

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 álfar (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 álfar. In this article, I will suggest various discourses of and construct a semantic centre for the álfar through an analysis of the stanzas of the Poetic Edda in which the álfar 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 álfar as chthonic beings, will help us make sense of the diversity in the discourses of the álfar in the eddic poems.*

RESUME: *Der findes en mængde forestillinger i eddadigtningen om den gruppe andenverdensvæsner, der kendes under navnet álfar (norrønt pl., sg. álfr). Forestillingerne er mange, men de er ikke arbitrære. Der synes at eksistere hvad Jens Peter Schjødt kalder et “semantisk centrum” fra hvilket forskellige “diskurser” kan siges at udgå. I denne artikel vil jeg foreslå forskellige diskurser om og konstruere et semantisk centrum for álfar gennem en analyse af de eddaastrofer, hvori álfar optræder. Jeg foreslår, at ved at konstruere et semantisk centrum forbundet med død og frugtbarhed og således forbinde álfar med det chthoniske, vil de forskelligartede diskurser om álfar i eddadigtningen give bedre mening.*

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 Þórðarson's *Austrfararvísur*, especially the so-called *álfablót* stanzas (4-6). What were the *álfar* to which the pagan Swedes were sacrificing, and what did the cult surrounding them entail? Should the *álfar* be viewed as "dødningevæsner" (beings of death) or "naturvætter" (nature spirits)? Hans Ellekilde called for a nuanced view by stating that

[v]i bør blot vogte os for at slå fast som et dogme, at alferne er dødningevæsner og intet andet. Sandheden turde være den, at alferne er overnaturlige, magtvejende 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 *álfar*. 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; Simek 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 *álfar* as follows: "it seems clear that the extant early Nordic sources point to a range of different understandings of *álfar* 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 *álfar* 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; Schøjt 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Svanberg 2003a, 2003b).

While these understandings of the *álfar* 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 *álfar* though an analysis of the stanzas of the Poetic Edda in which the *álfar* 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 known as the *dísir*.

Discourse, Semantic Centre, and the Notion of the Chthonic

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 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 *χθονός* (*khthōn*) 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 archetypal 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 *álfar* 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 *álfar* is to describe them as having a chthonic semantic centre connected to both death and fertility.

Before analysing the *álfar*-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 999/1000.² 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 *álfar* 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, *Brymskviða* 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 dæma
ok um vígrisni sína
sigtíva synir:
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru
manni 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
beggia vanr, Bragi;
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru,
þú ert við víg 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. Þegi 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.

hverr hefir þinn hór verit.

Be silent, Freyja! I know you full well, you are not in want of flaws; of the *æsir* and *álfar* who are in here, each one has been you lover.

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 fulfilment 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 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*

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 *vanir*. The *álfar* in this stanza would then refer to the same groups of gods as the *vanir*, residing somewhere within the walls of Ásgarðr.

5. Álfheim Frey
gáfu í árdaga
tívar at tannfé [...]

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

In *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 *álfar*’, which functions as a very strong connection between the two collectives of Otherworldly beings. The placement of the event in time (“í árdaga”) is also significant and makes the connection between the *álfar* and the *vanir* an ancient one in this instance.

The expression “ása ok álfa” can also be found in *Hávamál* stanza 159-60:

159. Þat kann ek it fjórtánda,
ef ek skal fyrða liði
telja tíva fyrir,
ása ok álfa
ek kann allra skil;
fár kann ósnotr svá.

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

160. Þat kann ek it fimmtánda
er gól Þjóðrörir,
dvergr, fyr Dellings durum:
afl gól hann ásum,
en álfum frama,
hyggju Hroptatý.

I know the fifteenth, which Þjóðrörir the dwarf sang in front of Dellings’ doors. Strength he sang for the *æsir*, well-being for the *álfar*, intellect for Hroptatýr [Óðinn].

In stanza 159 both the *æsir* and the *álfar* are designated as *tívar* (gods), and the *álfar* seem to take on the role the *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 *álfar* in this stanza seems to be in line with the previous one. The *dvergr* Þjóðrörir’s magic song gives strength to the *æsir* and *frami* (well-being) to the *álfar*. “Well-being” would seem to be within the area of function tied to the *vanir* (and *álfar*), that of fertility broadly understood. Again, it seems that the *álfar* are used to refer to the *vanir*.

In *Skírnismál* stanza 7, Freyr bemoans the fact that he cannot have Gerðr, the *jötunn* maiden he desires:

7. Mær er mér tíðari
en manni hveim
ungum í árdaga;
ása ok álfa
þat vill engi maðr
at vit samt sém.

I want the girl more than any young man before, in days of yore. Among the *æsir* and the *álfar* no one wants us two to be together.

