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The Earth as Body in Old Norse Poetry

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigates two of three main ways outlined by Snorri Sturlusson in* Gylfaginning *in which Old Norse poets might refer to the earth in their poetry: By reference to the myth of the killing of Ymir as well as by reference to the immediate family of the goddess Jǫrð. By looking at the meaning of these references to the origins of the earth, the article investigates the underlying human ideas and reactions of these references.*

RESUME: *Denne artikel undersøger to af tre hovedmåder skitseret af Snorri Sturlusson i* Gylfaginning*, hvorpå norrøne digtere kunne henvise til jorden i deres poesi: Gennem reference til myten om drabet på Ymir såvel som ved reference til gudinden Jǫrð's nærmeste familie. Ved at se på betydningen af disse henvisninger til jordens oprindelse, undersøger artiklen henvisningernes underliggende menneskelige ideer og reaktioner.*

KEYWORDS*: Earth; jǫtunn; Ymir; Grímnismál; Ragnarǫk; Jǫrð; Snorra Edda (Prologus); Saxo Grammaticus; Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld; Haustlǫng; Vǫlu-Steinn*

> Hvernig skal *jǫrð* kenna? Kalla Ymis hold ok *móður Þórs*, *dóttur Ónars*, *brúði Óðins*, *elju* Friggjar ok *Rindar* ok Gunnlaðar, sværu Sifjar, gólf ok *botn veðra hallar*, sjá dýranna, dóttir Náttar, *systir Auðs* ok Dags. (Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 24, ed. Faulkes I, 35).

> How shall earth be referred to? By calling it Ymir's flesh and *mother of Thor*, *daughter of Onar*, *bride of Odin*, *rival of* Frigg and *Rind* and Gunnlod, mother-in-law of Sif, floor and *base of winds' hall*, sea of the animals, daughter of Night, *sister of Aud* and Day (trans. Faulkes 90).

Chapter 24 of *Skáldskaparmál* lists fourteen ways in which poets may refer to the earth and quotes examples of six of them (those italicised in the quotation above). They are of three kinds:

a) References to aspects of Nature
b) Allusions to the myth of the killing of the giant[1] Ymir by Óðinn and his brothers, who then made the cosmos out of his body-parts
c) Allusions to the myth of Jǫrð as the mother of Þórr and abandoned mistress of Óðinn, and to other members of her immediate family

In this article I will discuss only the second and third of these groups. Taken literally as explanations of the earth's origin, they would be mutually contradictory, but that is not how myth works. As Jens Peter has recently pointed out: 'Myths are "logical" only within particular contexts or discourses … which is why two myths often seem to be mutually contradictory and incoherent'.[2] If these two explanations of the earth's origin are not to be taken as literal fact, they may be being used to express human ideas and reactions, and I will seek to explore what some of these may have been.

Ymir

In the eddic poems and *Snorra Edda* Ymir is said to have been the oldest of living beings and the ancestor of all giants,[3] and *Gylfaginning* ch. 7 (ed. Faulkes, 11) states bluntly that *Synir Bors drápu Ymi jǫtun* 'Borr's sons (i.e. Óðinn and his brothers) killed the giant Ymir'. The giants are a ferocious race,[4] and it is worth remembering that within defined conditions early Icelandic law permitted close relatives to take vengeance for killings, serious woundings, theft or the rape or seduction of female family members.[5] The behaviour of the gods in many of the surviving myths would justify the giants in seeking vengeance against them; in addition to the murder of Ymir this would apply to the killings of the Giant Builder[6] and Þjazi,[7] to Óðinn's theft of the mead of poetry,[8] and to his seductions of Gunnlǫð, Rindr,[9] Gríðr[10] and Jǫrð (see below). In the K and H versions of *Vǫluspá* the beginning of the world is described as *Ár var alda, þar er Ymir byggði* 'it was in ancient times, when Ymir lived';[11] his murder is not directly referred

1 Strictly speaking, it may be misleading to refer to *jǫtnar* as 'giants', since they do not necessarily have all the characteristics of giants in folktales – for example, they are not usually stupid – but there is no modern English word which describes them more exactly.
2 Schjødt, Jens Peter (2020), 10.
3 *Vafþrúðnismál* 28,4-6, *Eddukvæði I*, 361; *Hyndluljóð* 33,7-8, *Eddukvæði I*, 466. Further on the myth of Ymir and its probable connection with twelfth- and thirteenth-century learning, see Guðrún Nordal (2001), 277-83.
4 *Vafþrúðnismál* 31,6, *Eddukvæði I*, 361.
5 *Grágás: Konungsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, chs. 86, 90, I: 147, 164. Further see McKinnell (2009), 181-94 (see 187-94).
6 *Vǫluspá K* 25-26, *Eddukvæði I*, 297.
7 *Skáldskaparmál* ch. G 56, ed. Faulkes 1: 2.
8 *Hávamál* 104-110, *Eddukvæði I*, 343-4.
9 *Baldrs draumar* 11, *Eddukvæði I*, 448; Kormákr, *lausavísa* 3,4, *SkP* III, 277-9.
10 *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 18, ed. Faulkes 1: 24.
11 *Vǫluspá* K 3,1-2, *Eddukvæði I*, 292; H 3,1-2, *Eddukvæði I*, 308.

to, but later in the poem, when the giants and their allies will attack the gods from different directions as Ragnarǫk begins, their obvious motivation is the desire or obligation to take vengeance.[12]

Of course the Æsir usually have a powerful motivation for behaving as they do: keeping their agreement with the Giant Builder would have involved the loss of the sun and moon (probably representing the ordering of time) and of Freyja, the patroness of sexual fertility; the seduction of and theft from Gunnlǫð gained the gift of poetry for gods and human beings; and the seductions or rapes of Jǫrð, Rindr and Gríðr were necessary in order to bring about the births of Þórr, the defender of Ásgarðr, and of Váli and Víðarr, the avengers of Baldr and of Óðinn himself.

