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Innehåll

LISE GJEDSSØ BERTELSEN, Sigurd Fafnersbane sagnet som fortalt på Ramsundsristningen	5
ANNE-SOFIE GRÄSLUND, Kvinnorepresentationen på de senvikingatida runstenarna med utgångspunkt i Sigurdsristningarna	33
TERRY GUNNELL, Pantheon? What Pantheon? Concepts of a Family of Gods in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions	55
TOMMY KUUSELA, ”Den som rider på Freyfaxi ska dö”. Freyfaxis död och rituell nedstörtning av hästar för stup	77
LARS LÖNNROTH, Sigurður Nordals brev till Nanna	101
JAN ALEXANDER VAN NAHL, The Skilled Narrator. Myth and Scholarship in the Prose Edda	123
WILLIAM SAYERS, Generational Models for the Friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn (<i>Egils saga Skallagrímssonar</i>)	143
OLOF SUNDQVIST, The Pre-Christian Cult of Dead Royalty in Old Norse Sources: Medieval Speculations or Ancient Traditions? . . .	177

Recensioner

LARS LÖNNROTH, rec. av <i>Minni</i> and <i>Muninn</i> : Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture, red. Pernille Herrmann, Stephen A. Mitchell & Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir	213
OLOF SUNDQVIST, rec. av Mikael Males: Mytologi i skaldedikt, skaldedikt i prosa. En synkron analys av mytologiska referenser i medeltida norröna handskrifter	219
PER-AXEL WIKTORSSON, rec. av <i>The Power of the Book. Medial Approaches to Medieval Nordic Legal Manuscripts</i> , red. Lena Rohrbach	225
KIRSTEN WOLF, rev. of Lasse Mårtensson. <i>Skrivaren och förlagan: Norm och normbrott i Codex Upsaliensis av Snorra Edda</i>	234

Isländska sällskapet

AGNETA NEY & MARCO BIANCHI, Berättelse om verksamheten under 2014	241
Författarna i denna årgång	243

Pantheon? What Pantheon?

Concepts of a Family of Gods

in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions

TERRY GUNNELL

Introduction

This article might be regarded as a follow-up to several other papers and articles that the present author has presented in recent years on the subject of religious change and diversity in the Nordic countries during the Migration Period and Viking Age (see, for example, Gunnell 2007, 2010, 2013 and forthcoming a). The papers in question echo in many ways the views increasingly expressed over the last twenty years or so that there is good reason for students and scholars to be highly wary of trusting the image of Old Norse cosmology and mythology presented in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*.¹ There is no question that the *Prose Edda* (see Snorri Sturluson 1998 and 2005) should never be viewed as a Nordic *Bible*, reflecting a pan-Nordic or even Germanic pre-Christian worldview. To my mind there is equal reason to question Snorri's implication (expressed in both the *Prose Edda* and, indirectly, *Ynglinga saga*) that all Scandinavians (including the Icelanders) believed in a pantheon of Æsir and Vanir gods who lived together in the same space (*Ásgarðr*) under the rulership (and fatherhood) of Óðinn, each having his/her particular social or natural function (see most recently Hedeager 2011: 7–13). It also applies to Snorri's suggestion that all dead heroes went to *Valhöll* (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 32–34; see further Abram 2003; and DuBois 1999: 57–58). Both of these ideas have often been taken to reflect beliefs that were accepted across

¹ See, for example, McKinnell 1994: 9–10 and 2005: 13; DuBois 1999: 7–8; 10–12, 56–59; Price 2002: 26 and 54–55; and 2010: xiv; Abram 2003; Brink 2007: 105–35; Andréén 2007: 105–38; and 2014: 187–90; Schjødt 2008: 95; 2009: 9–22; and 2012; Gunnell 2007: 111–15; 2013a; and forthcoming; Carver 2010: 1–20; and Nordberg 2012.

the Nordic and Germanic area as a whole throughout the Viking period, if not longer. However, as the recent scholarship noted above suggests, the likelihood is that such views were probably geographically, socially and temporally limited, and that they belonged mainly to a particular elite militarily-orientated class living outside Iceland, in the close vicinity of the new class of ambitious area or national Scandinavian rulers that was evolving during the latter half of the first millennium (see further Gunnell 2013a). What has perhaps distorted our view is that the *skálds*, the mobile media of the time who have provided much of our extant literary source material on beliefs relating to Óðinn's leadership, were closely associated with this elite. Furthermore, it seems that Snorri himself preferred this foreign, elitist image of the cosmology. Nonetheless, it is clear that he often expresses quite different religious ideas in his *Prose Edda* to those found in *Landnámabók* or the Icelandic family sagas, which might be said to give a better reflection of the oral traditions and "historical" beliefs of most people living in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, if not before (see further Gunnell forthcoming a).²

