

Contradictory cosmology in Old Norse myth and religion – but still a system?

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This paper presents a new understanding of the cosmology of pre-Christian Scandinavian myth. The sources appear to give contradictory information; for example, the Æsir are located in different places: at the centre of the world, in the west, in the east, under the sea, and in the sky; Hel is placed both in the underground and beyond the sea. In recent studies, this has led to the conclusion that there is no system. The author argues that there is, and that we misunderstand the *passages* to other worlds. The otherworld can be defined as ‘the world beyond what we can access by natural means’. The starting-point is the realm that is physically accessible to humans, forming a compressed, wide ‘bubble’ around him/her and the local community, since our natural range is very wide in the horizontal plane in all directions, but very short downwards and upwards. Still, people have always imagined that it is possible *supernaturally* to transcend this ‘bubble’ through certain passages. These passages point in many directions from the middle of the ‘bubble’, but the locations of the passages are not identical to the location(s) of the other world(s), the passages being interchangeable with each other and often lead to the same (kind of) land/place. The other worlds have interfaces with this world and with each other, but have no geographical location in relation to this world or to the others – they are simply ‘beyond the passages’, ‘on the other side’. Accordingly, the fundamental model may be construed as an opposition between ‘us’ and ‘the others’, with an ever-changing border. This system becomes clear when we examine not only the limited Old Norse sources, but consider them in the light of the abundant folktales and legends recorded in post-medieval times throughout Northern Europe.¹

1. A version of this manuscript was presented at the Fifteenth International Saga Conference in Århus, Denmark, in August 2012. It has been partly modified based on the feedback received there. Thanks to Andreas Nordberg for commenting on the manuscript, to Pär Sandin for translating it into English, and to Helen Leslie and Christian Etheridge for proofreading. The final version is in all ways my responsibility. The English names of the folktales in Asbjørnsen & Moe’s collection have been translated for this article.

1 Introduction and brief research overview

The conception of cosmology in Nordic pre-Christian religion and myth has been the subject of much discussion. The sources present a vague, somewhat contradictory picture, which has given rise to a number of different interpretations. Snorri claims that the earth was imagined to be disc-shaped, surrounded by ocean, with Jötunn settlements along the coasts, inside of which the region of men, Miðgarðr, was supposed to lie, fenced in with bastions against the Jötunnar. In the centre of this the region of gods, Ásgarðr, was finally situated (*Gylfaginning* 8–9 = *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 22 ff.²). Snorri locates the living quarters of the gods in the heavens, and Hel, the land of the dead, below the earth. At the centre of the earth stands Yggdrasill, the World tree. Scholarship on Nordic cosmology has by and large accepted this model. Handbooks and other scholarly literature (overview in Løkka 2010: 18 ff.) often use a horizontal model consisting of three concentric circles to describe Old Norse cosmology: in the middle, the World tree stands, surrounded by Ásgarðr, outside of which is the Miðgarðr of men, outside of that is Útgarðr, home of the Jötunnar. Steinsland (2005: 98 ff.), for instance, says: “Outside and around Ásgarðr the world of humans unfolds; this place is called Miðgarðr. As the name implies, the humans live ‘in the middle’; they are located between the gods and the Jötunnar. This position tells us something about Nordic man’s experience of life: the humans are creatures living in constant tension between different forces” (my translation). Many scholars supplement this horizontal ring model with a vertical axis stretching along the roots, stem and crown of Yggdrasill: the tree reaches from the underworld, up and through this world, and into the heavens. Various mythological creatures inhabit this ‘tree axis’. Some interpreters (e.g., Meletinskij 1973a, 1973b; Hastrup 1981, 1990) agree with Snorri that the gods have their place in the heavens, but this is rejected by Schjødt (1990: 40 ff.): he believes that this owes to Christian influence, stating that only Snorri arranges things in this way, not the poetic Edda and Skaldic poetry. Schjødt says that the older sources portray the heavens only as a path in which the gods travel, and not as a dwelling place. He therefore imagines that the vertical axis consists of the underworld and the earth’s surface only. Another controversial aspect

2. The chapter enumeration of Snorri’s *Edda* follows the edition of Finnur Jónsson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931.

of the cosmological standard model is the number of worlds. Most scholars follow the threefold partition, but structuralists (such as Meletinskij & Hastrup) consider Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr together as one region, so that the sum total amounts to two: Miðgarðr and Útgarðr. This world view will then fit the structuralist notion of human mentality organising the world in opposite pairs. The structuralists (foremost Gurevich 1969, Meletinskij 1973a, 1973b; Hastrup 1981, 1990) also connect the opposition between Miðgarðr and Útgarðr with the ‘inland’ and ‘outland’ on a farm, and with further general opposite pairs such as *in : out*; *known : unknown*; *centre : periphery*; etc. They accordingly link the mythological macrocosm to the microcosm of everyman.

This model has gained wide impact, especially in the field of archaeology, but has faced some opposition in recent years. Clunies Ross (1994: 51) believes that the notion of only one region outside of Miðgarðr does not agree with the source texts, which speak of several regions, often nine. She suggests that the evidence favours rather “a spatial conceptualism of a series of territories belonging to different classes of beings arranged like a series of concentric half-circles, the perimeter of each circle being imagined as a kind of protective rampart, a *garðr*.” Moreover, Clunies Ross observes that the term *Útgarðr* is hardly documented at all – it does not appear in poetry and only once in *Snorra Edda*, pertaining to the abode of the enigmatic, untypical Jötunn *Útgarða-Loki*. *Jötunheimar* is the name for the region of the Jötnar in the older sources.³

Brink (2004) goes further in this direction and rejects the structuralist, binary model altogether, finding reason to believe the cosmology to “have been more complex, with a larger number of spheres and poles than two” (Brink 2004: 297), and enumerating *Mannheimar* ‘abode of men’, *Þrúðheimr* ‘abode of powers(?)’, *Jötunheimar* ‘abode of giants’, *Muspellsheimr* ‘world of fire (farthest to the south)’; and so on (ibid.: 294). Brink concludes:

Really it is impossible to try to create a spatial logic out of the mythical rooms and places appearing in Snorri’s narrative. [...] It is not an improvement, though, to try to structuralise the bits and pieces found in the Poetic Edda into a world system. [...] The ancient Scandinavian world model was not a logically structured system, but – as so typical

3. Vikstrand (2006) discusses the implications of the names *Miðgarðr*, *Ásgarðr* and *Útgarðr*.

of oral culture – an unstructured, mutable number of rooms and abodes [...]. Innumerable illogicalities and apparently impossible repetitions appear. (Brink 2004: 296–97; my translation).

Wellendorf independently arrives at the same conclusion (Wellendorf 2006: 52, based on a lecture in 2004). Schjødt also says that “there were not any consistent ideas about the mythic geography”, although in a footnote, without expanding further upon the idea (1995: 23).

On the other hand, the recent dissertation of Løkka on ancient Nordic cosmology defends the bipartition. After a close reading of the most reliable corpus, the mythological Eddic poems, she concludes that they “spring from a cosmology characterized by a basic opposition between the world of gods and the world surrounding it, an opposition which primarily seems to concretize the categories of *in-* and *outside*” (regardless of whether the outside is explicitly called *Útgarðr* or not; Løkka 2010: 115; my translation). Løkka accordingly supports a “cosmological base model consisting of two primary components, *Ásgarðr* and its surroundings”, even if “it is obvious that the region outside of *Ásgarðr* [...] consists of a number of lesser regions”.

2 Contradictory cosmological information

I agree with Løkka, and believe that the base model she refers to can be induced from the primary sources (to which Snorri in this case can only belong in part, as he, like most modern scholars, is trying to *create* a system), – and that it must be the starting point of any attempt to understand the system of cosmology. However, one cannot escape the criticism of Clunies Ross, Brink and Wellendorf simply by admitting that the region outside of *Ásgarðr* consists of several sub-regions, it is still necessary to account in greater detail for how the various out-regions are located within the model. The other problem that Brink and Wellendorf have observed remains as well: the information in the sources concerning the location of the different out-regions in relation to each other seems to deviate far in all directions. I will supply a number of examples of this, before proposing a manner of understanding the apparent deviations as part of a logically coherent structure, only on a different level in relation to our normal thinking.

