), is feasible, but depends heavily on the story told in Gylfaginning (see below). The Vǫluspá strophes lend no support to it. I think it more likely that *hús*, as first suggested by Palmér (1929, 115), denotes a part of the celestial valve that was regarded as the seat of the greatest influence of a particular planet. In that case, *hús* would translate Lat. *domus* (or *domicilium*) as an astrological term, making it the equivalent of Middle English *hous*: *whan the planetis intrede in-to theirre houses* (Middle English Dictionary p. 1004 s.v. 6). Old Norse *hús* in the sense 'sphere/location of a planet' does occur in the said manuscript AM 624, 4to (AÍ III, 29) cited above, and is still used as such in Modern Icelandic (Árni Böðvarsson 1983 s.v. *hús*: 'hluti himinhvelfingarinnar'). Originally, however, the designation for this was *herbergi* in Old Icelandic, and the use of *hús* in Vsp. 17–18 could, therefore, be taken as a sign of English influence.

It has long been noticed that Snorri's paraphrase of the story in Gylfaginning differs on some points from Vsp. 17–18, the strophes on which it is thought to be based. In Gylfaginning the text, put in the mouth of Hár, is as follows:

> Þá er þeir Bors synir gengu með sævar strǫndu fundu þeir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok skǫpuðu af menn. Gaf hinn fyrsti ǫnd ok líf, annarr vit ok hrœring, þriði ásjóna, málit ok heyrn ok sjón. Gáfu þeim klæði ok nǫfn. Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er bygðin var gefin undir Miðgarði.
>
> FAULKES 1982, 13

> As Bor's sons walked along the sea shore, they came across two logs and created people out of them. The first gave breath and life, the second consciousness and movement, the third a face, speech and hearing and sight; they gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ask, the woman Embla, and from them were produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place under Midgard was given.
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> TR. FAULKES 1987, 13

In Gylfaginning the gods are said to create humans out of tree-stumps which they come across on the shore, whereas the *Vǫluspá* poet mentions neither beach nor driftwood. For that reason, present-day scholars tend to regard these

features as later accretions, and they may well be right. If, however, these narrative details are not original, how did they get into the story? The answer to this is contained in the phrase *á landi*, which appears to have been understood as a reference to land as distinct from water, thereby giving rise to the picture of the beachcombing gods found in Snorra Edda. I readily accept that *á landi* implies an opposition, but in my opinion the contrast has been one of earth (*land*) versus sky (*hús*), not one of water as distinct from land. The space is the dwelling-place of the stars, the fixed as well as the wandering, while the earth represents the living-place destined to men.[12]

The reinterpretation of Vsp. 17 *á landi* in the sense 'on the shore' found in Snorri (and maintained in present-day handbooks) may be due to the influence of native lore about the high-seat pillars (*ǫndvegisúlur*), which according to tradition the first settlers of Iceland threw overboard on first sighting land. The places where these pillars washed ashore were believed to mark the territories divinely destined for these new settlers. It was, I suggest, against the background of this custom as memorized in *Landnámabók* (Finnur Jónsson 1900, 132), that a new meaning was read into the words *á landi* (Vsp. 18), as a result of which the Askr and Embla episode was transferred to a beach-like environment. Thus modified, the mythologem came to be associated with, and tentatively tied to, the lifting of the lands by the sons of Burr told in Vsp. 4, which would then be the stage of the myth we meet in Snorri's exposition.

Finally, the astrological character of the imagery would be in neat accordance with the epithet *ørlǫglauss* '(still) without fate', which, unaccounted for in the conventional interpretation, now receives an unexpected significance, as will be seen shortly.

All in all, the terminology used in the strophes definitely makes a case for tentatively ascribing the imagery of Vsp. 17–18 a planetary background.

As to the second question, concerning the position of our interpretation in relation to Old Norse culture at large, there is no reason why a 'planetary' background would stand isolated in Old Norse tradition. All civilisations, throughout the ages, have grouped the heavenly bodies into constellations associated with specific aspects of their culture. Back in Ancient Greece, Homer and Hesiod already allude to the celestial hunt of Orion, the mighty archer, before whose power the Pleiades are said to take flight (Bechtold 2011, 59). The possible role of the nightly sky as a device for memorizing Old Norse myths has been rather neglected, even though references like *Aurvandils tá, Úlfs keptr*

12 As touched upon, perhaps, in the phrase *knátti mær ok mǫgr moldveg sporna* (Od. 8) 'a boy and a girl tread the earth', concerning the successful delivery of two newborn infants.

'jaws of the wolf' (for Hyades) and *Ásar barðagi* 'battle of Þórr' (for Auriga)—preserved in twelfth-century writing—should have made us alert.