A Diversity of Beliefs and Blurred Boundaries

Before proceeding any further, it is worth briefly summing up the present state of scholarly opinion noted above with regard to the *nature* of Old Norse religion (see also Nordberg 2012; and Schjødt 2012 in particular). As noted at the start, in recent years, numerous scholars have been arguing that the idea that of any *set body* of "Old Norse religious" beliefs, myths and rituals ever having existed over a wide area of space and time (similar to those known in Christianity or Islam) should be abandoned. It has been suggested that instead of talking of Old Norse "religion", we should be talking of "religious systems" (DuBois 1999: 7–8) or

² Unlike the *Prose Edda* (and *Heimskringla*), *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic family sagas, which attest to recounting the early history of the Icelandic settlers, seem to have been essentially intended for Icelandic audiences who would have known and often heard most of the local legends that lie behind them, and were likely to question those details that were "wrong". It is certainly worth bearing in mind that the religious views that these accounts suggest existed amongst the settlers are reflected by both place-name and archaeological evidence (see below). The kings' sagas and most *skaldic* praise poetry, on the other hand, were intended for a foreign elite audience.

“discursive spaces” (Schjødt 2009) in which there was a great deal of variety around certain shared, linguistic concepts and a certain amount of shared cultural vocabulary (see also Shaw 2011: 10–11). In short, it now seems probable that like the Scandinavian folklore and dialects collected in the mid-nineteenth century, Old Norse religious beliefs and practices varied by time and space, largely in accordance with social practices and environments, depending on whether people lived in the mountains, or in the flat agricultural lands, by the sea, or on islands; depending on whether they were farmers, warriors or hunters; and also depending on the degree of social contact they had with people outside the immediate Nordic area.³ As noted above, the same would have applied to concepts of death: indeed, there is an increasing feeling among scholars that the idea of *Valholl* is something that developed alongside the growth of “central places” and increase in the number of large-scale armies from the sixth century onwards, and that, as with the dominance of Óðinn, it focused around the military elite (see, for example, Abram 2003).

Another development is the growing awareness that, as with folk legends and fairy tales which also lived in the oral tradition, myths must have also varied by area, and that the same applied to the key figures associated with these myths and many of the individual motifs contained within them: One notes how accounts vary about whether Freyr or Óðinn owned *Skíðblaðnir* (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 36 [*Gylfaginning* ch. 43]; cf. Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 18); whether Freyja or Frigg owned a bird costume (Snorri Sturluson 1998: 2 and 30 [*Skáldskaparmál*, chs G56 and 20]; *Þrymskviða*, sts 3, 4 and 9;⁴ cf. Snorri Sturluson 1998: 24 and 30 [*Skáldskaparmál*, chs 18 and 19]); and whether Freyr had the right to sit in *Hliðskjálf*, cf. Snorri Sturluson 2005: 30–31 [*Gylfaginning* ch. 37]; and *Skírnismál*, prose introduction cf. *Skírnismál*, st. 6 which says nothing about Freyr having used a seat belonging to Óðinn when he saw Gerðr⁵). There is even some dispute about which goddess was most closely associated with Óðinn (Frigg, Sága, Freyja and others all vying for the title in different accounts).

³ The degree of local variation is reflected in, among other things, place-name distribution (see Brink 2007); the variety of practices used for marking land described in *Landnámabók* (see also Strömbäck 1928); as well as archaeological finds, and not least those which reflect a range of differing burial practices (see further Price 2008).

⁴ References to the Eddic poems in this article refer to the texts contained in *Eddadigte* 1964 and 1971.

⁵ See further Gunnell 1995: 194–203 and 223–35 on the relationship between the prose introductions to the Eddic poems and the poems themselves.

Scholars are also increasingly aware that the fluidity and variety of ideas and practices that existed within the Nordic area itself were influenced in part by the fact that there were no hard cultural boundaries between the Scandinavian and Germanic peoples and the Celts, the Sami and the Baltic peoples (see in particular DuBois 1999; and Shaw 2011).⁶ As with later folklore, influences concerning religious ideas and practices were continually flowing back and forth between these cultures, new ideas coming north, west, and east with mercenaries, traders and other travellers from the Roman and Byzantine areas, from Christianity, and not least, in later times from the Carolingian Empire.

