

# Voluspa or The Völva's Prophecy

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## Volsupa 43: Rooster in the World-Tree

William P. Reaves

Message 1 of 3 , Oct 14, 2008

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This verse introduces two more roosters: Gullinkambi (Goldencomb), and a soot-red cock in the halls of Hel. In the prior verse, a cock named Fjalar crowed in the Gagl/Galg- wood. Thus we have a trio of roosters, just as we do have a trinity of worlds (Asgard, Midgard, and Hel ; cf.  $3 \times 3 = 9$  worlds), a trio of Creating Gods (the Sons of Bor), of Norns (Urd, Verdandi, Skuld), of Creating Artists (the sons of Ivaldi), of classes of men (thralls, karls, and jarls), etc.

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Saxo, Danish History, Book One (Elton tr.)

"While Hadding was sojourning with her a marvelous portent befell him. While he was at supper, a woman bearing hemlocks was seen to raise her head beside the brazier, and, stretching out the lap of her robe, seemed to ask, "in what part of the world such fresh herbs had grown in winter?" The king desired to know; and, wrapping him in her mantle, she drew him with her underground, and vanished. I take it that the nether gods purposed that he should pay a visit in the flesh to the regions whither he must go when he died. So they first pierced through a certain dark misty cloud (cf. nifl-), and then advancing along a path that was worn away with long thoroughfaring, they beheld certain men wearing rich robes, and nobles clad in purple; these passed, they at last approached sunny regions which produced the herbs the woman had brought away."

This place is underground, hidden by a cloud (the meaning of the word nifl- in Niflheim), and features a well-worn road long traveled it is the Road to Hel. Saxo is clear that this is the place men come to after death. This source, among others, speaks of it a warm green place in Hel where fresh plants grow. The northern part is cold and dismal, the southern portion is warm and temperate.

Who the richly clad men there are Saxo does not say. But in an earlier Völuspá verse, we were told that "Sindri's clan" lives in a golden hall in the same part of the worlds. Journeys here are not uncommon, and commonly they contain references to green fields and golden halls in the underworld. In the Fornaldarsagas (see Penguin Edition "Seven Viking Romances"), Mimir appears as the giant Gudmund of the Glittering Plains and has richly clad sons and daughters. I hope to touch more on this in future verses.

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manner of their death by a continual rehearsal, and enact the deeds of their past life in a living spectacle." Then a wall hard to approach and to climb blocked their further advance. The woman tried to leap it, but in vain, being unable to do so even with her slender wrinkled body; then she wrung off the head of a cock which she chanced to be taking down with her, and flung it beyond the barrier of the walls; and forthwith the bird came to life again, and testified by a loud crow to recovery of its breathing. Then Hadding turned back and began to make homewards"

In Baldur's Dreams (Vegtamskvida), Odin rides to the underworld and finds a hall richly decorated awaiting Baldur's arrival. This is not the bleak hall of the goddess Hel Snorri describes. Its benches are richly strewn and the tables hold mead cups filled with "clear-strengths" and covered with shields expecting Baldur. The walled city is most likely within Mimisholt, Mimir's grove, the home of Lif and Lifthrasir according to Vafthrudnismal 45. Not only Lif and Lifthraisir, but according to Voluspa also Baldur and Hodur, as well as Mimir's companion Hoenir will survive after Ragnarök. This grove is a sanctuary which acts as a seed within the Tree.

Elsewhere, a golden cock is closely associated with the Tree. In Völuspá 42, a golden cock crows "over the Aesir." His name is Gullinkambi, which means "Gold-comb."

Gól of ásum  
Gullinkambi,  
sá vekr hólða  
at Herjaföðrs;

Over the Æesir crows

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says:

Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimmti,  
þars in gullbjarta  
Valhöll víð of þrumir;

Gladshem, the fifth (hall) is called  
And there, gold-bright,  
Valhall spreads wide.

Odin's hall, Valhall at the top of the Tree mirrors Mimir's grove at the bottom. The Einherjar, spilling out of 540 doors 800 at a time, die in defense of Mimir's grove. After the conflagration, the world is reborn anew. If Hoenir is the stork-god (remembered in Europe and America as the stork bringing babies), his presence indicates the continuance of human generations.

