Book Review: *Old Norse Mythology*

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JOHN LINDOW: ***Old Norse Mythology***. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021. Pp. xii + 231. 35 figs. ISBN 978-0-1908-5225-2.

Lindow emphasises early in this book that in Old Norse mythology, for which canonical texts are lacking, we frequently find 'numerous versions of the same story, […] often contradicting one other (*sic*) in ways great and small' (pp vii-viii; cf. pp. 64, 116). This is especially well illustrated in Chapter 2, where Lindow steers a careful course among various versions of the story of the god Þórr's fishing expedition, as will be shown below. Referring in his Introduction to the *carmina* (songs) mentioned by Tacitus in his *Germania* (*c.* 100 CE), Lindow sees these as the likely ancestors of Germanic alliterative poetry, including Old Norse poetry, both eddic and skaldic (for which latter term he prefers Old Norse *dróttkvætt* 'recited before a retinue'), in which much of the mythology was transmitted orally before being given written form by such antiquaries as Saxo Grammaticus (*c.* 1200), Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), and the anonymous redactor of the collection containing most of what is known as the Poetic Edda (*c.* 1250?). In Chapter 1 he presents the mythology as a system, as far as this is possible given the nature of the sources, following the examples of the eddic poem *Vǫluspá* and the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri's prose *Edda* in tracing the mythic history of the cosmos from its creation to its destruction at Ragnarøk and rebirth.

The story of Þórr's encounter with the world serpent while fishing, the subject of Chapter 2, is preserved in versions depicted on stone monuments mostly from the Viking Age (*c.* 800-1100, cf. p. 1), as well as in *dróttkvætt* poetry, in the eddic poem *Hymiskviða*, and in *Gylfaginning*. Of the pictorial stone versions Lindow considers the runestone from Altuna, Sweden (mid or later 11th century, p. 84), the picture stone from Hørdum, north Jutland (?8th-11th century, p. 84), and two somewhat more doubtful cases (see p. 83): the stone slab from Gosforth in northern England (most likely 10th century, p. 86), and the picture stone Ardre VIII, from Ardre, on the Swedish island of Gotland (8th or 9th century, p. 87). The relevant *dróttkvætt* poems are what is preserved of *Ragnarsdrápa* by the Norwegian poet Bragi Boddason (9th century, p. 70), of *Húsdrápa* by the Icelander Úlfr Uggason (late 10th century, pp. 56, 75), and of poems by Ǫlvir hnúfa, a court poet of Haraldr hárfagri (d. *c.* 930, p. 74) and by Eysteinn Valdason and Gamli gnævaðarskáld (both thought to have been active in Iceland towards the end of the pre-Christian period, i.e. in the late

10th century, p. 81). The eddic poem *Hymiskviða* has been variously dated as earlier and later than Snorri's *Edda* (p. 90), itself composed c. 1220-1230 (cf. p. 1).

Lindow notes that according to Úlfr and Gamli Þórr kills the serpent (by beheading it in Úlfr's account) (pp. 76, 80), whereas in Bragi's poem and arguably also on the stones apart from Altuna a companion in the boat with Þórr cuts his fishing line, which would mean that the serpent survives, as indeed happens in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, where the companion is clearly identified as the giant Hymir; on the Altuna stone no companion is shown. The other sources, including Altuna, and also *Hymiskviða* in which Hymir is Þórr's companion in the boat, leave it open whether the serpent is killed or not. In *Gylfaginning* Hár, Snorri's second-level narrator of the story, mentions the tradition of the serpent's beheading, but expresses the opinion that it is still alive (pp. 74-75, 78-79, 83-102).

Lindow (pp. 81, 101) tentatively argues for a development from an early Viking-Age version of the story in which the serpent survives to a specifically Icelandic, late pre-Christian one in which it is killed, while noting that the early version, passed down orally, would also have been known in late pre-Christian Iceland. Snorri's much later use of both versions is to be explained by his respect for tradition and by tradition's demand that the serpent must be alive for Þórr to fight against it at Ragnarøk. Lindow answers the objection that Þórr could not have killed the serpent on his fishing expedition because he later fights it at Ragnarøk by pointing out that myths preserved orally can be expected to have inconsistencies, and, more questionably perhaps, that it would in any case have been consistent with the mythology for the serpent to rise from the dead to fight at Ragnarøk.