2.1 About Hel

Several sources state that Hel, the land of the dead, is located in the earth or below the earth, yet many and sometimes even the same sources claim that one may travel in a manner and direction *on* the earth in order to get there, while the stated manner and direction may vary to a considerable degree. *Grimnismál* 31 states that Hel lives⁴ under a root of the World tree, and *Völuspá* 43 says that Hel is *fyr jǫrð neðan* ‘below the earth’ (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 43, *Lokasenna* 63). In *Baldrs draumar* 2–3, Óðinn rides *niðr* to Hel, but on a *foldvegr* ‘ground road’, ‘road on the ground’, which undeniably looks like a direction *on* the earth. When Hermóðr is travelling to Hel to get Baldr out, Snorri states that the road to Hel goes *norðr ok niðr* ‘north and down’, saying nothing of any passage down into the earth. Instead he depicts a landscape through which Hermóðr rides, giving the impression of travel in the horizontal plane. This also appears in *Helreið Brynhildar* (prose preface and first strophe). Baldr, having been slain, also travels horizontally to Hel, but in a quite different manner. We are told that he covers the last distance on horseback, across a bridge over the river Gjöll, but the funeral consisted of him being deposited on a ship which is put out to sea and set on fire; and we are given the impression that a sea journey is the principal mode of transport (and in addition, passing through fire. *Gylfaginning* 33–34⁵). The same impression is given by the widespread pre-Christian custom of ship burial. In *Skírnismál* 27(–28), too, Hel seems to be located on the horizontal plane: the Jǫtunn girl Gerðr is threatened with being placed outside of the community, with her back against the world, ‘turned towards Hel’ (*snugga Heljar til*). Here Hel appears to be imagined as located immensely far away, outside of everything, similar to *at himins enda* (see below). There is nothing to suggest that Gerðr is to sit in the underworld when turned towards

4. *Hel* is the name both for a region and for its ruler.
5. The ‘complete’ story of Baldr is known only from Snorri, but many scholars (overview in Abram 2006) believe that his source value is high at this point, seeing that a number of alliterated sentences with three stave-rhymes in Snorri’s text suggests that he has followed a subsequently lost Eddic poem (e.g. *Vex viðarteinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhöll*; Lorenz 1984: 559–60 lists 8 examples). Abram (2006) rejects this view, arguing that alliteration appears also in prose that we know is not based on poetry. The appearance of alliteration as such in the prose of Snorri is not the argument, however; what suggests that he here builds on a lost poem is that this part of *Gylfaginning* differs from other parts of *Gylfaginning* by showing a distinctly higher frequency of this kind of triple rhyme stave sentences.

Hel; on the contrary she will sit in this manner on an ‘eagle’s tussock’ (*ara þúfu á*), i.e., in a high location.

2.2 *About the Jǫtnar*

The information about the location of the Jǫtnar is just as contradictory. In *Skírnismál* 10, Skírnir travels across ‘wet mountains’ and through a ‘flickering flame’ to reach the Jǫtunn Gymir. This may be in accordance with the model outlined by Snorri and accepted by most scholars: the Jǫtnar live in a mountainous region along the sea, surrounding Miðgarðr like a belt. However, *Skírnismál* 10 also states that Skírnir passes through darkness, and this is less apposite. Most sources are also at variance with Snorri in stating that the Jǫtnar live in the east (Løkka 2010: 152 ff.), or that Þórr travels to the east (*i austrveg*) in order to slay them (e.g., *Hárbarðsljóð* 23 and 29). If so, they do not live in a belt surrounding Miðgarðr. In addition, other quarters are mentioned: Snorri places the Jǫtnar in the east several times, but in *Gylfaginning* 1 and *Skáldskaparmál* 3 and 26 he says that *Jǫtunheimar* lie in the north, and in *Gylfaginning* 23 he states that the Jǫtunn girl Gerðr lives in the north. In *Skírnismál*, the sword of Freyr is presented to the Jǫtnar (cf. *Lokasenna* 42), and in *Völuspá* 52–53, Surtr comes from the south with ‘the sword of the gods’ (*sverð valtíva*), generally considered to be that same sword, in order to fight Freyr. Discordant with the common ‘belt model’ are also some sources in which the Jǫtnar appear to live *across* the sea. In *Völuspá* 51 the Jǫtnar arrive sailing from the east to the battle of Ragnarøk. In *Hárbarðsljóð* (especially strophe 56) it seems that the realm of the Jǫtnar is separated by a strait from that of gods and men. That the Jǫtnar may reach the realm of gods across the rainbow bridge Bifröst (more of which later) also suggests that they have to cross water, which is what bridges normally span. In *Hymiskviða* 5, Hymir, a typical Jǫtunn, lives east of *Élivágar* (*fyr austan Élivága*), which Snorri interprets as several rivers (*Gylfaginning* 5, based on *Vafþrúðnismál* 31), but which judging from the name (*-vágar*) ought to be ocean bays. Apparently these are situated a colossal distance away from the centre of the earth, for the strophe states that Hymir lives ‘east of the *Élivágar*, at heaven’s end’ (*fyr austan Élivága ... at himins enda*). So also in *Vafþrúðnismál* 37, which reports that the Jǫtunn Hræsvelgr sits in the form of an eagle at heaven’s end (*at himins enda*). Something similar is presented by *Þrymskviða*, in which it is only possible to reach the Jǫtunheimar through the air. Together, Þórr and

Loki travel in Þórr's chariot, but when Loki is to go by himself, he has to borrow the eagle's guise of Freyja in order to get there.

Other sources locate the Jǫtnar at the centre of the world: in *Hárbarðsljóð* 37–39, Þórr encounters Jǫtunn foes on *Hlésey* / *Læsø* in the Kattegat, which lies in the centre of south Scandinavia and accordingly of the Old Norse world (although in a remote part of this central location, see below). Several sources also state that the Jǫtunn *Hlér* / *Ægir* lives on this island (Simek 2006: 3, 193f.). In *Grímnismál* 31, we hear that the Jǫtnar are located even more centrally: they live under a root of the Yggdrasil and accordingly at the very centre of the earth. In this case, the position on the vertical axis is also different from what I have hitherto related, i.e., that the Jǫtnar live on the same horizontal plane as the gods, only far away. Other sources, too, locate the Jǫtnar below the earth. In *Skírnismál* 35, we learn that the Jǫtunn Hrímgímnir lives *fyr nágrindr neðan* 'below the corpses' gates', that is below Hel; some say that the Jǫtnar live inside mountains or below the earth (*Hárbarðsljóð* 23); even *Ægir* on the sandy island of *Læsø* is called a *bergbúi* 'mountain resident' (*Hymiskviða* 2. In skaldic kennings, Jǫtnar are often referred to by variants of this.) Nevertheless it is also often the case that the Jǫtnar are depicted as living on estates up in the daylight (e.g., *Skírnismál*, *Þrymskviða* 6, 23; *Lokasenna*, *Hymiskviða* 7). In the myth about Óðinn and the Jǫtunn girl Gunnlǫð, keeper of the Skaldic mead, both cases seem to apply at the same time. Gunnlǫð lives in the mountain Hnitbjörg, and Óðinn has a hard time getting to her, but finally manages to have a hole bored through the mountain, into which he crawls in the guise of a snake (*Gylfaginning* 5–6, *Hávamál* 106. In the *Hávamál* version it is apparent that the mead is located at some place under the ground; *nú upp kominn*, str. 107). But when Óðinn wants to get out, he does not have to crawl back the same way, but turns himself into an eagle and flies home, completely unhindered by the mountain, which would suggest that Gunnlǫð and her family lives above ground, in the daylight. In other myths, too, gods fly to the Jǫtnar – not only to their realm, but to individual estates, which are apparently situated above ground (e.g. *Þrymskviða*, *Gylfaginning* 3, *Skáldskaparmál* 27).

2.3 About the gods

It is hard to understand by looking at the sources where exactly the gods, as a whole, actually live. There are two questions that must be considered

here: the location of the gods in relation to other mythological creatures, and their location in relation to humans. The answer to the first question is usually ‘the opposite’ of whatever information is given regarding the other mythological creatures; for these are located with the gods as a starting point. The gods therefore live to the west, north or south of the Jǫtnar, and on the surface of the earth. But there is also explicit information that locates them next to Yggdrasill, i.e., in the centre of the world. It is Snorri in particular who makes this claim, but with support from *Grímnismál* 29, who states that the gods keep their assembly place (*þing*) by Yggdrasill. In *Lokasenna* 34, it nevertheless looks as if the gods live somewhere in the far east of the world: Loki refers to the myth that Njǫrðr was sent as a hostage from the Vanir to the Æsir (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 38–39, *Gylfaginning* 11), saying that Njǫrðr was *sendr austr héðan ... at goðum* ‘sent eastward from here to the gods’: ‘here’ is the home of Ægir, who is the host of the banquet in *Lokasenna*. This would imply that the Vanir live close to Ægir, and that the Æsir live east of both. There are also passages locating some of the gods below water: Frigg lives in *Fensalir* ‘the Fen Halls’ (but yet keeps a falcon’s guise in order to fly ..., *Skáldskaparmál* 27, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 105, 110). *Grímnismál* 7 speaks of a goddess Sága (understood by some as Frigg under another name) who lives in *Søkkvabekkr* ‘the Sunken Bench’ and sits there drinking with Óðinn as the waves roll above them (*svalar knegu / unnir yfir glymja*). The home of Heimdallr is situated in the opposite direction. He lives at *Himinbjörg* ‘heaven’s mountain’, guarding the rainbow bridge against the Jǫtnar (*Grímnismál* 13, cf. 44, *Fáfnismál* 15, *Gylfaginning* 6, 7, 8, 15). This would seem to imply that seen from the direction of the Jǫtnar, Heimdallr lives on a mountain that reaches up into heaven (and the gods ‘behind’ Heimdallr on the same height?).

