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The War of the Æsir and the Vanir

A note on sources

The war of the Æsir and the Vanir has been the subject of abundant attention ever since the myth became known. Already in the nineteenth century the myth's background and meaning was discussed by Wilhelm Mannhardt, Karl Weinhold and others, and over the years scholarly interest only increased. In spite of this, no interpretation seems to have won general acceptance.¹ This lack of consensus is due, partly to the paucity of our sources, partly to the preoccupation of earlier generations of scholars, who saw the myth primarily as a memory of primeval history preserved in the garb of myth.

In the following, I will first survey the textual evidence, then discuss some of the more seminal views on the war. Some new source material will be presented, which, it will be argued, enables us to dismiss definitely some of the earlier interpretations. The question of how the myth must be approached will be touched at the end of this paper, where an attempt will be made to outline the various stages of the war of the Æsir and the Vanir in history and poetic tradition.

¹ A glance at the contributions by Mannhardt, Karl Weinhold, Bernhard Salin, Eugen Mogk, Nils Odeen, George Dumézil, Jan de Vries, Heino Gehrts suffices to realize that the war is one of those mythological topics of which there are as many interpretations as there have been scholars working on it.

1. Textual evidence

1.1 *Völuspá*

Sources on the war of the Æsir and the Vanir are scarce. Our main source is *Völuspá* 21-24, but a proper understanding of these stanzas is hampered by the poet's manner of touching on things. He evidently regarded the war as a major historical vista, but what meaning he allotted to it is unclear, since his description, though lapidary, is full of references to events and persons otherwise unknown.

- 21 Þat man hon fólkvíg
fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveigo
geirum studdo
ok í höll Hárs
hána brendo,
þrysvar brendo,
þrysvar borna,
opt, ósialdan;
þó hon enn lifir.
- 22 Heiði hana héto
hvars til húsa kom,
völu vel spá,
vitti hon ganda;
seið hon kunni,
seið hon leikinn,
æ var hon angan
illrar brúðar.
- 23 Þá gengo regin öll
á rökstóla,
ginnheilög goð,
ok um þat gættos,
hvárt skyldo æsir
afráð gjalda
eða skyldo goðin öll
gildi eiga.

- 24 Fleygði Óðinn
 ok í fólk um skaut,
 þat var enn fólkvíg
 fyrst í heimi;
 brotinn var borðveggr
 borgar ása,
 knátto vanir vígspá
 völlo sporna.²

1.2 Snorri

More straightforward, but poorer in detail, are the allusions contained in *Gylfaginning* and *Ynglinga saga*. Snorri quotes none of the *Völuspá* stanzas, which is interesting, since he elsewhere regularly ends his paraphrases of the poem with citing the corresponding stanza(s): *svá sem segir í Völuspá*, etc. In view of this, it deserves attention that Snorri's report(s) contains some features not explicitly mentioned in the poem. These divergencies are minor, however, and can be explained as the result of the different aims Snorri was pursuing. In *Gylfaginning* Snorri is concerned, not with the war itself, but with the origin of the mead of poetry, which emerged as a result of the peace ceremony (SnE ch. 57):

þat váru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósætt við þat fólk er Vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund at þeir gengu hváirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum.

The origin of it was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides went up to a vat and spat their spittle into it.³

In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri's interest lies with the union of the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*, negotiated to end a war in which neither party is capable of defeating the other decisively.

Óðinn fór með her á hendr Vönum, en þeir urðu vel við ok vörðu

² Eddic references are to Neckel's 1927 edition. Works of literature are italicized the first time they occur.

³ Translations of *Snorra Edda* are taken from Faulkes 1987.

land sitt, ok höfðu ýmsir sigr; herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða. En er þat leiddisk hvárum tveggjum, lögðu þeir milli sín sættarstefnu ok gerðu frið ok seldusk gíslar.

Óðinn made war on the Vanir, but they resisted stoutly and defended their land; now the one, now the other was victorious, and both devastated the lands of their opponents, doing each other damage. But when both wearied of that, they agreed on a peace meeting and concluded a peace, giving each other hostages.⁴

This stalemate is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, but the feature may have been inferred from Vsp. 23, since a superiority of either party would make the idea of a truce largely redundant. It is possible that the detail betrays influence from oral commentary, where it may have become prominent out of a desire to give both groups of gods their share of honour. There is no reason to believe that Snorri represents a tradition different from that in *Völuspá*. In all probability, he was drawing on the poem, though occasionally his account may have been enriched with secondary features taken from popular tradition. If so, his account is not without interest, because it might indicate how the war was perceived in the early-thirteenth-century Iceland.

