

Three Women, Three Roots, Three Times, One Tree

Some Thoughts for Potential Gardeners

TERRY GUNNELL

ABSTRACT: *This article considers the potential connections between the three nornir mentioned in Völuspá and the three roots of Yggdrasill mentioned in Grímnismál st. 31 and Gylfaginning which, like the nornir themselves, may have been seen (by some) as being connected with time. This raises the possibility that, at some point and for some people, the jötnar were closely connected with the world of death and the underworld (which, for some, may have been associated with the east from whence the sun rises). It also raises questions about whether Urðr should be seen as referring to the past, rather than the future, and reconsiders the earlier posited idea that life, death and time were seen as being a circular process much like the natural year.*

RESUME: *Denne artikel omhandler den potentielle forbindelse mellem de tre nornir, der nævnes i Völuspá, og Yggdrasills tre rødder, der nævnes i Grímnismál st. 31 samt Gylfaginning. Ligesom nornerne selv kan de tre rødder være blevet set (af nogle) som forbundet med tid, hvilket kan betyde, at jætterne, i nogles øjne, var tæt forbundet med dødsriget og underverdenen (der, for nogle, kan have været associeret med retningen øst, hvor solen står op). Det åbner ligeledes for den mulighed, at Urðr snarere skal ses som forbundet med fremtiden, ikke fortiden. Artiklen genovervejer også en tidligere fremsat teori om, at livet, døden og tiden blev set som cirkulære processer på samme måde som årets gang.*

KEYWORDS: *Yggdrasill; nornir; Völuspá; Jötunheimar; circular processes; death; ancestors; the sun; directions*

Introduction: Time and the Tree

When it comes down to it, *Völuspá* is all about time, becoming, rising and falling, darkness and light, sound out of silence and (occasionally) movement (commonly upwards, inwards and from the east).¹ At its heart is a “mjǫtviðr” (i.e. measuring tree: *Völuspá* st. 22) that symbolically echoes the action of the poem as it grows from being a seed in the earth (*Völuspá* st. 2), reaching full bloom and linking earth, subterranean water and sky in st. 19,³ finally shivering, howling and apparently burning at the end of the poem in sts 46⁴ and 55.⁵ It has been argued that the tree not only measures time but “metes out fate” (La Farge and Tucker 1992, 182), somewhat like the three women said to rise from the water below the tree,⁶ and later (according to Snorri Sturluson [2005, 19]) nourish it with this same water (in the shape of white mud):

Þaðan koma meyjjar
margs vitandi
þrjár ór þeim sæ
er á þolli stendr;
Urð hétu eina,
aðra Verðandi

- ¹ This article is partially inspired by the ideas relating to horizontal and vertical understandings of the world expressed in Schjødtt 1990, and also earlier discussions about the *nornir* with Karen Bek-Pedersen, and about *jǫtnar*, trees, fate and death with my one-time students Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, Jan Harder Klitgaard and Lauren Hamm, and my present student Amanda Green. I would like to express my thanks to Luke John Murphy, Henning Kure and Karen Bek-Pedersen for a number of useful comments.
- ² All references to the Eddic poems in this article refer to those versions published in *Eddukvæði* 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all strophe numbers relating to *Völuspá* refer to the version of the poem in *Konungsbók* (the Codex Regius manuscript). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the present author.
- ³ “Ask veit ek standa,/ heitir Yggdrasill,/ hár baðmr, ausinn/ hvíta auri;/ [...] stendr æ yfir grœnn/ Urðarbrunni” (“I know an ash called Yggdrasill that stands, a high tree, watered with white mud; ever green, it stands over Urðarbrunnr”).
- ⁴ “Skelfr Yggdrasils/ askr standandi,/ ymr it aldna tré” (“The standing ash Yggdrasil trembles; the ancient tree howls”).
- ⁵ “... geisar eimi við aldrnara” (“... stream gushes forth beside the nourisher of life”). On the suggestion that the “aldrnari” is Yggdrasill, see, for example, *Eddukvæði* 2014, I, 305 (note).
- ⁶ Of course, the *Hauksbók* version of the poem (st. 20) talks of the women coming from a hall (“ór þeim sal”) rather than out of the water. This, however, contradicts the repeated idea in *Völuspá* that female figures exist in, or come from, an outside world: see *Völuspá* st. 2: “nú man ek heima,/ [...] fyr mold neðan” (“I remember nine worlds below the earth”); st. 8: “þrjár kvómu/ þursa meylla/ ór jötunheimum” (“three very powerful þurs maidens came from Jötunheimar”); st. 22: “Heiði hana hétu/ hvar til húsa kom” (“She was called Heiðr when she visited houses”); st. 28: “Ein sat hon úti” (“She sat alone outside”); st. 39: “Austr sat in aldna” (“In the east sat the old one”). The idea of the women coming from the water would also seem to be echoed in the line from st. 4 of *Sigurðardrápa* by the 10th century poet Kormákr Ögmundarson: “Komsk Urðr ór brunni” (“Urðr came from the well”): see Snorri Sturluson 1998, 70; and <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php?id=3361&if=default&table=verses&val=edition>. On connections between supernatural women and water in Old Norse (and Celtic) belief, see further Gunnell 2020.