We are allowed to learn more of the location of the gods in relation to men, but as far as I can tell it is only Snorri who claims that men live in a belt surrounding the gods, so that this information may be likely to owe much to his own attempt to create a logically coherent world model. According to *Grímnismál* 31, men live beneath one of the roots of the Yggdrasill, with the implication that the gods live upon the earth, i.e., above men. But in *Hárbarðsljóð* 56 the gods live far from men on the horizontal plane, and the same condition is implied by a piece of information from the Arab traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who describes the funeral of a Swedish Viking chief on the Volga in the tenth century. A slave girl is

to follow the chief into the afterworld, and before she is slain, she is raised above something that looks like a door frame, through which she can see the chief seated in paradise.⁶ As it is a chieftain, one may surmise that by ‘paradise’, Valhøll is intended. Accordingly it is possible to see this realm by supernatural means, apparently from an aspect in the horizontal plane. Saxo and several Old Norse sources state or imply that water has to be crossed, in the horizontal plane, in order to get to Valhøll. Saxo describes a horse ride from the realm of men, across the ocean to the home of Óðinn (Fisher & Ellis Davidson 1979–80, book 1, 6, and 7–69). In the prose introduction to *Grímnismál*, two young brothers go astray on a fishing expedition, landing on a coast where they are welcomed by Óðinn and his wife Frigg, disguised as peasants. In a prose section of *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, the body of Sinfjötli is forded across a fjord – and out of the story – by a mysterious boatman. Presumably he goes to Valhøll, for Sinfjötli was a great hero; and the skaldic poem *Eiríksmál* from the tenth century mentions him among the residents there (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 B I: 165). Further examples are given in Heide (2011: 61–62). The information given in *Lokasenna* 34 about the hostage Njörðr means that the Æsir live (far?) to the east of Læsø, an island in the world of men, in the Kattegat. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 49, on the other hand, Valhøll is ‘west of Heaven’s bridge’ (*fyr vestan / vindhjálms brúar*), and the (human) hero Helgi arrives there by ‘the flight road’ (*flugstigr*).

There is also a variant of the scenario that places the gods in *heaven*. Snorri locates all the gods there, but this must be owing to Christian influence, as Schjødt has noted. Nevertheless, it seems that the location in the heavens was one of several variants also in pre-Christian times, as Mundal (1991: 233, 242, note 4), Abram (2003: 55), and Wellendorf (2006) observe. These scholars present a number of examples, the most obvious being strophe 21 of Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Sonatorrek* from the tenth century (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 BI: 34 ff.): Óðinn has *lifted* the deceased son of Egill to the realm of the gods (...*mank.../es upp of hóf/i Goðheim / Gauta spjalli*). I may add that this is in accordance with the scenario where the gods can be reached on Heaven’s mountain across the rainbow bridge. *Friggerocken*, literally ‘Frigg’s distaff’, the name of the

6. Montgomery 2000: 17–18. The door frame scenario finds a parallel in *Völsa þáttr*, as observed by Steinsland and Vogt (1981); a woman there asks to be raised above a door frame, apparently in order to be able to see into the otherworld.

constellation Orion's belt in Swedish folk tradition, also implies that the gods may be located in the heavens: the name suggests that Frigg was imagined to be sitting up there spinning.⁷ As far as I am aware, the name *Friggerocken* is not attested before the 19th century,⁸ but it ought to stem from pre-Christian times, as it is difficult to imagine why Christians would invent such a name.⁹ Instead one would expect *Marirocken*, which is in fact attested (Sweden: Rietz 1862–67: 165, Zealand: Grimm 1953 [1876–78]: 251), but likely to be a younger variant, as there are many examples of *Maria* substituting pre-Christian mythological women's names (e.g., Lid 1946: 18, *norn* > *Maria*; Grimm 1953 [1876–78]: 251). The place and municipality Tysnes in Sunnhordland (Western Norway) also appears to give witness to pre-Christian gods connected to heaven. The name means 'the headland of the gods' or 'the headland of Týr'. (In addition to *Týr*, the god's name, Old Norse language had a masculine noun *týr* meaning 'god', pl. *tívar*; see Marteinn H. Sigurðsson 2009.) The place is characterized by a special relation to the sun at each of the four solar turning points of the year. A few minutes after the sun has set behind the mountains in each evening of either equinox or solstice, it makes an 'encore', as it were, appearing again above the mountain, and shines for a few minutes right upon the Tysnes headland. The effect is most spectacular at the winter solstice, as the sun then appears in a narrow gorge not far from the headland, so that the sun during these few minutes sends a precise beam of light right upon a large, man-made stone pile (Norwegian *røys*) situated here, while the rest of the area lies in shadow. Inside the stone pile, archaeologists have found a chamber with clear sacrificial remains from the late Iron Age (Rage & Agdestein 2007, Heide 2013 footnote 3). We have reason to believe that this 'heavenly contact' is the reason for both the location of the sacrificial stone pile and for the sacral name attached to the place (– and the unique concentration of place names bearing witness to pre-Christian cult in the area surrounding the headland; see Olsen 1905 and Heide 2013.)

But in a passage from Saxo, the (human) hero Hadingus visits something that looks like Valhøll after following an old woman down through

7. In old days *rokk(r)* was not a term for a spinning wheel, as in Modern Scandinavian, but a distaff; see Heide (2006: 235 ff. The spinning wheel did not appear until the late middle ages.)
8. Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–68 I: 237, 305, II: 124; Rietz 1862–67: 165.
9. Compare the Medieval Christian attempts to root out pagan astronomy, see McCluskey 1990.

the floor near the hearth (Fisher & Ellis Davidson 1979–80, book 1, 8, 14). Some Old Norse sources also indicate that Óðinn may be reached by travelling down through water (Heide 2011: 67–68); some place names and cult places indicate the same thing. The small lake *Odensjön* in Scania, named after Óðinn, if indeed the name is ancient,¹⁰ is one example. The water of the lake is gathered in a circular, crater-like hole in the flat landscape; the lake lacks inflows, and in old times it was believed to be bottomless (*Nordisk familjebok* 1888: 101). This has a similar character to the north Sami *sáiva* ponds (cf., e.g., *Pakasaivo* in northern Finland), which are typically small and without inflow, believed to be bottomless and containing passageways to another pond rather than the visible one (Wiklund 1916, Bäckman 1975, Mebius 2003: 82). There is reason to believe that this passage was considered in the past to be a link to the otherworld – the noaidis (Sami shamans) most often used the guise of a fish as transport when they went to the land of the dead;¹¹ they were said to ‘dive’ when going there (Olsen 1910 [etter 1715]: 45, cf. 46; Heide 2006: 232–33), and in southern Sami regions, *sáiva* – in the form *saavje* (*aajmoe*) – means ‘ancestral mountain’ of a similar type to the old Icelandic *Helgafell* (*Eyrbyggja saga*: 19, *Landnámabók*: 125) and *Kaldbakshorn* (*Njáls saga*: 46). Judging from its name and from the examples of the *sáiva* ponds, there is reason to believe that *Odensjön* was imagined to be a passageway to Óðinn / Valhöll. The argument is corroborated by *sáiva* / *saavje* being to all appearances a loan from Proto-Scandinavian *saiwa*-R ‘lake’ (the etymological ancestor of *sea* / *sjö* / *See*; Weisweiler 1940), which indicates that the ideas of such water passageways existed in old Germanic tradition. This is confusing in that one is able to travel through water to a mountain visible on earth, but this is also the case in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga*: both Þorsteinn Þorskabítr and Svanr of

10. Stig Isaksson (1958: 29) believes that the name *Odensjön* is a learned invention from early modern age, but if so, we ought to have heard of an older name. We have not, and Isaksson does not seem to have conclusive arguments. His strongest is that *d*- in *Oden*- is pronounced, while it is not in Scanian legends about Odin (*Odens jakt*). But there are many examples of peculiarities in the pronunciation of place names, and very many have had their pronunciation influenced by writing, without being for this reason learned constructions. There are many examples that an inter-vowel *d* because of spelling pronunciation is pronounced in ancient names (e.g. *Eide* in numerous places in Norway), in dialects that normally skip the *d* in this position.
11. Skanke 1945 [1728–31]: 191–92, 195, cf. Solander 1910 [1726]: 26; cf. Heide 2006: 136 and Skanke 1945 [1728–31]: 195, Jens Kildal 1945 [1730 and later]: 140, Sigvard Kildal 1807 [1730–t.?): 456.

Svanshóll *drown* before they can enter the mountain. Accordingly this does not run counter to what I have referred to previously so much as it simply presents further examples of confusing information. The lake *Tissø* on western Zealand (Holmberg 1986) also has traits in common with the *sáiva*-waters and Odensjön. The lake is only a metre deep along the edges, but about 250 metres from the shore it deepens spectacularly into a kettle of 10–12 metres' depth. This is highly unusual in this region, and it is the closest thing that western Zealand, flat as a pancake and poor in lakes, has to 'bottomless' water with a steep pit depth. This makes it reasonable to assume that this is some of the reason why the lake was named 'Týr's lake' or 'the gods' lake'. The many deposits of sacrifices from Merovingian and Viking ages found in the lake (outside a king's or chieftains's building complex; Jørgensen 1998, 2002, 2008) also suggest that contact with the gods was sought through the water. (Unfortunately, Odensjön has not been subject to archaeological investigation as far as I am aware.) The name *Goðeyjar* 'the god islands' in Salten (Northern Norway; Rygh 1905: 209) also indicates that people in pre-Christian times imagined that contact with the gods was possible down through water. The islands, which seem to have been a bastion of paganism during the conversion of Norway (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 1941: 324 ff., *Rognvalds þátrr ok Rauðs*; Perkins 2001), are situated in Saltstraumen, the strongest tidal current in the world, and there is reason to believe that this is the reason for the name that associates the island with the gods (and perhaps especially the many powerful whirlpools that occur in the current; whirlpools have been regarded as passageways to the otherworld in several traditions¹²).

