Völuspá, the Uncertainty of Norse Creation Myths and some Babylonian Parallels

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1 Introduction

Most of the scholars who at some point in their investigations have dealt with the problematic of the Scandinavian creation myths agree that these myths are often very inconsistent and not lacking in contradictions. The discrepancies not only stem from the fact that "the ancient Scandinavian world model was not a logical structured system",[1] but also because the sources dealing with cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths are of an ambiguous nature, sometimes even within the scope of single poems. In the mythological poems and narratives concerned, motifs and plots are not always sharply delineated, sometimes contain different versions of the myths, interpolations, and/or are often coloured with Christian symbolism. This should come as no surprise since, in the case of the poems contained in the *Poetic Edda*,[2] we have very few criteria for dating them (author, place) and thus it is difficult to decide whether a poem was composed in Christian or pagan times, as well as the fact that only in a some cases can we grasp all the details of the myths in their entirety.

This is precisely the situation for what we believe to be the main source of the creation myths in Old Norse mythology, the poem *Völuspá* (the Sybil's prophecy), whose oldest written version, like most Eddic poetry, is preserved in the late thirteenth-century *Codex Regius*, although it was most likely conceived around the year 1000, the approximate date of Iceland's conversion.[3] In the 63 stanzas of the poem,

1 Brink 2004.

2 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the *Poetic Edda* are taken from *Eddukvæði* 2014 and those from the *Prose Edda* from *Snorri Sturluson Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning* 1988.

3 The so-called *Codex Regius* was found on an Icelandic farm in 1643, but it probably dates back to the last quarter of the eighth century. It contained a collection of mythological and heroic

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the Sybil tells about the creation of the world, the appearance of the giants, the gods and dwarves, and finally the first human beings, Askr and Embla. From stanza 20 onwards, and after introducing the evergreen ash-tree Yggdrasill, the Sybil recollects the different stories that led to the first war between the Æsir and the Vanir, the subsequent struggles with the giants and the prophesies about *Ragnarök*, or the destruction of the gods. All in all, in *Völuspá* an Icelandic poet addressed his audience with a voice of authority, by means of the well-known and powerful figure of the seeress, to tell the history of the world—from its creation to its destruction.

The same stories about the origins of the Cosmos are retold and complemented by Snorri Sturluson in the *Gylfaginning*, the first part of his *Prose Edda*.[4] At this point we cannot stress enough that Snorri was not a heathen poet writing about the present, but a very learned person who belonged to a highly literate religion.[5] The difficulty about Snorri's versions of the Creation myth is that it poses as many problems as it solves, due to certain inconsistencies regarding some of the characters, he includes in his retelling of the myth, such as the mention of Muspell or Muspellzheimr, the giant Surtr, and the identification of Ymir and Aurgelmir in the same figure, which, unfortunately, lies beyond the scope of this study.

The mythic traditions contained in the *Poetic Edda*, as well as Snorri's versions of them have already been proven to share certain traits with other Germanic and Old Testamentarian myths,[6] but also with Vedic Creation myths which probably originated in a hypothetical proto-Indo-European religious past, as "the linguistic correspondences between the names of various mythic primordial beings meaning 'twin' seem to prove".[7] Other similarities between Indo-European mythology and non-Indo-European mythologies are much less clear, since the source material is unable to provide a significant semantic substance, although in some cases they are so widespread that they cannot be explained as mere coincidences. By way of example, we may mention the interrelation between the different versions of the

poems, partially known because Snorri had included them in his *Snorra Edda*, which, already in the 17th century, was thought to be based on a non-extant older anthology probably written by the Icelandic historian Sæmundr Sigfússon the wise (†1133). There is another extant version of the *Völuspá*, the one preserved in the Icelandic Hauksbók, a manuscript dating from the fourteenth century, which contains significant differences and a different arrangement of the ones we know from the version contained in the *Codex Regius*. In this study, we will use the *Codex Regius* version of the contained in the newly published edition of the *Poetic Edda* mentioned in the previous footnote.

4 Apart from these, we also have some references to the cosmogonic myths in stanza 21 of the Eddaic poem *Vafþrúðnismál* and in stanza 40 of *Grimnismál*, also contained in the *Poetic Edda*.

5 Clunies Ross 1998

6 West 2007, 356–357: "The Germanic one is the poetic tradition reported by Tacitus (Germ. 2.2.) concerning a divine figure Tuisto who grew out of the earth to become the father of Mannus, the ancestor of all the Germans".

7 Kure 2003, 313; Schjødt 2009.

flood narrative contained in the Semitic and all the Indo-European sources, Old Norse included.[8]

This is also the case, for example, of the creation myth where a god is killed and his body divided into parts, the sky is made from one part, the mountains and rivers from the others, as was related by the poets about the primeval being Ymir in Old Norse mythology. Different variations of the killed and dismembered god motif are known in many languages, without regard to their linguistic relationships, and belong to that vast field studied by comparative mythology.[9] In a recent article, Jens Peter Schjødt has stressed how "typological" comparativism, i.e., one which compares cultures and religions which are not historically related, could also be a very useful method to create basic religious models, which could enable us to reconstruct certain parts of the religion/mythology we are dealing with.[10] According to Schjødt, parallel societal situations could create similar religious phenomena on a structural level, which if analysed correctly could help us "to connect the various pieces of information in the Old Norse sources in order to generate a clearer picture of pagan Scandinavian religion".[11] Following this approach, we intend to discuss the difficulties posed by the different versions of the creation myths contained in our sources first and then, second, to offer some insights into the similarities that can be found between certain non-Indo-European variations of the creation myths and the Old Norse ones. Of particular interest for this study are the *Enūma Eliš*, also known as "the Babylonian Epic of creation", dated to the first millennium BCE, and also the *Epic of Atra-ḫasīs* an Akkadian text dating back to the 18th century BCE, both of which, as we aim to show, contain interesting parallels with Norse creation myths such as that of Ymir mentioned above, and the much debated presence/absence of the female elements in the creation myths.