– skáru á skíði –
Skuld ina þriðju.
Þær lög lögðu,
þær líf kuru
alda bǫrnum,
ørlög at segja (*Völuspá*, st. 20).

(From the water that the tree stands above come three very knowledgeable maidens, one called Urðr, the second Verðandi – they carved into wooden staves – the third was Skuld. They set laws, decided the lives of the children of man, spoke forth fate.)

This article aims to speculate a little further on the connection between the women and the tree, more specifically the three roots of the tree mentioned in *Grímnismál* st. 31 (and *Gylfaginning*: see Snorri Sturluson 2005, 17) which, to my mind, can also potentially be connected with time, and suggest that at some point, and for some people, the *ǫtnar* were closely connected with the world of death and the underworld (which, for some, may well have been associated with the east).

The Three *Nornir* and Time

The connection between the three women who came from the water and three periods of time (past, present and future) is naturally reflected in the shape of *Völuspá* as a whole, in which sts 2–27 refer to past events, sts 28–29 (and 1?) to the present, and sts 30–63 to the future.⁷ If this is the case, as Karen Bek-Pedersen (2011, 77–80) has noted, there is nonetheless good reason to question the regularly accepted idea that Urðr should represent the past, Verðandi the present, and Skuld the future, something which, when it comes down to it, makes little sense. This proposal goes back at least as far as the early 19th century, when Finnur Magnússon introduced the idea (see *Den Ældre Edda* 1821–23, I, 38; IV 279 and 288; Finnur Magnússon 1824–26, I, 29, 380 and II 210; and 1828, 435 and 495–98). The notion is based on the idea that the name of Skuld comes from the Icelandic verb “skulu” with reference to its use as a future tense, while the name of Urðr (like Verðandi) comes from the verb “verða” (linked to the past participle “orðinn”: Finnur Magnússon 1828: 495–498). While Finnur immediately notes the close connection between the name Urðr and the Old English word *wyrd* (used around 200 times in Old English works: see Bek-Pedersen 2011, 80; and Weber 1969, 17; see further below) and fate in general (in other words, what awaits us), he seems to see no contradiction in suggesting that Urðr presents the past, partly because of Snorri’s suggestion that Skuld is the “youngest” *norn* (“*norn in yngsta*”: Snorri Sturluson 2005, 30). The same ideas have been repeated endlessly into our own times using

⁷ See also Lindow 2001, 40. It was this connection that led Guðbrandur Vigfússon to call the poem “The Prophecy of the Three Sibyls”, the idea being that the various voices in the poem (“hon” and “ek”) could be explained by the idea that it was spoken by the three *nornir*: see Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell 1883, 621–9. See also Müllenhoff 1890–1922, V, 5.