In the case of the Ymir myth, it seems that his body-parts were needed for the making of the natural world:

> Ór Ymis holdi
> var jǫrð um skǫpuð,
> en ór sveita sær,
> bjǫrg ór beinum,
> baðmr ór hári,
> en ór hausi himinn.
>
> From Ymir's flesh
> the earth was formed
> and from his blood/sweat the sea,
> rocks from the bones,
> trees from the hair,
> and from the skull the sky.
>
> En ór hans brám
> gerðu blíð regin
> Miðgarð manna sonum;
> en ór hans heila
> váru þau in harðmóðgu
> ský ǫll um skǫpuð.
>
> And from his brows
> the blessed powers
> made mid-earth for men's sons;
> and from his brains
> those foreboding
> clouds were all created.[13]

The name *Ymir* has been linked to *Yama*, the first man in Sanskrit mythology, and to Iranian *Yima*, a legendary king from whose seed the first man and woman originate, and who becomes mortal only as the result of telling a lie; its root may be the same as

[12] *Vǫluspá* K 48-51, *Eddukvæði I*, 303-4; H 42-44, *Eddukvæði I*, 314.

[13] *Grímnismál* 40-41, *Eddukvæði I*, 376, my translation; cf. also *Vafþrúðnismál* 21, *Eddukvæði I*, 359.

that of Latin *geminus* 'twin'.[14] However, this ancient etymology cannot have been evident to medieval Norse scholars and poets; if they regarded the name as meaningful at all, they may rather have linked it to the ON verb *ymja* 'to make a noise', for the idea of giants as noisy is also reflected in the names of Ymir's son *Aurgelmir* 'mud roarer' and his son and grandson *Þrúðgelmir* 'mighty roarer' and *Bergelmir* 'rock-/bear roarer',[15] while in *Gylfaginning* ch. 5 *Aurgelmir* is simply another name for Ymir himself.[16] There was clearly a well-known mythological tradition of Ymir as the most ancient of living beings and the ancestor of all giants, in which the gods killed him and made the cosmos out of his body.

But *Vafþrúðnismál* 31-33 also includes some bizarre details which may be derived from other traditions or speculations about the origins of giants. In reply to the question where Aurgelmir came from, Vafþrúðnir replies that drops of venom dripped out of Élivágar and grew to become a giant; 'all our kindred came from that, which is why all of it is always so ferocious'.[17] Óðinn then asks how a solitary giant could have offspring, and receives the reply that under the frost giant's hand a maiden and a male child grew together, and that one leg of the wise giant begot a six-headed son on the other. Some of the details of this rather grotesque account may be ancient, since they might account for the possible etymological connection with Latin *geminus* 'twin', but the two halves of st. 33 introduce an element of redundancy, and neither of them seems to relate to the Ymir tradition, or to the idea of a giant who grew out of drops of venom.

The myth of Ymir is more fully outlined in prose in chs. 5-8 of *Gylfaginning*,[18] which includes all *Vafþrúðnismál*'s material about the origins of giants but gives pride of place to the idea that the first giant grew out of drops, not of venom (*eitrdropar*) as in *Vafþrúðnismál*, but of something living, namely yeast (*kvikudropar*). This explanation may have seemed more 'scientific' to a thirteenth-century Christian view than the story of one leg having sex with the other. We are also firmly reminded of this Christian outlook when Gangleri asks whether Hár believes that the one he has just spoken about is a god, and receives the emphatic reply: "Fyr øngan mun játum vér hann guð. Hann var illr ok allir hans ættmenn." (Not at all do we acknowledge him to be a god. He was evil, and all his descendants.)[19]

Despite the mythological context, the moral framework implied here is the medieval Christian struggle between good and evil, with Ymir and his descendants on the side of the devil, whereas the eddic sources suggest a less dogmatic view in which the killing of Ymir was necessary for the creation of the cosmos but gave the giants

[14] von See, Klaus, la Farge and Schulz (2019), 1/II, 1054-5; Curtis (1993), 25-6. See also Aktor's contribution to this issue.

[15] *Vafþrúðnismál* 29, *Eddukvæði I*, 361; Machan (2008), 64.

[16] Ed. Faulkes 10, trans. Faulkes 10.

[17] *þar órar ættir / kómu allar saman, / því er þat æ allt til atalt.* These lines are omitted from the Codex Regius text of *Vafþrúðnismál* and added from *Gylfaginning* ch. 5 (cf. ed. Faulkes 10, trans. Faulkes 10).

[18] Ed. Faulkes 10-12, trans. Faulkes 10-12.

[19] *Gylfaginning* ch. 5, ed. Faulkes 10; trans. Faulkes 11.

good reason to seek vengeance and destroy the world that the gods have created out of the corpse of their ancestor.