2 *Ár var alda þar er Ymir byggði*

"-It was in the old days, when Ymir lived-" are the first two lines of the third stanza of *Völuspá*. According to the seeress, nothing existed, there was no sand, no sea, and no earth, only a "vacuum", until the sons of Borr (Óðinn, Vili and Vé) raised up the vault of heaven and shaped Miðgarð. The lack of more details implies that the poet was able to assume that his audience already knew who Ymir, the sons of Borr and the giantess Bestla were. Nothing more is said about Ymir or how Borr's

8 Dundes 1988.

9 According to some scholars, even the Old Testament, Psalm 74, could contain a version of an Indo-European myth of creation by dismemberment. The psalm could be a retelling of the Ugaritic myth in which Yam is killed and divided into pieces: Van der Toorn 1999. For the relationship between Ymir and Yama: Meid 1991.

10 Schjødt 2018.

11 Schjødt 2018, 23.

offspring managed to create the earth, until Snorri provided another rendition of the story, probably based on stanza 21 of the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál* where it is clearly stated that the earth was fashioned out of Ymir's flesh, the mountains out of his bones, the sky from his skull and the ocean out of his blood,[12] although we are not told who performed this ritual of dismemberment. The author of *Grimnismál,* another Eddic poem (stanzas 40–41), while providing the same information, identifies the authors of the deed by saying that the gods (*regin*) made Miðgarð from Ymir's eyebrows for the benefit of the sons of men. Snorri's approach to the story of Ymir's origins was to reforge the scanty information of the mythical poems into a new cosmogony by means of incorporating neoplatonic (four elements) and medieval Christian ideas (flood, *creation ex nihilo*), into a typically pre-Christian worldview. Snorri tried consistently and consciously to dress the old gods in Christian robes, looking for the "common ground between the heathen past and his contemporary Christian times" as Henning Kure, among others, has accurately pointed out.[13]

Be that as it may, and taking into account that this myth, the creation of the world from human body parts, can be found among many cultures worldwide,[14] it is only thanks to Snorri (chapters 4–8 in *Gylfaginning*) that we have information regarding some otherwise unknown pieces in the puzzle of the Nordic creation myth, as well as the motivation behind the butchering of Ymir. His and his kindred's evil nature *"-Hann var illr ok allir hans ættmenn. Þá köllum vér hrímþursa-"*,[15] seem to be the reason not only behind his own death but also behind that of his progeny, when his blood flooded the world and drowned all of the *jötnar,* except two: his grandson Bergelmir and his wife. Snorri succeeds here in recreating a male-centred Norse analogue to the Judeo-Christian flood story, not only because most flood myths were very often used as a means of punishing mankind for various sins, but also because in most flood myths male gods destroy the world but save a known male and a female to repopulate the earth. The fact that females in the flood stories are nameless (e.g. Bergelmir's and Noah's wives) has been interpreted as an example of males seeking to imitate or usurp female creativity,[16] which as we will discuss later, is one of the features in the myths concerning the creation of the primeval human couple.

The question nevertheless remains as to how this affects our understanding of the whole mythical scenario of Old Norse creation myths. It seems obvious that the poets of *Völuspá, Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* had a different agenda than

12 *Eddukvæði* 2014, 359.

13 Kure 2003, 315.

14 Henning Kure mentions the case of the Purusha hymn of the Old Indian Rygveda where the gods instituted the rituals by dismembering and sacrificing a cosmic, man-like being, Purusha 2003, 311–319.

15 *Snorri Sturluson Edda Prologue and Gylfaginning,* 11.

16 Dundes 1998.

Snorri and thus did not need the *krafti þess* (~~kraft~~ = ~~power~~) to create the world that Snorri included in the picture. That is probably the reason why Snorri also changed the beginning of *Völuspá* from "at the time Ymir lived" to "at the time when there was nothing", in order to conform to contemporary 13th century Christian doctrine about how the world was created *ex nihilo*[17]:

Völuspá (from *Codex Regius*)	*Völuspá* (Snorri's version)
3. Ar uar alda	*Ár var alda,*
þar er ymir bygði	*þat er ekki var,*

For the origins of the gods, we have to rely once more on Snorri's retelling of an otherwise lost myth, only briefly delineated in stanza 21 of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* 41–42, and also alluded to by two skalds from pagan and Christian periods, Ormr Barreyjarskáld and Arnórr jarlaskáld. Snorri presented Ymir, who had resulted from the primeval fluids that were transformed by fire and frost, as an androgynous giant capable of generating life without any sexual concourse (similar to Gaia in the Greek mythology), first in the form of a set of twins—probably the remnants of an original myth about creation of mankind—that grew under his left armpit, and finally another male, by rubbing together his feet.[18] At the same time, the primeval cow Auðumla had originated from the drops of melting frost in order to nourish Ymir and his offspring. She also licked Búri, the ancestor of the gods, from the frozen ice blocks. No wife of Búri is mentioned, but soon he begot a son named Borr who took Bestla, the sister of an unknown giant, as his wife. Three sons were born to them, Óðinn, Vili and Vé, who as we have noted above, killed and dismembered Ymir and which are only identified in as such in *Gylfaginning*. That was, according to Snorri, the beginning of the earth and of the hostility between the offspring of the cow Auðumla (gods) and the one of the primeval fluids (giants), which had its culmination point in Ragnarök.