None of the *æsir* and *álfar* 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 *álfar*’, would indicate that Freyr is implying that he himself belongs to this group of *æsir* and *álfar*. 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 *álfar* could be seen as identical with the *vanir*.

Brymskviða 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 álfum?
Hví ertu einn kominn
í jötunheima?”
“Illt er með ásom!
Illt er með álfom!
hefr þú Hlórriða
hamar um fölginn?”

“What is up with the *æsir*? What is up with the *álfar*? Why have you come alone to Jötunheimar?”

“Things are bad with the *æsir*! Things are bad with the *álfar*! Have you hidden Hlórrið’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. Schjødtt 1991, 304-05; cf. Lindow 2020).⁵ 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 (Schjødtt 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 *álfar* stating:

Sá er einn staðr þar en er kallaðr Álfheimr. Þar byggvir folk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri i jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru svartari en bik (*Gylfaginning* p. 19).

(There is one place there which is called Álfheimr. Those who are called *ljósálfar* (light-álfar) live there, but the *dökkálfar* (dark-álfar) 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 *dökkálfar* are blacker than pitch.)

This passage, along with the statement a short while after that the *ljósálfar* inhabit the third heaven, Víðbláinn (*Gylfaginning* p. 20), has sparked considerable debate. The division of the *álfar* 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 *álfar*. 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 *dökkálfar*⁶ may just be representation of the fertility and death affinities of the pre-Christian *álfar* (cf. Schjødtt 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 *álfar* 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.

⁵ This general notion of fertility has been criticised (for instance, Motz 1996; Sundqvist 2020a; cf. Schjødtt 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’.

⁶ Motz (1973-74) argues that the *dökkálfar* should be viewed as identical with the *dvergjar* (see Gunnell 2020b), however, Motz does not distinguish systematically between *dökkálfar* 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, *Sigrdrífumál* 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 víssa vana?
Hvi 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 víssa vana;
þó ek einn um komk
eikinn fúr yfir
yður 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 *Sigrdrífumál* 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,

þær er váru á ristnar,
ok hverfðar við inn helga mjöð
ok sendar á víða vega;
þær ro með ásum,
þær ro með álfum,
sumar með vísom vönom
sumar hafa menzkir menn;

Those that were carved on were all scraped off, and thrown into the holy mead and sent on wide ways; they are with the *æsir*, they are with the *álfar*, some are with the wise *vanir*, 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 *Hrafnagaldur 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 *pula*-like list, supports this notion:

1. Alföður orkar,
álfar skilja,
Vanir vitu,
vísa normir,
elur Íviðja,
aldir bera,
þreyja þursar,
þjá valkyrjur.⁷

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

6. Dvelur í dölum
dís forvitin,
frá Yggdrasils
aski hnigin,
álfa ættar.
Iðunni hétu
Ivalds eldri
yngsta barna.⁸

The enquiring goddess, descended from the *álfar*,⁹ 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 Iðunn 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. Jörmungrundar
í jöður nyrðra
und rót yztu
aðalpollar
gengu til rekkju
gýgjur og þursar,
náir, 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 (Yggdrasil) (Lassen 2011, 94).

The portrayal of the *álfar* (as *dökkálfar* in st. 25) in *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 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 *náir* (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, *Vafþrúðnismál*, 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 Þórr and a *dvergr* called *Alvíss* (lit. very wise) who has been promised Þórr's daughter's hand in marriage. This does not suit Þórr, 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 *Skiðblaðnir*. If the Ívaldr of *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* and the Ívaldi of *Grimnismál* 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 Óðins* stanza 6 is here translated as "descended from the *álfar*".

¹⁰ Orthography normalised on the basis of Lassen's Icelandic prose paraphrase (2011, 94).

¹¹ Lassen notes in her edition of this *fornyrðislag* poem, that there has been much debate about its dating (2011, 9-18). While Jónas Kristjánson (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 Óðins* "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. *Alvíss* 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*,
– öll of røk fira
vörumk, *dvergr*, at vitir –
hvé sú jörð heitir,
er liggr 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. Jörð heitir með mönnum,
en með ásum fold,
kalla vega *vanir*,
ígræn jötnar,
álfar gróandi,
kalla aur uppregin.

It is called “earth” by men, “land” by the *æsir*, the *vanir* call it “roads”, the *jötnar* “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 *Alvíss*’ answers outline what various phenomena (the sun, moon, wind, fire, and beer) are called among men, *æsir*, *álfar*, *vanir*, *jötnar*, *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 *Alvíssmál* 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 *Alvíssmál*. 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 – “álfrøðull” (*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).

