Beyond ‘ása ok álfa’

Eddic Discourses of the Álfar and their Chthonic Semantic Centre

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ABSTRACT: In the Poetic Edda, a multitude of understandings and ideas exist concerning the Otherworldly collective known as the álfr (Old Norse pl., sg. álfr). While the understandings are indeed many, they are not arbitrary. There seems to exist what Jens Peter Schjødt has termed a “semantic centre” for a number of “discourses” on the álfr. In this article, I will suggest various discourses of and construct a semantic centre for the álfr though an analysis of the stanzas of the Poetic Edda in which the álfr feature, supported when it is relevant by other Old Norse textual sources. I propose that constructing a semantic centre focusing on death and fertility, and thus viewing the álfr as chthonic beings, will help us make sense of the diversity in the discourses of the álfr in the eddic poems.

KEYWORDS: Álfar; semantic centre; discourse; eddic poetry; chthonic beings; vanir; pre-Christian Nordic religion; Nordic mythology

In the 1930s, the journal Acta Scandinavica Philologica was the scene of a lively debate between two prominent Old Norse scholars of the time, Hans Ellekilde (1933-34) and...
Jan de Vries (1932-33; 1933-34). The topic of discussion was how to interpret Sigvatr Bóðarson’s Austrfararvisor, especially the so-called álfrblót stanzas (4-6). What were the álfr to which the pagan Swedes were sacrificing, and what did the cult surrounding them entail? Should the álfr be viewed as “dødningevæsner” (beings of death) or “naturvætter” (nature spirits)? Hans Ellekilde called for a nuanced view by stating that

[Vi] bør blot vogte os for at slå fast som et dogme, at alferne er dødningevæsner og intet andet. Sanheden turde være den, at alferne er overnaturlige, magtejende væsner, snart opfattet som naturvætter, snart som afdøde forfædre.

(We must just be wary of stating as a dogma that the álfar are beings of death and nothing else. The truth may rather be that the álfar are supernatural, power-possessing beings now perceived as nature spirits, now as deceased ancestors; Ellekilde 1933-34, 187).

Jan de Vries, however, was unconvinced, noting “at denne Sandhed bare registrerer Overleveringens Fakta uden at fordybe sig i deres egentlige Betydning” (that this truth merely registers the facts of the tradition without going into their actual meaning; de Vries 1933-34, 293) and that it can be difficult to differentiate between what is connected to nature and what is connected to death (de Vries 1933-34, 293).

This discussion is an excellent encapsulation of the álfr. The textual accounts of this collective of Otherworldly beings are many and diverse in the picture they paint (see, for instance, Ármann Jakobsson 2015; Gunnell 2020a; Hall 2007, 21-53; Simék 2017, 2019). The two interpretations put forth by Ellekilde and de Vries are not the only ones to be found in the Old Norse textual corpus. Terry Gunnell describes the source situation concerning the álfr as follows: “it seems clear that the extant early Nordic sources point to a range of different understandings of álfr which varied over time and in accordance with the worldviews of the writers” (2007, 116). This is an acute observation, and the variety of understandings of the álfr seems to be a case in point for the diversity within pre-Christian Scandinavian religion discussed at length by many scholars within at least the last two decades (for instance, Brink 2007; DuBois 1999; Murphy 2018, 2020; Nordberg 2018; Schjødt 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Svanberg 2003a, 2003b).

While these understandings of the álfr are indeed many, they are not arbitrary. There seems to exist what Jens Peter Schjødt has termed discursive spaces (2012a; in this article simply called discourses) with a specific semantic centre (2007, 2013a). In this article, I will suggest a number of discourses linked by a semantic centre for the álfr though an analysis of the stanzas of the Poetic Edda in which the álfr feature. This analysis will, when relevant, be supported by evidence from other Old Norse textual sources. In analysing the various discourses and thus constructing a chthonic semantic centre (cf. Schjødt 1991, 315; 2008, 384), both the points raised by Ellekilde and de Vries almost 90 years ago can be accommodated, and perhaps that particular discussion can come to an end – while new ones will undoubtedly open up.¹

¹ See Murphy in this issue for an analysis of the discourses of the Otherworldly collective know as the dísir.

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As mentioned above, the concept of religious diversity within the pre-Christian North is well established. Expressions of religiosity, as they are portrayed in Old Norse literature, varied according to time, place, and genre, and religiosity in pre-Christian times would certainly also have been of a correspondingly varied nature. This has been argued to be an inherent trait of the type of religion to which pre-Christian Nordic religion can be said to belong, termed “primary” religion (Assmann 2006, 122-26), “folk” or “ethnic” religion (Steinsland 2005, 34), or “chiefdom” religion (Nygaard 2016; 2022). What these terms have in common is a focus on some of the following traits: an oral, cult-based, inclusive, non-dogmatic type of religion covering a large geographical area during a long period of time (at least c. 500-1100). Different types of diversity seem to have been in play within what we call “pre-Christian Nordic religion” due to, among others things, some of the traits mentioned above. Jens Peter Schjødt (2007; 2009; 2013a) and other scholars such as Terry Gunnell (2015) and Fredrik Svanberg (2003a; 2003b) have suggested various types of diversity with which one can describe the picture found in the sources. These include chronological, geographical or regional, social, and cognitive or mental diversity, to use the types presented by Schjødt (2009). Additionally, the lack of dogma and a contemporary written canon for pre-Christian Nordic religion adds to the reasons for diversity present in extant sources. Such reasons for diversity might prompt readers of Old Norse myth to think that “everything goes” when it comes to religious ideas in the pre-Christian North. However, the religious ideas we are presented with seem by no means arbitrary. To paraphrase Schjødt, there were certain “discursive spaces” (Schjødt 2012, 272; or discourses), about gods and other supernatural beings that seem to have been centred around typical notions about these entities – which are also termed their semantic centre (Schjødt 2007; 2013a, 12-13). The semantic centre of a given god consists of the things that run through and tie together all discourses about this god. For instance, Óðinn always seeks more knowledge, both in order to better his understanding of the (end of the) world and to pass the knowledge on to his chosen warriors; this pursuit of knowledge can be argued to be Óðinn’s semantic centre. No matter which discourse of Óðinn we are dealing with (Óðinn as a god of rulers, of war, of magic etc.), he is always portrayed as the knowledgeable and could seemingly never be viewed as unwise or stupid – cunning, untrustworthy, false, yes, but always knowledgeable (Schjødt 2013a, 12). Importantly, the discourses of a given entity often overlap because they are not “closed space[s] with watertight barriers to other[s]” (Schjødt 2012a, 272); a case in point, which will become apparent in this article, is, for instance, that the álfar and dvergar share some characteristics which often make discourses of them hard to separate. Nevertheless, in order to construct a semantic centre, one must analyse the body of myths dealing with the being(s) in question, and pay heed to which discourses can be constructed from these myths. This is exactly what I propose to do in this article, when proposing that the álfar’s semantic centre is chthonic in its essence.