Some scholars have sensibly noted that the blurring of boundaries should not only be applied to cultures but also to periods of time, and most particularly to the suggestion that there were hard and fast differences between Bronze Age and Iron Age beliefs and practices. While something seems to have put a comparatively sudden end to the widespread rock carving practices of southern Scandinavian in around 500–350 BC (very loosely; see, for example, Coles 2005: 79; and Andrén 2014: 132–33), there is little question that the importance of the sun and the ship as central religious images survived a millennium, reaching into the practices and beliefs of Iron-Age Gotland (Andrén 2012; and 2014: 117–66). The same applies to the practices of placing figureheads on ships, the ritual wearing of horns (for references, see Gunnell 1995: 36–53), and deposition at certain watery sites on settlement peripheries (see references in Lund 2008; Fabech and Näsman 2013; and Fredengren 2011). All of these practices have very early roots indeed, and their age and background should not be ignored.

Religious Change

Something else that is receiving ever more acceptance is the idea that in the period around 500 AD (once again very loosely), another set of wide-

⁶ While there were obvious differences in language, as in our own times, the borderlines would have been blurred by trade contacts and other types of association (in mercenary work, and military cooperation for example: see for example Todd 1975: 23). Such contact, which has been underlined by archaeological finds, would have transgressed linguistic boundaries, since it demanded a degree of bilingualism. See also Andrén 2014: 188 for reference to further examples of this kind.

ranging and deep-rooted changes in religious belief and approach seem to have been taking place in southern Scandinavia. Whatever caused this (see also Gräslund 2007; and Andrén 2014: 178–87), this seems to have led to a reduction in the aforementioned depositions of weapons, artefacts and foods in lakes, pools and marshes on the peripheries of settlements (see further Fabech 1998; and 1999a and b; Lund 2008; Fabech and Näsman 2013; and Fredengren 2011). The same period saw a growth in the development of new so-called “central places”, centring round large halls governed by a new breed of area-ruler (see, for example, Andrén 2014: 182 and 186–87). In some of these places, such as Uppåkra in Sweden, it seems that these rulers were actively replacing those powers earlier associated with the watery sites, weapons now being deposited on dry land around the central halls, or the cult houses associated with them (see, for example, Jørgensen 2009; and Larsson 2007: 17–20). Similar sites were closely associated with making and giving of so-called *guldgubbar* or gold foils, often found in spaces associated with high-seat pillars where the male ruler appears to have sat, or in the increasing numbers of so-called small cult houses which have been found beside the halls in question (for references and discussion, see, for example, Watt 1999).

There was, it seems, a growing emphasis on the importance of male gods associated with war, and a gradual reduction in the importance of protective female deities (local or otherwise) related to fertility, goddesses who may have been associated with watery sites like those echoed in Eddic place names *Sökkvabekkr* (*Grímnismál*, st. 7) and *Fensalir* (*Völuspá*, st. 33), and in the accounts of supernatural figures like *Sága* (*Grímnismál*, st. 7), the *Nornir* (*Völuspá*, st. 20), Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*, Nerthus in Tacitus’ *Germania* (ch. 40), and even the Arthurian Lady of the Lake. These changes in emphasis, belief and religious practice might also be seen in Óðinn’s semi-take-over of the world of death from female figures like *Hel*, *Freyja*, *Gefjun*, and *Rán*, reflected in the development of ideas concerning *Valhöll* (see also Abram 2003). As noted above, the changes in question certainly seem to be occurring alongside the development of a new southern Scandinavian military, aristocratic elite which had increasingly nationalistic ambitions of territorial rulership extending beyond the local clan, tribe or family,⁷ and new, powerful, moveable

⁷ As with Native Americans and the Scottish clans, it can be expected that lines between family, clan and/or tribe would have been highly blurred amongst the Germanic tribes, within which one can expect a high degree of intermarriage to have taken place. Nonetheless, place names (such as *Hordaland* and *Rogaland* in Norway for example; and *Öster-*

rulers who needed to find a way of underlining the continuing existence of their personal power even when they were not physically present (for further discussion, see Gunnell 2013). There were, of course, useful lessons to be learnt here from the Roman, Byzantine and Carolingian empires, and not least from the Christian church. Essentially, what you do to answer these problems as a ruler, in addition to setting up a network of local representatives and military bases, is transform yourself into a god, his descendant or his representative on earth and place yourself on the coins in everyone's pockets (if not on statues in every square). Another effective idea is to suggest that all ravens are listening devices.

How High Was the High One?