the same etymological logic (if any explanation is given at all),⁸ little question being made about the slight absurdity that “skuld” means debt, something that has little to do with the future and much more to do with things done and mistakes made in the past (see further Bauschatz 1982, 14; and Bek-Pedersen 2011, 78).⁹ A few slightly different approaches can be seen in the work of Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell (1883, II, 621–629), which uses the same idea but calls the women “Weird”, “Becoming” and “Should”; Hilda Ellis Davidson (1964, 26) who echoes the same approach by calling the women “Fate”, “Being” and “Necessity”;¹⁰ John McKinnell (1994, 117), who has a similar understanding, but goes slightly further in talking directly of “Fate”, “Existence” and “Debt”; Folke Ström (1985, 202–203) who only discusses Urðr, whom he directly links to death (“Urd inte bara uppfattades som ett personligt ödeväsen utan också sem ödets konsekvens, som det onda ödet och dess slutresultat: döden” [“Urðr is not only understood as a personal fatal being, but also as the consequences of fate, a bad fate and its final result: death”]); and Clunies Ross (1994, 202), who, while noting that the names “represent aspects of time”, underlines that they derive “from verbs of becoming and obligation” (referring to de Vries (1977, 636)). The most detailed examinations are those conducted by Bauschatz (1982, 5, 8–16 and 20);¹¹ and Bek-Pedersen (2011, 73–82 and 88–91) who, as noted above, questions the relationship of Skuld to the future (seeing her more as being “close to Nemesis”: Bek-Pedersen 2011, 79) and Urðr to the past, eventually raising the possibility that “the three *nornir* should be regarded

⁸ See, for example, Grimm 1835, 228–9; and 1875–8, I, 335–37 (where close links to *wyrd* are noted); Thorpe 1851, 12; De la Saussaye 1902, 316; *The Poetic Edda* 1962, 2 (Hollander’s translation); Turville-Petre 1964, 279–80 (also mentioning the connection to *wyrd* as well as the Latin *vetere* [to wind] and the idea that Urðr could also refer to death); Simek 1993, 219 and 242 (where Snorri is wrongly blamed for starting this translation); Orchard 1997, 267; *The Poetic Edda* 1969–2011, I, 128 (Dronke’s translation, the explanation referring to Guðbrandur Vigfússon: see above); *Eddukvæði* 1998, 7 (ed. Gísli Sigurðsson); DuBois 1998, 208; Lindow 2001, 40 (which also refers to *wyrd*); Steinsland 2005, 102 (also referring to *wyrd*); *The Elder Edda* 2011, 8 (Orchard’s translation); and most recently, *Eddukvæði* 2014, 295–96 (ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason). Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1874, 559 and 657; de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* 1970 I, 269–73; and Finnur Jónsson 1931, 514 and 584 avoid any definition. The same applies to Carolyne Larrington’s revised translation of the Eddic poems (2014, 6) which merely repeats the original names.

⁹ Similar references to the past can be seen in the use of the word in the sense of “fault”/“blame” in modern Norwegian, Danish and Swedish (Nor., Dan. *skyld*/Swe. *skuld*). Cf. Nor., Dan., and Swe. *skyldig* (“guilty”).

¹⁰ Ellis Davidson later developed this idea, suggesting that Urðr represents fate and the “time of birth when an individual’s fate is decreed”, Verðandi, “the time of life on earth”, and Skuld, “death, the debt that all must pay”; see Ellis Davidson 1993, 118.

¹¹ On the basis of a detailed examination of the etymology and background of the names, Bauschatz questions the simple idea of the three figures simply representing past, present and future, and, as noted above, any connection between Skuld and the future. Like Ellis Davidson, McKinnell and Clunies Ross, he reaches the conclusion that Verðandi represents “the occurring”; Skuld “necessary or obligatory action” and Urðr, when it comes down to it, “actions made manifest”: in short, “her name represents the ‘past’” (Bauschatz 1982, 14 and 16).

as a three-in-one figure, a collective whole or as one *norn* representing all three ages at once" (Bek-Pedersen 2011, 81).