1.3 Saxo

In addition to *Völuspá* and Snorri, knowledge of the war of the Æsir and the Vanir seems reflected in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, but the connection is often unclear. Many of the alleged references have been rightly dismissed. Even Dumézil, who long defended that Saxo was a reliable recorder of an independent, otherwise lost tradition about the war, later conceded that the Deacon of Lund sometimes used his sources rather randomly. This does not mean that all of the analogues proposed in the past must be disregarded. In some instances, Saxo's wording is remarkably reminiscent of the *Völuspá* text, and his text may therefore illuminate some features of the war of the Æsir and the Vanir as perceived by a late-twelfth-century audience of the poem. What matters is to discern the nature of Saxo's source, which is only rarely

⁴ References to *Heimskringla* are taken from Finnur Jónsson's 1911 edition. Translations are from Lee M. Hollander 1964.

possible. Principally, three types of (alleged or real) borrowing can be distinguished: imaginary, distorted, clearly discernable. The first category comprises those cases in which the similarity is superficial, coincidental, or a commonplace of the genre. Of the last category, there is no example involving the war of the Æsir and the Vanir. This leaves us with those instances where Saxo, while drawing on an Old Norse source (c.q. *Völuspá*), handled his information very liberally, sometimes to the point of distortion. Of this, Saxo offers two examples: the *Mithotyn* episode and, secondly, the story of Ermanaric's war on the Hellespontines, which will be discussed later.

2. Scholarly stances

The great variety of scholarly views is best illustrated by discussing the interpretations proposed by Eugen Mogk (1924), Georges Dumézil (1947) and Ursula Dronke (1997). The selection is not nearly exhaustive, but suffices to give an idea of some of the interpretations articulated in the past, the echoes of which still resound in present-day discussions. Mogk's views may be outdated now, but his contribution had a lasting impact in that it forced scholars to reassess Snorri's report with a critical eye. As regards Dumézil, his ideas seem to have lost none of their appeal ever since they were published, even though his premisses have been called into question time and again. Dronke's interpretation, finally, is the latest in the field, eloquently written and bound to influence future generations of students.

2.1 *Eugen Mogk (1924)*

As Mogk sees it, the whole notion of a war between the Æsir and the Vanir derives from a misunderstanding on Snorri's part, who failed to grasp the meaning of Vsp. 21-24. Mogk suggests the following sequence of events in *Völuspá*. The coming (Vsp. 20) of the three maidens - according to him no others than the three giantesses of Vsp. 8-, deprives the gods of their power to rule the fate of men, the control of which is taken over by the maidens. However, the gods, above all the Vanir, are still capable of magic, which enables them to interfere with the course of events. To curb this power of the gods the giants send

Gullveig, whose magic skills surpass those of the gods. After their failure to kill her off, the gods drive her out of their community. The maiden now turns to mankind, instructing them in magic. As a consequence, the power of the gods declines still further. Perceiving this, the gods meet (Vsp. 22) to discuss whether they will accept the new situation, or demand compensation from the giants. They decide on war. Óðinn hurls his spear (Vsp. 24), starting the war against the giants. Unfortunately, things turn out badly. The giants manage to storm their fortress, and the gods are forced to retreat into the open -as Mogk interpretes *völlu sporna-*, only to be defeated once more, since Þórr, the only deity capable of beating the giants, is absent. The gods must accept that Freyja (*Óðs mey*) is delivered to the giants. Waking up to their loss, the gods meet in dismay (Vsp. 25). This time they are joined by Þórr, who loses no time in bringing Freyja back by force (Vsp. 26). In Mogk's view, therefore, the battle alluded to in *Völuspá* concerns a conflict between the gods and the giants -one out of many-, and not, as generally assumed, a war between the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*.

To defend this view, Mogk points to a number of alleged flaws of conventional interpretation:

1. Scholars traditionally argue that the meaning of the name *Gullveig* links the figure to the *Vanir*, whose functions are generally associated with wealth and prosperity. Mogk rejects the argument. The *Vanir*, he says, may have been prosperous, but they were not particularly associated with gold, whereas the giants are alluded to in a number of gold kennings. Consequently, if etymology is an argument -which Mogk seriously questions- we must connect her not with the *Vanir*, but with the giants.
2. Why should the *Vanir*, had they been victorious (as traditionally assumed on the strength of Vsp. 24/8) consent to a deal in which a member of their clan (Freyja = *Óðs mey*) is being delivered to the giants (cf. Vsp. 25)?
3. In traditional interpretation, *regin öll* has different meanings in Vsp. 23 and Vsp. 25 (Mogk 1924, 3) In Vsp. 23, the phrase would allude to the

Æsir who hold council to decide what course is to be followed, whereas in Vsp. 25 the words comprise both Æsir and Vanir.

Mogk's own interpretation rests on the following arguments:

4. The term *Vanir* (Vsp. 24/7) denotes the whole of the divine community, including both the Æsir and the Vanir. Such meaning is well attested for *Æsir*, of which *Vanir* is just a synonym. That the poet preferred the term *Vanir* is because it is they who suffered most from Gullveig's doings.

5. If the Æsir, as indicated by *borg ása*, were inside the fortress when its ramparts were crushed, their enemies must have outside it, e.g. in the open fields. Why, Mogk asks, should the Vanir *völlu sporna* first after the breaking of the walls? Mogk gives the answer himself. It means, he says, that the Vanir were initially inside the fortress, and fought alongside the Æsir against a common enemy, who can be no other than their longtime foe the giants:

Nun vergegenwärtige man sich einmal die Lage! Die Asen verteidigen sich in der Burg. Dann müssen sich doch ihre Gegner, die Vanen, vor dem Bruch des Walles auf freiem Felde befunden haben. Warum sollen sie sich dann erst auf dem Felde tummeln, nachdem sie den Ringwall erbrochen haben? Das ist ganz widersinnig. [...] Die Vanen müssen also vor dem Wallbruch mit in der Asenburg gewesen sein, und nehmen nun, nachdem diese erbrochen, den Kampf auf freiem Felde auf. [...] Asen und Vanen müssen daher einen gemeinsamen Gegner gehabt haben, und das sind die Riesen gewesen.