This, then, seems to be the present situation with regard to the scholarly understanding of Old Norse religions.⁸ There is, however, good reason to go even further in questioning of the cosmological worldview presented by Snorri which had a great deal of influence on scholars of religion in the past, many of whom have had an equal amount of influence on our own general ways of approaching mythology as a whole. One example is Dumézil (see in particular Dumézil 1973), who had particular influence on the thinking of other key scholars of Old Norse religion such as de Vries (1956–57), Turville-Petre (1964) and Ström (1985). In the above review of scholarship, mention was made of an increasing acceptance that there was more variation in belief and custom than Dumézil and others had imagined. This has raised the valid question of exactly how much variation existed and the degree to which it included cosmological hierarchies? In a forthcoming article entitled “How High Was the High One?” (Gunnell, forthcoming a), the present author has followed up arguments earlier expressed by Peterson (1876), de la Saussaye (1902: 77 and 222) and Turville-Petre (1958 and 1992), all of whom noted that in spite of the sentiments expressed in the *Prose Edda*, some of the Eddic poems, and the skaldic corpus, there is little “historical”, archaeological or place-name evidence to support the idea that a majority of people in pre-Christian Iceland and Norway viewed

and Västergötland in Sweden) suggest that the tribes had a sense of geographical belonging or ownership of land, and a sense of difference to outsiders.

⁸ The use of the plural here is becoming traditional practice amongst scholars, and is based on the idea of variety of belief and practice noted above.

Óðinn as the highest god, if they ever knew much about him at all. As the article notes, not only the place-name and archaeological material, but also the sagas and *Landnámabók* all point to Þórr (and occasionally Freyr) as having been seen as the gods who were most efficacious in Iceland. The same seems to have applied to much of Norway (Brink 2007: 113–16), and even Gotland (Andrén 2012). While such observations are not new, comparatively little attention has been given to the *consequences* they have for our understanding of Old Norse religions and mythology. My own article concentrates on the important implications the comparative absence of Óðinn in the religious hierarchy will have had for worldviews in the areas in question (and most especially in Snorri’s homeland), and for our understanding of Old Norse literary materials concerning the gods, and not least the poetry. In the very least, it would seem to suggest that the Óðinic Eddic and skaldic poetic material has a cultural background outside Iceland among the mainland Scandinavian elite (and their particular worldview).⁹ It also explains why this poetry should have been preserved, and by whom (in other words, by the *skálds* themselves, who had some reason for repeating and “learning”¹⁰ these poems as part of their craft, rather than the average people). It also tells us something about the cultural and performance contexts that should be borne in mind when considering how this material was understood, and where it was most commonly orally received: in other words, in the mainland halls and aristocratic central places noted earlier, that is, in the courts and the military barracks and fortresses ruled by single figures, but containing people from a range of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The comparative absence of Óðinn in Icelandic place names and sagas cannot be ignored (especially when compared to the place name evidence in Britain and mainland Scandinavia). In particular, it raises a number of other key questions, and not least with regard to the existence of the hierarchic family pantheon suggested by *The Prose Edda*, and Snorri’s key

⁹ There is little question that parts of *Hávamál*, usually seen as one of the Óðinic poems, seem to refer to a less elite, more poverty-stricken rural society (see, for example, st. 36). Nonetheless, it should also be remembered that most scholars agree that in its present state *Hávamál* seems to be an amalgamation of several poems which come from different backgrounds. In short, the sections on everyday life need not have the same background as those sections relating to the figure of Óðinn (such as sts 97–11; and sts 138–64). See, for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1962: 295–314.

¹⁰ By “learning” here, it should be stressed that a certain degree of variation and recreation can be expected, as in all oral cultures. The sense of a stable text was very different in an oral society to a written one.

Eddic sources, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Völuspá*, and in particular *Grímnismál*, in other words, the suggestion that all the gods were seen as living together in an Olympian *Ásgarðr* under the Óðinn's leadership. Rudolf Simek has recently questioned the existence of the Vanir as a distinctly named group (Simek 2010: 13; see further Gunnell forthcoming b). Here I would like to go one step further and question the idea of the Æsir as having generally been seen a recognised family of gods who lived, travelled and partied together, and not least the Dumézilian idea which still seems to hold sway in scholarly discussion, that these gods were essentially associated with different classes of people associated with different cultural functions (Dumézil 1973: 26, 32, 70–74) or different natural processes. Indeed, it is commonly suggested by earlier scholars such as Turville-Petre (1964: 103) and Folke Ström (1985: 108–09; 121–24) that individuals in Scandinavia (and Iceland) personally chose gods from the pantheon to worship on the basis of their social class. There is good reason to assume that the situation was both simpler and more complex than this.

Gods of Different Classes?