The term chthonic (from Greek χθωνικός (khθōn) meaning ‘earth’) covers several concepts pertaining to the underworld. Originally found in Greek religion and myth,
chthonic was used as a classification of both gods and sacrifices, distinguishing between the Olympian gods on the one hand, and the chthonic deities and supernatural beings of the underworld, including gods as well as dead heroes and ancestors, on the other. Chthonic sacrifices were primarily conducted at night, with black sacrificial animals whose blood was spilled directly onto the earth before they were burnt to ashes on the ground or in a pit. Death is, as such, a key aspect of the chthonic, but so too is fertility (Burkert 1985, 199-200). Death and fertility are often connected concepts in the typological classification of phenomenology of religion (cf. Schjødt 1991, 135; 2008, 384), and an excellent example of this comes from Greek mythology: the goddess of fertility Persephone as witnessed in, for instance, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. She resides as a queen of the underworld, Hades, married to the god of the same name, king of the underworld and god of death. She only returns to the world of the living during springtime, and is thus seen as a personification of the growth of the crops. Being an archetypical chthonic deity, she is a fertility goddess with an affiliation to death through her marriage to Hades. I am not going to claim that the álfað of the pre-Christian North can be seen as chthonic deities in the same way as Persephone, but rather that a useful way to view the diverse discourses of the álfað is to describe them as having a chthonic semantic centre connected to both death and fertility.

Before analysing the álfað-discourses in eddic poetry, I will briefly introduce the eddic poems as sources for pre-Christian Nordic religion.

Source Critical Issues with Eddic Poetry

The Poetic Edda consists of a series of anonymous Old Norse poems collected in a few manuscripts produced in Medieval Iceland after its official conversion to Christianity, traditionally set at 999/1000. The poems were seemingly collected partly because of their common metrical form, partly because of their content. The eddic corpus contains poems of primarily mythological focus, as well as poems with more heroic-legendary contents. The eddic poems are no doubt influenced by their contemporary Christian environment, which is as much a part of the characteristics of these poems as the pre-Christian mythology and religion that they also portray. One therefore has to differentiate between the eddic poems as purely written, textual products of 13th and 14th century Iceland (i.e., their linguistic contents, their physical manuscript context) on the one hand, and as possible representations of fragmented, diverse myths with an oral provenance relevant in an undatable pre-Christian religious context on the other (Meulengracht Sørensen 1991). These circumstances require scholars interested in the latter context to be clear about this, and to choose a relevant methodology to aid their investigations. For this article, the notions of discourse and of the semantic centre described above will serve as a basis for the analyses of the álfað in eddic poetry. The sources

2 The main manuscript for the eddic poems is Codex Regius or GKS 2365 4to which is dated to c. 1270.
used in this article have been selected by locating occurrences of the word álfar (pl.) or álfr (sg., often used in compounds) within the corpus of eddic poetry.

Discourse: The Álfar and Vanir as Identical Beings

The idea that the terms álfar and vanir should be seen as two names referring to more-or-less the same group of entities is fairly widespread among scholars of pre-Christian Nordic religion (for instance, Gunnell 2007, 121-23; 2020a, 1572-74; Hall 2007; 35-39; Nygaard 2022; Schjødt 1991) and seems to form a specific discourse of the álfar. This does not exclude other discourses, such the álfar and vanir having been thought of as two separate groups, to which I will return in a section below.

The idea that the álfar and vanir shared an identity can be seen most explicitly in Lokasenna stanzas 2, 13, and 30 (along with the prose introduction to the poem), as well as in Grímnismál stanzas 4-5, Hávamál stanzas 159-60, Prymskvíða stanzas 7, and Skírnismál stanza 7. These are the stanzas to which I will turn my attention to in the following, starting with Lokasenna's prose introduction:

[...] Margt var þar ása ok álfa.

Many of the æsir and the álfar were there.3

2. Of vápn sín dœma
ok um vigrisni sína
sigtva synir:
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru
manngi er þér í orði vinr.

Of their weapons and of their valour, the sons of the victory gods speak: of the æsir and álfar who are in here, no one claims to be your friend.

13. Jós ok armbauga
mundu æ vera
beggja vanr, Bragi;
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru,
þú ert við vig varastr
ok skjarrastr við skot.

Both steed and arm rings you will always be in want of, Bragi; of the æsir and álfar who are in here, you are the most cautious in killing and most scared by shooting.

30. Pegi þú, Freyja!
þik kann ek fullgerva,
era þér vamma vant;
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru,

3 All translations from Old Norse are my own unless otherwise noted.
These stanzas all contain the formulaic expression “ása ok álfa” (of æsir and álfar), an expression occurring a total of 14 times in the eddic poems. Often it is merely a formula without any apparent meaning other than the fulfillment of metric, alliterative requirements (see Fulk 2016). In Lokasenna, however, it seems to present a problem (Hall 2007, 35), since the prose introduction lists all the deities present for the feast in Ægir’s hall followed by the phrase: “Margt var þar ása ok álfa”. This is despite the fact that the deities mentioned are all normally are classified as æsir and vanir respectively.4 The term vanir is not mentioned once despite Njǫrðr, Freyr, and Freyja – who are conventionally seen as making up that group of gods – featuring several times in the poem. Lokasenna is all in all a very well-composed and well-informed eddic poem, so it would be quite uncharacteristic if this was a mistake by a misinformed scribe (Hall 2007, 36). Something else must be at stake. Stanza 30 is particularly interesting, since Freyja is here accused of having had sex with all of the æsir and álfar. It would be an odd, and much less grave, insult if the álfar in this context were an anonymous group of Otherworldly entities suddenly raised to be on par with the æsir in sexual desirability. It would make more sense to identify the álfar in Lokasenna with the vanir (Hall 2007, 36; Gunnell 2020a, 1572-73), especially given what Snorri relates about the incestuous relationships of the vanir in Ynglinga saga ch. 4. In this way Loki accuses Freyja of having had sex with not only all of the æsir, but also her kin, the vanir – an insult which is made explicit in stanza 32, where Freyja is said to have been found in bed with her brother Freyr; and their father, Njǫrðr, does nothing to deny this accusation in the following stanza.

Grímnismál stanza 4 seems to provide further evidence for the notions of a shared identity between the álfar and the vanir via another ása ok álfa-formula.