The earth kenning *Ymis hold* 'Ymir's flesh' does not appear in the surviving corpus of skaldic poetry, which names Ymir only three times. An isolated couplet by Ormr barreyjarskáld[20] refers to a roaring sea as Ymir's blood, but this is such a small fragment that nothing remains of its context beyond a generalised association with noise and possibly with danger. Arnórr jarlaskáld claims at the end of his memorial poem in praise of Magnús the Good that there will never be a young king as generous as Magnús *und Ymis hausi* 'under Ymir's skull' (> SKY),[21] and this resembles the end of another of Arnórr's praise poems, where he says that the sun will turn black, the earth sink into the sea, the sky will split and the sea rage over the mountains (i.e. Ragnarǫk will come) before a better ruler than Þorfinnr will be born in Orkney.[22] Finally, in a late verse in *Friðþjófs saga* the hero tries to bid a permanent farewell to his friend King Hringr and to Queen Ingibjǫrg, whom Friðþjófr loves; he wishes that Hringr may live healthy and long as the foremost of rulers *undir Ymis hausi* 'under Ymir's skull'.[23]

Whereas the mentions of Ymir in eddic verse mostly have to do with ancient origins, at least two of the three skaldic references to him are concerned with future finality: Arnórr jarlaskáld asserts that a finer king than Magnús will never board a ship, and Friðþjófr emphasises that he intends his parting from King Hringr to be final. The reason for this link between past and future remains uncertain, but it may have resulted from the idea that Ragnarǫk, the downfall of the gods, will be the giants' revenge for the killing of Ymir. That killing is not condemned as morally wrong and it may have seemed essential, but it may also have suggested that a time will come when the actions of the gods will have to be paid for in violent confrontation.

'Mother Earth'

Before passing on to consider the myth which personifies the earth as the giantess Jǫrð it is necessary to touch on a much older source, which turns out, however, to be less helpful than one might have wished. This is the famous passage in Tacitus's *Germania* which identifies the Germanic goddess Nerthus with *Terra Mater*, 'Mother Earth':

> Nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehi populis arbitrantur.
>
> There is nothing noteworthy about them [a group of northern Germanic tribes] individually, except that collectively they worship Nerthus, or Mother Earth, and believe

[20] *SkP* III, 322; probably tenth or eleventh century.
[21] *Magnúsdrápa* 19,4, *SkP* II, 229; ca. 1047.
[22] *Þorfinnsdrápa* 24, *SkP* II, 258-9; 1064 or earlier.
[23] *Friðþjófs saga*, *lausavísa* 38,1-2, *SkP* VII, 237-8; possibly fourteenth century.

that she takes part in human affairs and rides among the peoples.[24]

This might seem to connect Jǫrð with the Vanir, since *Nerthus* is the same name as Njǫrðr, the oldest of the Vanir and father of Freyr and Freyja. But this link is probably illusory, since some key elements of Tacitus's description of Nerthus seem to be derived from his knowledge of the cult of Mater Magna 'the great mother' in Rome. For example, he says that the wagon that carried the idol of the goddess was pulled by heifers, as the black stone which represented Mater Magna was in Rome, but the remains of actual ceremonial wagons recovered from bog deposits at Dejbjerg (Jutland) and elsewhere are of very light construction and evidently designed to be pulled by a single horse.[25] The references to the Old Norse Jǫrð are of course all centuries later, but none of them suggest any connection with the Vanir, and Rindr and Jǫrð seem to be counted as goddesses in *Gylfaginning* ch. 36 (ed. Faulkes 30, trans. Faulkes 31) only because they are the mothers of Váli and Þórr. It seems most likely that Tacitus equated Nerthus with *Terra Mater* as an *interpretatio Romana*, a translation into terms that his Roman readers would find familiar.

The idea of 'Mother Earth' as the mother of all terrestrial life is widespread in medieval European literature. It may sometimes have been a dead metaphor, as it seems to be in St. Francis's *Canticle of the Sun*:

> Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra matre Terra,
> la quale ne sustenta et gouerna
> et produce diuersi fructi con coloriti fior et herba
>
> Praise be to you, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth
> who sustains and governs us
> and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.[26]

where the earth cannot, speaking literally, be both our mother and our sister. In fact, these lines form the end of a section of the poem which is organised according to the scientific theory of the four elements of air, fire, water and earth. Occasionally, we do encounter vivid re-imaginings of the idea of Mother Earth, like the speech of the Old Man in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, who says that he knocks on the ground with his staff, pleading with his mother to let him in (i.e. to let him die and be buried):

> 'And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
> I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
> And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!"'[27]

[24] Tacitus, *Germania* ch. 40; ed. Anderson (1938), trans. Rives 93 (1999); *Germania* was published by Tacitus in 98 AD.

[25] The Dejbjerg wagon probably dates from about the time of Christ; see also the Bronze-Age model sun chariot from Trundholm (Sjælland). Both are now in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen; for descriptions and images see https://en.natmus.dk/soegning/?q=dejbjerg and https://en.natmus.dk/soegning/?q=trundholm.

[26] Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Sun* 20-22, composed 1224: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle_of_the_Sun#Text_and_translation.

[27] Chaucer, *Pardoner's Tale*, *Canterbury Tales* C 729-31, c. 1390; Riverside Chaucer 199.

But even here the metaphorical image is of the earth as Mother Earth's residence rather than her body.