All in all, to my mind, as Bauschatz, Bek-Pedersen, McKinnell, Ellis Davidson and Clunies Ross have argued, there is strong logic in abandoning the idea of Skuld being related to the future, and instead concentrating on her associations with debt, something which, ultimately, is based on an action carried out in the past. After all, as already mentioned, the word *skuld* in its present form literally means "debt", something drawn from *skulu* in the sense of obligation or necessity rather than any future actions. And, as the etymologists have shown, Urðr has a much closer relationship to the verb *verða* in the sense of "becoming" (and even, indirectly, the word *orð*) than it has to the past participle *orðinn* (which is pushing things unnecessarily far).¹² This idea of Urðr having closer, more direct, connections to the future rather than to the past is, of course, underlined by the fact that she seems to be the leading figure of the three (the well, Urðarbrunnr, being named after her). It is also very hard to ignore the direct links between her name to the Old English word *wyrd*, which, while it may have taken on Christian connotations in later times (see, for example, Lochrie 1986), evidently referred to a fated future rather than any idea of the past. The fact that the word was clearly deeply rooted in Anglo-Saxon language and culture in this sense can be seen from its use in *Beowulf*,¹³ and especially *The Wanderer* from the 9th or 10th century.¹⁴

As noted above, the direct link between these figures and periods of time in *Völuspá* is underlined by the shape of the poem as a whole, and not least the positioning of the strophe in question, directly after the gods give life to the originally "ørløglausa" Ask and Embla (in sts 17-18), thereby also giving them death (their eventual *ørløg*). This is an act which echoes the gods' creation of time in st. 6,¹⁵ something which in st. 8 led almost immediately to the arrival of "þrjár/ [...] þursa meyjar/ ámáttkar mjök/ ór jötunheimum" ("three very powerful þurs maidens from Jötunheimar"), figures that scholars have with some logic equated with the *nornir* (see, for example, Orchard 2011, 268; and Larrington 2014, 283; and other references in Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, 54): in short, time has been started, something which simultaneously gives birth to past, present and future.

¹² That this explanation (of Skuld representing the past and Urðr the future) makes both etymological and grammatical sense has been confirmed in private conversation by Vésteinn Ólason and Guðvarður Gunnlaugsson.

¹³ See *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* 1950, 18: "Gæð ā Wyrð swā hīo scel!" (line 455: Fate will take its course: *Beowulf* 1973, 65).

¹⁴ For the *Wanderer*, see *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* 1970, 174–83. *Wyrd* is referred to three times here: "Wyrd bið ful aræd!" (line 1: fate is relentless); "Ne mæg werig mod/ wyrde wiðstondan" (line 15: no weary mind may stand against fate); and "Onwendeð wyrda gesceaft weoruld under heofonum" (line 107: *wyrd*'s shaping changes the world under the heavens). The third latter quote clearly refers to an active shaping similar to that found in *Völuspá*.

¹⁵ "... nótt ok niðjum/ nǫfn um gáfu,/ morgin hétu/ ok miðjan dag,/ undorn ok aptan,/ árum at telja" ("... they gave names to night and her relations, named morning, midday, afternoon and evening, a means of counting the years").

Out of the Depths

In the case of both groups of women noted above, they clearly come from “outside”, one group coming from “jötunheimum”, while the other comes the watery depths below. This might seem to be a contradiction with the way in which we normally view Jötunheimar on the horizontal plane (as a place “outside” Ásgarðr, somewhere which is definitely not in Útgarðr, which, as Snorri clearly shows in *Gylfaginning*, is seen as being across the sea *beyond* Jötunheimar, and home to someone who is never referred to as a *jötunn* [Snorri Sturluson 2005, 37]). Nonetheless, it is also important to remember that, when the *völva* in *Völuspá* talks about her upbringing amongst the *jötnar* in st. 2, she remembers this as being below the ground:

Ek man jötna
ár um borna
þá er forðum mik
fædda höfðu;
nú man ek heima,
mjötvið mæran
fyr mold neðan.

(I remember the jötnar, born in ancient times, those who in the past fed me; I remember nine worlds, and the shining measuring tree, beneath the earth.)

This strophe not only underlines clear parallels with the *nornir* arising from water (something perhaps stressed by the *völva*’s final words “Nú mun hon sökkvask” [“Now she will sink”] in st. 63) but also reminds us of the direction from which Óðinn gains his runic (and potentially poetic¹⁶) wisdom while hanging on Yggdrasill (*Hávamál* st. 139: “nýsta ek niðr/ nam ek upp rúnar,/ æpandi nam,/ fell ek aptr þaðan” [“I peered down, took up the runes, screaming I took them, and fell back from there once again”]). All in all, the implication is that at some point (at least in the first part of *Völuspá* and one strophe of *Hávamál*), the world of numinous knowledge closely associated with the world of the *völur*, *nornir* and *jötnar* was seen as being below the ground on the vertical plane.