4. Land er heilagt er ek liggja sé
ásom ok álfom nær....

The land is sacred which I see lie near the æsir and the álfar […]

This sacred land could be interpreted as Ásgarðr, the home of the gods (Schjødt 2008, 384), and the two groups of gods who we are usually told live in Ásgarðr are the æsir

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4 The so-called “Vanir Debate” (Frog 2021, 142) will not be dealt with here. This discussion concerns whether or not the word vanir was ever more than “a rare collective term” (Simek 2010, 18) for Old Norse gods made into a family of gods by Snorri Sturluson, as Simek has argued (first and nearly unnoticed in 2005, later in 2010). See Tolley (2011), Frog and Roper (2011), Schjødt (2014), Lindow 2020, 1047-48) for varied perspectives on the debate. See also Frog (2021) for a similar take on the æsir.
and the \textit{vanir}. The \textit{álfar} in this stanza would then refer to the same groups of gods as the \textit{vanir}, residing somewhere within the walls of Ásgarðr.

5. Álfheim Frey
\begin{center}
gáfu í árdaga
tívar at tannfé [...]
\end{center}

The gods gave Álfheimr to Freyr as a tooth-payment in days of yore [...]

In \textit{Grímnismál} stanza 5 we are told that Freyr received Álfheimr as a gift for his first tooth in the mythic past. Here Freyr can be viewed as the ruler of ‘the world of the \textit{álfar}, which functions as a very strong connection between the two collectives of Otherworldly beings. The placement of the event in time (“i árdaga”) is also significant and makes the connection between the \textit{álfar} and the \textit{vanir} an ancient one in this instance.

The expression “ása ok álfa” can also be found in \textit{Hávamál} stanza 159-60:

159. Þat kann ek it fjórtánda,
\begin{center}
ef ek skal fyrða liði telja tíva fyrir,
ásə ok álfa ek kann allra skil;
fár kann ósnotr svá.
\end{center}

I know the fourteenth, if I am to count gods in front of a group of men. Of the \textit{æsir} and the \textit{álfar}, I know all about them, few who are unwise can do that.

160. Þat kann ek it fimmtánda
\begin{center}
er gól Bjóðrörir,
dvergr, fyr Dellingr’s durum:
afl gól hann ásum,
en álum frama,
hyggju Hroptatý.
\end{center}

I know the fifteenth, which Bjóðrörir the dwarf sang in front of Dellingr’s doors. Strength he sang for the \textit{æsir}, well-being for the \textit{álfar}, intellect for Hroptatýr [Óðinn].

In stanza 159 both the \textit{æsir} and the \textit{álfar} are designated as \textit{tívar} (gods), and the \textit{álfar} seem to take on the role the \textit{vanir} usually play as the other group of gods. While stanza 160 does not feature as clear-cut a formulaic “ása ok álfa”, the idea of the \textit{álfar} in this stanza seems to be in line with the previous one. The \textit{dvergr} Bjóðrörir’s magic song gives strength to the \textit{æsir} and \textit{frami} (well-being) to the \textit{álfar}. “Well-being” would seem to be within the area of function tied to the \textit{vanir} (and \textit{álfar}), that of fertility broadly understood. Again, it seems that the \textit{álfar} are used to refer to the \textit{vanir}.

In \textit{Skírnismál} stanza 7, Freyr bemoans the fact that he cannot have Gerðr, the \textit{jótunn} maiden he desires:
None of the æsir and álfr want the two, Freyr and Gerðr, to be together. Gerðr herself clearly does not desire this either, and it is only after being magically coerced by Skírnir that she agrees to meet with Freyr. The formula, here meaning ‘among the æsir and the álfr’, would indicate that Freyr is implying that he himself belongs to this group of æsir and álfr. As he is nowhere mentioned among the æsir, this would mean that he is seen as an álfr in this instance (Schjødt 2008, 384). This also aligns nicely with Grímnismál stanza 5, and provides further evidence that the álfr could be seen as identical with the vanir.

Þrymskviða stanza 7 is one of the cases where the use of a variant of “ása ok álfa” seems chiefly to fulfil that purpose of an alliterative formula:

Þrymr kvað:
7. “Hvat er með ásum?
Hvat er með álsum?
Hví ertu einn kominn
í þotunheimar?”
“Illt er með ásum!
Illt er með álsum!
hefr þú Hlóriða
hamar um fólgvinn?”
“What is up with the æsir? What is up with the álfr? Why have you come alone to Þotunheimar?”
“Things are bad with the æsir! Things are bad with the álfr! Have you hidden Hlóriði’s hammer?”

The world of the gods is threatened as Þórr, protector of cosmos, has lost his hammer – as Loki explains in response to Þrymr’s question. Both questions begin with the variant of the formula in question. As has also been the case in the above examples, the two groups of gods often found in Snorri’s writings (æsir and vanir), and the two groups of entities in the eddic formulaic “ása ok álfa”, seem to refer to the same mythological construct (Hall 2007, 36).

Traditionally speaking, the main functional area of the vanir gods is fertility in a broad sense, which means that they represent fertility in terms of sexual reproduction,
prosperity, good health, well-being, and peace (cf. Schjødt 1991, 304-05; cf. Lindow 2020). The fact that “álfar” can be used relatively unproblematically to refer to the vanir-gods suggest a strong connection with this area of function (cf. Nygaard 2022).

Additionally, in Grímnismál stanza 14 it is said that Freyja chooses half of the slain every day, which means an affiliation with death also exists for this named member of the vanir-group, which connects the vanir to the concept of the chthonic (Schjødt 1991, 305). This is corroborated by Snorri’s connection of Álfheimr – or perhaps part of it – where Freyr is regent as we saw above (Grímnismál stanza 5), to an underground location in a possible underworld. Here, Snorri furthermore expands on his notion of the álfr stating:

Sá er einn staðr þar en er kallaðr Álfheimr. Þar byggvir folk þat er ljósálfar heita, en døkkálfar búi niðri í þrøðu, ok eru þeir òlíkir þeim sýnum en myklu òlíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fégrí en sól synum, en døkkálfar eru svartari en bik (Gylfaginning p. 19).

(There is one place there which is called Álfheimr. Those who are called ljósálfar (light-álfr) live there, but the døkkálfar (dark-álfr) live down in the earth and they are unlike them in appearance, and even less like them in nature. The ljósálfar are fairer than the sun in appearance, but the døkkálfar are blacker than pitch.)