Snorri's overcomplicated and elaborated Old Norse theogony and cosmogony has often been "criticised" for his Christian interpretation of the sources, while at the same time his *Snorra Edda* has been used to fill in some uncomfortable gaps in the interpretation of the insufficient poetic sources. That has been the case for scholars trying to make sense of how the world was created, what the etymology of the name Ymir could be, or how many similarities exist between *Völuspá* (3–6) and *Genesis* (1.1–1.4), to just mention a few.

17 For an insightful analysis of this trend: Holtsmark 1964, 31 ff. Some early studies had already pointed out that this 'void' was not an empty space but infused with magical powers later and surrounded by a number of mythological worlds.

18 For an interpretation of the symbolic dimensions of power and sexuality in the Nordic Creation myth: Linke 1988.

If we only consider the *Poetic Edda, Völuspá* 3, the world in which Ymir lived was described by the elements it lacked, be they sand, water or waves (*vara sand né sær, né svalr unnir*), until the gods came and lifted/called the earth from the waters. Such emphasis on the emptiness and chaos is surely not original, as some scholars have already pointed out. McKinnell, among others, has studied the similarities between the Norse source and the beginning of Genesis, adding to the intricate equation a ninth-century Bavarian poem, *Das Wessobrunner Gebet,* and has come to the conclusion that the close phrasal echoes with *Völuspá* and similar detailed structure could point towards a common origin of the mythologem in the poet's reworking of the readings heard at the Easter Vigil service about how God created the world.[19]

Völuspá does not mention that Ymir was killed and dismembered, but both *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* contain a very similar version of how the earth was created *ór Ymis holdi* (out of Ymir's flesh) and how other parts of his corpse were used in the creation of other geographical and astronomical features. Since neither Snorri nor the authors of the Eddic poems explain how the gods managed to create the world we know, apart from what we can infer from the use of the verbs *yppða* and the more general *skapa,* some scholars have correctly shifted from the interpretation of the first one as 'to lift, to bring up', to 'to announce, to name' more in tune with Old Norse traditions about the value of the spoken word. Notwithstanding Mackinnell's emphasis on the fact that both Genesis 1:5 and *Völuspá* 6 coincide in ascribing to the Christian God and the *Æsir* the naming of day and night, he fails to mention that while in the Old Testament that information comes naturally after "let there be lights in the firmament [...]", in the Old Norse version the process took a rather legal aspect in the form of the expression *ganga á rökstóla,* which can be found four times in the poem. The second part of stanza 5 includes the information that both the sun, the stars and the moon did not know what their places were (*Sól þat né vissi / hvar hon sali átti, / stjörnur þat né vissu / hvar þær staði áttu, / Máni þat né vissi / hvat hann megins átti*), and it was not until the gods held council and decreed upon it, that the firmament was organised, day and night received their names and a system for counting the time was established.

In this respect, Henning Kure's insightful reinterpretation of the etymology of Ymir as 'scream' and his inclusion among the paradigmatic themes in Old Norse mythology, is a very welcome addition to the process of re-examination of alleged foreign influences, be they Vedic or Christian. All the same, it may be that the mythological traits about the creation of the world contained in Genesis and *Völuspá* are simply a reflection of a belief found in mythologies all over the world. They could be a part of an archetype originating in the representation of the relationship/interaction between different gods or between (semi)gods and humans in various ritual contexts within societies, as proposed by Schjødt, with a similar level of re-

19 McKinnell 2008.

ligious, cultural or political development.[20] Regardless of whether or not the Norse and the Babylonian cultures could be said to share a very similar degree of socio-economic and political advancement, I believe that the comparison between the most important texts which deal with the creation of the world in both mythologies could help us get a somewhat new perspective on the actors and acts of creation as portrayed in the pre-Christian Nordic mythology. That being so, if we consider the first lines of the Baylonian creation myth *Enūma Eliš*, which dates from the first millennium BCE, we will find a similar conceptual relationship between the uttered word and an act of creation, as proposed by Kure, as well as the fact that both texts describe the beginning of the world by the features that were not present in it.[21] On further reading, we also find the common motif of "holding council" when Apsu the begetter of the great gods summoned Mummu, his minister, and proposed to go before Tiamat and consult on a plan with regard to the gods, their sons.

Enūma Eliš 1–10
When the heavens above did not exist,
And earth beneath had not come into being–,
There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth them all,–
They had mingled their waters together,
Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed
was to be found–
When not one of the gods had been formed,
Or had come into being, when no destinies had
been decreed,
The gods were created within them,
Laḫmu and Laḫamu were formed and came into
being.