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but I have included more examples of contradictions than previous scholars, as I have been intentionally looking for such examples, whereas the preferred method has elsewhere usually been to search out information that may as far as possible be arranged into a coherent pattern. In any case, the above presentation ought to show that it is futile to try to arrange all the cosmological information found in the different sources into a coherent picture, for they blatantly contradict each other.

12. Holmberg [Harva] 1927: 78–79, Patch 1970: 21, Anttonen 1992: 36, Nordberg 2003: 39; cf. 'sucked down' in some German tales, Siuts 1911: 54–55.

2.4 *In folk traditions and other religions*

This is true not only for (the sources to) Old Norse religion, but also for European folk traditions. Irish and Welsh traditions, as attested from early Viking age to the present time, exhibit beliefs in something somewhat similar to Valhöll: a rich, lush land of happiness inhabited by a race similar to the Fairy people, which can be reached by heroes and princes after death. On this realm, MacKillop says:

[The] accounts are frequently ambiguous and contradictory about the place of the Otherworld. It may be unplaceable on human maps, or it may be identified with a remote island in or under the western seas. Sometimes an enterprising sailor reaching that remote island may enter the Otherworld. Or another adventurer may enter the Otherworld by travelling on land to enter mounds or dwelling-places of the divine; [...] caves, especially the famous one at Cruachain, are often thought to be routes to the Otherworld in all Celtic traditions, and so are some lakes. (MacKillop 1998: 359–60, similarly in Jones 1930: 52, Macculloch 1964: 49 ff., 114 ff.; cf. Byberg 1970: 181, 198, Carey 2000: 116.)

A similar diversity of possibilities is probably to be found in most folk traditions, all over the world. Slavic folk tradition exhibits notions about the dead person having to travel long distances here on earth in order to reach the land of the dead; or over a rainbow or across the Milky Way; or up a steep mountain of iron or glass; or sailing after death to a land beyond the ocean, sometimes imagined to be situated at the place where the sun sets, sometimes being simply an island; the land of the dead may also be situated beneath a certain lake, or the dead person may be thought to inhabit his grave (Ralston 1872: 107 ff.). Siuts has demonstrated this kind of variation in German folktales (1911: 19–58): in order to get to ‘das Jenseits’ – the troll or the land of the dead, in many cases – one has to travel far, and farther than far, maybe through several kingdoms and over the sea or a big river, or a bridge; or one has to get across a silver mountain or a golden mountain on the way, or across an endless plain, or through a large, thick, dark forest; in some cases one has to go to the sun or the moon; or into a hole or shaft in the earth, or a well; far, far down; or into a hole or through a passageway leaning in a vertical direction or leading up into the daylight in the otherworld (ibid: 53); or up onto a

mountain, preferably one that reaches into the sky and is steep and smooth as glass; or a mountain may open, so that one may enter it. This kind of variation is found also in Norwegian folktales (e.g. Asbjørnsen & Moe 1965 II: 7 ff., 248 ff., 322 ff.; III: 55 ff.), and in other ethnic religions, and partly also in the large book religions (cf. Widengren 1953: 340 ff.). In ancient Greek religion one imagined lands of the dead situated both in the underworld (Hades) and on a western island or islands of happiness (for the chosen), not unlike that imagined by the insular Celts, or in or at the grave (Knight 1958: 227). In Christianity, Hell has sometimes been imagined to be situated beyond a large ocean bay and/or below the land of the living (Long 2005: 9454). In Jewish tradition, the mythological purgatory Gehenna seems to be located both under the sea and/or under the ground; or at the foot of a mountain range (Long 2005: 9453 f.).

2.5 *Contradictions also within tales*

An important point is that the inconsistent variation of locations for the otherworld is not only found in the tradition at large. Such variation is found also within the scope of a single tale. We have seen above how Baldr travels across the sea to reach Hel, even while Hermóðr not long afterwards can ride there, and even while it is said to lie *níðr*. We have seen how Óðinn, having had to bore through the mountain to get into Gunnlǫð's abode, can fly out of it, unhindered by the mountain. Such inconsistent combinations may be found also in folk traditions recorded in later times. The last mentioned inconsistency finds a parallel in the Norwegian folktale "The king's three daughters in the Blue Mountain" (Asbjørnsen & Moe 1965 II: 7 ff.). Here the troll abducts the king's daughters through the air, but in order to release them, the hero has to lower himself down through a deep shaft (from the top of a hill, beyond wastelands and a river guarded by a bear and a lion). When he has slain the troll, he raises the king's daughters up through the shaft, but as he is betrayed he has to find another way for himself, and may finally fly home on the back of a giant eagle, unhindered by the earth and the hill that he lowered himself down through. In the north Norwegian legend "The fairies (*tuftefolket*) at Sandflesa", the fairies (literally *tuftefolket* 'the toft people', the people who live under the house foundation), arrive sailing to a small island in the sea, but they cannot return by ship, since the hero has thrown steel over their craft. Instead they enter a hole in the rock on

the island, and apparently reach home this way instead (Asbjørnsen & Moe 1965 II: 52). In a Sami tale from Nesseby in eastern Finnmark it is possible to sail, in the horizontal plane, through fog to the sea Fairies, but when their realm is reached, a (dry) land underneath the sea is encountered (Christiansen 1920: 19, cf. Heide 2011). In the German folktale “Das Wasser des Lebens” (Grimm 1843 II: 71–78) it is possible without trouble to ride – very far – to the supernatural part of the world, but in order to get back again, one has to take a ship across the sea. In another German folktale, ‘Frau Holle’ (Grimm 1843 I: 155–58), the stepdaughter reaches the otherworld by jumping down into a well, but returns in the horizontal plane through a magical door.

3 A proposal for a solution

3.1 Considerations about the ‘enlarged corpus’

When I adduce folk traditions recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as evidence, this is not because I believe that these traditions have remained unchanged during the eight to fourteen centuries that have passed since the advent of Christianity. There is reason to believe that most folk traditions have changed very much during this period. Nevertheless, there is also reason to believe that quite a number of basic notions stood the test of time well, in particular those that did not directly contradict Christian doctrine. To these belong the cosmological notions in tales where the plot alternates between where humans live and where trolls, fairies and other supernatural creatures live (i.e., folktales / Märchen, and in part legends / Sagen). In some cases we have confirmation that such cosmological notions have been very stable, when legends known from later years have been recorded in writing in the Middle Ages, such as for instance the *gandreið* episode in *Þorsteins þátrr Þójar-magns*¹³ (more of which below). That cosmological notions have remained relatively consistent can also be observed by comparing folktales and legends with the mythological texts, because they contain the same cosmological motifs, possibilities of variation, and internal contradictions. (Myths are in fact a kind of folk tradition, and the old Norse religion

13. Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni 1827: 176–78; cf. Jón Árnason 1958–61 [1862–64] I: 101 ff., III: 162 ff. and Heide 2006: 222 ff. The elf queen legend is so clearly revised in the þátrr that the later tradition can hardly be based on this version, *ibid.*

was folklore, cf., e.g., Gunnell 2006, but we are not used to think about it that way, as Christianity has introduced the idea of an antagonistic relationship between authorized religion and folk belief.) Accordingly it ought to be possible to supplement to some degree the scarce Old Norse corpus of texts with cosmological information found in folktales and legends. Here some might object that it is unnecessary to resort to folk traditions recorded as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as basically the same system appears in legends from the high middle ages, especially in ‘post-classical’ sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas, sometimes also in the ‘classical’ sagas of Icelanders: supernatural creatures are found in *all kinds* of remote locations, often at night on distant islands (e.g., *Ketils saga hængs*: 172–73) or on a mountain in poor visibility (e.g., *Bárðar saga*: 133 ff.), or in *all kinds* of remote lands (cf. Røthe 2010, Lassen 2011, Arngrímur Vídalín 2012). But regarding cosmology, none of the saga genres is as close to the myths as are folktales. Only in folktales, myths and legends, the relation between ‘us’ and ‘the others’ is the principal motif, with the action *based upon* an oscillation across the border between this and the other world. But the encounters with the other-world in the sagas are also in accordance with the pattern found in folktales and legends from later times. If we then examine this ‘enlarged corpus’ of myths, and especially the folktales and legends, it will be even more apparent that it is impossible to tweak and adjust the forthcoming information so as to arrive at a logically coherent system of the type that has been construed, with gods in one region of the cosmos, Jǫtnar in another, men in a third and so on. This kind of system is not extant.

3.2 *What is the mythological landscape?*

Nevertheless I have reached the conclusion that there is some kind of system, since the ‘enlarged corpus’ almost insists upon it being equal whether one or another manner or road is to be travelled in order to reach the fairy people, the land of the dead, or whatever place one is going to. I believe that the reason that we do not discern this system is because we misunderstand it, or mistake the level of abstraction at which it is construed. Melitinskij (1973a: 56, 50) has used a somewhat similar approach to the problem when claiming that the horizontal and vertical axes in the Eddic texts are parallel systems of code which may be converted into each other, so that for instance the travels of Óðinn along horizontal and vertical vectors in search of secret knowledge may be regarded as variants

of the same kind of passage (similarly in, e.g., Drobin 1991: 113 ff. and Nordberg 2003: 76 f.). Nevertheless this does not solve the problem of the sources often giving opposite directions to each other, for instance locating the gods in the west and in the east, in the centre of the world by the World tree as well as at the end of the Rainbow bridge in the far west. It looks to me as if we are mistaken as to the very fabric of the mythological landscape.