The question of how this can be placed in connection with the other clear associations that Jötunheimar has with the east (and later north) will be considered later. For now, though, it is worth considering the potential connections that exist between the three women who sit beneath the tree and the three roots that apparently run out from it, linking different worlds. Only mentioned twice in the extant texts, in two different versions, the roots are first described in one of Snorri’s main sources, *Grímnismál*, st. 31:

Þrjár røtr

¹⁶ It is worth noting that in the next strophe, st. 140, Óðinn talks about how he gained the “fimbulljóð nú” (“nine powerful chants”) from the son of Bölþórr, when drinking from the “dýra mjaðar/ ausinn Óðrerir” (“the rich mead drawn from Óðrerir”). Here, the line between poetry, runes and *ljóð* in the shape of magical runic chants is clearly blurred.

standa á þrjá vega
undan aski Yggdrasils;
Hel býr undir einni,
annarri hrímþursar,
þriðju mennskir menn.

(There are three roots running in three directions below the ash Yggdrasill; Hel lives under one, the hrímþursar under another, and under a third humans.)

Snorri then develops this idea in *Gylfaginning* as follows:

Askinn er allra tréa mestr ok bestr. Limar hans dreifask yfir heim allan ok standa yfir himni. Þrjár rætur trésins halda því uppi ok standa afar breitt. Ein er með Ásum en önnur með hrímþursum, þar sem forðum var Ginnungagap. Hin þriðja stendr yfir Niflheimi, ok undir þeirri rót er Hvergelmir, en Niðhöggr gnagar neðan rótina. En undir þeirri rót er til hrímþursa horfir, þar er Mímisbrunnr, er spekð ok mannvit er í fólgt, ok heitir sá Mímir er á brunninn. [...] Þriðja rót asksins stendur á himni, ok undir þeirri rót er brunnr sá er mjök er heilagr er heitir Urðar brunnr (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 17).

(The ash is the greatest and best of all trees. Its branches spread across the world and reach above the heavens. The three roots of the tree hold it up and reach very far. One is with the Æsir, another with the hrímþursar where Ginnungagap was in the past. The third runs over Niflheimr, and under that root is Hvergelmir, and Niðhöggr gnaws beneath the roots. And under the root that goes to the hrímþursar is Mímisbrunnr, which contains wisdom and intelligence, and the owner of the well is Mímir. [...] The third root reaches up to heaven, and under that root is that well which is very sacred and is called Urðar-brunnr.

Once again (as in many other places), Snorri is attempting to connect various pieces from various puzzles here, albeit somewhat illogically when he suggests that both the branches and one of the roots reach up to the heavens. What is nonetheless clear is that in both cases one root reaches out to the hrímþursar (whom Snorri directly connects to the beginnings of the world); another to “here” (in the sense of the world of humans/the gods); and the third to the world of death (Snorri directly connecting Niflheimr to Hel¹⁷). The link between two of the roots and the present (“here”) and future (death) thus seems relatively clear. But to what degree can we connect the world of the hrímþursar (which here seems to be a synonym for jöttnar¹⁸) to the past?

¹⁷ Niflheimr is only mentioned in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 9–10 and 27) and seems to be a creation of Snorri based on Niflhel, which is mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 43 as a place people travel to from Hel which is connected to the nine worlds. In *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 9), Snorri suggests that Niflhel is where the worst of people go. Niflhel is also mentioned in *Baldursdraumar* st. 2 as a synonym for Hel. The connection between Niflheimr and Niflhel is underlined when Snorri Sturluson (2005, 27) states that Loki’s daughter Hel is sent to Niflheimr and given control over the aforementioned nine worlds, which would thus all seem to be associated with death.