29–34
Thereupon Apsû, the begetter of the great gods,
Called Mummu, his vizier, and addressed him:
"Vizier Mummu, who gratifies my pleasure,
Come, let us go to Tiāmat!"
They went and sat, facing Tiāmat,
As they conferred about the gods, their sons.
(Lambert 2013, 51, 53)

Völuspa 3–4
It was the dawn of time
There where Ymir resided
Was neither sand nor sea
Nor cool waves.
Earth did not exist
Nor sky above
–it was a gap of ginnungar–
And grass nowhere.
Until the sons of Burr
Did *name* the grounds,
They who the renowned
Miðgarð created.
(My translation)

Stanza 6
Then the gods sought
their assembly seats,
The holy ones, and
held council

20 Schjødt 2018, 23.

21 The *Enūma Eliš* also portrays the emergence of land out of the waters, since life became only possible when primal waters, surging from Tiamat's body, were controlled and restricted within boundaries. As in many other mythologies, the textual evidence suggests that there is no single

To the similarities between *Völuspá, Enūma Eliš* and Genesis we could even add the version of the creation myth contained in the *Rigveda* 10:129 in which, at the beginning of time, "Neither non-being was nor being was at that time; there was not the air, nor the heaven beyond it [...]."[22] The main difference concerning the Vedic hymn about the creation of the world is that we are not told who its maker was, which is almost like saying there was not a maker. On the other hand, the *Rigveda* contains a similar series of negative statements, which have surprising formulaic coincidences with the Germanic *Wessobrunner Gebet,* as West has pointed out,[23] but they are not the only ones, since also between the Nordic *Ginnunga gap,* the Greek *Xáos,* as found in Aristophanes, and the chaos in *Enūma Eliš,* personified by the goddess Tiamat, we can find echoes of what seems to be a similar conceptual thinking about the beginnings of the known world. That being said, we cannot but agree with those who explain such general parallelisms in terms of the pervasion of theological themes across numerous cultures over many centuries, and consider the differences as a later cultural transformation of every particular myth.[24] In this process, each author might first have developed their own version from an archetype, influenced by existing oral or written traditions, Christian, or pre-Christian in the case of the Germanic and Nordic material, and then added some features especially relevant to the target culture of all the people within that culture.

3 Of dwarves and men

Especially interesting for our study are *Völuspá* stanzas 9–10 and *Gylfaginning* chapter 14 where the origins of the dwarves are described:

Völuspá 9–10
Then went all the powers
to their judgment-seats,
the all-holy gods
and thereon held council
who should of the dwarfs
the race create
from the sea-giant's blood
and livid bones

Gylfaginning 14
Next after this, the gods enthroned themselves in their seats and held judgment, and called to mind whence the dwarfs had quickened in the mould and underneath in the earth, even as do maggots in flesh. The dwarfs had first received shape and life in the flesh of Ymir, and were then maggots; but by decree of the gods had become conscious with the intelligence of men,

22 West 2007, 355.
23 West 2007, 356.
24 Kure 2003, 317.

many man's likeness
the dwarfs created
from earth
as Durin said.[25]

and had human shape. And nevertheless they
dwell in the earth and in stones.[26]

The importance of the creation of the dwarves, even though they are not represented as an especially active group in our sources, lies in the fact that they were bestowed with the creative skills of the *Æsir* right from the moment of their creation. According to *Völuspá* 9, they were made out of Bláin's bones and blood and we see them engaged in moulding men's likenesses from the earth immediately afterwards, which will be the object of further attention in the following.[27] Snorri introduces some changes, and in *Gylfaginning* he tells how the dwarves were fashioned from Ymir's flesh but lived as maggots (*maðkar*) until "by decree of the gods had become conscious with the intelligence of men, and had human shape but dwell in the earth and in stones". An ephemeral existence as maggots to be instantly turned into the shape of dwarfs but equipped with the intelligence of men, is something that reveals Snorri's proclivity for mythologems in keeping with Christian ideas about God's benevolence towards his creatures.[28]

Their living under the earth and in stones may be the reason why the author of the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, "~~The sayings of the High One~~", praises dwarves as figures with unique wisdom and sagacity, but also for the fact that they are the mighty artisans who crafted for the gods the most valuable of their possessions, such as Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir*, Óðinn's arm-ring named *Draupnir* or the fetter *Gleipnir* used to bind the wolf Fenrir. For our study, though, Tryggvi Gíslason's disputed reinterpretation of *Völuspá* 9–10, according to which, the dwarves created man's likeness from earth (*mannlíkun í jörðu*), as opposed to the more commonly accepted reading, that the gods hold council to decide who should form the race of dwarves from Ymir's blood, is of special importance.[29] If Gíslason's suggestion is correct, it would imply that the dwarves are responsible for creating the first members of human-

25 *Völuspá* 9: *Þá gengu regin öll / á rökstóla, / ginnheilög goð / ok um þat gættusk / hverr skyldi dverga/ drótt of skepja / ór brimi blóðgu / ok ór Bláins leggjum / Þar mannlíkun / mörg of gerðusk / dvergar í jörðu / sem Durinn sagði.*

26 *Gylfaginning* (p. 15): *Þar næst settust goðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sína ok minntust, hvaðan dvergar höfðu kviknat í moldinni ok niðri í jörðunni, svá sem maðkar í holdi. Dvergarnir höfðu skipazt fyrst ok tekit kviknun í holdi Ymis ok váru þá maðkar, en af atkvæðum goðanna urðu þeir vitandi mannvits ok höfðu manns líki ok búa þó í jörðu ok í steinum.*

27 Bláinn, related to the adjective blue (*blá*), was probably one of the various names of the giant Ymir.

28 One of the very few examples of the use of the substantive *maðkr* in Old Norse is found in Psalm 22 (7) where the author admits his misery by saying *eg sannliga emm maðkur ok eigi maður brigxlik;* see the entry for *maðkr* in the electronic version of the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog.*