Jǫrð

The most obvious distinction between the Ymir references and the allusions to Jǫrð is that the first group look on the earth as the flesh of a dead male body, while the second usually treat 'her' as a living female. Two possible exceptions appear in consecutive *lausavísur* attributed to the tenth-century poet Eyvindr skáldaspillir, in which he complains that King Haraldr gráfeldi, unlike his generous predecessor Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, hides his gold in the earth (*í holdi móður mellu dolgs* 'in the flesh of the mother of the enemy of the giantess', or *í líki móður dolgs jǫtna* '(in) the body of the mother of the enemy of giants'.[28] Unfortunately for this study, both *hold* 'flesh' and *lík* 'form' or 'body' can be applied either to the living or to the dead, but that may not have mattered to Eyvindr, who is probably implying that in hiding his gold in the earth Haraldr is behaving more like a giant than like their divine opponent Þórr.[29]

The Prologue to *Snorra Edda* explains that worship of the earth as a living being came about after people had lost the tradition of the true God:

> Bjǫrg ok steina þýddu þeir á móti tǫnnum ok beinum kvikvenda. Af þessu skilðu þeir svá at jǫrðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nokkurum hætti, ok þat vissu þeir at hon var furðuliga gǫmul at aldartali ok máttug í eðli. Hon fœddi ǫll kvikvendi ok hon eignaðist allt þat er dó. Fyrir þá sǫk gáfu þeir henni nafn ok tǫlðu ættir sínar til hennar.
>
> Rocks and stones they thought of as equivalent to teeth and bones of living creatures. From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion, and they realised that it was enormously old in count of years and mighty in nature. It fed all creatures and took possession of everything that died. For this reason they gave it a name and traced their ancestry to it.[30]

But this looks more like a piece of learned Christian theorising than a description of the religious outlook of Old Norse poets who were either actually pre-Christian or making literary use of pre-Christian mythology. One clear difference between passages like those in other European traditions and the poetic references to Jǫrð is that the former regard the Earth as a generalised universal mother to all living beings, whereas in the Old Norse poetic sources Jǫrð is nearly always imagined as taking part in specific relationships with named individuals.

No explicit narrative of Óðinn's seduction of Jǫrð survives in Old Norse, but there is what looks like a distorted reflection of one in the Latin of Saxo grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*:

> Denique nauigationem ingressus, cum defecta uentis classe uicos alimenta petiturus

[28] Eyvindr skáldaspillir, *lausavísur* 8,7-8 and 9,6-8, *SkP* I, 226-9, attributed date ca. 965.

[29] Cf. *Þrymskviða* 8, where Þrymr hides Þórr's hammer eight leagues beneath the earth (*Eddukvæði I*, 423); *Skáldskaparmál* ch. G57 (ed. Faulkes I: 3), where Suttungr hides his daughter Gunnlǫð, the keeper of the mead of poetry, in the mountain Hnitbjǫrg.

[30] Ed. Faulkes 3, trans. Faulkes 1-2.

> irrumperet, a Grubbo quodam hospitaliter habitus tandemque filiæ eius connubio potitus Olauum uocabulo filium procreauit … Pellicem uero Iuritham eandemque Olaui matrem recepto in commilitium Anoni matrimonio copulauit, æquiori animo repudium lauram existimans, si tanto pugili maritata pro regio strenuum sortiretur amplexum.
>
> Then he (Fridlef) embarked on the journey, but when his fleet was becalmed he invaded some villages to try to find food, he was entertained hospitably by a man called Grubbi and eventually formed a connexion with his daughter, by whom he had a son, Olaf … Fridlef also joined in marriage his mistress Jurith, Olaf's mother, and Ani, whom he had made a companion-in-arms, since he judged that she would brook separation from him more cheerfully if she were wedded to so mighty a champion and obtained his strong embraces instead of the King's.[31]

Saxo replaces the gods, Óðinn and his son Þórr, with the heroic King Fridlevus and his son Olavus, but the name Iuritha is clearly derived from that of Jǫrð; that of her father Grubbi is probably related to ON *grybba* 'an ugly hag' (CV 218), a masculine form of which would be a suitable name for a giant; and the name of her eventual husband Ani is similar to that of An(n)ar or Ónarr, who is Jǫrð's father according to *Gylfaginning* ch. 10[32] and three skaldic poets (although one of them may have agreed with Saxo in regarding Ónarr as her husband rather than her father).[33] The shape of the story is also broadly the same as that implied by *Gylfaginning* and the skaldic references, in which Jǫrð bears a heroic son after being seduced and then abandoned by Óðinn. It is only in the final marriage of Juritha to one of the King's men that Saxo's story seems different, and that variant of the myth may also be implied by Guthormr sindri's *fljóð Ónars* 'Ó's lady'.

The word *jǫrð* appears quite frequently in eddic verse, usually as a common noun meaning 'the Earth' (e.g. *Vǫluspá* 3,5), 'the ground' (e.g. *Vǫluspá* 43,6), 'a particular territory' (e.g. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 36,5) or 'soil' (e.g. *Hávamál* 137,6). The only instance in eddic verse where it refers to Þórr's giantess mother is the reference to him as *Jarðar burr* 'child of Jǫrð' in *Þrymskviða* 1,7.[34] But the giantess Jǫrð can also be called *Fjǫrgyn* or *Hlóðyn*, and she appears three times under these names in Eddic poetry, all in references to her son Þórr.[35] The original meaning of the name *Fjǫrgyn* is uncertain, although it may be related to Gothic *fairguni* and OE *fyrgen-*, both meaning

[31] Saxo grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* VI.iv.10-11, ed. Friis-Jensen I, 376-78; trans. Fisher and Davidson I, 168, 169; c. 1200.

[32] Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning* ch. 10, ed. Faulkes 13; trans. Faulkes 13-14.

[33] Jǫrð is *fljóð Ónars, eiki grónu* 'Ó's lady, grown with oak' (Guthormr sindri, *Hákonardrápa* 5,2-3, *SkP* I, 163-4, attributed date before 965); *eingadóttir Ónars*, 'Ó.'s only daughter' (Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *Hákonardrápa* 7,3-4, *SkP* III, 223-4, attributed date 994 or earlier); *Anars mey* 'A.'s girl' (Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* 3,6, *SkP* II, 114-6, attributed date c. 1065).

[34] *Eddukvæði I*, 422.