This passage, along with the statement a short while after that the ljósálfar inhabit the third heaven, Viðbláinn (Gylfaginning p. 20), has sparked considerable debate. The division of the álfr into light and dark elves in particular has been linked to the Old Norse translation of the Latin Elucidarius (p. 12-14), which includes a classification of angels very reminiscent of Snorri’s division of the álfr. It is generally accepted that Snorri was inspired by Elucidarius in writing this part of Gylfaginning (Gunnell 2020a, 1575-76; Hall 2007, 25; Simek 2017). This, however, does not necessarily present a problem for this specific discourse nor my proposed semantic centre: Snorri’s ljósálfar and døkkálfar⁶ may just be representation of the fertility and death affinities of the pre-Christian álfr (cf. Schjødt 1991, 306), while at the same time being inspired by the Christian idea of angels and fallen angles (Hall 2007, 24-26). These notions are well within the semantic range of the chthonic.

All in all, the discourse of álfr as being identical with the vanir falls under the category of the chthonic, since both groups are connected to death and fertility, and thus the interpretation fits my proposed semantic centre.

This general notion of fertility has been criticised (for instance, Motz 1996; Sundqvist 2020a; cf. Schjødt 2012b, 2014). All in all, the vanir are not exclusively fertility gods, but it remains one of their main functions nonetheless. See Murphy in this issue for a critical assessment of notions of fertility, which he suggests to replace with ‘prosperity’.

Motz (1973-74) argues that the the døkkálfar should be viewed as identical with the ávergar (see Gunnell 2020b), however, Motz does not distinguish systematically between døkkálfar and svartálfar, which can be seen as problematic (see also Barriero 2014).
Discourse: The Álfar as a Separate Category of Otherworldly Beings

In the eddic poems, álfar are also often treated as a separate category of Otherworldly beings, which forms a discourse of its own. This often occurs in lists of beings that mention, for instance, the æsir, vanir, nornir, þursar etc. Alaric Hall terms the distinction between álfar and vanir in the eddic poems “a variant tradition” of the discourse of shared identity discussed above (Hall 2007, 37). I prefer the term parallel tradition, as it allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple traditions and discourses while not attributing any of these with primacy or originality.

The idea that the álfar were a separate category of Otherworldly beings seems quite widespread, as it is attested in Skírnismál stanza 17-18, Sigrdrifumál stanza 18, Hrafnagaldur Óðins stanza 1, 6, and 25, as well as throughout the poem Alvíssmál.

In Skírnismál, Freyr sends his servant Skírnir on a journey to Jötunheimr to woo the jötunn maiden Gerðr. In stanzas 17-18, the álfar are clearly distinguished from the æsir and vanir when Gerðr enquires about Skírnir’s identity:

17. Hvat er þat álfa
né ása sona
né vissa vana?
Hví þú einn um komt
eikinn fúr yfir
ór salkynni at sjá?

Which are you, of the álfar, or the sons of the æsir, or the wise vanir? Why are you come alone over the furious fire to see our hall?

18. Emkat ek álfa
né ása sona
né vissa vana;
þó ek einn um komk
eikinn fúr yfir
þúr salkynni at síá.

I am neither of the álfar, nor the sons of the æsir, nor the wise vanir. Still I am come alone over the furious fire to see your hall.

According to Alaric Hall (2007, 35), these stanzas are the only instance in eddic poetry where the álfar are mentioned before the æsir, and thus breaks with the “æsir ok álfar” formula. Furthermore, the inclusion of “víssi vanir” indicates that the three groups are thought to be separate entities within this discourse.

In Sigrdrifumál stanza 19 the same three groups are mentioned, as are humans. The context is that the valkyrja Sigrdrífa is teaching the human hero Sigurðr rune lore. She tells him about the groups that received the runes described in the previous stanza:

19. Allar váru af skafnar,
Beyond ‘ása ok álfa’

Those that were carved on were all scraped off, and thrown into the holy mead and sent on wide ways; they are with the *ásir*, they are with the *álfar*, some are with the wise *vánir*, some the humans have.

The three categories of Otherworldly beings and the humans are mentioned as recipients, which indicates the underlying discourse of the *álfar* being envisioned as a separate category in their own right.

In *Hrafnalgaldur Óðins* stanza 1, 6, and 25, the *álfar* are described in a way that clearly separates them from other kinds of Otherworldly beings. Stanza 1 in particular, which comprises a *þula*-like list, supports this notion:

1. Alþöður orkar,  
álfar skilja,  
Vanir vitu,  
visa nornir,  
elur Íviðja,  
aldir bera,  
þrejja þursar,  
þjá valkyrjur.7

All-father exerts power, elves understand, Vanir know, norns show, Íviðja [a trollwife] strives, humans bear, giants endure, valkyries are distressed (Lassen 2011, 82).

6. Dvelur í döllum  
dís forvitin,  
frá Yggdrasils  
aski hñigin,  
álfa ættar.  
lóunni hétu  
Ivalds eldri  
yngsta barna.8

The enquiring goddess, descended from the *álfar,* sunk down from the ash Yggdrasil,

7 Orthography normalised on the basis of Lassen’s Icelandic prose paraphrase (2011, 82).
8 Orthography normalised on the basis of Lassen’s Icelandic prose paraphrase (2011, 84).
9 Lassen (2011, 84) translates “álfa ættar” as “descended from dwarves”, which is either a mistake or a quite particular choice of interpretation, which Lassen does not elaborate on in her commentary (Lassen 2011, 98). It might, however, be based on the latter part of this stanza, which states that lóunn is a child of Ívaldr. According to *Gylfaginning* (p. 36) and *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 41; p. 18 quotes *Grímnismál* stanza 43) the sons of one Ívaldi (“Ívalda synir”) are said
stays in the valleys. The elder ones of the children of Ívaldur called the youngest Iðunn (Lassen 2011, 84, emendation mine).

25. Jörmunggrundar
í jöður nyrðra
und rót yztu
aðalpollar
gengu til rekju
gyýjur og þursar,
nár, dvergar
og dökkálfar.¹⁰

Trollwives and giants, corpses, dwarves and dark-elves went to bed further north on the edge of the mighty earth under the outermost root of the foremost tree (Yggdrasill) (Lassen 2011, 94).