In Chapter 3, Lindow discusses *how* and *why* the Old Norse myths continued to be told in medieval Scandinavia in the Christian period, when they were no longer sacred narratives, i.e. no longer accepted by their audiences as consistent with their religious beliefs. As for *how*, this is apparent in demonization, the transformation of the pre-Christian gods into Satan or his minions, and in euhemerism, the treatment of the gods as never having been anything other than human beings, even if people worshipped them. For *why*, Lindow gives four reasons: first, the entertainment value of the myths; secondly, the explanation they offered of surviving witnesses to the pre-Christian religion, such as theophoric place names and various artifacts, not least stone monuments; thirdly, the fact that they could be, in Lévi-Strauss's phrase, 'good to think with' (cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*, 1962, p. 132), understood here mainly in the

sense that they could serve as cautionary tales; and fourthly, their value as a repository of native wisdom, of information about the past. Particularly interesting in the context of the third reason is Lindow's view that recollection of the blending of their blood by Óðinn and Loki, referred to in the eddic poem *Lokasenna*, st. 9, would have increased the attentiveness of thirteenth-century Icelandic saga audiences to accounts of such an oath of blood-brotherhood in the family sagas; and that the internecine strife of the Age of the Sturlungar (1220-64) could well have been seen as leading to a re-enactment of Ragnarøk, averted only by Iceland's submission to Norway in 1262-64.

In Chapter 4 Lindow gives a historical overview of the uses and misuses of Old Norse mythology in reinforcing various kinds of ideology, involving, *inter alia*, concepts of kingship in medieval Scandinavia; patriotism in the Scandinavian countries from the seventeenth century to the Romantic period and beyond; anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Germany and under Nazism; novels recasting Ragnarøk in a cautionary spirit (by Villy Sørensen, Neil Gaiman, and A. S. Byatt); and the ideals (or idols) of modern pop culture. After a brief Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Readings (*sic*) he appends a section on Resources in which he reproduces in translation and with photographs a selection of texts (including *Lokasenna* in its entirety) and artifacts (other than those treated in Chapter 2) which may be regarded as primary sources for Old Norse mythology.

While dealing in detail with only one myth, this book is an admirably wide-ranging account of Old Norse mythology in general, and a welcome addition to Lindow's earlier works on the subject, notably his *Murder and vengeance among the gods: Baldr in Scandinavian mythology* (1997) and *Norse mythology: a guide to the gods, heroes, rituals, and beliefs* (2001). A few criticisms may nevertheless be made.

On p. 14 Lindow mentions the two thirteenth-century manuscripts in which the eddic poems are 'mostly found'. By these he must mean the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, GKS 2365 4to, which contains 29 poems, ten on mythological subjects, and AM 748 4to, which contains seven mythological poems, six of them also preserved in the Codex Regius, but which does not contain *Vǫluspá*, the first of the poems contained in the Codex Regius. Lindow seems to recognize this on p. 56, where he writes, correctly, that *Vǫluspá* is found 'in only one of the two main manuscripts', i.e. in the Codex Regius but not in 748 4to. On p. 28, however, shortly after his first mention of these two manuscripts, he writes with reference to *Vǫluspá* of 'one of the two eddic manuscripts' and in a footnote mentions, still on the subject of *Vǫluspá*, 'the other manuscript of eddic poetry', here giving the

impression that *Vǫluspá* is indeed contained in 748 4to. *Vǫluspá* is in fact preserved, as well as in the Codex Regius, in a somewhat variant version in the AM 544 4to section of the early fourteenth-century codex known as *Hauksbók*, but this is nowhere specified in the book under review (nor are the other two manuscripts referred to by collection, number, or size), and it would be easy for the reader to miss the passing reference on p. 56 and to conclude from the earlier references and from those on pp. 131 ('two different manuscript versions') and 169 ('both versions of *Vǫluspá*') that in the case of *Vǫluspá* we are dealing with the Codex Regius and 748 4to, rather than with the Codex Regius and *Hauksbók*.