How valid are Mogk's arguments? To start with, the notion of giants as owners of gold is confined to kennings of the type *Iðja mál*, based on a story about the sons of the giant Ölvaldi, who divided the gold they inherited by in turns taking a mouthful of it.⁵ Apart from these few

⁵ The story probably has southern connections, since its central figure, Allvaldi's son Þjazi, is in origin probably no other than Theodorik the Great (called *Tjasse* in

kennings, the giants are not particularly associated with gold. Even if the motif gained some currency in the North, there is no reason why this should invalidate the traditional view, which situates *Gullveig* in the vicinity of the Vanir, whose wealth was proverbial.

Of interest is Mogk's remark that the Vanir, had they been victorious, would hardly have consented to a treaty in which a member of their clan was handed over to the giants (cf. Vsp. 25). It is true that most scholars interpret *völlu sporna* as 'gain victory', but this meaning far from given (see below). Also, it is uncertain whether Vsp. 25 is part of the Æsir-Vanir conflict. In all probability, it marks the start of a new episode.

The third argument (the semantics of *regin öll*) is not all that weighty. It was refuted by George Dumézil (1947, 266) -who maintained that *regin öll* in Vsp. 23/1 and 25/1 includes both the Æsir and the Vanir-, but defended again by others (Dronke 1997). The divergence must not be exaggerated. The epithet *ginnheilög* seems to support Mogk's view, but whatever interpretation is followed, it has only a limited bearing on the meaning of the passage as a whole.

As regards the term *Vanir*, it is undeniable that the poet sometimes uses words and phrases that are deliberately ambiguous, and one could argue that he used the word because the Vanir were hit relatively hard by Gullveig's doings. It is also true that Old Norse *Æsir* regularly denotes all of the gods, but such use is not attested for *Vanir*,⁶ and it is hard to escape the impression that the poet contrasts the damaged stronghold of the Æsir with the marching Vanir, which suggests an opposition, rather than an alliance.

As to Mogk's last argument, the phrase *völlu sporna* which concludes the stanza, this final position either represents a hysteron proteron, or the words are colloquial for 'parade the field', 'march fiercely/defiantly' or the like. A combination of these two possibilities is also conceivable. It is often assumed that *völlu sporna* means 'to gain victory,' and perhaps

Frisian), so the motif need not be more than a memory of the gold-richness of the South (cf. Samplonius 1993, 22). A comparable background can, perhaps, be discerned in the name *Gustr*, the otherwise unknown owner of a fabulous gold-ring, whose name, as first suggested by Otto Höfler, probably harks back to *Augustus*.

⁶ On *Brymskviða* st. 15 (*sem Vanir aðrir*), see von See 1997, 548.

that is what the Vanir achieved,⁷ but all our text says is that they marched the fields, signalling that they did not flee in disarray. A partial parallel is, perhaps, found in *Darraðarljóð*, where king Brian managed to *halda velli*. Brian was of course victorious, but the text only says that the king stood firm and held his position. A similar meaning may be present in Vsp. 24/7, though in terms of strategy it may have involved a counter-offensive by the Vanir, who, after being attacked, apparently take the initiative in the second half of the stanza.

Finally, it is hard to see that the gods would be so stupid to wage war on the giants in Þórr's absence.

2.2 Georges Dumézil (1947, and later publications)

Mogk's conclusions met with fierce opposition, in particular by Dumézil, who in his book *Tarpeia* put forward another, structuralistic interpretation of Vsp. 21-24.

The French scholar regards Óðinn's spear-cast (Vsp. 24/1-2) as a magic device, employed to destroy the enemy, or to throw him into flight. Of panic-stricken armies, literature offers several examples. In Vsp. 24 however, the device fails to achieve much effect. In spite of their losses, the Vanir stand firm, and even retaliate by storming the stronghold of the Æsir, breaking down its ramparts (*bordveggr*). That they oust its defence entirely is not explicitly said. According to Dumézil (1947, 274), the stanza depicts a situation in which the effect of Óðinn's magic spear is neutralized by the figure of Gullveig (etymologized as by him as 'Gold-power') which the Vanir have commissioned. A situation, in short, in which neither side is strong enough to defeat the other decisively:

chacun des deux partis intervient dans cette guerre, par une figure ou par une initiative originale, inédite, et *si clairement liée à l'essence du parti où elle se manifeste qu'on ne peut la concevoir dans l'autre* : du clan des riches Vanes vient «Puissance de l'or», qui donne tant de mal aux Ases; et le plus sacré des Ases lance contre les Vanes son arme-talisman.