[35] Þórr is called *Fjǫrgynjar burr* in *Vǫluspá (K)* 54,10 (and cf. *Vǫluspá (H)* 48,2 [*Eddukvæði I*, 315] and *Vǫluspá (SnE)* 25,2 [*Eddukvæði I*, 321]), and *mǫgr Hlóðynjar* in *Vǫluspá (K)* 54,2 (*Eddukvæði I*, 305); see also *Hárbarðsljóð* 56,7-8 (*Eddukvæði I*, 397): *þar mun Fjǫrgyn / hitta Þór son sinn* 'there Fjǫrgyn will meet Þórr, her son'.

'mountain',[36] but this derivation may not have been obvious to Old Norse speakers. The derivation of *Hlóðyn* (or perhaps *Hlǫðyn*) remains obscure, and both names were probably regarded simply as synonyms for *Jǫrð*.

In skaldic poetry, references to the mythological Jǫrð are more frequent: there are at least three instances where Þórr is referred to as her son (all in literal descriptions of Þórr's fights with giants or with the World Serpent attributed to pre-Christian poets),[37] and two where she is his mother.[38] However, these numbers are dwarfed by those in which Jǫrð is referred to in terms of her relationship with Óðinn, of which there are at least sixteen (and the large number of available Óðinn names makes it impossible to be sure that one has found them all).[39] This large number does not necessarily prove that Jǫrð's seduction and abandonment by Óðinn loomed larger in the minds of skaldic poets than the fact that she was Þórr's mother. It may be merely that the abundance of names for Óðinn gave poets a wide choice of possibilities for alliteration, and in fact an Óðinn name forms part of the alliteration in all but three of these contexts (those asterisked in note 30). On the other hand, there are also many surviving names of giants, and with a very few exceptions they are not used in kennings for Jǫrð or the earth,[40] so it may be that her relationship with Óðinn did seem mythologically more useful to most poets than the fact that she was a giantess.

[36] *AEW* 126.

[37] *sonr Jarðar* (Ǫlvir hnúfa, fragment on Þórr's fight with the Miðgarðsormr, *SkP* III, 491, attributed date ninth century); *sonr Jarðar* (Þjóðólfr of Hvin, *Haustlǫng* 14,6, *SkP* III, 453-4, on Þórr's fight with Hrungnir as depicted on a ceremonial shield, attributed date late ninth century); *konr Jarðar* (Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa* 16,2, *SkP* III, 111-2, on Þórr's 'handball' contest with the giant Geirrøðr, attributed date c. 985).

[38] Eyvindr skáldaspillir, *lausavísur* 8,7-8 and 9,6-8, *SkP* I, 226-9, see above.

[39] Those I have noted are, in approximate order of attributed dates: *Hergauts vina* ('Army-Gautr's girlfriend', Bragi, *Ragnarsdrápa* 5,8, *SkP* III, 35-6, c. 850); *Svǫlnis ekkja* ('S.'s widow/abandoned wife', Þjóðólfr of Hvin, *Haustlǫng* 15, *SkP* III, 455-6, late ninth century); *Svǫlnis Vár* ('S.'s goddess/woman', Eyvindr skáldaspillir, *lausavísa* 12,1, *SkP* I, 231, c. 965); **Þriðja man* ('Third's girl', Tindr, poem on Hákon jarl 8,2, *SkP* I, 351-3; c. 987); *biðkván Þriðja* ('woman asked for by Third', Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *Hákonardrápa* 5,4, *SkP* III, 219-20, c. 990); *brúðr Báleygs* ('Flaming Eye's bride', Hallfreðr, *Hákonardrápa* 8,1-2, *SkP* III, 224-5, c. 990); *Yggjar brúðr* ('The terrifier's bride', Eyjólfr dáðaskáld, *Bandadrápa* 3,5, *SkP* I, 460-1, c. 1010); *Óskvíf víg-Freys* ('Desired lady of the Freyr of slaughter [> of Óðinn]', Óttarr svarti, *Óláfsdrápa sœnska* 5,4, *SkP* III, 339-40, c. 1018); *Þundar beðja* ('Þ.'s bedfellow', Grettir, *Ævikviða* 7,2, Skj. I B, 288, supposedly early 11th century); **elja Rindar* ('Rindr's fellow concubine', Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* 3,3, *SkP* II, 114-6, c. 1065); *Þundar beðja* (*Noregs konungatal* 8,2, *SkP* II, 767, c. 1190; *Yggs man* ('The terrifier's girl', *Noregs konungatal* 23,4, *SkP* II, 776, c. 1190); **man Yggjar* (*Noregs konungatal* 42,6 *SkP* II, 788, c. 1190); *Hárs víf* ('The High One's lady'; *Noregs konungatal* 17,4, *SkP* II, 773, c. 1190); *drós Þrós* ('the potent one's lady', Haukr Valdísarson, *Íslendingadrápa* 17,7, *Skj.* I B, 543, possibly 13th century); *Svǫlnis beðja* ('S.'s bedfellow', Einar Gilsson, *Selkolluvísur* 20,3, *Skj.* II B, 439, 14th century).

[40] I have found only four exceptions: *fljóð Ónars, eiki grónu* ('Ó's lady, grown with oak', Guthormr sindri, *Hákonardrápa* 5,2-3, *SkP* I, 163-4, before 965); *Auðs systir* (Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *Hákonardrápa* 6,4, *SkP* III, 221-2); *eingadóttir Ónars* ('Ó.'s only daughter', Hallfreðr, *Hákonardrápa* 7,3-4, *SkP* III, 223-4); *Anars mey* ('A.'s girl', Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* 3,6, *SkP* II, 114-6, c. 1065).