Men do not live in the same realm as the gods, as the structuralists have supposed. We do not live in the ordinary sense in the mythological world at all, as most scholars seem to take for granted (an exception is Nordberg 2003, e.g. p. 149; there may be others). Certainly some of the Eddic poems (*Völuspá* 4, *Hárbarðsljóð* 23) do appear to use *Miðgarðr* as a designation of a place that is inhabited by both gods and men. This is understandable since we and the gods are as it were ‘allied’ and share the same purpose in the cosmos. But when we look at matters more closely, a different picture emerges: *Grímnismál* 41 presents *Miðgarðr* as a place created for humans only, and the mythology supplies different place names (overview in Løkka 2010: 147), and accordingly an entirely different geography than this world. Only exceptionally do men appear there, and then always when some kind of threshold has been crossed which is normally impassable for humans – as in *Gylfaginning* 26, where Þórr drives with his goats [across the sky] and arrives to a human family, or when human heroes die and pass over water or other in a mystical manner in order to reach *Valhöll* (Heide 2011: 61). It is also only exceptionally that gods appear in stories about men, and then only at places or times that are removed from the normal: long, long ago, as in *Rígsþula*, perhaps *Grímnismál*, and the legendary sagas (see Røthe 2010 and Lassen 2011: 152 ff.); beyond the ocean, as in the prose preface to *Grímnismál*; on *Læsø*, a small, scarcely populated island far out in the sea (see Heide 2011: 62, 67, 72, 76 ff.); or on a headland jutting out into the ocean in a gale, as in *Reginismál* 15–19. Normally, the gods in this world are represented only by cult places sacred to them and/or carrying their names.¹⁴ Last but not least, the most dependable sources erect barriers impassable to men between the realms of gods and humans: the latter may live below the earth under the World tree (*Grímnismál* 31) or at walking distances that are discouragingly long for gods (*Hárbarðsljóð* 56). The gods and the

14. In a manner, Þórr is in the human realm when he is creating thunder, but at the same time he is in the heavens; that is not in the human realm at all.

other mythological creatures do not live in this world; they live in what scholars usually refer to as ‘the otherworld’. Here, in something that all scholars are fully aware of, but which I believe not has been taken to its full consequences bearing on the question of cosmology, the key may lie to the understanding of the mythological world view.

3.3 *What is the otherworld?*

‘The otherworld’ I shall define as ‘the world beyond that which is reachable by natural means’. The starting point is the flat, very wide ‘bubble’ that constitutes the radius of action for each man and society before modern technology. In the horizontal plane one may reach far in all directions around the circle, but down into the earth, rock or water, and up into the air, only a very short distance. Nevertheless, people in all times have imagined that these are not absolute limits; there is something beyond them, but only supernatural powers and creatures and sorcerers may reach there, or from there to here, i.e., pass over the outer borders of our natural reach. These supernatural travellers cannot pass in any manner or at any place they might wish, but only through those methods and passageways that we have seen in our attempt to extract cosmological information from the mythological texts and folk traditions. Supernaturally, one may reach the otherworld or contact its powers in several ways, often combined with each other:

- Through the air, flying or walking over a rainbow, usually far and often into heaven.
- Over the ocean.
- Travelling to the end of the world, often to the place of the sun rising (east) or setting (west, in the ocean).
- Through darkness.
- Over high mountains.
- Down into the earth or into mountains, often through natural ‘openings’, like clefts or holes or door-like passageways in the rock.
- Into special mounds or mountains.
- Down into (special) lakes, brooks, wells, or bog holes.
- Traveling up or down along the World tree or something that symbolizes it.
- Through sacrifice or ritual at unusual landscape formations – (special) groves, waterfalls, mountains, glacial erratics, caves and crags,

round ponds without inflows, strong currents, small islands in the sea, etc. (cf. von Sydow 1926, Eskeröd 1947) – or at artificial counterparts to such formations: grave mounds, grave cairns (*røysar*), altars or cult houses situated on or near similar formations or at central locations in human society.

3.4 *Passageways*

To sum up: to the gods, Jøtnar or fairies, it is possible to reach by travelling west over the ocean, to the sunrise in the east, towards heaven, down into a mountain or the earth, or down into water (of a special kind). But this does not mean that the realm of gods or that of the Jøtnar ‘is’ in any one of these places, nor in fact that the information is contradictory. What has been tended to be understood as the location of these other realms, seems to me simply to be passageways there, since it is possible to reach the same realm through several passages, and since they may be exchanged with each other, as in the myth of Gunnlōð, where Óðinn has to crawl in through the mountain, but may fly home.

That these constitute passageways and not the otherworld as such may also be seen in that the realm at which one arrives on the other side does not have the same character as the passageway, being instead similar to this world, only with richer qualities, such as greener grass, fatter cows, greater wealth (and often inverted from this world to a greater or lesser degree; Holmberg [Harva] 1925, Wiklund 1916: 55–57, Heide 2011). This is especially obvious in folk tradition;¹⁵ whereas in the Norse mythological texts unfortunately few descriptions are to be found of the places in the otherworld. One exception is the realm of elves in *Þorsteins þátrr bō-jarmagns* (see footnote 13 here), taken to be from the end of the thirteenth century but with much content that is ‘considerably older’ (Power 1993: 675–76).¹⁶ The hero and his companion jump into a river and pass down through some sort of fog, until it brightens and they arrive at a place where a waterfall falls from some cliffs, and they see a large settlement and a castle. Inside, a party is going on where people are drinking wine from silver cups; in the high seat sit what appear to be a king and queen; and everything looks as if it is made of gold and silver. It becomes clear

15. E.g., Jones 1930: 58 ff., Grimm 1843 I: 155–158 (“Frau Holle”), Straubergs 1957: 84.

16. Two parchment mss. (+ younger paper mss) are extant, one dating from ca. 1450–75 (AM 343, 4to) and one from around 1550 (AM 510, 4to. Cf. *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. Registre* 1989: 452–53).

that at least one of the party guests is a fairy (*huldumaðr*), and since the episode is a Legendary saga version of the Elf queen legends attested on Iceland from the early nineteenth century (see footnote 13), it is apparent that this is the realm of the elves. Perhaps this description is only ‘semi-mythological’, since the elves keep a marginal position in Old Norse mythology, but the mythological texts that tell of gods and Jǫtnar supply many enough clues to allow the conclusion that the pattern is the same as in folk tradition and *Þorsteins þáttr*: Óðinn and Sága ‘drink happily’ beneath the waves, so they too apparently sit in a dry world below a water passageway, not in a world of water that mixes with the mead in their cups. In *Vǫluspá* 43, Hel is not *in* the earth, but ‘below the earth’ (*fyr jörð neðan*), which probably means ‘on the other side of a passageway leading down through the earth (or through water?)’.¹⁷ Beyond the aerial passageway, the Jǫtunn Prymr keeps a farm, as everyone else, but there is obviously more wealth in his world; for his cows have golden horns, and he has gold in abundance (*Þrymskviða* 23). We are not told how things are constituted at Gunnlǫð’s place beyond the passageway through the mountain or air, except that the wealth obviously is greater there than in this world, since she sits on a golden chair (*Hávamál* 105).

3.5 Only two realms in focus at the time

I believe that to a great degree there is a basis for a model in which the realms of gods, men and Jǫtnar circularly surround each other with the World tree in the middle, corresponding on a cosmological level to the *tuntre* (‘courtyard tree’), *gardstun* (‘courtyard’), *innmarka* (‘inland’) and *utmarka* (‘outland’) on a farm (Modern Norwegian forms). To be sure, the placement of men as a belt in-between the gods and the Jǫtnar ought to be rejected as a construction of Snorri, but the rest seems to be correct. In Iron Age agricultural society, most people inhabited a personal environment that often had a farmyard tree in the middle, surrounded by

17. The general system is not contradicted by the controversy regarding whether Hel specifically is ‘a place with richer qualities’ or rather the opposite. Snorri describes it as a pale, cheerless place (*Gylfaginning* 34), but in this, Christian influence quite certainly can be discerned. *Baldur’s draumar* presents another vision of Hel; one where a banquet is prepared and the floors and benches are littered with rings and gold (str. 6). In Snorri’s version of the Baldr myth (*Gylfaginning* 49), Hel also seems like an ordinarily pleasant realm (cf. Nordberg 2003: 72). In a 10th-century skaldic stanza by Egil Skallagrímsson, Hel is called *Heljar hásalar*, ‘the tall hall of Hel’ (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 B I: 43 [lausavise 5], Bergsveinn Birgisson 2001: 5), i.e., something desirable.

