

Eschatology and Fatalism in Norse Myth: The Impact of Pessimism on Nordic Culture

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Abstract

The article explores the unique eschatological themes in Norse Myth, where gods are portrayed as mortal beings bound by the same natural laws as humans. The Norse tales stressing the inevitable Ragnarok and the final destruction of the whole world reflect a worldview deeply rooted in fatalism. The article examines the fear and acceptance of death in Norse Myth, explaining how these themes influenced society and the people. Through the comparative study of key myths and cultural practices, the article offers insights into how the ancient Nordic people balanced the fear of devastation with awe and adoration for life's fleeting nature.

Keywords

Norse Mythology, Balder's Death, Eschatology, Ragnarok

1. Introduction

The year 2002 saw the first appearance of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* and the following-up craze it soon led to. Since then, such a craze of mythology from middle ages has lasted till today. The old is new again. The series of *Lord of Rings* has filmed three movies and all gained excellent rewards. Besides, in recent movie and television markets, the review, discovery and innovation of ancient mythology largely widened audiences' horizon.

A noticeable point is that the myths here are mostly not the ancient Greek fairies which Chinese people are more familiar with. Instead, more frequently they appeared to come from Norse Mythology. Therefore, this essay focuses on the features of Norse Myths and their traits. Distinct from other mythological cultures, Norse Myth presents a world where even gods are not immortal. This belief in the destined death of gods, alongside the gloomy fate, profoundly shaped the

pessimistic worldview and cultural practices of the ancient Nordic peoples. Central to these myths are the stories of Ragnarok and the repetitive stress on the World Tree, Yggdrasil. These tales reflect a unique fatalism, where gods, though mighty, are bound by the same natural laws as humans, living under the shadow of fire, death, and destruction. The article explores the eschatological themes in Norse Myth, delving into how the fear and acceptance of death influenced the culture, values, and outlook on life of the Nordic people. Through the mythological perspective, we gain insight into a society that both revered life and confronted the harsh realities of its inevitable end.

2. Eschatology

2.1. Death of Gods

One of the most distinctive features of North Myth is that the gods are not immortal, which, however, was a common trait of other myths—gods living on Greek Olympus and in Chinese Heaven (“Tianting” in Chinese version) all gain the ability of living forever. In Norse culture, however, gods were believed to be mighty but not almighty. They would also experience birth, growth, illness and death, just like human beings. In this way, the god stories frequently released some human distinction.

In Asgard, the center main building was Valhalla where the dead warriors’ souls would return after their sacrifices. Valhalla was heaven for those entitled to be the bravest on the battlefield. When warriors got killed, Odin sent Valkyries to kiss them so that their souls would be called up to come back to Valhalla, enjoying the supreme honor. Valkyries’ kisses therefore were regarded as a promise of heroes’ rebirth. Death of a hero was no longer fearful, but honorable because Odin would endow them with holy rites and renaissance. These legends affected Nordic people’s characters—they were courageous, unafraid of wars, and fully prepared to meet Odin, their chief god.

There was one more resounding event worth our deeper meditation on—Balder’s death. Balder was the god of light. His death would take Asgard’s prosperity away, so before anything happened the god himself had got some warning predictions about his catastrophe. This caused tremendous stir among gods and goddesses. Odin and Frigga (Balder’s mother) tried every method to stop the tragedy, like asking each god not to hurt him and begging for mercy from Hela, the goddess of Death. Nevertheless, Balder still died of a mistletoe, a little trick played by Loki, which sounded even like a joke. But the small joke brought in disastrous consequences—the god of light fell, with the peak time of Asgard gone away.

This fable to some extent warned that death is unavoidable, even to the mighty gods. It also demonstrated that gods were not all-purpose. Gods in North Myths were also threatened by the fear of death. It further formed the unique fatalism in the North region that no one could escape the determined fate. No god could get rid of destruction.

2.2. Ragnarok and Yggdrasil

The apocalyptic myth, Ragnarok, is typical of North Myths. It has also been spreading as a well-known North tale. It was believed that there was a determined destructive fate of nine realms, which was called Ragnarok. Long before the doomsday all species knew about the fate, and the gods and goddesses in Asgard had made every effort to escape it. Nevertheless, the fate was inevitable. During Ragnarok, “The sun grows black. The earth sinks into the sea. The bright stars vanish from the heavens. Steam surges up and the fire rages. Heat reaches high against heaven itself.”