The nouns applied to Jǫrð in these kennings vary in tone: some are respectful (*Vár* 'the name of a goddess', *víf* and *drós*, both 'lady') or imply a marriage between her and Óðinn (*ekkja* 'widow' – perhaps equivalent to 'abandoned wife', as in modern English 'grass widow' [see OED], *biðkván*, 'woman asked for in marriage' and *brúðr* 'bride'), while *man* 'girl' is probably neutral. But others suggest a more derogatory view of her as Óðinn's concubine (*vina*, 'girlfriend', *beðja* 'bedfellow', and probably *elja Rindar* 'Rindr's fellow concubine' in Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* 3,3, *SkP* II, 114-6).[41] The Óðinn-names used seem to fall roughly into three categories:

1. *Hár* 'High', *Báleygr* 'Flaming eye' and possibly *Þriðja* 'Third' focus on Óðinn as an awe-inspiring figure
2. *Óski* 'the desired one' and *Þrór*, 'sexually potent', probably allude to Óðinn's sexual conquests and the sons he has fathered as a result of them
3. *Hergautr* 'Army-Goth', *Yggr* 'Terrifier' and *Svǫlnir* (probably 'the One who makes (warriors) cold', see below)[42] look like names for Óðinn as a god of war

It may be worth noticing that while there are examples of respectful nouns for Jǫrð attached to all three types of Óðinn name, the more disrespectful *vina* and *beðja* only appear alongside Óðinn names of the war-god type; perhaps, therefore, these examples may include connotations of Jǫrð / the earth as a woman captured in war.

Three of the four earth kennings that refer to Jǫrð's giant relatives are addressed to a single (rather sinister) ruler, Hákon jarl (see note 40 above). They all refer to Jǫrð using the names of her father Ónarr (or Anarr) or her brother Auðr, and the account of her family in *Gylfaginning* ch. 10 includes both these relationships.[43] Following *Vafþrúðnismál* 25,3 and *Alvíssmál* 29,4-5,[44] it adds that *Nótt* 'Night' is the daughter of *Nǫrvi* (or more probably of *Nǫrr*), and its paragraph ends with the interesting idea that earth is the daughter of *Nótt* 'night', whose first husband was called *Naglfari* (probably 'traveller on Naglfar', the ship on which some of the giants will travel to Ragnarǫk according to *Vǫluspá K* 48,8 and *Gylfaginning* ch. 51);[45] I do not know of any poetic source for either of these statements.

[41] *elja* appears in verse only here and in a *þula* listing terms for 'woman' (*Þul* 2,7, *SkP* III, 993), although *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 19 (ed. p. 30) includes the corresponding statement that Frigg may be referred to as *elja* of Jǫrð, Rindr, Gunnlǫð or Gerðr. *AEW* 100 relates it to Finnish *aljo* 'whore' and Latin *alia* 'the other (woman)', and in Norwegian legal prose the compound *arinelja* 'hearth concubine' is used of women who are illegally living with a married man (see e.g. *Ældre Gulatingslov* 25, *NgL* I, 16). There are a few cases where *elja* refers to married women: in *Stjórn* ch. 212 (ed. Unger, 428) Peninah is the tormenting 'other wife' of Elkanah in the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (I Samuel 1,6); and in *Njáls saga* ch. 98 (ÍF 12, 251) Njáll's former mistress Hróðný refers to his wife Bergþóra when she tells Njáll to 'get up out of my *elja*'s bed'. However, both of these are in contexts of strong sexual resentment, so the emotional connotations of the word were probably always derogatory.

[42] See *AEW* 571-72.

[43] Ed. Faulkes 13, trans. Faulkes 13-14.

[44] *Eddukvæði I*, 360, 442.

[45] *Eddukvæði I*, 303; ed.Faulkes 50, trans. Faulkes 53.

Most of these names have sinister associations. *Nǫrr* has the same root as English 'narrow', but OE *nearu* could also mean 'oppression' or 'affliction', and the writer of *Gylfaginning* identifies him with Narfi, who is said in *Ynglingatal* 7 to be the brother of Hel and Fenrir and the son of Loki.[46] The name of Jǫrð's half-brother *Auðr* may be derived either from the feminine noun *auðr* 'fate', 'death' or from the adjective *auðr* 'desolate'. The name *Ánarr* leads *Gylfaginning* ch. 9 to claim that Jǫrð is the daughter of Óðinn as well as his wife,[47] but this is probably a misunderstanding: it looks as if *Gylfaginning* identifies *Ánarr* or *Ónarr* with *Annarr* 'Second' and assumes that this is an Óðinn name like *Þriði* 'Third'. If the first vowel is short, it may rather mean that Nótt's second husband is simply called 'Second', but the skaldic references make it seem more likely that the first vowel is long, and *Ánarr* also appears as a dwarf-name in *Vǫluspá K* 11,7.[48]

However, this sinister view of Jǫrð's origins does not usually seem to worry the skaldic poets, and their uses of her as a female representative of the land or the earth include a wide variety of poetic strategies. An example of astute political use of the mythological figure of Jǫrð can be seen in Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *Hákonardrápa*, four of whose eight surviving quatrains, all preserved separately in *Skáldskaparmál*,[49] refer to the myth of Jǫrð:

5. Sannyrðum spenr sverða
snarr þiggjandi viggjar
harrhaddaða byrjar
biðkvǫn und sik Þriðja.

With the true language of swords (= battle)
the keen receiver of the wind-steed (= ship)
lures under himself the pine-haired
asked-for wife of Þriði (=Jǫrð, the land).