The portrayal of the álfar (as dökkálfar in st. 25) in Hrafnagaldur Öðins stanzas 1, 6, and 25 seems to fit within the discourse of them as a separate category of beings. The context of the poem – which features the gods Heimdallr, Loki and Bragi undertaking a trip to the underworld to visit the goddess Iðunn – suggests an association of the álfar with this domain, and thus with the chthonic and possibly death. This is accentuated in stanza 6, where Iðunn is said to be descended from the álfar and placed in the underworld, and in stanza 25, which lists the dökkálfar among underworld beings such as dvergar (and thus differentiating between the two groups) and nár (corpses, dead ones). The discourse of the álfar in this problematic, possibly post-medieval poem thus falls entirely within the category of the chthonic semantic centre of the álfar in eddic poetry in general.¹¹

Alvíssmál, for all its eddic metre and content, is often seen as a poem inspired more by skaldic listing traditions than other mythological verse (Simek 1993, 12-13). That said, clear parallels to the (primarily Odinic) wisdom-contest poetry in, for instance, Vafþruðnismál, are also present. The contents of the poem present clear evidence for a discourse of the álfar as a separate category of beings. The narrative features the god Bórr and a dvergr called Alvíss (lit. very wise) who has been promised Bórr’s daughter’s hand in marriage. This does not suit Bórr, who demands that the dvergr tell him “allt þat er ek vil vita” (everything that I want to know; stanza 8, l.6) about all the
to be the dwarves who made the ship Skíðblaðnir. If the Ívaldr of Hrafnagaldur Öðins and the Ívaldi of Griminsmál stanza 43 and Snorra Edda are indeed the same, then one could presume that Iðunn was also a dwarf. However, this may not be the case, and the “álfa ættar” of Hrafnagaldur Öðins stanza 6 is here translated as “descended from the álfar”.

¹⁰Orthography normalised on the basis of Lassen’s Icelandic prose paraphrase (2011, 94).
¹¹Lassen notes in her edition of this fornyrðislag poem, that there has been much debate about its dating (2011, 9-18). While Jónas Kristjánsson (2002) has recently argued for a composition in the late 14th century, something which Lassen remains open for in her 2006 paper (557-58), in 2011 Lassen concluded that Hrafnagaldur Öðins “is a postmedieval poem that was probably composed in connection with the enormous interest in collections of eddic poems that arose immediately after the rediscovery of the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda in 1643” (7).
worlds before honouring the agreement. He then poses questions about what primarily cosmological and natural phenomena are called. Alviss duly replies until the sun comes up and he – apparently (see Acker 2002, 183) – is turned to stone. Stanza 9 and 10 provide an example of the exchange.

9. Segðu mér þat, Alvíss,
– ǫll of rök fira
vǫrumk, dvergr, at vitir –
hvé sú jǫrð heitir,
er liggur fyr alda sonum
heimi hverjum í?

Tell me that, Alvíss – everything about the fate of peoples I expect you, dvergr, to know – what is that earth called, which lies before the sons of men, in every world?

10. Jǫrð heitir með mǫnnum,
en með ásum fold,
kalla vega vanir,
ígrœn jǫtnar,
álfar gróandi,
kalla aur uppregin.

It is called “earth” by men, “land” by the æsir, the vanir call it “roads”, the jǫtnar “bright-green”, the álfar “growing”, the high powers call it “mud”.

Þórr’s questions all begin with the same formulaic phrase reminiscent of other dialogic eddic poems, and Alviss’ answers outline what various phenomena (the sun, moon, wind, fire, and beer) are called among men, æsir, álfar, vanir, jǫtnar, dvergar and more. This indicates the existence of not only various separate categories of beings, but also potentially separate dialects – the terms are all very transparently Old Norse.

The connection between the discourse analysed above and the chthonic semantic centre does not stand out as clearly as in other cases. It seems clear enough that the discourse of the álfar as a separate category was well-established, but not much more can be gathered from the use of the term in these texts. However, if Alvissmál is to be taken as an expression of each group of beings having their own dialect, some semantic value might be established via looking at what the various phenomena are called in the world of the álfar – at least according to Alvíss.

The álfar are mentioned a total of 10 times in Alvissmál. In stanza 26 (concerning the words for fire) and stanza 34 (concerning the words for ale) the álfar are left out of the list in favour of the realm of Hel and the sons of Suttungr, respectively. Stanza 14 cites “ártala” (year-counter), for moon; stanza 18 states that the clouds are called “veðrme-gin” (storm-power); stanza 20 has “dynfara” (din-traveller) for the wind; stanza 22 uses “dagsefa” (day-soother), for calm or quiet; stanza 30 states that night is called “svefngaman”, (sleep-joy); while stanzas 24 and 32 have “lagastafr” for both the sea and grain respectively. (Finnur Jónnson (1931, 356) renders these “still-sea” and “staff
of the liquids” (connected to barley’s use in brewing.) Many of these words emphasise joy and the quiet of sea, night and calm weather, but also the power of the storms and wind. This seems to be what can be expected semantically of these phenomena.

However, in the remaining four stanzas, there are more firm indications of the connection of the álfar to fertility in a broad sense and thus by extension to the concept of the chthonic. In stanza 10 the álfar’s word for “(the) earth” is said to be “gróandi” (growing), which would seem to emphasise the fertility of the earth – something very much within the proposed chthonic semantic centre of the álfar presented in this article. Stanza 12 has “fagraræfr” (beautiful roof) for sky; stanza 16 notes “fagrahvel” (beautiful wheel) for the sun; and stanza 28 has “fagrlima” (beautiful branch) for wood. The emphasis on the beauty of natural things might also be tentatively connected to fertility in the broad sense of the term, and thus associate the potential dialect of the álfar to the chthonic semantic centre proposed in this article. Alternatively, it might be seen as an example of overlapping discourses if it is viewed as being linked with the discourse of the álfar to which we now turn our attention.

Discourse: The Álfar’s Connection to Brightness, Shining, and the Sun

Since the very early research into Nordic mythology by Jacob Grimm in the early 1800s, an oft-highlighted characteristic of the álfar is their connection to brightness and shining (Grimm 1966 [1835], 444), something that might also have influenced Snorri’s idea of the ljósálfar. The stanzas examined in connection with this particular discourse all mention a heiti for the sun – “álfrǫðull” (álfr-ray) – which would constitute a strong connection between the álfar and fertility, the sun being one of the main natural forces to give life to crops and, by extension, to human kind. Evidence of the veneration of the sun in Scandinavia (implicit in Snorri’s description of the goddess Sól in Gylfaginning (p. 13-14)) in various ways can be traced back to rock carvings from the Bronze Age as well as the Trundholm sun chariot from the same period (Simek 1993, 297).