While there seems little question that Óðinn was increasingly adopted by the new aristocracy and their armies based in the new national central places, when we look outside this sphere a little more careful thought is needed about exactly what is meant when we talk about gods and their relationship to social classes or functions, and especially what we mean when we talk about “classes” of peasants, farmers, priests and aristocrats in the Old Norse world. Which class did Skalla-Grímr, Egill, Ingólfr, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, Snorri *goði*, Ketill *hœngr*, Ingimundr *gamli* and the *jarlar* of Hlaðir belong to? Were they farmers, priests, warriors or aristocrats? Did they ever keep to one particular function in the course of their daily lives? While it would be naïve to suggest that the various gods mentioned in the *Grímnismál* pantheon would not have heard of by most of those living in the Nordic world, to my mind it is questionable whether most people ever saw them as living together in a group, as a “family” of Æsir like the gods on Olympus. As Philip Shaw has recently suggested (Shaw 2011: 10–12, 47, 71–72, and 99–100), there is reason to consider that many of the gods known in the Germanic and Scandinavian world were tribally-, area-, or clan- (family-) related rather than bound to social classes, and that most

groups of people living in the Scandinavian countryside, like the “tribe of Þórr” (*muintir Tomair*) mentioned in the Irish annals (Turville-Petre 1964: 94), or even the forefathers of Ari *fróði* and the Breiðfirðingar mentioned in *Íslendingabók* (1968: 27–28), would have focused their attention on a single all-purpose god and his other half, rather than a group of gods. There seems to be little evidence to suggest that rural communities ever worshipped a range of gods (even if they had heard of the gods worshipped by other people). A similar approach certainly seems to have occurred in the Sámi and Finno-Ugric areas (DuBois 1999: 55–59).

A Family of Gods?

If we begin with the general idea of the Æsir family, an idea which, in the extant Old Norse mythological sources is closely allied to the idea of Óðinn as family head or “alföðr”, it is interesting to note how rarely the gods appear or function in a group in the extant mythical sources: Outside *Grímnismál* (which makes no mention of Loki, Frigg or Týr) and *Völuspá* (both of which belong firmly within the sphere of the Óðinic hall — like *Vafþrúðnismál*), the only Eddic poems suggesting that the gods meet as a group are the equally Óðinically-focused *Lokasenna*, and then *Prymskviða* (which makes no mention of Óðinn). In addition to these works, are the accounts of the funeral of Baldr in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 46–47, based largely on *Húsdrápa*), in which all the gods appear with their various modes of transport; and then, indirectly, the *Gylfaginning* accounts of the dwarfs’ creation of the gods’ various artefacts (Snorri Sturluson 1998: 41–42). Outside these narratives, the gods tend to lead their own private existences in the myths, with the occasional shared involvement of Freyja or Loki, who as Triin Laidoner has noted, seems to serve as a kind of escort or bridge to the other world for both Óðinn and Þórr (Laidoner 2009). It is also noteworthy how little Óðinn has to do with the account of Freyr’s potential meeting with Gerðr in *Skírnismál* (in which Freyr seems to own Draupnir: see sts 21–22), outside the suggestion that the god (along with Þórr) will be angered by Gerðr’s refusal of Freyr (st. 33), a curse which seems somewhat out of place here. The same applies to the myths of Þórr’s encounters with Útgardarloki and the *jötnar* (Hrungnir, Prymr, Hymir, or Geirröðr), and Heimdallr’s creation of the social classes in *Rígspula*. It also can be seen in the myths

of Óðinn's acquisition of the poetic mead, his self-sacrifice on the tree, and the accounts of his encounters with Vafþrúðnir and Billings *mey*, none of which involve other male gods. In short, the gods rarely work together outside going for occasional strolls in threesomes. Even their apparent joint participation and demise at *ragnarök* seems a little forced, considering that *Þórsdrápa* suggests Þórr has already killed the *miðgarðs-ormr* (Snorri Sturluson 1998: 22–24); that *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 39, suggests that Njörðr has gone back home to the Vanir; and that little focus at all is placed on the role played by Freyr (implied by *Völuspá*, st. 53), who, like Heimdallr and Týr, is only directly mentioned in the *Gylfaginning* account (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 50–51), and seems like an afterthought in the action. (One notes that Freyja is also totally absent from the proceedings.)

Considering the variability noted earlier, and what was stated earlier about myths and folk legends, one starts to wonder whether all of these myths come from the same cultural environment, or whether, like the later folk legends, they were actually collected in different places, and never actually belonged together as a corpus. Indeed, bearing in mind that Óðinn seems to have had little importance for most Icelandic settlers, one also starts to wonder whether there might have been different sets of myths in different environments: whether the Óðinic myths of hierarchic group meetings, banquets and final battles originated in (and reflected) the mercenary warrior halls and elite courts ruled by the kings, while most people living in rural environments knew better the myths which centred on Freyr and/or Þórr (here I would not include the satirical *Hárbarðsljóð*, which seems to reflect a conflict between two groups of belief systems as much as two gods).