houses and the cultivated land, outside of which lay the areas that were uncultivated but still resourceful, housing powers over which one did not exercise control. This is in accordance with the world of gods, having the World tree in the middle, surrounded by the homesteads of the gods, outside of which are all ‘the others’, whom the gods do not fully control, but which represent important resources and potential. This is the model at which Løkka 2010 arrives, entirely correctly in my opinion – except that I believe that it stands in need of revision in one important aspect: The other realms do not keep a (mytho-)geographical location in relation to the realm of gods, nor in relation to each other. Each realm – for instance Hel and the individual Jötunn homesteads – is instead closed within itself, like a ‘bubble’ (of the flat type I have described above). The different realms are not situated in one or another direction from other ‘bubbles’, nor inside others, but they have interfaces with, and passageways to, other ‘bubbles’. They are not located in any geographical coordinates, but simply ‘beyond the passageways’. It may seem strange that such a system could work without the realms having a geographical location in relation to each other, but we must remember that mythological geography is always tied to myths, and subordinate to narratives. Then it works, since in the myths, only two realms are in focus at the time, or to be more precise: the realm which one occupies and another one, which is accordingly ‘the other’ seen from the point of view of the first one. As one enters the other, *that* realm becomes ‘the present realm’, from which one may again enter ‘the other’, that is yet another world. Here are some examples: in *Gylfaginning* 26, Þórr drives with his he-goats [across the sky] and arrives at the farm of a human family, spending the night there, before travelling *austr* across the great ocean to the realms of the Jötnar. In *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* (a prose tale transmitted with the poetic Edda), the human hero Sinfjötli dies. It seems that he then comes to the gods after having crossed the sea (Heide 2011: 61), and there he may have witnessed the dead Baldr being sent across the sea to Hel. Before this, in *Baldurs draumar*, Óðinn wants to find out if it is true that Baldr is going to die, and for this purpose rides on the magical horse Sleipnir, making the *foldvegr* rumble, *niðr* to Hel, the land of the dead. But he does not stop there; he takes another just as large a step, riding east before the entrance, coming to the grave of a *völva*, whom he raises from death with spells and interrogates about the future. – Njǫrðr is a Vanr, having come a long time ago from the Vanir to the Æsir (*Vafþrúðnismál* 38–39,

Lokasenna 34, *Gylfaginning* 11), and he follows the gods along to a banquet at Ægir's place. The home of Ægir in the sea is then in the otherworld as seen from the realm of gods, Ásgarðr; but Ásgarðr beyond the sea in the east is in the otherworld as seen from the realm of the Vanir. The *völva* in the grave is in the otherworld seen from Hel; Hel is in the otherworld seen from Valhøll (to which Sinfjötli arrives and from which Baldr departs); and Valhøll is in the otherworld seen from the realm of men (from which Sinfjötli has departed). Similarly the human family that Þórr visits is in the otherworld as seen from the realm of gods; and the Jǫtnar beyond the sea is in the otherworld as seen from the human family. Which realm is 'this' and which 'the other', and which realm borders on which, are perpetually shifting; and if one attempts to place all the realms in relation to each other, the result will only be confusion. But as long as the focus remains on each separate narrative, featuring one interworldly relation at the time, no problem will ensue.

3.6 *The passageways are re-used*

One thing that clearly indicates a system of the suggested kind is that regardless of where one is and regardless of what version of the otherworld one is to reach, the same methods or passageways are always used in order to reach the target. Here are some examples: Læsø / Hlésey is a small island in the middle of the Kattegat, and accordingly a place to which notions of the otherworld have often been tied in Norse literature as well as in later folk traditions (see, e.g., Byberg 1970 & Heide 2011). In folk tradition the fairies and similar creatures often live on similar islands; and in *Egils saga einhenda* 1954 (365) it looks as if the hero Ásmundr comes to Óðinn after jumping into the sea at Læsø (Heide 2011: 67, 76 ff.). But it is not only to humans that Læsø is a place of contact with the otherworld; this is the case also for the gods. Þórr meets some Jǫtunn crones on Læsø (*Hárbarðsljóð* 37–39), and the gods meet the sea Jǫtunn Ægir / Hlér there (from where the name Hlésey comes. *Lokasenna*, *Grimnismál* 45, cf. Simek 2006: 193–94, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 78). The geographical quarters are also 'recycled': we have just seen that both the realm of gods and that of the Jǫtnar are situated beyond the sea in the east; that is, seen from the home of Ægir and from the human family at which Þórr stayed. The home of Ægir and the realm of the Vanir ought then, seen from the home of the Æsir, to be located to the west over the sea (above 2.2, cf. Ólafur Briem 1985 I: 325), but in *Helgakviða Hund-*

ingsbana II 49, the hero reaches *Valhöll* travelling to the far west (across the sea? See above, 2.3). The direction down is ‘recycled’ in the same manner: generally it is possible to go down to the elves (footnote 13), or the fairies, or dwarfs, and occasionally *Jotnar*, but *Grimnismál* 31 locates the humans in this direction, seen from the gods; and in Saxo, the (human) hero Hadingus goes down into the ground next to the hearth in a house and reaches something that looks like *Valhöll* (Fisher & Ellis Davidson 1979–80, book 1, 8, 14). The many cult places that are connected to special geographical formations (like *Tissø*) also suggest that one imagined that the gods could be contacted in a downward direction. Not least often, people have attempted to get into contact with gods and other powers through springs and wells; and the same method was successfully applied by Óðinn – that is, a god – when he sacrificed one of his eyes to a *Jotunn* who is associated with the well beneath the World tree (*Völuspá* 27–28, Simek 2006: 281–82). Simultaneously there are myths that locate some of the gods themselves under water (above, 2.3). The motif ‘immensely far away’ is also often ‘recycled’; that passageway you can always travel, no matter what version of the otherworld you want to go to. Also, ‘death’ and the ‘Land of the dead’ are often ‘recycled’: from there Óðinn attains secret knowledge, like sorcerers (McKinnell 2005: 200 ff.), – only he cannot get it from that land of the dead which he himself inhabits (i.e. *Valhöll*); he goes instead to *Hel*; he raises corpses from the grave; and he speaks with bodies dangling from the gallows (above 3.5; *Hávamál* 157, *Ynglinga saga* 18). Óðinn accordingly uses the same points of contact with the land of the dead as are available to humans with special abilities. This holds true in general: the gods use the same points of contact with the otherworld as humans do, even in cases where it appears to make no sense for the gods: for they have cult places and cult buildings (*Völuspá* 7, *Grimnismál* 13 and 16, probably *Hyndluljóð* 1); and in *Lokasenna*, it seems that the gods attend the same kind of inviolable, cultic symposia as the humans use in their religious cult – even while the gods do not have gods.¹⁸

This last phenomenon, and the fact that no matter in which world one is situated, the other worlds and the passageways to them are always placed in the same directions and at the same kind of geographical for-

18. In *Vafþrúðnismál* 38, the many *hof* and *hørgar* over which *Njörðr* is said to be master may be located in the human world, but in the mentioned Eddic stanzas, it is clear that the cult place / building is located among the gods.

mations in the landscape, can only be explained to stem from an ethnocentric generalization from the point of view of the 'bubble' each man and society is surrounded by, as described above. As we humans – if we possess special abilities – may reach the otherworld by travelling west on the ocean (to the place where the sun sets?), east to heaven's end (where the sun rises?), heavenward, over faraway mountains, down through openings in the ground; or contact the otherworld through sacrifice on cult locations, etc., so has to be the case also among the others – the gods, elves, Jǫtnar, etc. The other realms are generalized from the present one, with the same points (or types of points) of contact with other realms as are imagined to exist in the present realm.¹⁹

3.7 *The fundamental model of understanding*

This ought not to be particularly controversial in itself. But it implies that one did not imagine a unity of any greater kind than that relative to the individual 'bubble'; there was no notion of a unity of several 'bubbles', but only of something else, of similar kind, *outside the limits* of the present 'bubble'. It would then be a misinterpretation to attempt to unite the different realms into one complex model.

But if one is able to go in all directions from the gods to the other realms, surely they must nevertheless – collectively – be situated as a 'bubble' outside of the 'god bubble', so that all realms may yet be described with one single model? Regarded from the realm of the gods, being then 'this world', this appears to be the case. But seen from the realm of the Jǫtnar, or from any one of the other realms, the opposite relationship is likely to be true: the realm of the gods is situated *around* each one of these realms, as one may go there in any direction from where one is situated at present, through the same kind of passageways that we have seen time and again. On the other hand, it would seem to misrepresent matters to say that all of the other realms *collectively* lie wrapped around the realm of the gods, for only *one of them at the time* does so. When it appears that the other realms collectively lie wrapped around the realm of the gods, or this world, that is because there is only one set of passageways out of this world.

Accordingly, I reject the analysis of Meletinskij, according to which the gods live in heaven and the Jǫtnar in the horizontal periphery, which

19. This may be compared with the way nomadic Sami created a ritual microcosm surrounding each new camp (Rydving 2004: 100–101).

is the same as the underworld, where Hel is situated. Nor do I think that Schjødt's analysis is on target (1990), which states that the gods are located at the centre of the earth's surface, Hel in the underworld, and the Jǫtnar in the horizontal periphery. To associate the gods exclusively with heaven must be attributed to Christian influences upon Snorri, as Schjødt has made clear, even if this location was probably one of several variants also in pre-Christian times. But to place the gods in an opposite relation to the underworld is also problematic since Frigg lives in *Fensalir* and Sága in *Sökkvabekkr*, Ásmundr comes to Óðinn by jumping into the sea at Læsø, humans throw sacrifices to *tívar* or *Týr* down into lake Tissø, and so on. (Also one cannot claim that the humans are situated in an opposite relation to the underworld, when *Grímnismál* 31 locates us in this very region.) It is not even necessarily the case that Hel is always located in the underworld (as Schjødt claims, 1990: 47); there are examples of Hel being simply in a place terribly far away, in the horizontal plane (II above). Also, an outright opposition between heaven and the Jǫtnar does not seem to exist. It appears to be unproblematic that the eyes of the Jǫtunn Tjatse become stars (*Hárbarðsljóð* 19, *Skáldskaparmál* 4, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 81), and the vault of heaven was created from the skull of the primordial Jǫtunn Ýmir (*Gylfaginning* 5). Christianity has probably influenced us both directly and indirectly to see a model with the gods' enemies in the underworld and the gods situated upon high. Snorri is an important source, and he claims this to be so; and from our Christian background we are used to seeing it this way.