¹⁸ As Ingunn Ásdísardóttir has shown, the interchangeability of (hrím)þursar and jöttnar seems to be the result of a development over time. In *Skirnismál* sts 10 (in AM 748), 31, 34 and 35, the þursar are clearly presented as a different (and lower) race than the jöttnar. As shown

Jötunheimar and the World of the Dead

As *Vafþrúðnismál* underlines, the *jötnar* know more about the past than the gods (as is also suggested by the quote given above from *Gylfaginning* which implies that the root that reaches to the *hrímþursar* is not only connected to a well associated with wisdom and intelligence but also a figure associated with memory [Mímir]). *Vafþrúðnir* is said to know about “fornir stafir” (ancient words) (st. 1), and his memory goes back at least as far as the grandson of Aurgelmir (another name for Ymir?), before the earth was created (sts 29 and 35). Hymir, meanwhile, is said to be “forn” (ancient) (*Hymiskviða* st. 13), and the *jötnakonur* in *Þórsdrápa* “hundfornar” (really ancient) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 29). A similar idea is expressed in the common use of the adjective “aldinn” (aged) for *jötnar*, in all cases underlining their difference to the more youthful gods.¹⁹ Also worth noting is the way in which the *jötnar* are often referred to in terms of more than one generation, something that is far rarer amongst the gods.²⁰ All in all, there is good reason to consider them in terms of forefathers of some kind, figures strongly associated with the past, who can also naturally be assumed to be closely associated with the grave. Indeed, as Laidoner (2020, 12-13) notes, we meet several of them sitting on potential gravemounds (“haugar”) at the border of Jötunheimar in *Þrymskviða*, st. 6, *Skírnismál* st. 11, and *Völuspá*, st. 41. *Vafþrúðnir*, meanwhile, states that he himself (like the *völva* in *Völuspá*) has traversed thorough nine worlds below Niflhel, where the dead go, potentially implying that he has experienced some form of rebirth (see further below).

The idea of connections between the *jötnar* and the world of the dead, of course, has roots in part in the etymology of the word *jötunn*, which has often been connected to the Icelandic *etaléta* (to eat), a word that in turn is connected to the Germanic **etuna* and the Old English word *eoten* (see de Vries 1977, 295–96; Turville-Petre 1964, 80; and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, 23 and 31), the implication being that these beings were corpse-eaters, somewhat like *Hræsvelgr* mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 37. Indeed, Emil Birkeli went as far as arguing that the *jötnar* were at one point viewed as reigning over a kingdom of the dead (Birkeli 1943, 117–18), something perhaps echoed in the fact that in Denmark, Stone Age dolmens are still regularly referred to as *jættestuer*, an idea that in all probability has a background in earlier folk beliefs (the implication being that these are not only places made by the ancient *jætter*, but also places they inhabited). In a sense, Þórr’s regular expeditions to the east could thus be regarded as

above, *Völuspá* st. 8 nonetheless talks directly of “þursa meyjar” (*þurs* maidens) coming from Jötunheimar. On the potential connection between these figures, see further *Hávamál* st. 109; *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 33; *Þrymskviða* sts 6, 11, 12, 18, 20–21, 25 and 30–31; and *Baldrsdráumar*, st. 14. Snorri, meanwhile, clearly has little problem with blending *jötnar*, *bergrisar* and *hrímþursar*: see Snorri Sturluson 2005, 34. On this question, see further Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, 52, 55, 91, 104, 109, 138–139, 155–156, 197 and 205–206.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Skírnismál* st. 25; *Hávamál* st. 104; *Grímnismál* st. 50; *Fáfnismál* st. 29; and *Þrymskviða* st. 32. See also Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, 51, 60, 98–99, 104, 228 and 267.

²⁰ See, for example, *Vafþrúðnismál* sts 29, 30, 32, and 35; *Völuspá* sts 4 and 45; *Skírnismál* st. 34; *Hárbarðsljóð* st. 29; *Lokasenna* st. 42; *Alvíssmál* st. 34; *Skírnismál* st. 12; and *Hyndluljóð* st. 30.

reflecting the recurring feature in the “heroic biography” of classical heroes, that at some point in their careers they need to make an initiatory trip into and back out of the underworld (see, for example, de Vries 1963, 216; Campbell 1988, 245–46; and Miller 2000, 156–58). Indeed, this is an idea that might potentially be reflected in Saxo Grammaticus’ versions of the Geirrøðr and Útgarða-Loki narratives (Book VIII, 14.1–15.10) (Saxo Grammaticus 2015, I, 598–621; and Ellis 1968, 185–88).²¹ Worth noting is the way in which Saxo describes the journey to the world of Geruthus (whom he had apparently heard about from the Icelanders) as follows:

Ambitorem namque terrarum Oceanum nauigandum, solem postponendum ac sydera, sub Chao peregrinandum ac demum in loca lucis expertia iugibusque tenebris obnoxia transeundum expertorum assertione constabat (Saxo Grammaticus 2015, I, 599).