⁷ Turville-Petre (1964, 305) refers to Old English expressions like *abton wælstowe genwald*, *hæfde wigsigor* ... *weold wælstowe*, which lends indeed some support to the idea.

Dumézil compares the war of the Æsir and the Vanir with Romulus' war on the Sabines, recorded in the first Book of Livius' *Ab urbe condita*. Here, Tarpeia, a young Roman girl, is bribed by Sabine soldiers to let them into the fortress in exchange for the gold they are wearing. When the Romans try to reconquer the citadel, they are driven back in disarray. Fearing that all will be lost, Romulus stretches his arms to heaven and appeals to Jupiter for help, vowing to build a temple for him. The plea is granted, and the Roman flight comes to a halt. Dumézil equates the incident with Óðinn's spear-cast in *Völuspá*, and regards Tarpeia and Gullveig as originally identical. On the strength of these alleged correspondances Dumézil (1973, 24) concludes that

the happy union of these two complementary groups, like that of the Æsir and Vanir, was brought at the conclusion of a difficult and long-contested war, in the course of which each adversary in turn gained the upper hand. [...] It is notable that the two episodes of the war of the two divine clans in *Völuspá* corresponds to these two, with the same functional features. The rich and voluptuous Vanir send among the Æsir as a scourge the woman called Gullveig [...], who corrupts their hearts, especially those of women.

The words *functional features* are illustrative of Dumézil's reasoning, in which historic or legendary episodes are reduced to seemingly comparable sets of structural oppositions between different mythological groups. Central to his theory is the assumed tripartite structure of early Indo-European culture, of which the aforesaid wars are said to be reflexes (Dumézil 1947, 286):

dans ces deux « premières guerres », le premier épisode est une mise en scène de la puissance corruptrice de l'or, propre à la troisième fonction; un personnage féminin ici incarne (Gullveig), là symbolise (Tarpeia) cette forme dangereuse d'ivresse; les victimes de ces agissements sont ici Odhinn avec ses Ases, là Romulus et ses compagnons, c'est-à-dire, dans les deux cas, les représentants d'une autre fonction, de la première.

It is worth noting that Dumézil regards all these examples, not as parallels illuminating each other, but as genetically related phenotypes deriving from one and the same genotype.⁸ The possibility of borrowing he dismissed, a premise with far-reaching consequences, given that his examples derive from widely different Indo-European traditions, which implies that the underlying structure that generated them must predate the emergence of linguistic subgroups. Dumézil's claim to reconstruct a mythologem from an otherwise unknown past probably explains the popularity of his thesis. However, as pointed out by von See and others, it must be rejected because of the high level of abstraction required to make his examples fit. As regards the war of the Æsir, Dumézil's interpretation of Vsp. 21-24 rests heavily on the emendation *vígská(u)* 'warlike, belligerent' (for attested *vígsþá*), which finds no support in the manuscripts. Not surprisingly, the emendation was rejected by Icelandic scholars like Finnur Jónsson and Sigurður Nordal. Dumézil, however, had little use for the manuscript reading, since it would endow the Vanir with magic, in his eyes the prerogative of Óðinn and other gods of the first function. In his 1947 *Tarpeia* book he maintained the reading *vígská*, rendered by him as "belliqueux", but in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (the 1973 translation of his 1959 *Dieux des Germains*) a question-mark has been added to the translation 'warlike,' but only in brackets, which shows that he, though aware of the problem, was unwilling to reevaluate his conclusion.

Hans Kuhn (1978, 274) pointed out yet another difficulty. The name *Vanir* as a collective of deities (Njörðr, Freyr, Freyja etc.) is confined to

⁸ Dumézil (1973, 20) produces also other examples, such as the Indo-Iranian legend of the Násatya, who had to struggle their way into the ranks of the higher gods: Originally the gods of the lower level, the Násatya or givers of health and prosperity, were apart from the other gods. The gods, headed by Indra [...], whose weapon is the lightning, refused them what is the privilege [...] of divinity, participations in benefits of the oblations, under the pretext that they were not "proper" gods, but rather some kind of artisans or warriors who were too much mixed in with men. On the day when the Násatya raised their claims and tried to enter into divine society, a bitter conflict ensued. We see how this entrance is substantially parallel to the initial separation of the higher Æsir -the masters of magic and lightning- and the lower Vanir- givers of richness and fecundity.

Scandinavia -there is no trace of it elsewhere in the Germania- which is at variance with the alleged great anciennity of the episode. It is of course possible that the name *Vanir* was superimposed at a later stage, but the necessity of such auxiliary explanation does little to promote Dumézil's thesis. No one will doubt that some of these fertility gods were venerated at an early date -Tacitus' *Nerthus* is a case in point,- but we nowhere read that these third function deities fought a battle for recognition with the rest of the gods.