Þórr as an All-Purpose God

If we tentatively take this idea one step further, and consider the logical idea that there probably *was* an individual body of mythology which originally centred on Þórr (in which he was central, for example in places like Iceland and most of western Norway), then it would have been natural that this mythology would also have included some explanation of the origin of the world and mankind, in terms relating to Þórr. If that was the case, what has happened to that myth? While this is totally speculative, it is an interesting experiment to replace Óðinn with Þórr in the accounts

Snorri gives us of Ymir's violent destruction being a means to create the earth, and of washed-up tree trunks being consecrated to create human kind (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 11–13). Þórr is, of course, both the god that smashes, and the consecrator (of runes) (see McKinnell, Simek and Düwel 2004: 48, 118–20 and 127); and, he is also the one most commonly associated with trees, high-seat pillars, tides, sea shores and waters (see references in Gunnell forthcoming a). Whether there is anything in this hypothetical game or not, there is certainly reason to start considering each of the extant myths more as separate entities and/or in terms of the context of Óðinic-, Þórr- or Freyr-based societies rather than as a corpus. It is also worth considering whether these myths might have changed their central hero by time and area as migratory folk legends do (see, for example, the records of local migratory legend variations in Norway and Sweden in Christiansen 1958 and af Klintberg 2010).

Considering the comparative absence of other gods in Þórr myths, it is also noteworthy how little Þórr needs their assistance in the myths told about him. Never personally introducing himself directly as a son of Óðinn (they compete in *Hárbarðsljóð*), he is clearly quite capable of functioning without the aid of any other figures (except perhaps for a female figure like Sif or Freyja and/or a travelling companion like Loki and Þjálfi). His functions and skills are also widespread. Far from being limited to air, thunder, lightning, rain and help with crops (as Adam of Bremen suggests [1959: 207–08], he is also called on for help with wind and sea-travel (*Landnámabók* 1968: 250–53 [S 218; H 184]; and 55 [H 15]); and in later folklore (as in *Prymskviða*) is still closely associated with marriage (see Bø, Grambo, Hodne and Hodne 1981: 89–90, and 265–66). Þórr's connection with lightning also implies an association with fire. While he might not be an aggressive warrior (interestingly enough, he is never depicted hunting for *jotnar* to fight), he is an effective protector against outside forces, and the key figure Icelanders call on to oppose the coming of Christian missionaries (see references in Gunnell 2010 and forthcoming a). He is also a creator, and a life force, creating tides, shaping salmon, and bringing his goats back to life with his hammer (a club according to Saxo Grammaticus 1979: 72), which like the club of the Celtic god, the Dagda, seems to have the combined skills of bringing about both life and death (see Snorri Sturluson 2005: 37, 43, and 49; and Ó hÓgáin 2006: 152). Þórr decides where people should settle (see *Landnámabók* 1968: 124–25 [S 75; H 73]; 163–64 [S 123; H 95]; and 232–33 [S 197; H 164]), and, as noted above, is the consecrator of both marriage and runes. It is also worth noting

that Snorri's *Prologue* contains signs that Snorri had heard of one Þórr and another Vingeþórr who were forefathers of Óðinn (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 4), an idea echoed in Ælfric's tenth-century sermon on pagan gods which suggests that Þórr (also called Jove [Jouis] here) was the father of Týr, Freyr and Freyja (Ælfric 1968, 683–85; see also Saxo Grammaticus 1979: 171). In short, there is very little that Þórr does not do as a god. He is furthermore depicted as the central god at both Mære and Uppsala (Adam of Bremen 1959: 207; and Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 317). It is difficult to ignore the parallels Ælfric and Saxo make between him and Jove/Jupiter/Zeus, who was both ruler and god of thunder and lightning in the Greco-Roman world (see also Saxo Grammaticus 1979: 171). Considering all of the above, in addition to the place-name evidence (Brink 2007: 113–16), and Þórr's widespread and lasting popularity over time (see references in Gunnell forthcoming a), there is good reason to support the suggestion made by DuBois (1999: 57) and others that Þórr probably preceded Óðinn on his move north, something which would provide yet another reason for considering his independence from the other Æsir.

Freyr as an All-Purpose God

Þórr, though, is not the only all-purpose god in the corpus: In spite of the limited extant evidence, the same seems to have applied to Freyr, whose name means “lord”, and who even Snorri admits was called “veraldargoð”, the world god to whom people sacrificed for good crops and peace (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 21).¹¹ Far from being limited to marriage, rain, sun, fertility and peace as Adam of Bremen and Snorri suggest (Adam of Bremen 1959: 205–07; Snorri Sturluson 2005: 24), Freyr also rules and fights. In *Skírnismál*, he is shown once sitting in Hliðskjálf, and he appears in a similar situation in *Víga-Glúms saga* (1956: 87–88). He fights Beli and Surtr (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 31 and 50), is seen as the best rider (*Lokasenna*, st. 37), and has a horse called “Blóðughófi” (Snorri Sturluson 1998: 89) and a sword that fights automatically with *jötnar* (*Skírnismál*, st. 8). Closely connected to the sun and barley (*Skírnismál*, st. 4, and *Lokasenna*, sts 44–46); the ruler of Álfheimr (*Grímnismál*, st. 5), and