(Those who were knowledgeable claimed that you had to sail across the Ocean which girds the earth, putting the sun and stars behind your back, journey beneath the realm of night and pass finally into the regions which suffer perennial darkness without a glimmer of daylight [Saxo Grammaticus 2015, I, 599].)

Jötunheimar and the Rising of the Sun

At the same time, however, as noted above, such ideas of the *jötnar* being a kind of chthonic forefathers with a close relation to the world of death need to be reconciled in some way with the other concept regularly expressed in the Eddic poems, and much of *Snorra Edda*, that the *jötnar* live in the east,²² Hymir literally living “at himins enda” (“at the end of the world”) in *Hymiskviða* st. 5. Various discussions have been made about why Jötunheimar should be set in that direction, one of the most logical being that, from the standpoint of those living in the fjords of western Norway, the east would have meant the mountainous wilderness that anyone travelling east would have had to cross (Lindow 1994, 219–20). Another equally logical point that has to the best of my knowledge never been suggested relates to the fact that the east is where the sun rises at the start of the day, a time of beginnings. In Christianity, such an idea

²¹ Indeed, the idea that Þorr’s excursions away from Ásgarðr might have been seen as taking place at times in which our world was left in darkness could potentially reflect an argument tentatively made in Gunnell 2021 about these trips perhaps being associated with seasonal change in the minds of some people.

²² See *Lokasenna* sts 59–60 (and prologue), *Völuspá* 39 and 48; *Hárbarðsljóð* sts 29–30, *Hymiskviða* st. 5, and Snorri Sturluson 2005, 35 and 37; and 1998, 20 and 40. Elsewhere, however, Snorri seems to place Jötunheimar in the north (see Snorri Sturluson 1998, 20 and 31), an idea that would develop over time, probably partly because, for Icelanders, the east was coming to mean Norway, and partly because of the increasing sense that *hrímpursar* and *jötnar* were the same beings, both being connected with cold (see, for example, *Vafþrúðnismál*, sts. 10 and 21). See further Lindow 1994, 219–20; and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, 210 and 231–32. Interestingly enough, we find Snorri placing Hel in the same cardinal direction in his account of Hermóðr’s trip into the underworld. As Móðguðr says to Hermóðr: “niðr ok norðr liggir Helveggar” (“the road to Hel runs northwards and downwards”: Snorri Sturluson 2005, 47), an expression and idea that have since taken root in Icelandic culture.

was naturally associated with the overriding idea of Judgement Day (a time of both ending and beginning). However, as the Bronze Age rock carvings of southern Sweden and south-eastern Norway and the later Gotland stones effectively demonstrate, the sun had a great deal of importance for those living in the north long before the arrival of Christianity (see, for example, Gelling and Davidson 1969; Lindqvist 1941–2; and Andrén 2014, 117–66; see also Procopius 1914–54, III, 414–19 [*History of the Wars* ch. 15] on Norwegians and the sun). While the idea of connecting sunrise with the world of the *jötnar*, who have so often been associated in the general imagination with cold and darkness, might seem somewhat incongruous, connections to the sunrise also make a degree of sense in various ways, not least in the sense of creative beginnings (the *jötnar* being depicted as having been the first beings, when the world initially came into existence out of nothing). Indeed, one can even link this idea to their connections with frost (which commonly appears at daybreak). Of course, the *jötnar* themselves are not the sun, but should rather be regarded as the inhabitants of dark world of night from which the sun *comes*. In a sense, one can see parallels with Hel, Niflhel and Niflheim, although now, not so much in the sense of a world of death that *follows*, but rather one that *precedes*, in other words, the cold world of the past and the forefathers that have passed away.