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

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

Álfr-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 *þotnunn* maiden Gerðr:

4. Hví um segjak þér,
seggr inn ungi,
mikinn móðtrega?
Þvíat álfrøðull
lýsir um alla daga
ok þeygi at mínum 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 *álfrøðull* in *Skírnismál* as a *kenning*, not a *heiti*, and thus as “the *røðull* (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 *álfar* 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 *Brymskviða* stanza 15, the god Heimdallr is called “hvítastr 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 Alfrøðull,
norður að Niflheim
Njóla sótti;
upp nam ár Gjöll
Úlfrúnar niður
hornþyt valdur
Himinbjarga.¹²

The gods rose up, *Álfrøðull* (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 *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza 47 and *Skírnismál* stanza 4.

The *álfar* are the Otherworldly group most often connected to brightness and shining, and the uses of an *álf*-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 *álfar*, which places this discourse of them within the chthonic semantic centre.

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

There are instances in the eddic poems where the *álfar* are grouped together with the *æsir* in opposition to what Alaric Hall (2007, 29-34) terms “monstrous otherworldly beings”, as the *álfar* 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 *álfar* 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 *álfar* have no place in the formula “ása ok álfa” (Motz 1973-74, 119). More recently, Santiago Barreiro has argued that the differences between the *álfar* 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 *álfar* with a positive reciprocal nature, the *dvergar* with a negative reciprocal nature, which explains accounts of worship of the *álfar* but not the *dvergar* (Barriero 2014, 44). The fact that the discourses of both *álfar* 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 *álfar* 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 *álfar* 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 *Fáfrismál* stanza 13, where the two groups are contrasted with, for instance, *dvergar* and *jötnar*.

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 jötunheimr,
æsir ro á þingi;
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 *Brymskviða* stanza 7, but the two groups are not alone. *Jötnar* 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 *jötnar* 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 *jötnar* 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 álfum 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 *jötnar*, I myself carved some.

The *æsir* and *álfar* are clearly grouped together and once more juxtaposed with the monstrous *dvergar* and *jötnar*. Furthermore, the name of the of *álfr* rune carver is Dáinn (the dead one; also the name of a *dvergr* in *Völuspá* 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. “Sundbornar mjök
hygg ek at nornir sé,
eigut þær ætt saman;
sumar eru áskunngar,
sumar álfkunngar,
sumar dætr 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 *álfar* 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 “*nauðgönglar ro / ok kjósa mœðr fra mögum*” (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. *nauðgöngull* 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 *álfar* 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 *æsir* and juxtaposed with the *dvergjar* 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 *æsir*, and do not necessarily fulfil any distinct function. However, this strengthens the idea of the *álfar* being a non-monstrous representative of the Otherworld, since their continued association with the *æsir* 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.¹⁴ 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 *Austrfararvísur* 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 (Simek 1993, 8).

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

1. Spruttu á tái
tregnar iðir,
græti álfa
in glýstømu;
ár um morgin
manna þølva
sútir 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 *álfablót* mentioned in *Austrfararvísur* 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 *álfablót* in *Austrfararvísur*. In *Kormáks saga* ch. 22, the protagonist of the saga, Þorvarðr, 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 sacrificed 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 *tíll árs sér* (for their prosperity; see Hultgård 2003). King Óláfr earns a special byname after this; he is named *Geirstadaálfr* (the *álfr* 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 *álfr* (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 (Ármann 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,
bauga talði,
álfa ljóði,
eins saknaði;
hugði hann at hefði
Hlǫðvés dóttir,
alvitr unga,
væri hon aftr komin.

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

14. Kallaði nú Níðuðr
Njára dróttinn:
"Hvar gaztu, *Völundr*,
vísi álfa,
vára aura
í Úlfdǫlom? [...]"

Now Níðuðr called, the ruler of the Njárar: "Where did you, *Völundr*, lord of the *álfar*, get your riches in Úlfdalar?"

31. "Seg þú mér þat, *Völundr*,
vísi álfa,
af heilum hvat varð
húnum mínum?"

"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, "*vísi*" and "*ljóði*", can be translated as 'ruler' or 'lord'. "*Vísi*" 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 (Ármann 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”,¹⁵ 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 *álfar* 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 *álfar* 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 “hvítan háls” (a white neck; cf. Hall 2007, 44-45), reminiscent of the idea that the *álfar* were linked with brightness. What’s more, stanza 15 of *Brymskviða* 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 *álfar* 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 *álfar* in the eddic poems, this article has argued that the *álfar*’s semantic centre should be viewed as essentially chthonic. The suggested (and sometimes overlapping) discourses of the *álfar* 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 *jöttnar* and *dvergjar*; 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 *álfar* – 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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