To me, it looks as if two 'universal directions' are essential to Norse religious cosmology: *away* in the direction of the otherworld, from a centre that is dependent on the circumstances, and *back*. This may be heavily reminiscent of Meletinskij, who claims that *down* and *away* horizontally mean the same thing, each in its own system of code, and that they may be 'translated' into each other. But there are two important distinctions. The first is that *away* may be in any direction, not just down or horizontally, but up as well, and not just in the case of the gods. I mentioned an example of this in section 2.1 above: in *Skírnismál* 27, the Jǫtunn girl Gerðr is threatened with having to sit outside of society, with her back on the world, 'turned towards Hel' – on an eagle's tussock, that is on a steep, preferably high, inaccessible crest. We find another example in *Fjolsvinismál*, where the Óðinn-hero Svipdagr has travelled long roads, arriving at a Jǫtunn homestead where the desired Jǫtunn maid resides

on the top of a mountain (str. 35–36 & 49).²⁰ This is one of the manners in which she is located out of reach; trolls in the folktales are often both terribly far away *and* situated on a high mountain (above, 2.4). Probably this is the idea also behind Heimdallr's residence, *Himinbjörg*, which we considered above in part 2.3 That Loki hides at the top of a mountain in *Gylfaginning* 36, and that Þjazi and after him his daughter Skaði reside on mountains, should probably also be understood in the same way, as well as perhaps the general tendency of the Jötunnar to reside in mountainous regions. The other difference from Meletinskij's model is that the centre does not have to be Ásgarðr; the location of the centre is dependent on the myth and situation. When the gods attend a banquet at the Jötunn Ægir's place in *Lokasenna*; or Helgi is to go to Valhöll from his wife in the realm of men (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 49); or people in the human realm make sacrifices to the gods or send one of their own deceased to them, the centre is located at Ægir's or somewhere in the human realm, and the *realm of the gods* is instead 'beyond the passageways': in the far east (*Lokasenna* 34), or beyond Heaven's bridge in the west (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 49), or beyond the ocean (human boat funeral), or in the underworld (human cultic practice: the names *Fensalir* and *Søkkvabekkr* accordingly make better sense seen from the point of view of humans worshipping Frigg and Sága than seen from the realm of the gods). The relevant directions are accordingly not away from an absolute centre and back again, but away from and back to the centre as defined by the present circumstances, the starting point being, as sketched above, the 'bubble' surrounding each human being and society stretching in all directions as far a distance as ordinary human reach allows. But the same goes for any realm, not just the world of men. When it looks like other beings than gods properly live at the end of the world and in the underground, this is probably because most myths are regarded from the point of view of the realm of gods. If they had offered a perspective *towards* the realm of the gods, from any one of the other realms, there is all reason to believe that it would be the realm of gods that would most often have appeared to be situated at the end of the world or in the underground.²¹

20. The idea that *Fjölsvinnsmál* is a late pastiche is on close examination not firmly based on textual evidence: see Heide 1997.

21. The reason for supernatural powers being more often connected with the underground, through passageways such as springs, caves, clefts, special mounds, etc., than

This proposed model of understanding may be relevant to the interpretation of sacrificial findings and graves. If the underlying idea is that several passageways exist out of the ‘bubble’ and into the otherworld, and accordingly several methods may be used in order to get there or in contact with the powers there, no essential difference needs to be read into for instance cremation, corporeal burial, horse and ship burials, or various kinds of sacrifices. At least the different kinds of cultic practice need not imply different cosmological beliefs. Certainly the point of view that I propose does not imply that the choice between a sacrifice in water, on a mound, at a mountain or of another kind, or the choice between a burial in one or the other manner is necessarily irrelevant. That the various kinds of sacrificial or funereal methods are variations on the same theme – i.e., manners of reaching, or getting in contact with, the otherworld – does not rule out the possibility that some powers were particularly connected to certain passageways (e.g. female powers to springs, wells and water, due to elementary symbolism), or that the choice of funereal method may have some significance. For instance, one may surmise that men earning their living from the sea would prefer a ship burial or boat funeral, whereas horsemen would choose a horse burial. This would be an ‘extended parallel’ to the practice that women were usually buried with women’s tools and men with men’s tools and weapons; and a direct parallel to the artefacts found in graves that answer to the dead person’s profession, for instance in the grave of a smith the particular tools of his trade. If this is accordingly the case, i.e., that the choice of a certain ritual is not necessarily significant, but may be so, a parallel can be observed in the periphrastic practice of skaldic poetry. Normally it makes no difference if a ship is called a ‘deer of sail’ or a ‘reindeer of the waves’, but in certain instances the poet can be shown to have chosen a *heiti* or *kenning* in order to add particular connotations.

with the sky, may be that a great part of the background of the idea of the otherworld are mirror images in water, which show us just that, another world beneath us: see Holmberg [Harva] 1925 and Heide 2011. Other locations to which supernatural powers are especially connected are also inciting to the imagination or attract attention, but in different ways: the place where the sun rises or sets; the rainbow; far away, tall mountains, etc.

4 Problems and paradoxes

4.1 Otherworld creatures on the border

In my opinion, there are strong arguments that support the model of understanding outlined here, but this does not mean that it is entirely unproblematic. Something that may look as an objection is that it is not always clear that the creatures in the otherworld inhabit universes of their own, as for instance the elves do in *Þorsteins þáttr þójar­magns*. This is especially the case when mounds or mountains that resemble peat houses, or caves, are not depicted as passageways to a different universe beyond them, but quite simply as homesteads,²² with outdoor areas belonging to the present world (the world of humans). This scenario we find in for instance *Bergbúa þáttr* and also regarding the Elf hill in *Kormáks saga* (288). Elves live inside it (*hóll ... er álfar búa í*), and people from the human settlement that lies adjacent to it sacrifice an ox to the hill, painting it red with the blood of the sacrifice for the purpose of healing a man. Often such mounds or hills are situated outside of human settlements, though, in an undefined or unknown location far into the forest or high in the mountains. This is the case in for instance *Göngu-Hrólfss saga* (199–200), *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* (351–54) and *Þorsteins þáttr þójar­magns* (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni*: 176–78), and also concerning the Dwarf stone in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (12–13). In the folktales as well, several trolls do actually live in cliffs or mountains (e.g. Asbjørnsen & Moe 1965 II: 233, 39; III: 7–13, 117–22), and not in another world beyond a passageway in a mountain. They may also live in ordinary farms in the daylight (e.g. *ibid.*: 189–207). In such cases, they nevertheless live beyond obstacles of other kinds, for instance far into the woods, beyond a large lake, or terribly far away, and are in this respect situated in ‘the otherworld’, as most of the Elf hills and Dwarf stones are. But the Elf hill in *Kormáks saga* is placed right next to the human settlement. So is the stone in which the *ármaðr* / *spámaðr* of Koðrán Eilífsson lives in *Kristni saga* and *Þorvalds þáttr víðforla* (*Biskupa sögur* I: 8–9, 62 ff.), and there are several parallels in folk traditions.

22. Some of the background to this is probably that many houses, especially peat houses (and especially of the *goahti* kind. North Sami; Norwegian *gamme*, Swedish *kåta*), in old times resembled spherical mounds, cf. Lid 1942: 143. Larger houses also often had peat roofs and peat or stone walls, and could therefore look like rectangular mounds. Caves have been used as homesteads, especially by hunters and shepherds, until the present times.

The problem here can be formulated in the following way: some of the creatures of the otherworld do not exclusively belong there. Perhaps notions around the deceased inhabiting mounds and other kinds of graves may aid our understanding of how this adds up. It seems that even though there was a belief in mythological lands of the dead such as Hel and Valhøll, this was not incommensurate with the notion that the deceased inhabited their graves. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 51, a burial mound is accordingly called *draughús* ‘ghost house’. In *Landnámabók* (102 ff.), Ásmundr Atlason composes a strophe of poetry from inside his grave mound about his existence there, and the legendary sagas in many places speak of deceased people living on inside their grave mounds (e.g., *Egils saga einhenda*: 338, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*: 96, *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*: 410 ff.). As many scholars have observed, perhaps most lucidly Nordberg (2003: 73 ff.), a ‘mythological amalgamation’ of the graves and the mythological lands of the dead takes place. Here are some examples: in *Ynglingatal* 30 (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 B I: 12), Hel is called *hallvarps hlífi-nauma* ‘shelter wife of the (grave) mound’ – as if she is present in the grave (mound) itself. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (17), as Hervor conjures Angantýr up from the dead in his grave, and the grave mound opens, he says *hnigin er helgrind* ‘the gate of Hel has opened’ – as if the entrance to the grave mound is also the entrance to Hel. A near identity between the grave and the land of the dead was also seen above, in the myth in which Óðinn visits the grave of a *völva* that is situated in Hel itself – in *Baldrs draumar*. (A more extensive treatment of this can be found in Quinn 1994.) In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II, it is in the context of Helgi returning from Valhøll to the mound in order to meet his beloved that his grave mound is called a *draughús*. Perhaps the connection between the grave and the land of the dead was imagined to consist of an option for the dead to ‘commute’ between the two, or more diffusely in a simultaneous presence of some kind at both places. Similar notions occur even today in everyday Christianity – a Christian widow, for example, believes that her husband is in heaven, but if she wishes to speak to him, she typically visits his grave. In such a ‘holistic’ comprehension of the grave and the land of the dead, the grave becomes a kind of ‘border post’ between this and the other world. It is situated in this world, often at a central location or viewpoint, and we may assume that the deceased in the grave is following what is happening in this world among his progeny, of which *Hænsa-Þóris saga*

(46) is one example. If the deceased returns, his or her 'haunt' is in this world (e.g., *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935: 93 ff.). Nevertheless, the grave, as the residence of the deceased and as a closed space beneath the earth, is obviously in the other world, and from there passages lead further to the collective / mythological lands of the dead. Such an idea of a constant connection between the grave and the mythological land of the dead is probably inherent in the notions of grave mounds that kept green or bare throughout the winter (*Bárðar saga*: 121, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: 57, *Ketils saga hængs*: 173; maybe others).