This concept of the sun rising from a world of death naturally offers a close parallel to the argument that has been voiced in recent decades by Flemming Kaul. Kaul has pointed to a possible connection between the Bronze Age petroglyphs and ideas concerning the circular passage of the sun, which Kaul feels was believed to sink into the underworld in the west at the end of the day, and then rise from it once again in the east in the morning.²³ This is an idea reflected in the image of the Bronze Age sun wagon (see Andrén 2014, 127) that was still being echoed over 1,500 years later in *Vafþúðnismál* sts 11–14. Considering the ideas noted above, this potentially introduces the idea of two underworlds with two entrances, or rather two aspects of an underworld that are reflected in the passage of nature, whereby things die and are then re-born.²⁴ In a sense, this potentially brings us back to Finnur Magnússon's early table depicting the nine worlds in which Niflheimr/Niflhel leads directly on to Jötunheimar (Finnur Magnússon 1824–26, III, 189).²⁵

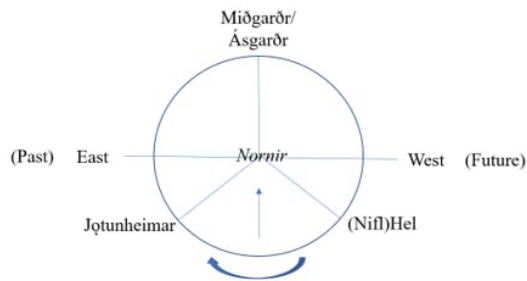
If there is any sense in this suggestion of two linked underworlds and the idea of endings leading to beginnings and our futures becoming the past of others, one can see the three roots, the three worlds and even the three women as being representations of the wheel of time, something that is naturally reflected in the last strophes of

²³ See further the National Museum of Denmark web site: “The Journey of the Sun Across the Sky”; Kaul 1998, 262; and Andrén 2014, 127–133.

²⁴ With regard to associations between the west, sunset and death, it is perhaps worth noting the much later English expression for death, “gone west”, first recorded in the First World War: see Word Histories.

²⁵ Finnur divides the worlds as follows: The “Oververden” is made up of (1) the world of the *ljósálfar*; (2) Muspell; and (3) Goðheimr; Miðgarðr of (4) Vanaheimr; (5) Mannheimr; and (6) the world of the *svartálfar*; and the Underworld of (7) Jötunheimar (and the depths of the ocean); (8) Helheimr; and (9) Niflheimr (with Hvergelmir and Náströnd).

Völuspá. We are thus dealing with a pattern that might look something like the following (a mixture of the horizontal and the vertical leading ultimately to the circular):



A Gardening Tip

Whether such ideas about the three roots and their parallel to the three *nornir*, if they existed, were widespread can naturally be little more than conjecture based on the evidence that we have.²⁶ They nonetheless seem to make some sense with regard to the overall concept of *Völuspá*, in which, as noted above, ideas about the siting of Jötunheimar at the start and end of the poem seem to vary. This underlines, to my mind, that we should think of different parts of the poem as having evolved at different times and even in different places, something we can still see happening even in the 13th century with the addition of st. 57 in *Hauksbók*. The probability is that ideas developed and changed over time and space (as we see happening later in the gradual movement of Jötunheimar to the north: see note 22 above). Nonetheless, as Anders Andrén has shown (Andrén 2014, 30 and 48–67), archaeological evidence suggests that the idea of a three-rooted tree was both ancient and comparatively widespread (from Borre in Vestfold into southern Sweden). Also certain is that the notion of the world tree being directly connected to the three roots and the three women underlined the central idea of the need for nourishment from the various forces under the ground, forces which, according to *Völuspá*, had a strong connection to death, the past and the feminine. For potential gardeners, the main message would appear to be: never forget the important role played by compost in the growth of future plants.

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²⁶ The fact that the creation story in *Völuspá* is essentially different to that in *Vafþrúðnismál* naturally underlines that different concepts of the nature of the world existed. The idea of the three *nornir*, of course, only exists in *Völuspá* (and thereby *Gylfaginning*).

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