Vafþrúðnismál mentions álfrǫðull in the context of pre-Christian Nordic eschatology and possibly portraying a cyclical understanding of time. The jotunn Vafþrúðnir answers Óðinn’s questions about where the sun will re-emerge from after Fenrir has eaten her:

47. Eina dóttur
berr Álfrǫðul,
áðr hana Fenrir fari;
sú skal ríða,
þá er regin deyja,
móður brautir mær.

Álf-ray will bear a daughter, before Fenrir assails her; she shall ride, when the powers die, girl on her mother’s paths.
In *Skírnismál*, Freyr uses the same sun-*heiti* when he laments to his servant Skírnir that he cannot have the *jötnunn* maiden Gerðr:

4. Hví um segjak þér,
seggr inn ungi.
mikinn móðtrega?
Þviat álfröðull
lýsir um alla daga
ok þeygi at minum munum.

Why should I tell you, young man, about my heart’s great sorrow? Because álfr-ray [i.e. the sun] shines every day and yet not on my desire.

Alaric Hall reads álfröðull in *Skírnismál* as a *kenning*, not a *heiti*, and thus as “the rødull (denoting the sun) of the Álfr (=Freyr)” (Hall 2007, 38), connecting it to Snorri’s account in *Gylfaginning* (p. 24) that Freyr governs the rain and the shining of the sun. This would fit with the discourse of the álfr and the *vanir* being identical entities. Further supporting this notion is the meaning of the name Skírnir (from skírr (bright, clear)), best rendered “Shining One”, again indirectly associating Freyr with the notion of shining (Hall 2007, 38-39). In addition to this, other instances of eddic poetry associate the *vanir* with brightness or the colour white. In *Brymskríða* stanza 15, the god Heimdallr is called “hvitastr ása” (the whitest of the æsir) and is said to “vissi...vel fram / sem vanir aðrir (know the future well like the other *vanir*, or possibly “like the *vanir*, [those] others”). Favouring the former translation would constitute a semantic overlap between shining or brightness, predominantly an álfr-trait, and the *vanir* (Gunnell 2007, 122).

In the final stanza of *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, Heimdallr blows the Gjallarhorn at sunrise to wake the gods from their night of sleep pondering what to do about the ominous dreams described in the poem’s initial stanzas. Nothing of what happens next is recounted, which has been used to argue that the poem is fragmentary (Lassen 2006).

26. Risu raknar,
rann Alfröðull,
norður að Niflheim
Njóla sótti;
upp nam ár Gjöll
Úlfrúnar niður
hornþyt valdur
Himinbjarga.12

The gods rose up, Álfröðull (the sun) rose, Njóla (darkness, i.e. night) went north to Niflheimur; early Úlfrún’s son (Heimdallur), ruler of Himinbjörg, began the sound of the horn with Gjöll (Gjallarhorn). (Lassen 2011, 94)

12 Orthography normalised on the basis of Lassen’s Icelandic prose paraphrase (2011, 94).
Here, the poem uses the word “álfröðrull” as a heiti for the sun, and thus connects the álfar with brightness, comparable to Vafþruðnismál stanza 47 and Skírnismál stanza 4.

The álfar are the Otherworldly group most often connected to brightness and shining, and the uses of an álfr-based heiti for the sun above clearly evidence this discourse. As noted above, the sun can be seen as a strong symbol of fertility through its power to give life to growing things, and the fact that the álfar are used as a compound in this frequently occurring heiti, implies connotations of shining, brightness, as well as fertility to the álfr, which places this discourse of them within the chthonic semantic centre.

Discourse: The Álfar Grouped with the ÁEsir, Opposed to Monstrous Beings

There are instances in the eddic poems where the álfr are grouped together with the æsir in opposition to what Alaric Hall (2007, 29-34) terms “monstrous otherworldly beings”, as the álfr and æsir are comparable to humans (particularly in terms of naming traditions and use in kenningar). This classification breaks with the notion – following Jacob Grimm (1966 [1835], 439-517) – that connects the álfr with the dvergar; a notion also seen in Snorra-Edda, where the collectives of the dvergar seems to be conflated in particular with the svartálfar (see Gylfaginning p. 28, Skáldskaparmál p. 41, 45). Lotte Motz, for instance, claims that due to this affinity with the dvergar, the álfr have no place in the formula “ása ok álfa” (Motz 1973-74, 119). More recently, Santiago Barreiro has argued that the differences between the álfr and dvergar “are blurry as they seem to overlap” (Barriero 2014, 30), which leads him to conclude that they represent collective beings in general: the álfr with a positive reciprocal nature, the dvergar with a negative reciprocal nature, which explains accounts of worship of the álfr but not the dvergar (Barriero 2014, 44). The fact that the discourses of both álfr and dvergar are often linked to the underworld and to notions of the chthonic indeed sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish these discourses from each other. For instance, the examples of names for dvergar containing the element -álfr – Gandálfr, Vindálfr, and simply Álfr – in the dvergatal preserved in Völuspá (K1213 and K15) have been used to argue that the álfr are indeed dvergar. However, Hall has convincingly countered this by noting the problematic nature of assigning literal meaning to names that are often symbolical (Hall 2007, 38): furthermore, one could argue that associating -álfr name elements with dvergar is a way of emphasising the connection to the underworld or the earth, from which the dvergar are said to be created in Völuspá stanza K10. This would fit with the chthonic characteristics that in general can be ascribed to both of the álfr and dvergar throughout the eddic poetry and would at the same time constitute an example of their

13 Jonas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014) edit all the three main versions of the poem (i.e., Konungsbók, Hauksbók, and Snorra Edda) separately in the edition of the eddic poems. Cited in this article are the Konungsbók stanzas, denoted by a capital K, unless indicated otherwise.
overlapping discourses. However, Hall’s emphasis on their differing relations to humans might be a key distinguishing point, and Hall’s arguments are quite convincing, as they seem better to explain the particular discourse of the álfar when grouped with the æsir in Völuspá stanza K50, Hávamál stanza 143, and Fafnismál stanza 13, where the two groups are contrasted with, for instance, dvergar and jötunar.

In Völuspá stanza K50, the álfar are mentioned in the context of the pre-Christian Nordic eschatological myth Ragnarök (see also Hultgård 2020):

K50. Hvat er með ásum?
Hvat er með álfum?
Gnýr allr jö tunheimr,
æsir ro á þíningi;
stynja dvergar
fyr steindurum,
veggbergs visir –
vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

What is up with the æsir? What is up with the álfar? All Jötunheimr is thundering, the æsir go to the assembly; the dvergar, lords of the mountain walls, groan before their stone doors – do you want to know more, or what?