29 That is of course if we ignore Snorri's account (*Gylfaginning*, 11) in which he says that the primeval man and woman grew under Ymir's left hand (*þá óx undir vinstri hönd honum maðr ok kona, ok annarr fótr hans gat son við öðrum*): Gíslason 1984.

kind out of earth and not wood, as has been generally agreed. His reading provides a convincing solution to the continuity of *Völuspá* 9–10 to 17–18 and puts forward the view that dwarves must be included among the primeval chthonic beings, or even as brothers of the giants, as Vésteinn Ólason has also suggested.[30] Such an opinion could find some support in *Þórsdrápa* 15:8 where the giant Geirroðr is said to be a kinsman of Suðri, one of the dwarves who supports the cardinal points, as mentioned by Snorri in *Gylfaggining*. With the creation of the dwarfs from Ymir's blood and bones the main stage in the creation myth came to an end. From stanzas 11–16 the author recollects all the names of the dwarfs in the so-called *dvergatal*, which deserves some discussion, but which is outside the scope of this study.

In order to find reason behind this creative act, we need to turn to the second part of stanza 8 in *Völuspá*. The beginning of the stanza recounts how the gods enjoyed themselves playing games at home and had no lack of gold (*var þeim vettergis vant ór gulli*) until:

[...] uns þrjár kvómu	until three came,
þursa meyjar	Thurs-maidens,
ámáttkar mjök	very powerful
ór Jötunheimum.	from Jötunheim

According to *Völuspá*, thus, it was the giantesses who put an end to the world's golden age. Most scholars have supported the idea that the gods had created the dwarves so that they could provide them with gold, even though in stanza 7 the gods are said to be able to make gold for themselves (*auð smíðuðu*).[31] Subsequently, they "created" the human race for no apparent reason and gave them precious gifts (breath, mind and blood). The presence of the powerful giantesses has been difficult to explain, not because they do not play a prominent role in many of the Eddic poems, there are indeed several cases of intermarriage between with the gods, but because they seem to be necessary in the process of creation, as Else Mundal has correctly argued.[32]

Snorri's reordering of *Völuspá*'s course of events, in that men were created before dwarves, answers to a Christian logic but coincides nonetheless in explaining the creation of the dwarves in terms of a reaction against the coming of some women from Jötunheimum (the land of the giants) who would probably have deprived the gods of some unnamed benefits. A similar idea, i.e., that of finding the solution to a loss of privileges in the devising of a new race of subordinates, is also present in the *Epic of Atraḫasīs*, an Akkadian text dating back to the 18th century

30 Ólason 1992.
31 Mundal 2012.
32 Mundal 2012, 319 ff.

BCE,[33] which presents in historical sequence both the creation of humankind and its near extinction in the flood, which recalls comparisons with the myth's biblical version. The story tells how, before humankind existed, the high gods forced the rest of the deities to perform manual labour. The lesser gods rebelled and the higher gods, similar to the Norse, *gengu á røkstóla* (held a council) and took legal decision in the assembly after the goddess Nintu proposed the slaughter of one of the gods (We-ila, a god with intelligence), and the mixing of his flesh and blood with clay. The complete sequence of events is as follows:

> Enki and Nintu (the birth-goddess)
> work to create man]
> We-ila [a god], who had a personality
> They slaughtered in their assembly.
> From his flesh and blood
> Nintu mixed clay.
> For the rest of the time they heard the drum,
> From the flesh of the god there was a spirit.
> It proclaimed living man as its sign,
> And so that this was not forgotten there was a spirit.
> After she had mixed that clay
> She summoned the Anunnaki, the great gods.
> The Igigi, the great gods,
> Spat upon the clay.
> Mami [Nintu] opened her mouth
> And addressed the great gods,
> 'You commanded me a task, I have completed it;
> (Epic of Atraḫasīs, 2002)

If we leave aside the differences regarding the numbers and the identities of the subordinate races created by decision of the assembly (men and dwarves), the similarities between both texts are striking. Furthermore, although Babylonian literature contains a fair number of references to creation from clay,[34] the new motif of the theomachy influenced later texts, such as the already mentioned *Enūma eliš*.[35] Both traditions about man's creation draw on basic metaphors of human existence, which is also valid for the Norse myths, as contained in *Völuspá*, which were concerned with the creation of dwarfs from earth, blood and flesh, and that of men just from clay.

Interesting for our analysis also are the facts that a) in both traditions a "lesser" type of being is created to alleviate the toil of the gods, b) that the decision is taken at the Assembly, c) that a female character or characters (birth goddesses in

33 In the authors' introduction to the translation, it is said that the texts of the *Epic of Atra-ḫasīs* "are taken from a reconstruction based on three tablets from the Old Babylonian period copied by the scribe Ku-Aya" (*Epic of Atraḫasīs* 2002).

34 Pettinato 1971.

35 This epic narrates how a male god (Ea) created mankind from the god Qingu's blood, who as a sacrificial victim was punished for his taking part in an unjustified war of vengeance. This motif of the righteous/unrighteous cause is absent both from the Norse sources and the oldest Atraḫasīs

Atraḫasīs or giantesses who were the mothers of the *Æsir* in Norse mythology) are behind that decision and probably took part in the ritual, and d) that the flesh and blood of a superior being mixed with clay is used to fulfil the task. Other elements contained in the Akkadian myth such as the incantations recited in the ritual, the stress laid upon the fact that the new creature had a spirit or intelligences and a destiny, or the spitting upon the clay are not completely alien to Norse thinking, as we will see when we analyse the anthropogonic myth as presented in the *Völuspá* and the *Snorra Edda*.