This legend vividly depicted the horrifying images of the catastrophe. In a macroscopic sense, this legend has disclosed the same theory as Balder’s death as we mentioned above—the destruction was something that no one could get rid of. “The Baldr myth recounts how death first came into the world and was nearly defeated.” (Mills, 2024) Balder’s tale was seen as a foreshadowing of Ragnarok. If the god of light could not escape his predicted fall, then no one else could, no matter the gods or the monsters. A tragic air descended on North Myth even since the establishment of nine realms, and it extended the whole space and time. That was a kind of ideology of Nordic people—since gods were born to die, people themselves then no longer pursued immortality.

There was also a significant image in North Myth called the World Tree, also named Yggdrasil. From Edda, we learned that Yggdrasil extended itself into three different worlds of gods, giants, and the dead, while it had been constantly consumed. On top of Valhalla were goats eating leaves, while down in the dark world of Niflhel, there was a huge serpent called Nidhogg as well as other countless snakes consistently ripping and devouring the foliage of the tree. These consumptions predicted the collapse of the universe, inferring that Ragnarok was ineluctable.

However, here is another point worth noticing: besides the consuming power, the myth also demonstrated an eagle who sat high up the branches of Yggdrasil, closely watching every evil force threatening the tree. About the eagle, there prevail two assumptions. Some argue that it was also proof that doomsday was unavoidable, even though the tree was under the protection of the eagle. But another point contends that the battle between the eagle and the serpent resembled the balance in the universe: the order and the chaos, the goodness, and the evil, as well as the vitality and the death threats of the tree.

In summary, Ragnarok can be regarded as the representation of time in the North Myth universe, while Yggdrasil is that of space. The two consisted of the basic order in Norse mythology and structured a grand tragic atmosphere of the whole realm.

3. Traits of Vision of Death

3.1. Extreme Fear of Death

The ancient North region was mostly covered by old-growth forests with cruel

climates, surrounded by fierce oceans coming from melted glaciers, and threatened by volcanic chains due to geological movement. Plus, the region had experienced several cycles of ice ages and interglacial periods. All above produced an extreme fear of death among Nordic people.

This fear could be seen in many works. Taking the mentioned myths as an example, the depiction of Ragnarok was particularly vivid, not only referring to the battle between gods and devils but describing the environment at length: the sun, the earth, the stars, etc. Story-tellers were coincidentally or purposely admirably long on the doomsday, indicating their profound understanding towards death—no matter how wise and mighty these gods, even Odin, were, they finally came to die.

Here we concluded the first ideology of this nation: everything had its limitations, and extermination could never be avoided.

Such despair of individual fall and group extinction was also demonstrated in other literary works. In *Nibelungenlied*, narrative poetry prevalent in the Middle Ages, the majority of the masterpiece was occupied by death and ruin, by far surpassing love, religion, or morality.

Another feature of this ideology is that the fear had led to some positive cultural trends. Owing to the determinism, Nordic people were calmer and more comfortable about death itself than any other nation. As death is inevitable and equal, they did not estimate it as an end. In Nordic cultures, the ultimate pursuit was not toward immortality (as in China), but for rebirth and revival. This characteristic had been deeply branded into Viking's mind and hence went around in Germans.

For people in this area, death is endowed with some positive meanings. One typical instance was the Scorched-earth Policy the German army adopted during the later part of World War II: to destroy anything that was possibly useful for their enemies. This action showed the value orientation of Germans that the destruction was not tragic but another beginning of their success. This ideology is far colder and grimmer, but also more rational. This was a conspicuous influence the Vikings left on the descendants.

3.2. Life Blessings

In conjunction with the particular fear of death, Nordic people cherish life far more than other peoples, too. Because of the irreversible fate, life itself hence is entrusted with deeper understanding. It is natural to find more vivid depictions of people's feelings in North Myths, not only among the all-falling-apart hell but including the indulging debauchery banquet as well. If we say the former is the reflection of their dreadful nightmare, then the latter was the consequence of it that they devoted more of themselves to enjoying real life.

One of the typical examples is contenders in Valhalla. Soldiers went there after their sacrifices on the battlefield, receiving their rewards for bravery from All-Father Odin. Prose Edda recorded that every day these warriors would get dressed and set up their daily fight, going out for the field to pursue their honor, while

after the “sport” they would return to Valhalla and sit down to drink. Fabulous Valkyries accompanied them, and Odin himself was also willing to attend the everyday party and have fun with these heroes. The image of Valhalla was the ideal life Nordic people dreamt of. Pushed by the threats of death, they valued every second of living days and demonstrated all the power and energy of life.

Better still, the awareness of death endowed the divinity with profound aesthetic feelings. In the first stage, the above Valhalla revelry was held by All-Father Odin. He let the heroes continuously experience battles, death and rebirth, and treated them with the greatest wines and delicacies. The dual stimulations of war and alcohol filled up the lives of gods, disclosing Odin’s theory—the limited life needed maximized stimuli to strive for thrills and enjoyment.