We are here seemingly presented with a variant of the “ása ok álfa” formula echoing Bryniskviða stanza 7, but the two groups are not alone. Jötunar and dvergar make up another group of more monstrous Otherworldly beings, to follow Hall’s classification. The æsir are meeting, apparently to decide what to do in response to the assembling jötunn armies implied to be making Jötunheimr thunder, as well as the invading jötunar of stanzas K48-K49 and the preceding eschatological auguries in stanzas K42-K47. The dvergar are groaning outside their homes, possibly because earth and stone are no longer fit for living in. The grouping of æsir and álfar juxtaposed with dvergar and jötunar would support Hall’s argument for the former being thought to be more anthropomorphic, the latter more monstrous. indicated

This juxtaposition is even more clearly thematised in Hávamál stanza 143, which explains which of the named Otherworldly beings first learnt to carve runes:

143. Óðinn með ásum,
en fyr álum Dáinn,
Dvalinn dvergum fyrir
Ásviðr jötnum fyrir,
ek reist sjálfr sumar.

Óðinn for the æsir and for the álfar Dáinn, Dvalinn for the dvergar, Ásviðr for the jötunar, I myself carved some.
The æsir and álfr are clearly grouped together and once more juxtaposed with the monstrous dvergar and jotnar. Furthermore, the name of the of álfr rune carver is Dáinn (the dead one; also the name of a dvergr in Völszpá H11). This would be quite appropriate for a chthonic being as well as showing overlapping discourses, although it might just be a name with no literal meaning.

Fáfnismál recounts how the prototypical Old Norse (Odinic) hero, Sigurðr, earns his byname fáfnisbani (slayer of Fáfnir) by killing the great ormr (dragon, serpent, wyrm). On his deathbed, Fáfnir asks Sigurðr about various topics, including his lineage, and Sigurðr too asks some questions of the dying ormr. These include an exchange about the origins of the female collective of Otherworldly beings, the nornir (Bek-Pedersen 2011, 2020):

13. “Sundrbornar mjökk
    hygg ek at nornir sé,
    eigut þær ætt saman;
    sumar eru áskunningar,
    sumar álfkunningar,
    sumar dœtr Dvalins.”

Of very varied origins I think the nornir must be, they are not of the same lineage; some are of æsir descent, some are of álfr descent, some are the daughters of Dvalinn.

The nornir are here said to descend from various other kinds of Otherworldly beings: two non-monstrous and one monstrous, following Hall. The stanzas have been linked with Snorri’s otherwise unknown good and evil nornir in Gylfaginning (p. 17-18), although, as Karen Bek-Pedersen writes, “Fáfnismál does not provide evidence for enmity between the different kinds of nornir” (Bek-Pedersen 2020, 1509). In the preceding stanzas, some of the characteristics and functions of the nornir are noted, described by Folke Ström as both life-giving and death-bringing (Ström 1954, 80-82). Stanza 11 claims the nornir judge the lives of men, which feeds into their commonly-accepted association with fate in general (Bek-Pedersen 2020; Steinsland 2005, 249; see also Gunnell in this issue). Stanza 12 is ambiguous in its wording, saying that the nornir are said to be “nauðgǫnglar ro / ok kjósa mœðr fra mǫgum” (coming to those in need and to choose mothers from sons). Ström (1954, 81) interprets this as underlining their life-giving function and furthermore connects it with assistance during childbirth (something which is corroborated by very late folkloric evidence from Norway and the Faeroe Islands; Bek-Pedersen 2020; 1509; see also Finnur Jónsson 1931 s.v. nauðgongull which he associates with the nornir as midwives). The text itself is, however, ambiguous, and an association with grieving mothers has equal validity, as Bek-Pedersen contends (2020, 1509). In this case, an association with fate and death would seem more reasonable. A possible association between the nornir and the álfr through an affinity of death would further tie this particular use of the discourse with the chthonic semantic centre.
The fact that the álfar are, in these examples, paired with the asir and juxtaposed with the dvergar is in line with an interpretation of them representing the non-monstrous in Hall’s proposed classification. One point of criticism which could be raised is that in all three instances examined here the álfar are used as a means of securing alliteration with the asir, and do not necessary fulfil any distinct function. However, this strengthens the idea of the álfar being a non-monstrous representative of the Other-world, since their continued association with the asir aligns them with this group of very anthropomorphic gods. This discourse is quite difficult to tie firmly with the proposed semantic centre, even if a possible connection with the nornir and fate/death in Fáfnismál stanza 11-13 ties in well with the general notion of the álfar as representatives of the chthonic found throughout the eddic poems.

Discourse: The Álfar as Ancestral Beings

The idea that the álfar were a form of ancestral beings can be seen only in one instance in the eddic poetry. However, the evidence for this discourse outside of the eddic poetry is quite extensive. The term álfablót (sacrifice to the álfar), while only specifically used in the skaldic poem Austrfararvisur by Sigvatr Þórðarson, is often linked to descriptions of cultic activity connected to ancestor worship in prose accounts like Kormáks saga chapter 22, Flateyjarbók chapter 2, and Ynglinga saga chapter 10 (Símeck 1993, 8).

Hamðismál 1 may be argued to present the álfar as ancestors connected to the fate of a family. In this heroic poem, Gúðrun urges her sons Hamðir and Sǫrlí to revenge the killing of their sister, Svanhildr. During this vendetta, however, they kill their half-brother Erpr, and all the remaining children of Gúðrun die as well, which could well be why the álfar are joyless and weep:

1. Spruttu á táí
tregnar íðir, 
græti álfa 
in g lýstømu; 
árm unmorgin 
manna bølva 
súrir hverjar 
sorg um kveykva.

There sprang upon the path grievous actions that made álfar weep, the joyless; early in the morning, the wicked deeds of men, every misery kindles sorrow.

This stanza shows us a strong connection between the family, their health, fate, and the álfar, because they know that the fate of the Guðrunarsýnir is to die.

14 On ancestor worship, or the potential lack thereof, see Laidoner (2020) and Nordberg (2013, 279-99) respectively. See also Sundqvist (2020b) for a critical treatment of Laidoner (2020).
Despite the mentions of something akin to (ancestor) worship connected to the álfar mentioned above, Rudolf Simek (2011a) concludes that this notion should be abandoned, since none of the sources in question have much value as evidence of pre-Christian cultic activity. Simek’s approach to the sources is admittedly more source-critical than the one presented here, and other scholarship on the álfar does not so readily deem these sources without worth for the reconstruction of pre-Christian Nordic religion (see, for instance, Barrerio 2014, 39; Gunnell 2020a, 1576-79; Hall 2007, 30-31). In this article, the focus of which is on the eddic poems, these sources can be used as indicative evidence that supports the reading of Hamðismál stanza 1 and will thus be briefly treated here as they serve to emphasise this particular discourse and its connection to the proposed semantic centre.