This motif of the "spitting of the great gods upon the clay" mentioned last is worth some attention, since even though *Völuspá* does not include this motif in the creative process, we have a similar occurrence in the Norse myth of Kvasir, a man or a lesser god who was endowed with superhuman wisdom, exactly like We-ila. His origins—and this time we need to ask for Snorri's help (*Skáldskaparmál* and *Gylfaginning* 50)—are to be found in the primordial war between the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* (greater and lesser gods) and in the peace agreement reached by both contending parties. As part of the truce, both sides spat into a vessel to seal peace, and from the spittle they made Kvasir, who later is slain by the dwarfs Fjalarr and Galarr and who mixed his blood with honey and brew the mead of poetry.[36] Even though there are obvious differences between both narratives, such as the fact that the myth of Kvasir has been said to refer to a fermented plant juice drunk at ceremonial gatherings like the ones that signal the end of hostilities, there are also some shared elements which are worth further study, e.g., the fact that the killed gods or demigods are sacrificed, transformed and continue to be guides to wisdom or peace.[37]

4 Of men and trees

The anthropogenic Nordic myth is only attested in stanzas 17–18 of the poem *Völuspá* and in chapter 9 of Snorri's *Prose Edda*. The *Völuspá* version relates how the mighty *Æsir* found Askr and Embla on the land, powerless (*litt megandi*), lacking in destiny (*örlöglausa*), without breath of life (*ǫnd þau ne attu*), without mind (*oð þau ne höfðu*), neither blood nor voice or god appearance (*lá ne læti ne litv goða*).[38] After that, Óðinn gave them the breath of life, Hœnir gave them mind and Lóðurr gave them blood and good appearance.

36 *Skáldskaparmál* 5: *En þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund, at þeir gengu hvárirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum. En at skilnaði þá tóku goðin ok vildu eigi láta týnast þat griðamark ok skǫpuðu þar ór mann. Sá heitir Kvasir. Hann er svá vitr, at engi spyrr hann þeira hluta, er eigi kann hann órlausn.*

37 Stübe 1924.

38 *Völuspá* 17; *Unz þrír kvámu / ór því liði / öflgir ok ástkir / æsir at húsi, / fundu á landi / lítt megandi / Ask ok Emblu / örlöglausa.* Stanza 18: *Önd þau né áttu, / óð þau né höfðu, / lá né læti / né litu góða; / önd gaf Óðinn, / óð gaf Hœnir, / lá gaf Lóðurr / ok litu góða.*

Snorri's retelling of the myth introduces certain nuances:

> Þá er þeir gengu með sævarströndu Borssynir, fundu þeir *tré* tvau ok tóku upp trén ok *sköpuðu* af menn. Gaf inn fyrsti önd ok líf, annarr vit ok hræring, þriði ásjónu, mál ok heyrn ok sjón, gáfu þeim klæði ok nöfn. Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla.
>
> When the sons of Borr were walking along the sea-strand, they found *two* trees, and took up the trees and *shaped* men of them: the first gave them spirit and life; the second, wit and feeling; the third, form, speech, hearing, and sight. They gave them clothing and names: the male was called Askr, and the female Embla.

Most research has endorsed Snorri's version of the myth where the gods performed the "magical" act of creating two human beings from two lifeless pieces of wood that had reached the seashore. The sole mention of the *tré tvau* has resulted in an abundant crop of theories about whether or not the myth of mankind originating from trees conforms to the Nordic mythological system and whether or not the names Askr and (especially) Embla have a logical connection to nature and *Weltanschauung* of the Nordic peoples from that period. Scholars who subscribe to that interpretation have made recourse to ancient traditions where men sprung from plants, like the Iranian cosmogony mentioned by West, where mankind's first parents grew in the form of rhubarb, also from ash-trees, as in the case in Hesiod's *Works and Days* 43–44,[39] or were put forth from the Earth as reported by Tacitus in his description of Tuisto, the father of Mannus.[40] In the Sumerian traditions, the introductory lines to the *Hymn to E-engur* also have an example of humans sprouting from the grounds like plants, once the destinies had been determined for all engendered things.[41]

The meaning of the substantive *askr* is quite straightforward and refers to a tree, probably not native to Iceland, the ash, which also appears in poetical diction in *kenningar* for men or warriors. In the second part of his *Edda,* in chapter 39 of the *Skáldskaparmál,* Snorri says that:

> Ok fyrir því at hann er reynir vápnanna ok viðr víganna, allt eitt ok vinnandi. Viðr heitir tré. Reynir heitir ok tré. Af þessum heitum hafa skáldin kallat manninn *ask* eða hlyn, lund eða öðrum viðarheitum karlkenndum ok kennt til víga eða skipa eða fjár.
>
> And because he is a tester of weapons and a winner of battles,—the words for 'winner' and 'wood' being the same, as are also those for 'tester' and 'rowan,'—therefore, from

39 Dronke 1997.
40 West 2007, 376.
41 Jacobsen 1970.

> these phrases, skalds have called man *Ash* or Maple, Grove, or other masculine tree-names, and paraphrased him in such expressions in terms of battles or ships or possessions.