6. Því hykk fleygjanda frakna
(ferr jǫrð und menþverri
ítran) eina at láta
Auðs systur mjǫk trauðan.

So I think the famous distributor (i.e. of wealth)
(land/Jǫrð comes under the glorious
necklace diminisher) very reluctant to leave
Auðr's splendid sister (=Jǫrð) alone.

7. Ráð lukusk, at sá síðan,
snjallráðr konungs spjalli
átti einga dóttur

[46] *SkP* I, 19-20, ÍF 26, 34.
[47] Ed. Faulkes 13, trans. Faulkes 13.
[48] *Eddukvæði I*, 294.
[49] See *Skáldskaparmál* vv. 10 (in ch. 2), 119 (in ch. 24), 121 (in ch. 24) and 291 (in ch. 53) ed. Faulkes (1998), I, pp. 8, 36, 36, 81, trans. Faulkes pp. 67, 90, 91, 130-1. See also *SkP* III, 219-25.

Ónars, viði gróna.

The match was later concluded by which that
bold-thinking confidant of a king (Hákon)
married the only daughter,
grown with woodland, of Ónarr (=Jǫrð).

8. Breiðleita gat brúði
Báleygs at sér teygða
stefnir stǫðvar Hrafna
stála ríkismálum.

He managed to entice to himself
Báleygr's (Óðinn's) broad-faced bride (Jǫrð),
- the guider of harbour horses (=Hákon jarl) -
with the politics of steel (=battle).
(Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *Hákonardrápa* 5-8, 995 or earlier)'

Prosaically stated, what Hallfreðr says in each of these stanzas is that Hákon jarl has succeeded in conquering Norway, but he portrays this conquest as a wooing leading to a marriage between the Jarl and the land, personified as Jǫrð; the imagery is of sincere wooing (st. 5) and enticement (st. 8), even if it is conducted in the language of swords and steel. It is also a union between sea (represented by Hákon's ship, as 'receiver of the wind-steed' [st. 5] and 'guider of harbour horses' [st. 8]) and land (Jǫrð). Both parties are romanticised – Hákon as warrior, seafarer and generous aristocrat, Jǫrð as 'pine-haired', 'grown with woodland' (the image again being that of a woman's long hair) and 'broad faced' (probably 'with beautiful features' combined with a more literal reference to the wide extent and probable fertility of the land). A consummated sexual seduction may be implied in the repeated statement that Hákon has lured Jǫrð *under* him, but this is no more than a suggestion, since a country can be said to be 'under' its ruler without any sexual implication being intended, and the mention of Jǫrð's brother and father (stt. 6, 7) and the words *biðkvǫn* 'woman asked for (in marriage)', *ráð* 'marriage agreement', *átti* 'married' and *brúðr* 'bride' show that the metaphor evokes what seemed according to the social mores of the time to be a correctly conducted wooing culminating in an honourable arranged marriage. This use of the myth is politically astute: the Norwegian farmers no doubt preferred the idea that Hákon's conquest had been a wooing rather than a rape. It may also have appealed to Hákon himself, whose devotion to the local goddess Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr seems to have been a kind of fertility worship which led him, according to Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*,[50] to abduct and sleep with the female relatives of his most important subjects in what looks like literal imitation of his sexual conquest of the land.

Þjóðólfr Árnórsson's *Sexstefja* (ca. 1065) describes a very different metaphorical sexual relationship between a ruler and Jǫrð.[51] Preserved in the historical work known

[50] Ch. 45, ÍF 26. 290-1.
[51] *SkP* II, 114-6.

as *Fagrskinna*,[52] it celebrates the exploits of Haraldr harðráði, and each of its first five stanzas praises Haraldr's victory over a different people while he was in command of the Varangian guard in the service of the emperor in Byzantium. St. 3 claims what is probably a fictional campaign against the king of 'Africa':

> Dolgljóss, hefir dási
> darrlátr staðit fjarri
> endr, es elju Rindar
> ómynda tók skyndir;
> vasat Affríka jǫfri
> Ánars mey fyr hánum
> haglfaldinni at halda
> hlýðisamt né lýðum.
>
> The spear-shy good-for-nothing
> remained standing
> far off long ago,
> when the wound-gleam's (= sword's) wielder
> took Rindr's rival (Jǫrð/the land) without a bride-price;
> the prince of the Africans could not
> keep Ánar's girl (Jǫrð/the land) from him
> with her hail headdress (=snow-covered mountains),
> nor could his forces.

Again, a sexual relationship between the ruler and Jǫrð (the land) is implied, but in this case the country represented by Jǫrð is merely one of a number of foreign lands that Haraldr is said to have conquered, and there is no question of a permanent 'marriage' between him and this particular Jǫrð. Instead, the king of the Africans is portrayed as a cowardly husband who stands by helplessly while Haraldr takes his wife *ómynda* 'without a bride-price' (i.e. without marrying her). Jǫrð is again seen as sexually attractive, and the image of snow-topped mountains being like a woman's headdress is an interesting variant on the idea of the forest as her hair, but she is merely one of at least two concubines ('Rindr's rival'). To a modern view this stanza is morally unattractive, and in figurative terms it seems to celebrate a rape. Þjóðólfr presumably did not disapprove of this, since his poem is in praise of Haraldr, but it is quite unlike the image of an honourable arranged marriage in *Hákonardrápa*.

Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlǫng* uses the myth of Jǫrð in a quite different way:

> Knáttu ǫll, en, Ullar
> endilǫg, fyr mági,
> grund var grápi hrundinn,
> ginnunga vé brinna,
> þá's hófregin hafrar
> hógreiðar framm drógu
> (seðr gekk Svǫlnis ekkja
> sundr) at Hrungnis fundi.