2.3 Dronke (1997 and other publications)

The most recent interpretation to date is that of Ursula Dronke, whose views to some extent resemble those of Dumézil. She accepts the Indo-European parallels adduced by him, but only inasfar they illuminate the *Völuspá* episode. She follows Dumézil in calling Óðinn's spear-cast an act of magic, but retains the reading *vígspá*, interpreted by her as 'war-charm,' as magic with which the Vanir keep the Æsir at bay. As she sees it, Vsp. 24 describes the armed confrontation of the Æsir and the Vanir, in which each party uses his own kind of magic to counter that of the other. The scope of the magic employed by the Vanir, Dronke believes reflected in Vsp. 25/7-8, where it is said that the Vanir manage to *völlu sporna*. She interpretes the phrase as 'to be born again,' referring to *Oddrúnargrátr* (st. 8), where *knátti ... moldveg sporna* 'could kick the ground' alludes to newborn infants. The Vanir, she says, are providers of fecundity, and this capacity of theirs they use to bring to life again all those killed as a result of Óðinn's magic spear-cast. The two kinds of magic level each other out, a stalemate which convinces both parties of the need for peace. Compared with Mogk and Dumézil, Dronke's interpretation is a step forward. It has the merit of explaining how the Vanir manage to withstand the Æsir, for whatever device we think of, the fact remains that Óðinn, as the god of war, grants victory. However, her solution is not in every respect convincing. To start with, the power to raise the dead to their feet is not characteristic of the Vanir -neither Njörðr nor Freyr are mentioned in such context-, and the *Hjaðningavíg*, to which Dronke refers, has actually been engineered by Óðinn. It might be argued that Óðinn's role in *Sörla þáttur* represents a later development, but this hardly alters our objection, since in that case

Hildr would be responsible, and no-one has ever argued that the valkyrjur are third function deities.

3. Notes on Vsp. 24

3.1 *vígsþá*

Central to the war of the Æsir and the Vanir is Vsp. 24, especially *vígsþá* in line 7, the meaning of which, as shown above, has been much discussed. Dronke's translation 'battle charm' is almost certainly correct, but her interpretation of it hardly holds good. The word *vígsþá* appears to be a determinative compound, which implies that the meaning of the baseword (*þá*) is more closely defined by its determinant (*víg*). In Dronke's interpretation, however, *víg* would have no bearing on the meaning of the compound. Had he wished to depict a magic resurrection of the slain, the poet, to make his intentions clear, could have used a word as *val* (cf. *valgaldr*), which would have served the alliterative pattern equally well.

What, then, is the meaning of *vígsþá*? Its first element *víg* 'battle' is well attested, and there are basically two possibilities to explain the second:

1. The baseword *þá* may refer to knowledge about future enemy strategy, a knowledge capable of effectively frustrating the other party's strategy. Divination of this kind is attested in *Landnámabók*, where it is recorded how two colonists compete for the ownership of pasture land.

Önundr viss hét maðr er land nam upp frá Merkigili, enn eystra dal alt fyrir austan. En þá er Eiríkr vildi til fara at nema dalinn allan alt fyrir vestan, þá feldi Önundr blótspán til, at hann skyldi verða viss hvern tíma Eiríkr mundi til fara at nema dalinn, ok varð þá Önundr skjótari ok skaut yfir ána með tundröru ok helgaði sér svá landit (Lnb. I-III 188).

Önundr Wise was called the man who took possession of land up from Merkigill, the whole of the easternmost valley. When Eiríkr intended to take possession of the whole western side of the valley, Önundr cast the divining stick to find out when Eiríkr would set out to make his claim. Then Önundr was the quicker and shot a tinder-arrow across the river to

claim the western side.

This interpretation comes close to Finnur Jónsson's idea (1911, 46) that *vígspá* "kunde hentyde til at de i forvejen ved sejd havde indhentet vished om at de ville sejre," though his definition makes the Vanir seem rather inactive in the encounter.⁹

2. The other possibility is to explain *spá* not as 'prophecy,' but as 'incantation', a magic spell used to influence the course of events, as first suggested by Robert Höckert (1926, 42), and endorsed by Nordal (1952, 84) and Hermann Pálsson (1994, 67). The use of *spá* in this sense is amply attested, especially in fornaldarsaga prose, as for instance *Sörla þáttr* (Flb. I, 281) *af vándum spám ok illum álögum*, where *spá* seems synonymous with *álag* 'curse'. A similar notion of *spá* occurs in *Agrip*, the author of which comments *seiðmaðr, þat er spámaðr* (Finnur Jónsson 1929, 3).

In the latter case, *vígspá* may have been employed by the Vanir as a delusionary device of the sort described by Saxo and Snorri, where it is used to confuse the opponents. This meaning of *spá* occurs also in combination with the first, for instance in the opening chapter of *Gylfaginning* (SnE 1931, 9):

Æsir váru því vísari at þeir höfðu spádóm, ok sá þeir ferð hans fyrr en hann kom, ok gerðu í móti honum sjónhverfingar.

But the Æsir [here: the gods in general] were the wiser in that they had the gift of prophecy and knew of his movements in advance, and met him with ocular delusions

The employment of delusionary magic as a strategem in warfare is attested in Saxo (Holder 1886, 281):

⁹ Finnur (1907, 374) had earlier suggested that the word might have skaldic dimensions, and pointed to Egill's verse (Hfl. 4): (*þar beyrðiz*) *malmbríðar spá* 'sonitus pugnae', interpreted by him as 'battle'. The comparison is slightly misleading, in that our stanza lacks a verb corresponding to Egill's *beyra*, but it does prove that *spá*, in a skaldic context, could be used methonymically.