On the other hand, as the chief god in North Myth, Odin had a relatively higher keen on Ragnarok and therefore owned deeper rationality of life. To explore the way to get rid of the dilemma, he made tremendous contributions: he once gave up his right eye in exchange for drinking magic well water, and even agreed to be hanged upside down and suffered unbearable thirst and wounds to pursue mysterious Ronan. During the whole myth, Odin was consistently seeking more knowledge and wisdom. Here is the second theory of Odin—life is limited, but the exploration of knowledge is endless.

4. Brightness

Most of the Nordic regions are located in a frigid zone with a rigid climate. The winter is long and bitterly cold, with monthly average temperature down to 0 degrees with huge year temperature differences. The precipitations are little but concentrated in summer. It is believed that Snorri’s Edda is an expression of environment-based narration (Mathias, 2021). However, thanks to the low temperature, the evaporation is weak, so the humidity is relatively high. There are polar nights in some areas, too.

Under such circumstances, Nordic people cherish brightness very much. Lights to them are something no less valuable than gold, which makes North Myths distinct from many other myths.

4.1. Mythology

From many images can we see these preferences toward lights. In North Myths, from the beginning of this universe, the whole world was in chaos, darkness, and frost. After the gods and goddesses were born, they built their hometown Asgard, and the great Valhalla, where the wall was built of gold spears and the roof of the silver shield. Asgard was filled up with lights, and that affected the representation of North Gods.

On the contrary, where the evil sides live was the other way around. Because of the complicated landform in the Scandinavian area, people there were tremendously afraid of frigidity and midnight. Thus, they depicted the northern region which was unsuitable for survival as the hometown of the trolls and giants. They

called the north region Jothuheim and Utgarde, and even where Hel lay. It was believed that a god would go to Hel after his death. Therefore, we came to the conclusion that these dark places were signs of unpleasant existences.

Nordic people believed that sunlight was closely connected to the appearances and growth of all species, so both trolls and giants who lived without lights were described as ugly, fearful, slow-moving, and retarded animals. Even the trickster Loki had to disguise his appearance as a god in order to make friends with Odin. These negative characters somehow shared the above common points, reflecting the legend-tellers' own attitudes toward the environment.

Another thing worth noticing is Ragnarok. As we mentioned before, Ragnarok was not an ending to them, but another beginning. In this sense, the inevitable disaster in North Myth was not an explosion like many other mythologies, but a lasting and catastrophic fire. The fire not only ruined all the goodness, but also buried the devils and monsters—the fire was not to bring darkness, but to shine the universe in this circle. Thus, the brightness here can also be understood as hope, as another starting point.

4.2. Customs

Many conventional customs in the northern region reflected their respect for brightness. It was believed to be immoral to kill someone when it was dark, even to kill a prisoner. In Thorstein saga, the great Viking carelessly let his enemy Ingjald go just because he was unwilling to execute him in darkness. Even the evil had to obey the tradition, which left our hero Thorstein a chance to escape. The Nordic people not only admired brightness, but on the other hand, they resented the reverse side—they hated darkness.

Such a theory later evolved into some higher levels. In the Nordic region, it was unacceptable to kill someone backing you. He could not see you, and then you were considered to be in shadow, which also belonged to darkness. Similarly, to kill someone asleep was also shameful. "DARKNESS and BLINDNESS are involved as a god, a weapon, and a result." (Ginevra, 2023) The only respectful way to win in this area was to face-to-face, relying on true strengths to beat your enemy. That was a typical sign of Vikings' spirit—to be straightforward and brave.

5. Conclusion

Due to the unique temperature and cultural factors, Norse myths present a universe where even the gods face an inevitable end. Such a perspective reflects a deeply ingrained fatalism, where the inevitability of death and destruction is a central theme.

Key myths, such as the death of Balder, and the catastrophic event of Ragnarok, are evident to illustrate the pervasive fatalistic undertones of Norse myths. The myth of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, represents the interconnectedness of life and death, symbolizing the constant tension between the forces of chaos and order within the universe. The core of the tragic worldview is that even the gods are not

immune to the ravages of time and fate; annihilation is inevitable. This led to a unique ethos among the Nordic peoples, marked by a valorization of bravery and honor in the face of death, as well as a profound appreciation for the transient nature of life.

In conclusion, the eschatological and fatalistic elements of Norse mythology played a crucial role in shaping the cultural outlook and the societal values of the ancient Nordic peoples. This worldview, characterized by a high acceptance of life's impermanence and the inevitability of destruction, profoundly impacted their societal norms and practices, contributing to a distinctive cultural identity rooted in both the fear and reverence of death.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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