¹¹ On Freyr and the Vanir, and their inherent “difference” to the Æsir, see further Gunnell forthcoming b.

apparent spouse of the earth in the form of Gerðr (Snorri Sturluson 2005: 31), he is not only the forefather of kings (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 24–25) but also, as noted above, Ari *fróði*'s family (*Íslendingabók* 1968: 27–28). Freyr is thus another multifunctional ruling figure, and like Pórr, in many ways more wide-ranging in function than Óðinn can ever be as an *alfǫðr*. Place-name evidence (Brink 2007: 109–11), Saxo Grammaticus (1979: 174), and even Snorri Sturluson (1941–51: I, 24–25) all suggest that Freyr's cult was geographically connected to the Uppland area, and the Ynglingar kings (Vikstrand 2001: 55–71; and Sundqvist 2002). There are also obvious connections to the Ingvaeones tribe (Tacitus 1948: 102), something which once again encourages consideration of whether the Old Norse gods might not have originally been earlier more tribal- and/or geographical- rather than class-orientated, and whether they, like the *matronæ* and *dísir* (see Gunnell 2005a) might not have been seen as independent figures at the head of cults which were also connected to ancestor spirits, as Philip Shaw suggests (Shaw 2011: 47, 71–72, and 99–100). Is it so foolhardy to consider that the same might have also at one point applied to other gods like Týr, Njǫrðr and Ullr, as certain earlier scholars such as de la Saussaye suggested in the late nineteenth century (see, for example, de la Saussaye 1902: 77, and 283)?

Arguably, part of the problem involves the way in which as scholars of pre-Christian Scandinavian and Germanic religions, we often casually jump from talking of tribal groups or family clans like those mentioned in works like Tacitus' *Germania* to discussing national units like those reflected in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, often forgetting that there must have been middle stages, and that the new nations were made up of earlier tribes/clans, all of which would have had different historical, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and associations with different local areas with their own environmental concerns. Remains of this idea are, of course, seen in the way in which in *Landnámabók* and the sagas, people tend to associate themselves with counties, and with local groups of people rather than with larger nations.

Gods of Different Functions?

Another problem relates to the long-term influences of classical mythological models that we all grew up with, the faint but fading influences of

the nature-mythology scholars, and then the heavy stamp of Dumézil (noted above). All of these, encouraged by Adam of Bremen's and Snorri's varying comments about the different functions of the various gods (noted above), have resulted in us continuing to try to limit different gods to different natural and/or social functions. Here, however, as Philip Shaw notes (Shaw 2011: 12 and 99), we are trying to fit sources into uncomfortable pre-conceived theoretical moulds, rather than allowing the sources to shape the patterns (a recurring problem with academia). As Jens Peter Schjødt has recently pointed out (Schjødt 2012: 278–79), fitting the Old Norse gods into Dumézilian functions is extremely difficult, if not impossible, not least because of the earlier noted degree of social overlap between classes in the north. As noted above, the sagas demonstrate most farmer-chieftains in Scandinavia moving comfortably between the roles of farmer, warrior and priest. Prior to the arrival of the central places and new breed of kings after c. 500 AD, there was no feudal aristocracy of the kind Dumézil seems to imagine in the Nordic countries. While there were slaves, but they would hardly have been allowed to practice their own formal religion. Peasants, farmers and chieftains were all closely related, forming part of the same family or clan which would have shared a similar form of worship, and almost certainly, allegiance to the same god, similar grave sites, and the same communal places of worship (alongside other smaller local cult sites on and around individual farms where offerings might have been made to local nature spirits or personal ancestors).¹² This is the kind of system that can be witnessed in sagas like *Eyrbyggja saga* (where Þórr is the only god mentioned), and considering what has been noted above, it makes sense.¹³ For Þórołfr Mostrarskegg, Þórr is much more than a mere thunder god. Like the gods known among the Sámi (DuBois 1999, 59), Þórr was part of the family and would have been called on for a wide variety of purposes.

Pantheon? What Pantheon?

It is natural to question why, if the Old Norse gods were not seen by most as living as a family, they are presented as living together under Óðinn's

¹² As noted above, place-name evidence also points to religious sites of worship as having been dedicated to individual gods rather than groups of gods.