The meaning and etymology of Embla has been much debated and, as far as I am aware, none of the possibilities proposed have found unanimous support among Old Norse scholars. Most of what has been written on this topic is based on Snorri's interpretation and assume that there must be a sort of parallelisms between the names Askr and Embla and two trees, probably the ash and the elm, even though the Icelandic for "elm" *almr* is a masculine and often used in poetry in metaphors for "man".[42]

Anders Hultgårds has recently offered us an overview of the different lines of interpretation, which include etymological attempts suggesting that Embla could derive from the Greek word ἄμπελος ("vine"), which could have reached Scandinavia through the German *Embila*, a proper female name.[43] Hultgårds also mentions other researchers who have renounced the arboreal connection, like Karl G. Johansson who suggests the word could be derived from the Latin root *-am* (from *amphora*, "water pot"), or Gunlög Josefsson who introduces another possibility in the Indo-European root *eim+la ("fire or smoke-maker"). In the first lines of his conclusion, Hultgårds admits that "as already noted, *Völuspá* does not state what shape Askr and Embla had been discovered by the gods,"[44] but since most scholars have accepted the idea that the *tré tvau* also applies to *Völuspá*, he also follows the arboreal connection and proposes a closer look at the second part of stanza 4 that "the sun shining on the stony ground brought forth green plants".[45] For him, then, the *grænum lauki* should be interpreted as a reflection on the origin of mankind from trees, not only as a part of a common Indo-European heritage but also of a fundamental metaphor of human existence, the parallel between man and plants.[46]

A different approach hinted at by Josefsson suggests that Embla could derive from **Ammila* ▸ *amma*, "ancestress", but this is rejected on the basis that, although not controversial from an etymological point of view, one would expect some sort of symmetry or parallelism between the names for man and woman.[47] Gro Steinsland, on the other hand, after recognising that the myth about Askr and Embla falls perfectly into place in the Indo-European mythological system—i.e., humankind being born from trees—, also suggests that the similarities in the alliteration

42 Kure 2002.

43 Josefsson 2011; Hultgårds 2006.

44 Hultgårds 2006, 61; Stanza 4: *sól skein sunnan / á salar steina, / þá var grund groin / grænum lauki.*

45 Hultgårds 2006, 61

46 Frymer-Kensky 1987. "Within the Near East the image is well developed, and the picture emerges of man being planted in the ground [...]. In Israel the vegetal image survives in numerous metaphors and similes, and in the concept of the Israel-plant".

47 Josefsson 2011, 73.

between the biblical Adam/Eve and the Nordic Askr/Embla cannot be a mere coincidence.[48] Steinsland's conclusion does not imply, however, that the author of *Völuspá* has tried to rewrite the myth in Christian terms—there are too many discrepancies—,[49] but only that the poet carried out an *interpretatio norroena* of the Christian anthropogonic myth without leaving the boundaries of the Nordic pre-Christian mythological internal logic.

The two stanzas in which the (second) creation of mankind is recorded in *Völuspá* are as follows:

17.	17
Unz þrír kvámu	Until there came three
ór því liði	from their group/assembly.
öflgir ok ástkir	mighty and benevolent
æsir at húsi,	Æsir to the house
fundu á landi	They found on earth,
lítt megandi	nearly powerless,
Ask ok Emblu	Ask and Embla,
örlöglausa.	void of destiny.
18.	18
Önd þau né áttu,	The breath of life they possessed not,
óð þau né höfðu,	mind they had not,
lá né læti	blood nor voice,
né litu góða;	nor goodly colour.
önd gaf Óðinn,	Breath gave Odin,
óð gaf Hænir,	mind gave Hoenir,
lá gaf Lóðurr	blood gave Lodur,
ok litu góða.	and goodly colour.

According to the poem, three male gods from the group of the high gods[50] came to a house (?) from their group/assembly (?). On the land (*á landi*) they found the powerless Askr and Embla for whom the norns had not yet decided a destiny (*örlöglausa*). In stanza 18, three gods are mentioned and each one provides the two humans with a valuable gift which should be enough to make them complete (we must not forget that the creation of humans is attributed in the Snorra Edda to the sons of Borr, Óðinn, Vili and Vé). The motive behind the inclusion of those goods in

48 Steinsland 1983, 2001.

49 In the Nordic Creation myth there is no almighty God who created Heaven and Earth, no idea of original sin, and both woman and man are created at the same time.

50 In the Hauksbók version of the poem, the two first lines are: *Vndz þriar komu / þussa brudir*, with the feminine form *þrjár* instead of *þrír*, which allows for a completely different interpretation of the identity of the promoters of humankind (Mundal 2012, 217 ff.).

the ritual has proven difficult to explain. Óðinn's presence comes as no surprise as the almighty god, but Hœnir, later known as a stupid god, and Lóðurr, who is only briefly mentioned in other sources, are little more than outsiders.[51] Else Mundal has offered a very insightful justification for their election before other more "capable" gods. For Mundal, "Óðinn gave life and became god of the dead, Hœnir gave his intelligence and became stupid and Lóðurr gave his own looks and disappeared".[52]

As important as the different traditions behind the identity of the gods who took part in the creative process might be, we should now turn back to the discussion as to whether *Völuspá* contains more than one motif about the creation of mankind or whether the stanza above mentioned is directly dependent on stanza 9. That is, to decide whether the first human pair was created by the dwarves from clay at the behest of the Æsir, and then found and filled with life by the gods at a later stage, or whether they were just found on the shore as lifeless logs and quickened into life. The answer to the questions posed by the latter option, not only when dealing with Embla's name and identity but also in ascribing the arboreal nature to Askr and Embla, depends too much on Snorri's agenda so as not to go unquestioned. The first option is not completely waterproof either, but it contains certain motifs which, as far as we know, have not been hitherto much discussed and which have interesting parallels in the Babylonian creation myth, that is the object of this study.