Igitur, quod tamtam copiarum partem intestina clade consumpserat, aule expugnationem suis alciorem viribus rati, veneficam, cui Guthrune erat vocabulum, consulunt. Qua efficiente regie partis propugnatores subito oculis capti in se ipsos arma convertunt. Quo viso, Hellespontici, applicata testudine, primos portarum aditus occupant. Deinde convulsis postibus irruptaque ede, caecas hostium phalanges obtruncant. Eo tumultu superveniens Othinus mediosque preliancium globos appetens, Danis (quos paterna semper pietate coluerat) ademptum prestigii visum supera virtute restituit.

Now it happened that the Hellespontines, before sharing out their booty, put to death a great band of their own men who had been accused of embezzlement. Having lost so large a part of their own men through internal killing they thought their forces would fail to take the castle by storm, and consulted a sorceress named Gudrun despaired of killed. By her magic the king's defenders were suddenly robbed of sight and turned their weapons against each other. Perceiving this, the Hellespontines seized the entrances to the gates by coming up under a mantlet of shields. Then they tore up the posts, burst into the building, and hewed down the blinded ranks of the enemies. In this uproar Othin appeared, and, seeking the very thick of the fighting, by his divine power counteracted the sorcery to restore to the Danes (for he had always fostered them with a fatherly affection) the sight of which they had been robbed by magic cunning.

The passage shows that in Saxo's days delusionary magic of the above kind was regarded an intrinsic feature of pagan society, which adds weight to our suggestion that *vígsþá* probably refers to a strategic device of the *sjónhverfing* type, used to confuse the enemies, and make them turn on each other.

3.2 A new source

As the above analysis of *vígsþá* makes clear, there is something to be gained from comparing Saxo's account and *Völuspá*. The observation is not new, but earlier claims have been found untenable, and there seems

to be a general reluctance at present to use Saxo for the reconstruction of Old Norse myth.¹⁰ However, there is no reason to refrain from using Saxo altogether. Compared with the former high opinion of Saxo as a source, the gain may be little, but enough, perhaps, to help us understand some features of Vsp. 21-24. It brings me to the following. The above cited Saxo text is more than just a good example of delusionary magic, the whole passage is strongly reminiscent of the battle between the Æsir and the Vanir described in Vsp. 24. Careful reading of the passage gradually convinced me that Saxo used either the same narrative tradition as that underlying the stanza, or, as seems more likely, one deriving from it. Since Völuspá criticism started more than a century ago, one hardly expects to find new evidence concerning the war of the Æsir and the Vanir, but Saxo's torn-up posts (*convulsi postes*) correspond remarkably to the *brotinn borðveggr* of Vsp. 24, which makes it difficult to dismiss the similarity as coincidence. Apart from the use of illusionary magic, the two accounts share the storming of a stronghold, the fences of which are broken. It might be added that the Hellespontines make use of magic because of the losses they have suffered, albeit for different reasons, prior to their storming of the castle, which brings to mind the losses suffered by the Vanir as a result of Óðinn's spear-cast. The occurrence of these combinations of features in both accounts makes a strong case for arguing that Saxo's description is indebted to Vsp. 24. That Saxo's description represents

¹⁰ Earlier scholars have pointed to an episode of Book VI (Holder 1886, 173), where it is told how Fridlevus, son of king Frotho, rounds up a gang of twelve robbers whose names all contain a second element *-bjorn* 'bear'. To trick the robbers, who had fortified themselves on an inaccessible islet in a river, Fridlevus kills his companion and leaves him in the river after having exchanged clothes, thus suggesting that the king drowned. Detter and Heinzel (1894, 542) and, more recently, Östvold (1969, 196) equated the story with the war of the Æsir and the Vanir as told in Vsp. 21-24, but the assumed analogue differs not a little from the *Völuspá* account. The location is entirely different. The murder of the king's companion is admittedly interesting, but it requires quite a bit of imagination to identify this ruse with the *vígspá* of Vsp. 24. Östvold explains the divergencies by assuming a deliberate reworking by what he calls the Uppsala school of theology, which is not really convincing. As Ellis Davidson (1980, 95) points out, the story much resembles the encounters with berserkers described in some of the sagas, and it probably must be judged accordingly.

an independent oral tradition I think unlikely.

The observation raises the question why Saxo inserted the description in his Ermanaric account. In the *Gesta* the war is caused by Ermanaric's murder of the Hellespontine brothers' sister, Svanilda, married to the king as part of a truce and allegiance, and it is commonly assumed that in *Völuspá* the war is triggered by the abortive killing of Gullveig (Vsp. 21/5). It will be noticed that in both cases the killing initially fails, but this need not mean much, and the mode of execution is different anyway.¹¹ The similarity, however, have led Saxo into inserting a paraphrase of Vsp. 24 at this point. Whatever Saxo's reasons, it is useful to look for additional features which the two accounts have in common. Illustrative in this respect is the treaty which Ermanaric initially concludes with the Hellespontine brothers following an undecisive sea-battle of three days. According to the conditions of the treaty, Ermanaric, apart from marrying the brothers' sister, receives one half of the tribute which the brothers have imposed on their subjects (Holder 1886, 279):

Qua triduo gesta, sororem eorum cum medietate tributi, quo
victos oneraverant, pactus prelium revocavit

After this battle has lasted three days he called it off, having bargained
for their sister and half the tribute which they had imposed on those they
had conquered.