¹³ Similarly *Hrafnkels saga* (1950), *Víga-Glúms saga* (1956) and *Vatnsdæla saga* (1939), which point to memories of the worship of Freyr, make no mention of Þórr.

leadership in a poem like *Grímnismál*; and why Þórr, Freyr and Óðinn should appear together in Adam of Bremen's earlier-noted description of Gamla Uppsala? With regard to the latter, it should be remembered that the festival described by Adam was a large-scale "national" gathering of people from different communities within a wide area, who may well have had different religious backgrounds. It was not an annual occurrence (taking place every nine years). One should also remember its time of occurrence, at the beginning of the spring when the male sphere of life, war, trade, and farming was taking over from the female sphere of darkness and the home (see Gunnell 2006). It is quite natural that *various male* gods (and no female figures) should appear together here (albeit under Þórr's dominance). *Grímnismál* probably stems from a similar mixed community involving people from differing cultural and religious backgrounds: as has been noted above, the world of the poem reflects that of the central hall, the central royal court, and the great barracks like those of Fyrkat and Trelleborg, which centre around a hierarchic system of one man ruling over others who were meant to function as a unit. It seems evident that many of the rulers in question had adopted the fashionable, but highly practical allegiance to Óðinn (in his role as a chaotic, moving god of war, poetry and magic who provides future rewards for those who die in battle) (see further Gunnell 2013a). The same personal allegiance need not necessarily have applied to the rulers' followers, at least at first. As the later Christian missionaries knew, totally denying the beliefs and backgrounds of a ruler's followers was less practical than adapting them to fit into an overall hierarchic scheme in which an *alfǫðr*, Óðinn, ruled over all other gods who were now depicted as living together (like the followers) in Ásgarðr. Indeed, as time went on, it would seem that Óðinn was gradually starting to take on increasing numbers of elements (and names) which had previously belonged to these now-lower deities, as the rulers invited their followers to join them and Óðinn in Valhøll. Even more effective would have been when the ruler and Óðinn started to blend in the minds of their followers, as a result of various rituals, performances and other kinds of what might now be termed "effective spin" (see further Gunnell 2005b and 2013b).

While this can be nothing but speculation (like so much of our considerations of Old Norse religions), I believe that there is good reason for questioning the idea that most people in Scandinavia ever imagined the existence of a general family pantheon of gods like that presented by Snorri, and that we instead consider a form of henotheism (if not total

monotheism) of the kind presented by H. S. Versnel, which involved “the privileged devotion to one god who is regarded as uniquely superior, with other gods who were neither depreciated nor rejected and continue receiving due cultic observance whenever this is ritually required” (Versnel 2011: 244; see also 239–44). In short, we should consider the possibility that in many areas, while they would probably have heard of other local gods (just as they would have heard of the Christian God) people principally believed in and worshipped *individual* gods and goddesses (such as Þórr and Freyr) who served a majority of key functions rather than a family of different, if related, gods. In such a system, outside the central places and halls, the name of the god in question would not have been guided so much by individual class as by greater or smaller rural areas in which all classes of people would have belonged to the same family or clan, the main gods perhaps working alongside (and in relation to) a number of “lesser” nature spirits and ancestors that would have inhabited the local landscape (see further Gunnell 2005a and 2007 on the *álfar* and *dísir*). Considering the differences between such a system and that which we encounter in Adam of Bremen’s description of the celebrations at Gamla Uppsala, we should maybe also give more consideration to the possibility that potential differences existed between the religious activities and beliefs seen in the local settlement, and those encountered at the larger communal *þing*, in the court or in the military camp, all of which would have had to cater for people coming from a variety of different backgrounds and would have seen the natural development of the new idea of a pantheistic family of gods headed by Óðinn. It would seem apparent that the world view of Snorri’s work is much more applicable to such a limited, but essentially mixed and more hierarchic cultural world than that which would have been experienced by the average Norwegian, Swedish or Icelandic farmer, and that it is time his work is treated with such a background in mind.

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Summary

This article questions the commonly-held idea that the Norse gods were seen by those who worshipped them as a form of pantheon, in other words a family of gods under the rule of an *alfǫðr*, Óðinn. Building on previous research and not least the evidence of *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic family sagas, it underlines the idea that Old Norse religions almost certainly varied by time and area, and questions whether the Dumézilian idea of gods of different functions and classes would have been applicable

to the Nordic area. The author points to the fact that evidence seems to suggest that instead of people worshipping gods on the basis of function or class, families and tribes appear to have worshipped single, all-purpose gods such as Þórr and Freyr. The article ends with the suggestion that the idea of Óðinn as an *alfǫðr*, ruling over a family of gods was a later development that came hand-in-hand with the development of a new kind of national (rather than tribal) ruler in the period after ca. 500 AD.

Keywords: Old Norse religion, Old Norse cosmology, Old Norse gods, Dumézil, Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr

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