The connection between the álfar as ancestors and the álfblot mentioned in Austfararvísur is longstanding, and the sacrifice has been seen as a seasonal, private ritual conducted in the autumn by the female head of the household (Ellekilde 1933-34, 185; Murphy 2018; Steinsland 2005, 345). Other sources describe sacrifices to the álfar as well, although these sacrifices are not necessarily connected to the álfblot in Austfararvísur. In Kormáks saga ch. 22, the protagonist of the saga, Porvarðr, has been wounded by Kormákr in a holmgangr, and, in order for him to recover, the witch Þordís tells him make a sacrifice to the álfar who live in a nearby hillock. He is told pour the blood of a sacrificial bull onto the hill, and to prepare a veizla (feast) for the álfar from the bull’s meat. The álfar here are described as providing health and well-being from their abode underneath the earth, an echo of the underworld. Similarly, Flateyjarbók ch. 2 describes how king Óláfr Guðroðarson receives sacrifices in his gravemound after he has died. The people sacrifice to him til árs sér (for their prosperity; see Hultgård 2003). King Óláfr earns a special byname after this; he is named Geirstaðaálfr (the álf of Geirstaðr). Here we therefore encounter an ancestor believed to be able to grant prosperity residing in an underworld, and he is thus seemingly called álf (see also Laidoner 2020, 121-25). As a potential link between this discourse of the álfar as ancestral beings and the vanir, we have the description of Freyr in Ynglinga saga ch. 10, where it is said that after his death he was put into a gravemound and the people sacrificed gold, silver, and copper to him for “ár ok friðr” (prosperity and peace). Freyr is portrayed as an ancestor residing in the underworld, and granting good and peaceful years to the people – reminiscent of Óláfr Geirstadaálfr – and as such this also ties in with the discourse of the álfar and vanir being seen as identical entities. The two discourses seem to overlap in this particular myth. It also provides us with another connection between worship of the álfar as ancestors on the one hand, and fertility, death, and the underworld on the other. All in all, these accounts paint a very chthonic picture of the álfar in the guise of ancestral beings, which can hypothetically also be argued to be behind the discourse of the álfar in Hamðismál stanza 1.
Discourse: The Álfar as an Out-Group Connected with Otherness

Völundarkviða, it has often been remarked, has more in common with heroic eddic poems, even if it is to be found among the mythological eddic poems (Árman Jakobsson 2006, 227). The association of the poem’s eponymous hero, Völundr, with the álfar in stanzas 11, 14, and 31, has also troubled scholars. It has been noted that the poem’s use of the term “álfar” “seems to have a background in a slightly different belief system to that of the other eddic poems” (Gunnell 2020a, 1573; cf. Lindow and Schjødt 2020, 960-64).

11. Sat á berfjalli, 
    baugatálði, 
    álfaljóði, 
    eins saknaði; 
    hugði hann at hefði 
    Hlóðvés dóttir, 
    alvitr unga, 
    væri hon aftir komin. 

Sat on bearskins counting rings, the lord of the álfar was missing one; he thought that the daughter of Hlóðver, the young Otherworldly creature, was come again.

14. Kallaði nú Níðuðr 
  Njára dróttinn: 
  “Hvar gaztu, Völundr, 
  visi álfa, 
  vára aura 
  í Úlfþjólom? [...]” 

Now Níðuðr called, the ruler of the Njárar: “Where did you, Völundr, lord of the álfar, get your riches in Úlfðalar?”

31. “Seg þú mér þat, Völundr, 
    visi álfa, 
    af heilum hvat varð 
    húnnum mínnum?”

    “Tell me this, Völundr, lord of the álfar, what has become of my healthy young sons?”

These instances suggest that Völundr was seen as a high-ranking álfr: both words, “visi” and “ljóði”, can be translated as ‘ruler’ or ‘lord’. “Visi” can also be translated as ‘wise’, but Hall (2007, 40-42; cf. McKinnell 1990, 3) notes that there are no reasons to prefer one over the other on internal evidence. Indications are that both terms signify that Völundr is himself an álfr. Relatively recent research (Árman Jakobsson 2006; Hall 2007, 40-47; McKinnell 1990) on this poem has focussed on the fact that the prose introduction states that Völundr and his brothers are “synir Finnakonungs” (sons of the king of the Finnar). This has been connected by, for instance, Gunnell (2007) to the
concept of “otherness”, the unknown, foreign, and potentially dangerous (see, for instance, McKinnell 2005, 1-10 on the term). Gunnell notes that this otherness is often attributed to the Finnar or Sámi, but in Völundarkviða it is used to describe an álfr instead of sacredness and more common álfar-traits (Gunnell 2007, 124). Ármann Jakobsson (2006) notes that Völundr represents both the human and “the other” at the same time, seeing his “extreme emotional life” as a hallmark of the álfr as “human-others” that were relatable to the medieval human (Ármann Jakobsson 2006, 227).

None of the above seems to point to the proposed chthonic semantic centre that is the focus of this article, which would corroborate Gunnell’s proposal that the discourse of the álfr found in Völundarkviða is quite different from the other eddic poems. One small detail could, however, indicate otherwise: in stanza 2, Völundr is described as having “hvitan háls” (a white neck; cf. Hall 2007, 44-45), reminiscent of the idea that the álfr were linked with brightness. What’s more, stanza 15 of Þrymskviða attributes this characteristic to Heimdallr, calling him hvítastr ása (the whitest of the æsir) and links him with the vanir, as noted above. This one descriptive term is, of course, not much to build an argument on, but it might indicate some kernel of the chthonic in the conception of the álfr in Völundarkviða – something perhaps substantiated by Völundr’s connection to the dwarves through his metallurgic expertise; a recurring ability of this group of Otherworldly, chthonic beings (Gunnell 2020b; Motz 1973-74, 1983).

Conclusion

In conclusion, though surveying the various discourses of the álfr in the eddic poems, this article has argued that the álfr’s semantic centre should be viewed as essentially chthonic. The suggested (and sometimes overlapping) discourses of the álfr view them as identical to the vanir; as a separate category of Otherworldly beings; as connected to brightness, shining, and the sun; as relatable to humans when grouping them with the æsir while opposing them to more monstrous beings such as jotnar and dvergar; as ancestral beings; and as an out-group connected with otherness. All of these discourses have – to various degrees – been linked with the category from the phenomenology of religion connected to the earth, death, and fertility, known as the chthonic. These concepts have throughout this article been established as relevant, perhaps even characteristic, terms for the collective of Otherworldly beings known as the álfr – both with regard to their eddic discourses and regarding their discourses within pre-Christian Nordic religion in general.

15 Hall (2007, 42) notes that the category of otherness is anachronistic when being used to differentiate between humans and ethnic ‘others’. He advocates for the use of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ where out-groups often are affiliated with the supernatural – Völundr being a case in point.
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