In fact, we may, perhaps, already even have a tradition (other than Vsp. 17–18) in which Hœnir figures in the capacity of a celestial body. Little as we know about the figure, there is one source which presumably predates the *Vǫluspá*, namely the poem *Haustlǫng* by Þjóðólfr of Hvin, from the early-tenth century. As in Vsp. 17–18, the story concerns three travelling figures of myth, Óðinn, Hœnir, and Loki. One night, when they fail to roast an ox, the giant Þjazi, guised as an eagle, tells them how to do it in return for a share. On this, a quarrel ensues. Loki tries to hit him with a pole, only to find himself stuck to it, upon which Þjazi takes off. Loki is being dragged over stones and rocks, until he promises to play Iðunn and her life-giving apples into the hands of the giant. Loki keeps his oath, and the gods now find themselves rapidly aging. Realizing who is to blame, they bring pressure on Loki, who in the shape of a falcon manages to carry her back as a nut in his claws. Þjazi, who chases them, is caught in the fire of the burning wood-shavings which the æsir have lit. *Haustlǫng* is traditionally regarded as a shield poem, but as Marold (1983, 153) points out, that the scenes are not really descriptive. It is possible, therefore, that the ox, pole, rocks and stones, and the intriguing spear-shaft shavings have referential loads that fall partly outside the poem proper. Following a lead by Phillpotts (1920), Holtsmark once suggested that ritual drama relative to the seasonal cycle constituted the frame of references underlying Þjóðólfr's composition. The conception of ritual drama initiated by the Cambridge School of anthropologists a century ago, was never entirely accepted. But the seasonal aspect of it was adopted by Anne Holtsmark in her 1949 analysis of the poem *Haustlǫng* (Holtsmark 1949). If we combine this cyclical aspect with the idea of a planetary background, the inference would be that scenes described there may allude to, and correspond with, the changing stellar panorama as it unfolds on the celestial valve during the season. Phrases like *Þá var Iðunn nýkominn sunnan* 'when Iðunn had newly arrived from the south' in str. Hstl. 10 may well refer to the repositioning of the celestial signs relative to the seasonal cycle. 'The spear-shaft shavings' (*skǫpt*) mentioned in Hstl. 13, which burnt as the gods shaved them, may then apply to a swarm of meteorites (such as the Geminids in December). To me, the strongest indication of a astronomical background is the title *Haustlǫng* ('Autumn Long') itself, which, commonly seen as a reference to the time which the composition had taken (Turville-Petre 1976, 8; North 1997), can also be understood as a reference to the changing stellar configuration of the nightly sky in autumn. If so, the planetary qualities suggested here for Hœnir would be as old as the early tenth-century, when *Haustlǫng* was composed.

Striking as the similarity of medieval encyclopaedic lore and the imagery of Vsp. 17–18 may be, it would be remarkable if the strophes were nothing but a distorted echo of medieval astrological speculations that entered the north in the wake of the area's conversion. If the poet based himself on medieval encyclopaedic lore, where did he get the names *Hœnir* and *Lóðurr* from? The logical answer to this, as hinted at above, is that Hœnir and Lóðurr figured already in native tradition, as indigenous designations of celestial bodies (ON *himinskepnur*), presumably planets, and that they first after acquaintance with medieval encyclopaedic lore accumulated the semi-divine role we find them endowed with in Vsp. 17–18.

If in the above we have linked Lóðurr to Saturn, on account of the similar faculties distributed by them, this preliminary identification may draw support from the name *Lóðurr* itself, which has not yet been satisfactory explained.[13] In my opinion, the name may derive from the same stem as *Lœdingr*, the chain with which the gods tried to bind Fenrir. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, 591)

13 In the last century, two explanations have been prominent. The first one draws on the word **logaþore** in the runic inscription of the 7th-century Nordendorf Clasp found 1843, (inscription discovered 1865), which on account of the references to Wodan (ON Óðinn) and Donar (ON Þórr) in the inscription was long regarded as the name of a pagan Germanic deity cognate with ON *Lóðurr*. Suggestions have been made that the inscription refers to a "Wodansweihe", but Klaus Düwel (1982) and Ottar Grønvik (1987) are probably right correct in reading the inscription as an abrenunciatio, in that **logaþore** represents an adjective corresponding with the 8th-century Old English gloss logðor (v.l. *logdor*, logþor) for Latin *cacomicanus* 'mischief-plotting, deceitful', used here as a pejorative epithet for denouncing Wodan and Donar as deceivers. This adjectival, predicative function of **logaþore** is made clear by the ending –e, a case-marker of the nominative masculine plural of strong adjectives. With our ON *Lóðurr* this **logaþore** has nothing to do, since the meaning 'cacomicanus' of the Old English gloss *logðor* ties the latter firmly to the Germanic stem **lug-* 'to lie' (from IE **laugh*, as attested in Germ. *lügen*), which stem lacks the requisite conditions for prompting Verner's Law into generating the unvoiced guttural spirant needed for Old Norse *lóðurr* (Grønvik 1987, 114). The other explanation (McTurk 1991, 39) seeks to derive ON *Lóðurr* from *Loðverr, a fertility-god reconstructed as the envisaged counterpart of *Loðkona, an alleged fertility-goddess whose existence scholars have deduced from the place-name Locknevi (1371 de Lødhkonuwj) in Småland (Sweden). This would imply the root vowel to have been short, which clashes with the aðalhending *Lóðurr ~ glóða* used by Haukr Valdísarson in the 12th century, which rhyme shows that, for him, the vowels were identical (Turville-Petre 1964, 143). To maintain the derivation, we would have to assume secondary lenghtening, which does not inspire confidence, since no such lengthening seems to occur in comparable cases of un-compounding, such as dagverðr > dǫgurðr and farvista > fǫrusta etc. Also, *verr* means primarily 'husband', not 'man', and, viðkenningar as *Sifjar verr* aside, the word occurs nowhere for denoting deities.