When Lindow further mentions on p. 28 'the difficult lines in *Vǫluspá* st. 9' he is referring to those in the Codex Regius in which the gods are debating the question *hverr skyldi dverga / dróttin skepja*, which Carolyne Larrington translates acceptably as 'who should create the lord of dwarfs'. (Lindow uses Larrington's revised translation of *The Poetic Edda*, 2014, for eddic quotations throughout, but not in this instance.) Tryggvi Gíslason, in an article which Lindow does not seem to have used (published in the Ludvig Holm-Olsen *festskrift*, 1984, pp. 84-88), emends *dróttin* 'lord' here to *dróttir*, accusative plural of *drótt* 'troop', taking it to mean 'people in general', and translates 'which one of the dwarfs should create the races of men'. This reading finds support in the *Hauksbók* text of *Vǫluspá*, which reads unambiguously *hverer skyldu dvergar / dróttir skepja* 'which dwarfs should create troops' (unfortunately mistranslated by Larrington as 'who should create the dwarf-folk'). It must be *Hauksbók* that Lindow means by 'the other manuscript of eddic poetry' in this context on p. 28, note 2, and he is clearly attracted to the idea that the gods, rather than creating the dwarfs, as the Codex Regius (unemended) implies, appointed them to create human beings, as *Hauksbók* suggests, but is prevented from advancing it with confidence by the contradiction between the Codex Regius in its unemended form and *Hauksbók*. This idea, if recognized as what lies behind *Vǫluspá* st. 9, has the advantage of being consistent, as Lindow realises, with the information given in subsequent stanzas: st. 10, where it is said that the dwarfs Mótsognir and Durinn made *manlíkon* 'man-like figures', and sts 17 and 18, where three of the gods, including Óðinn, find the fateless figures Askr ('ash') and Embla ('elm'?), into which Óðinn breathes the breath of life.

Lindow can hardly be blamed for being unaware of Tryggvi's article, but he could have given clearer and greater emphasis to the support the *Hauksbók* text of *Vǫluspá* st. 9 provides for what he seems to want to argue in relation to this stanza. It would be unfair to criticise

Larrington's revised translation of *The Poetic Edda* on the basis of the one error quoted above, though it does raise the question of whether hers is the best English translation available, as Lindow (p. 169) seems to believe.

There are two names missing from Lindow's list of References (pp. 211-21) that I would like to have seen there. One is that of Anatoly Liberman, who, in his book *In prayer and laughter: essays in medieval Scandinavian and Germanic mythology, literature and culture* (2016; reviewed in *Scandinavica* 57: 2 (2018), 90–94), argues against the view, tentatively put forward by Lindow on p. 47, that the tree on which Óðinn claims to have hung in st. 138 of the eddic poem *Hávamál* is identical with the world tree of Old Norse mythology (for which, according to Liberman, *Yggdrasill* is a misnomer). Liberman on the other hand supports the view, referred to by Lindow on p. 141, that Óðinn was associated from the beginning with the legend of the Wild Hunt, and offers a persuasive explanation of why the mythical portrayal of the gods as misbehaving, suffering, or being mocked (cf. Lindow, pp. 160, 178) should not necessarily be regarded as a sign of Christian influence.

The other name is that of Gro Steinsland, whose book *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: an analyse av hierogami-myten i* Skírnismál*,* Ynglingatal*,* Háleygjatal *og* Hyndluljóð (1991) might have led Lindow to modify somewhat his statement on p. 194 that the concept of Óðinn and the giantess Skaði as the joint progenitors of the ancestral line of the earls of Hlaðir has not received much attention in treatments of Old Norse mythology.

One must always remember, though, that one can't have everything! This book, as indicated above, is greatly to be welcomed.