This sharing of tribute rings a bell, since it is along this line that Vsp. 23/5-8 is commonly explained. Saxo's *tribus* recalls the *gildi* of the stanza, and in both cases the deal is concluded first after a prolonged fight in which neither party gains the upperhand. Unfortunately, the

¹¹ A proper evaluation of the relation is hampered by the fact that the heroic motifs of the Ermanaric cycle are inconsistently distributed, and much depends on the strand of tradition which one consults. The initial failure to have Svanilda trampled by horses, for instance, also occurs, in slightly different form, in *Völsunga saga*, but nowhere else. It might be argued, therefore, that the saga author got it from Saxo, but as there is little sign that *Völsunga saga* borrowed from Saxo the motif was probably an intrinsic part of the Ermanaric cycle as it developed in later times. The example suffices to show the difficulty of establishing intertextual relations.

motif is not uncommon, and its occurrence here may be empty rhetoric to the purpose of enlarging Ermanaric's fame, depicted by Saxo as a king of the Danes. A connection with Vsp. 21-24, or some paraphrase of it, is made problematic by the fact that in the *Gesta* the treaty precedes the killing of the maiden, whereas in *Völuspá* the order is the reverse. This does not rule out a connection -hysteron proteron is the poet's favorite device-, but it shows the problems one encounters in trying to interpret Vsp. 21-24 with the help of the Ermanaric episode. The comparison gives reason for thought, though. If we count the naval battle and the fight for the stronghold as reflexes of the same narrative tradition, Saxo mentions two battles between the parties, which brings to mind Vsp. 24/3-4: *þat var enn fólkevíg fyrst í heimi*, of which the word *enn* has given scholars headaches. Interestingly, the storming of the stronghold constitutes the last act of the hostilities in both Saxo and *Völuspá*, but again, the similarity, though instructive, is insufficient to allow any certain conclusion. It appears from Saxo's description that the Hellespontine brothers lose most in the treaty. The impetus of its conditions can be inferred from another Saxo passage (Holder 1886, 87), where Orvendil, Hamlet's father, shares the spoils of his conquests with his political overlord. The parallel, if accepted, could suggest that the Vanir had collected tribute which the Æsir regarded as rightfully theirs. The term *afráð gjalda*, then, would refer to the potential loss of tribute which the Æsir suffered as a result of the Vanir's doings. Ermanaric's treaty, therefore, suggests that the war of the Æsir and the Vanir involved three parties, rather than two, as seems often taken for granted.

The most intriguing feature of Saxo's account concerns the figure of the witch *Guthruna*. Is her role part of the original story? Given Saxo's liberal use of sources, most scholars will be inclined to answer in the negative, and the name *Guthruna* is clearly borrowed from heroic tradition. But what is in a name? There is some indication that the figure itself cannot easily be dismissed. In the only stanza of *Völuspá* *hinn skamma* quoted by Snorri, all völvás are said to descend from a certain Viðólfir.¹² Of this Viðólfir nothing is known, and his significance as a

¹² Snorri (SnE 1931, 13): *Eru völvur allar frá Viðólfi [...] jötnar allir frá Ymi komnir* (All völvás are from Viðólfir, [...] all giants are from Ymir descended).

progenitor is hard to gauge. Olrik (1903, 177) identified the figure with Vit[h]olphus, described by Saxo as a man skilled in leechcraft and delusionary cunning (Holder 1886, 219). Few scholars subscribed to the idea -mostly because they connected *Vit[h]olphus* with ON *vitt* 'witchcraft'- but Olrik's identification derives support from the fact that knowledge of healing was part of the völvu's inventory (Samplonius 2001, 209). It makes the connection hard to refute. Viðólfur mastered the art of delusion, and there is accordingly a case for arguing that the witch figure of Saxo's account was part of the mythologem echoed Vsp. 21-24. This can (though not *must*) be taken to mean that the *vígspá* with which the Vanir retaliate, was executed by a völvu on their behalf. Nordal (1952, 85) once suggested, albeit in a different context, that the poet may have expected his listeners to fill in narrative gaps from a collective stock of mythological knowledge. Here, we may have a rare case in which such assumption might be proved right: if the figure is part of the original story, her role must have been conveyed to Saxo by his Icelandic informant, since it cannot be inferred from the *Völuspá* text as we have it. It would imply that war between the Æsir and the Vanir involved three factions, rather than two, which resonates with the conclusion arrived at above on different grounds.