[52] Ch. 51, ÍF 29, 231-2.

Because of Ullr's stepfather (Þórr)
they all proceeded to burn,
the hawks' sanctuaries (skies),
the ground beneath was beaten with hail,
when the goats pulled forward
the temple-god's (Þórr's) ready chariot
(Svǫlnir's widow [Jǫrð] almost split asunder)
towards the meeting with Hrungnir.[53]

This is not a poem in praise of the exploits of a ruler, but one of thanks for the gift of a decorated ceremonial shield. Þjóðólfr describes the mythological motifs depicted on the shield, which include Þórr's fight with the giant Hrungnir; st. 15 lists the awesome burning skies and beating hail as the god drives in his goat-drawn chariot towards his meeting with the enormous giant. The climax of these portentous events is the parenthesis *seðr gekk Svǫlnis ekkja* / *sundr* 'Svǫlnir's widow almost split apart'. The Óðinn name *Svǫlnir* means literally 'the one who makes (someone or something) cold',[54] and as the name of a war-god it probably refers to the cold corpses of those killed in battle. Jǫrð is obviously like a widow in that Óðinn has abandoned her, and although the word *ekkja* 'widow' may remind us that Óðinn himself is also destined to fall in battle, the most obvious effect of the kenning in this context is to present Þórr as the suitably warlike son of his warlike father. But that depends on our also remembering that Jǫrð is not only the literal earth that is almost split apart by Þórr's ferocious progress towards the fight with Hrungnir, but also his mother, so that there is a suggestion of a childbirth in which the mother is almost split apart by the birth of her exceptionally large son, as also happens in ch. 2 of *Vǫlsunga saga* (*FSN* I, 6), where the queen dies after giving birth to Vǫlsungr after having been pregnant with him for six years.[55] This makes Þórr seem huge and impressive, but also unintentionally destructive; there may even be a suggestion of the horrific about it.

All the uses of the myth of Jǫrð that I have discussed so far present her figuratively, representing her either as a political state (Norway or 'Africa') or as the world in general, but I will end with a *helmingr* which also encapsulates a horrific image, but one in which she represents earth in the most literal sense. It is part of a memory fixed in the mind of the tenth-century poet Vǫlu-Steinn as he recalls the funeral of his son Ǫgmundr:

Mank, þats jǫrð við orða
endr myrk-Danar sendi
grœnnar grǫfnum munni
gein Hlóðynjar beina.

I still remember when the dark earth gaped
with excavated mouth for the sender of the words

[53] Þjóðólfr of Hvin, *Haustlǫng* 15 (attributed date c. 900), *SkP* III, 455-6; *Skáldskaparmál* v. 66 in ch. 17, ed. Faulkes I, p. 23, trans. Faulkes p. 80.

[54] *AEW* 571-2.

[55] *FSN* I, 6.

of the Dane of bones of green Hlǫðyn.[56]

Here the simultaneous consciousness of the literal earth (*jǫrð*) and of its female mythological equivalent, 'green Hlǫðyn', is quite explicit, although the latter is grammatically tied up in a complicated kenning whose decoded meaning is 'generous man'.[57] Nonetheless, this kenning is so complex that the images within it seem to acquire an independent life of their own, and one can contrast the picture of Jǫrð as a woman clad in green with her dark, gaping mouth which is the literal earth (*jǫrð*) of the open grave. The imagery is further complicated by the designation of rocks as the 'bones' of a giant, which seems to borrow a detail from the Ymir myth and apply it to Jǫrð as if she were also a corpse whose bones are rocks. The effect is to create an image of Jǫrð as a monstrous female, green-clad but dark-mouthed, related to the primeval giant and about to swallow the poet's son, which is in stark contrast to the positive decoded sense of the kenning as it applies to the dead man. In *The Pardoner's Tale* Chaucer shies away from the image of the earth swallowing her son, but Vǫlu-Steinn does not avoid it – he still remembers her gaping wide to devour his son. This traumatic memory is primarily that of a literal experience, but it may also reflect a universal human fear of being 'swallowed up' by a figure who represents both birth and death, and this image has continued to resonate in more recent folktale,[58] psychology[59] and art.[60]

One cannot assign a single definitive meaning to any myth, although it is possible to consider the ways in which it has been used by individual poets and prose writers. In the case of the two myths about the earth that I have discussed in this paper, some of these uses are clearly conscious and deliberate, like Hallfreðr's political pretence that Hákon jarl's conquest of parts of Norway that his family had never ruled was akin to an honourable marriage. Others, like the sense of unease in some of the references to Ymir, the pseudo-childbirth image in *Haustlǫng* and Vǫlu-Steinn's image of the gaping mouth of Jǫrð, probably reflect subconscious concerns. However, despite the fact that they are all preserved in manuscripts written by Christians, their very variety shows that some parts of the old mythology were, functionally speaking, still very much alive – and perhaps they still are today.

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[57] In *SkP* III, 429-30 Edith Marold unpacks this kenning as 'distributor of the words of the dark Dane of the bones of green Hlóðyn <earth> [ROCKS > GIANT > GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]', taking *myrk* 'dark' to relate to *Danar*, but the imagery seems more effective if it is linked to *jǫrð*, as suggested by Konráð Gíslason (1874), p. 28.

[58] See Aarne and Thompson (1961), no. 765: The Mother who Wants to Kill her Children (p. 265).

[59] See Jung (1956), 'the dual mother' (pp. 306-393).

[60] See e.g. Edvard Munch's painting 'The Dead Mother' (1893), Munchmuseet, Oslo.

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