I believe that mounds or stones which are residences of Elves (fairies), and which are placed at central locations in human settlements, should also be considered as the same kinds of border posts as these grave mounds. Perhaps people imagined that they bordered on a collective realm of Elves beyond them, but this is not crucial to the argument. The important thing as regards to my proposition is that such borderline cases do not contradict the idea that a greater realm of Elves existed in a universe of its own, in the same way as the idea of the dead residing in their own graves does not contradict the notion of separate collective lands of the dead situated in universes of their own. My investigation does not concern such borderline cases but the problem of how to understand the (mytho-)geographical relations between the different mythological races, when the sources state that they inhabited realms of their own.

It may also be significant that the beings who appear to live in mounds, cliffs, mountains, caves, etc., and have their outdoor areas in this world, seem especially to belong to what used to be referred to as the 'lower' mythology, which perhaps more properly (and less evolutionistically) could be called 'local mythology', as opposed to the mythology that was to a large degree common to all Nordic or even North Germanic areas.

4.2 *Basic elements common to all realms?*

Another difficult question is whether the different realms were actually imagined as entirely complete in themselves and separate. I have indicated above evidence that suggests that this was the case. But the extreme, and therefore the most unitive, elements in the universe sometimes contradict this notion.²³ The Miðgarðr Serpent encircles the world seen from

23. For this question I have tried to extract some cosmological evidence out of *Alvísmál*, where Þórr questions the dwarf Alvið ('All-wise') about different names of for in-

the point of view of the gods (*Gylfaginning* 31), and from the point of view of the Jǫtnar (*Hymiskviða*), and from the point of view of the men (as seen in skaldic kennings; see Meulengracht Sørensen 1986: 271, Bergsveinn Birgisson 1997). As it is the same serpent in all three cases, we could say that it encircles all three worlds at the same time, and if so there *is* a greater system than simply individual ‘bubbles’. Still I believe that this is a modern conclusion that overlooks the mind-set of the past. Just as pre-modern people imagined the dead to be present at the same time in the grave and in a collective mythological land of the dead, he may also have regarded each realm as complete in itself, yet surrounded by the same serpent, without reflecting on this being problematic. This follows in a manner from the other realms being generalized from the present one, i.e., the ‘bubble’ we are surrounded by: ‘just as things are here, so are they also in the other realms (only qualitatively greater)’. This paradox – that the same Miðgarðr Serpent encircles different universes – is of a similar type to that of the other realms surrounding the realm of the gods seen from the point of view of the latter, but the realm of the gods most likely surrounding each of the other realms seen from the point of view of them.

A similar case is presented by the sun. In *Gylfaginning*, the Jǫtunn master builder demands among other things the sun and the moon as payment for building a wall around Ásgarðr (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*: 45–47, cf. *Vǫluspá* 21–26), and this indicates that the Jǫtnar have the same sun as the gods. But the question is whether this is not simply the case of the other realms being generalized from the present one. In folk tradition, there are several examples of a unique sun in the otherworld (e.g., “The king’s three daughters in the Blue Mountain”, Asbjørnsen & Moe 1965 II: 7 ff.). This has to be the case when the otherworld is reached through a passageway down through the ground, and also when Þorsteinn Bǫjarmagn goes to *heimrinn niðri* (see above) – there is no explicit mention of a sun, but light appears when the passageway of water and fog is exited (*Því næst birti þeim fyrir augum*). On the other hand, when one only has to travel terribly far in order to reach the troll, the same sun

stance great and important things in the universe, but it is not clear whether the same earth, sun and moon are present in all the realms, or if each has its own separate versions, or if the questions exclusively consider the earth, sun and moon of the realm of the gods.

is above one's head all the time, and this means that this and the other-world are not separate 'bubbles' or universes. Accordingly, Hel has its own sun and universe when it is described as situated below the ground, but when it is located terribly far away in the horizontal plane, it has the same sun as the realm of the gods, and shares its universe.

To observe such contradictions is subtlety of a modern academic kind. Clear notions about these things probably did not exist, nor the idea that such notions should be necessary. Still I believe that the 'bubble model' best captures and describes the system that yet exists: 'This world stretches to the outer limits of our normal reach, in all directions, and beyond it lies the otherworld, which is basically similar, but with qualitatively greater properties, and which may be reached by supernatural means through certain anomalous locations that constitute passageways.' This system entails paradoxes, but is still what may be abstracted from most of the sources.²⁴

Another question is to what degree the system outlined here was something that people in general saw, or reflected upon. As the reader may have observed, I have not, even after having formulated a theory about it, been able to say consistently that everything is just passageways; I sometimes say that the different mythological races live in this or that direction. This is of course because the sources often express matters in this way. Did not people then actually imagine that the Jǫtnar quite simply lived in the Far East? Well, the sources also state that the gods live in the east, and that the gods live in the west, and that the sea Jǫtunn Ægir lives in the west, and so on. Would not accordingly 'beyond what you and I can reach' be a simpler way to understand the notion that lay behind these formulations, the passageways to the beyond being 're-cycled' again

24. Some may perhaps say that the World tree has to be common to all of the realms, but there is hardly ground for this supposition, as the World tree is first and foremost simply a centre, and little universes have centres as well. Therefore it is reasonable to believe that each world had its own central location – if it was at all structured in a centralizing manner. One might imagine that the Jotnar had a central location with a World tree of their own, but as Løkka (2010: 242) observes, fragmentation is one of the characteristics of Jotunn society; i.e., that it lacks a central organisation. Rather, the Jotnar have many 'world trees', the farmyard tree of each Jotunn farm constituting a centre of its own, just as each Jotunn homestead seems to be in a 'bubble' of its own in the sources. (The model that I outline in fact means that one central location did not exist in our world (the world of humans), only local and regional centres, in part with symbolical equivalents of the World tree, as for instance the sacred grove in Uppsala [*Adam av Bremen* 1984 [1075]: 224, Buchner & Trillmich 1961: 470] and Irminsül of the Saxons [Simek 2006: 222].)

and again, because this manner of thinking was useful and economical as long as only one version of the beyond featured in any given case? How aware, or unaware, any given person was, is not, to my mind, crucial.

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Samandrag

Denne artikkelen presenterer ein ny måte forstå kosmologien i førkristen nordisk mytologi på. Kjeldene ser ut til å gje motstridande opplysningar; til dømes blir æsene plasserte på ulike stader: I midten av verda, i vest, i aust, under havet og i himmelen; Hel blir plassert under bakken og bortom havet. På grunn av slike ting har ein i nyare granskingar konkludert med at det ikkje er noko system. Denne artikkelen argumenterer for at det er det og at vi misforstår *passasjane* til andre verder. Den andre verda kan definerast som ‘verda bortanfor det vi har tilgang til med naturlege middel’. Utgangspunktet er sfæren som var tilgjengeleg for menneska før moderne teknologi og som har form som ei kjempestor, flattrykt boble: Bortover har vi svært lang rekkevidde, heile sirkelen rundt, men nedover i jord, berg og vatn, og oppover i lufta, har vi svært kort rekkevidde. Til alle tider har folk likevel tenkt seg at denne avgrensinga ikkje er absolutt; det finst noko bortanfor, men berre overnaturlige makter og skapningar og trolldomskunnige menneske kan fara dit eller koma derifrå, gjennom visse passasjar. Dei peikar i mange retningar ut frå ‘bobla’, men passasjane er ikkje det same som Den andre verda, for dei kan skiftast ut med kvarandre og fører ofte til same slag stader. Dei andre verdene har kontaktflater med denne verda og med kvarandre, men ligg ikkje på nokon stad som kan plasserast i høve til denne verda eller andre. Dei er berre ‘på den andre sida’, bortom passasjane. Den grunnleggjande mo-

dellen ser dermed ut til å vera ein motsetnad mellom 'oss' og 'dei andre', med ei stadig skiftande grense. Dette systemet kjem til syne når vi undersøker ikkje berre dei avgrensa norrøne tekstane, men ser dei i lys av det kolossale korpuset av eventyr og segner nedskrivne i Nord-Europa etter mellomalderen.

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