4. Outline for further research

A discussion of the above kind is helpful in determining some of the details of the war of the Æsir and the Vanir, but for a proper understanding of it, and its reflexes in literature, it is necessary to distinguish between the successive processes of transmission and reception of the various (strings of) motifs of the narrative. Roughly, four successive layers can be distinguished: historic event, later tradition (as part of a shared cultural heritage), new poetic arrangement and presentation (containing an individual momentum), exegetic accretion. The last two categories, it will be noticed, resemble to some degree the well-known binary model of author versus reader. Each of these categories poses interesting problems that can only be touched on here.

a. historic dimension

Oldest is of course the historic momentum which provided the narrative core around which the story accumulated. In *Atlakviða* this would be the dealing of the Burgundians with the Huns.

b. existing tradition

What comes next is the narrative tradition about the event, existing at the time the poem was composed. In composing a poem on historic events the poet certainly drew on stories which circulated about these events. In later times he could make use of poems composed by earlier poets. At this stage the distinction of epic and myth fades away, both genres belonging to man's oral history. This shared cultural heritage constitutes the framework from which the poet draw his references. It is important to realize that there probably was a diversity of opinion already then: earlier poems have been interpreted differently, and differences in individual perception of orally memorized events could lead to the emergence of narrative variants. For all that, oral commentaries provided a mostly cohesive common stock of traditions from which the poets drew for composing a new poem on the subject.

c. new poetic momentum

In a poem composed on this basis (= b), the poet could (though not *must*) rearrange this traditional material and present it his way. In this process (which might involve a rearrangement of narrative nuclei) the poet could adhere to existing conventions, but he could also introduce new features, be it to amuse the audience, or to bring the narrative in line with changed circumstances (geographically, socially etc.). These additions certainly contributed to the vitality (and development) of the tradition, and could prevent the audience from losing interest. *Atlamál*, for instance, reads like an updated version of *Atlakviða*, with the narrative setting depicted in accordance with changed conditions, and the poet takes a more humourous stance towards the subject. It is also possible that a poet used an existing tradition to express his own views on it, as seems the case with *Völuspá*, where existing myths and other oral traditions appear carefully arranged to the effect of presenting pre-Christian history in a new perspective. It is worthwhile to note that a very similar process underlies the composition of sagas like *Njála*. Here,

too, we find historic data retrospectively arranged and modified to the purpose of making them appear in a special light. The fables may be different, but in terms of composition there is little difference.

d. popular exegesis

Once a composition was accomplished, and the new poem recited, interpretation set in. This might lead to new stanzas being added, and could give rise to oral commentaries on that composition, the occurrence of which I call *exegetic accretion*. Such exegetic commentary could influence the way in which a poem was understood, thus adding to the already existing oral layer from which the composition had emerged, and which, as discussed above (= b), provided the referential framework necessary for citation.

Auditory reception, both collective and individual, always falls into this category. This also holds true when a poem was transmitted to someone less familiar with the culture which gave rise to the poem. Saxo drew of course on Icelandic poetic tradition, and he may have been eager to learn more about it, but he certainly lacked the competence to evaluate the source value of its diction. He probably relied on paraphrases conveyed to him by Icelanders, whom we know to have been around, since some of them he mentions by name. This implies that there may be a discrepancy between the explanation given by Saxo's informant and the message which the poet intended to express (= 3).

The above outline of textual transmission still needs refinement, but suffices for our purpose. It is illustrative for various reasons. Early scholars writing about the war of the Æsir and the Vanir mostly regarded it as history preserved in the garb of myth. Mannhardt, for instance, followed later by Hermann Güntert (1937, 46) and Karl Eckhardt (1940, 60), thought of a sedentary agricultural pre-Indo-European population, who after initial resistance merged with Indo-European invaders in a union that was the origin of the Germanic people. Taking archeology as point of departure, Bernhard Salin, too, thought of a migration (from the Black Sea to the North) followed by a conflict, which would have taken place by about 400 AD (Salin 1903). His conclusion was that an invading tribe venerating Óðinn/Wuotan clashed with indigenous people who practiced the (agricultural) cult of

the Vanir. Slightly different was the explanation given by Henrik Schück, who saw the story as a memory of the war between the Vinili (Langobards) and the Vandals recorded by Paulus Diaconus, in which *Vodan* (= Óðinn), through *Frea's* cunning, gives the victory to the former. In his *Wodan* monography, Mogk (1946, 60) also thought of a battle between clans which venerated different deities. Even Dumézil, for all his derision of what he calls historicizing approaches, was basically concerned with retrieving the alleged underlying Indo-European genotype (of which the *Völuspá* episode would be the reflex), and as such no less of a historian.

These interpretations all have their merits, but they all focus on the alleged historic momentum (real or mythic), and fail to take into account individual genius as a factor which may have contributed to the picture of the war as presented in *Völuspá*. It is not always realized that the poet's handling of the past may have been instrumental in the shaping of the poem as we have it. It is possible, likely even, that the war of the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* preserves a memory of past events, but the quest for the historic momentum easily makes us forget that the war episode must first and foremost be seen in the context of the poem, and be judged along the ideological perspective underlying the poem's composition (a largely individual momentum falling into category 3). In other words, the war as we find it in *Völuspá* must be seen, not so much as historic truth, but as poetic truth, and it is our task to analyze how the poet used it, and why. As I deal with this elsewhere, I will leave it at this here.

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