connects the name with Icelandic *lóða* 'to lag, linger', cognate with Nynorsk *loa* 'to move slowly' (as distinct from moving quickly), interpreting *Læðingr* as meaning something on a par with Icel. '*doði*, *slen*, *e-ð lamandi*'. If his derivation holds good, the name might refer to the planet Saturn, which planet, on account of its slow orbiting of the sun (or the earth, from a medieval perspective), was generally associated with tardiness in medieval tradition, cf. Isidore of Seville (*De natura rerum* (III, 4) cited above. If *Lóðurr* denotes Saturn, as suggested here, this interpretation of the name would be in keeping with the salient characteristic of the planet as 'the slow one'.

As regards *Hœnir*, the name, not convincingly explained so far, seems even less of a problem. I am much inclined to view the name as a native designation of the morning star, that is, of the planet Venus as seen at dawn, for the following reasons. The name has the hallmark of a causativum of the same stem as ON *hani* Greek *ei-kanos* 'cock', and Latin *cano* 'to sing', (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, 407). Its original meaning would then be 'he who makes [the cocks] sing/crow'. A better designation for the morning star will be difficult to imagine.

Now we come to the more speculative part of this exposition, concerning the function of the imagery in relation to the poem as a whole. To this, the following can be said. Triads of deities occur also elsewhere in Germanic tradition, customarily with Óðinn as the main protagonist. Some decade ago Edith Marold (2003, 414) has suggested that Óðinn's companions in Vǫluspá 17–18 represent antagonist 'positive' and 'negative' powers, which is an intriguing thought. The etymology of *Lóðurr*, on which Marold's scheme rests, is unfortunately problematic, but the idea as such, of a structural opposition of 'positive' and 'negative' forces constituting the core of the triad's *modus operandi* is attractive. It would accord with the medieval view of some planets—Venus (the morning star) and Jupiter—being good and beneficiary (*stellae beneficae*), whereas others, such as Saturn and Mars, were regarded as ominous and non-beneficiary (*stellae maleficae*). Mercury was regarded as indifferent (*communis*), since its influence could operate either way, depending on the character of the planet which it happened to accompany, the powers of which it was believed to strengthen (Boll 1926, 50). This would mean that, theoretically, Marold's idea can be applied to the *figurae dramatis* of Vsp. 17–18 irrespective of her etymology of *Lóðurr*. One of the Æsir, Hœnir [the morning star], would then represent positive, beneficiary powers, with Lóðurr representing the opposite position, and Óðinn's role being intermediary, corresponding to that of Mercury in medieval astrology.

Speculative as the idea may sound, it opens interesting perspectives, since it allows us to view the enigmatic reference to Hœnir in Vsp. 63 *þá knáa Hœnir*

hlutvið [H] *kiósa*, as colloquial or proverbial speech for 'then only Hœnir [the beneficiary planet] chooses (= destines/rules over) the *hlutvið* 'fates' [of the righteous]'. In the happy new world conditions are good only, evil influences now being eliminated. It is worth noting that in describing the blissful abode of the righteous, the *Book of Revelation* (XXII, 16) refers to the presence of the morning star (*stella splendida et matutina*) as a token and a figurative image of the lasting peace which Christ symbolizes. It will be a matter of dispute whether our poet has been copying *Revelation*, but the likeness does illuminate the *Vǫluspá* passage, and, as I have shown elsewhere (Samplonius 2013), there is no reason for considering influence of the Book of Revelation on the imagery of Vǫluspá as out of the question.

Perhaps we may even go further and include the strophes Vsp. 19–20 into the picture. Why should the poet continue with this tree image if not to be of use to the audience? The tree is introduced in st. 2 as *miǫtvið mœran* (acc.) 'measure-tree', a reference, possibly, to the *lignum scientiae mali et boni*, the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. If so, we might be dealing with a contrast between, on the one hand, Vsp. 17–18—where the first human couple, still without fate (*ørlǫglauss*), is being equipped with faculties enabling them to distinguish between good and evil, hence to cope with (the moral perils of) earthly life—and, on the other, the poem's concluding stanzas, describing the fates of those who passed Judgement to enjoy a life of bliss, and of those who did not.

Even if we leave this interpretation of the tree aside as perhaps too a priori, the fact remains that most, if not all, of the imagery of Vsp. 17–18 can be explained from a medieval Christian perspective, and there is accordingly no need to regard the stanzas as the reflection of any ancient pagan myth kept on ice in the poem in the centuries following the conversion.

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