If that is the case, I intend now to evaluate the creation myth as portrayed in the *Epic of Atra-ḫasīs* one of the sources for the Akkadian mythology and see whether it could introduce a new approach to the discussion around Old Norse creation myths, or even just shed some light into its most obscure corners. The context of the ritual, as was already delineated, goes back to Enki and Nintu's proposal to create a man from the flesh and blood of a sacrificed god. After the decision was taken at the assembly, the gods:

They entered the house of destiny
Did Prince Ea [Enki] and the wise Mami
With the birth-goddesses assembled
He trod the clay in her presence.
She kept reciting the incantation,
Ea, seated before her, was prompting her.
After she had finished her incantation
She nipped off fourteen pieces of clay.
Seven she put on the right
Seven she put on the left.
Between them she placed the brick
She [line damaged] the cutter
of the umbilical cord [line damaged]
The wise and the learned
Twice seven birth-goddesses had
assembled,
Seven produced males,
Seven produced females.
The birth-goddesses, creatress of destiny-
They completed them in pairs.
(Arnold & Beyer 2002)

51 According to Ursula Dronke 1997, Lóðurr could be "a third name of Loki/Loptr", since the gods Odin, Hœnir and Loki occur already as a trio in *Haustlöng* and the prose prologue to *Reginsmál*.

52 Mundal 2001, 250 ff.

In the *Epic of Atra-ḫasīs*, as we can see, the participants in the ritual also arrived at what is called "the house of destiny", where the birth goddesses, creators of destiny, were already assembled and the goddess in charge of the ritual kept reciting her incantations. In this creation myth, there are, of course, alien metaphors to the Norse culture, such as Enki's preparation of the clay by stamping it with his feet, which serves as a metaphor for the shaping of the foetus in the womb, or the mention of the mud brick that was usually put in the birthing house for seven days in honour of Mami. Other elements are not so foreign, for example Mami's recitation of incantations so that the foetus will be born properly, which is a common task of midwives in many cultures. In the Old Norse parallel, the debated presence of the female deities in the scene where mankind was created would thus provide for the mother and ancestress figures that would establish a very common link between birth and fate.[53]

The necessity of the female element in the creative process seems to lend even more credibility to Mundal's and Steinsland's ideas about the participation of the female giantesses in the creation of the world and of mankind but also to the interpretation of stanza 20. It introduces the coming of three very wise maidens from a dwelling down near the tree (Yggdrasill):

Þaðan koma meyjar margs vitandi	Thence come the maidens mighty in
þrjár, ór þeim sæ er und þolli stendr;	wisdom, Three from the dwelling down
Urð hétu eina, aðra Verðandi,	near the tree;
skáru á skíði, Skuld ina þriðju;	Urth is one named, Verðandi another one,
þær lög lögðu, þær líf kuru	On the wood they scored, and Skuld the
alda börnum, örlög seggja.	third.
(Eddukvæði, 295)	they made Laws there, and allotted life
	to the sons of men and set their fates.

These maidens were the *nornir* who allotted life to the sons of men and set their fates, a concept which is much in consonance with the description of Askr and Embla as *örlöglausa*, void of destiny, in *Völuspá* 17.

It is interesting to mention that that spot near the tree seems to refer to the very holy place were the Gods held their assemblies according to Snorri, *þar skulu guðin eiga dóma sína hvern dag*,[54] which could give us some clues about the obscure reference *æsir kvámu at húsit*, the gods came to the house—especially, if we consider the importance of the concept of destiny in old Norse mythology.[55] This interpretation

53 Bek-Pedersen 2011.

54 *Gylfaginning*, 17.

55 The dwelling was placed in *Iðavöllr* and was probably made of wood: *Hár mælir: 'Í upphafi setti hann stjórnarmenn ok beiddi flá at dœma með sér ørlög manna ok ráða um skipun borgarinnar. þat var þar sem heitir Iðavöllr í miðri borginni. Var þat hit fyrsta fleira verk at gera hof þat er sæti fleira standa í, tólf önnur en hasætit þat er Alföðr á. þat hús er bezt gert á jörðu ok mest.*

is also preferrable to the link established by some scholars between this house and the one mentioned in the second stanza of the eddic poem *Rígsþula*, since in *Gylfaginning* (a sui generis rendering of *Völuspá* 7) we have a clear example of another *hús* where the fate of men was decided.

According to this model, based solely on a reinterpretation of *Völuspá*, Askr and Embla could have been created from clay by the dwarves and left on the ground void of destiny and lifeless until three unnamed gods found them by the house of destiny and decided to filling them with life (blood, breath and colour) in the presence of unnamed female deities or *nornir* who also set their fates and gave them life. A possible relocation of *Völuspá* stanza 20 (possibly right after stanza 8) would allow for a different interpretation of the myth and for the inclusion of the female element in the account of the creation of humans. Even though our assumptions are venturing into a somewhat unexplored territory, we must be aware of the fact that we will probably never be sure whether *Völuspá* contains the "original"-version of the Norse creation myth or just individual pieces of a mixed nature and origin, probably composed around 1000 CE, and then arranged and edited more than two centuries later. The importance of this new approach lies thus in the possibility it offers to look at our Norse sources from a different angle and with new and fresher questions in mind, as Schjødt, among others, has convincingly argued.

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