In Fjölvinnsmál 24, we are told that this golden cock perches on the branches of Vedurglasir, the boughs of Mimir's Tree (Mimameiðr). Vedurglasir is thus another name for Mimameiðr. All mythic things have more than one name. Elsewhere the world-tree is called Yggdrassil, Yggdrassils askur (Völuspa 19 and 47), Askr Yggdrassils (Grímnismál 34, 35) and aski Yggdrassils (Grímnismál 29-31). In Grímnismál 25 and 26, the tree is also called Lærad. The goat Heiðrún and the hart Eikþyrnir, standing on the roof of a hall, bite from its limbs, Læraðs limum. In Gylfaginning 39, regarding Heidrun, Snorri elaborates:

Geit sú er Heiðrún heitir stendr uppi á Valhöll ok bítr barr af limum trés þess er mjök er nafnfrægt, er Léraðr heitir, en ór spenum hennar rennr mjöðr sá er hon fyllir skapker hvern dag. Þat er svá mikit at allir einherjar verða fulldruknir af."

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42, poses the question:

Hví er gull kallat barr eða lauf Glasir? Í Ásgarði fyrir durum Valhallar stendr lundr, sá er Glasir er kallaðr, en lauf hans allt er gull rautt, svá sem hér er kveðit, at

Glasir stendr með gullnu laufi fyrir Sigtýs sölum.

Sá er víðr fegrstr með goðum ok mönnum.

"Why is gold called Glasir's foliage or leaves? In Asgard, in front of the doors of Valhall, there stands a tree called Glasir, and all its foliage is red gold, as in this verse where it says that:

Glasir stands with golden leaf before Sigtyr's [Odin's] door.

"That is the most beautiful tree among gods and men."

The imagery remains consistent across a number of sources. The world-tree, its branches, leaves and fruits, as well as the cock perched in its boughs, are all aglow with golden light.

Gylfaginning 14 says: "Its branches spread out over all the worlds and extend across the sky. Three of the tree's roots support it and extend very, very far." Also according to Gylfaginning, one root reaches Hvergelmir in the most northern part of the underworld, one extends to Mimir's realm, "where Ginnungagap once was," another reaches Urd's realm in the south. Thus the tree expands in all directions above and below ground.

The hall may have been conceived of as built around the great tree in

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The name Barnstokkr literally means "child-trunk" (Bairnstock). Jesse Byock notes: "A few passages farther on it is called apaldr (apple tree)" which "may have symbolic meaning, possibly being associated with the apple tree of the goddess Idunn. Barnstokkr may also be identified with the world tree Yggdrasil."

Regarding the tree's alternate name Vedurglasir, Björn M. Ólsen concludes: "This name (Veðurglasir) seems to be a name of that part of Mímameiður, which rises above the earth, and is afflicted by the weather and the winds." With this understanding of the term, compare the term Aurglasir found in Fjölsvinnsmál 28. We appear to have two reflexive names of the Tree. The top of the tree is called Vedurglasir, the "Glasir of the winds," while the bottom of the Tree is called Aurglasir, the "Glasir of the Mud." The lower half of the Tree is apparently a mirror image of the upper half of the Tree. Fjölsvinnsmál 23 and 24 inform us that a golden cock roosts in its canopy. Its name is Víðofnir. Víðofnir is listed among the names of cocks in the Nafnapulur. Thus, it cannot be written off as a poetic invention of the Fjölsvinnsmál poet.

Svipdagur kvað:

hvað sá hani heitir  
er situr í inum háva viði,  
allur hann við gull glóir?

"What is the name of the cock  
who sits in the lofty tree,  
all aglow with gold?"

Fjölsviður kvað:

Víðófnir hann heitir,

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Helgakviða Hundingsbana I:2-4, we learn that the norns bound their threads of fate across the sky (undir mána sal). The web of fate was seen as a complex pattern, similar to a spider web, stretching across the heavens. This is in accordance with the principles of the medieval world-picture, where fate was written in the starry heavens, according to the principles of astrology. Víðófnir is thus a symbol of the heavens, where the web of the norns is woven. He also symbolizes the crown of Glasir, whose leaves are golden, and whose fruit are the golden apples of life. Víðófnir is star-studded, because he was a symbol of heaven (or the night sky), adorned with glittering stars. The stars, perhaps, were the apples growing in the uppermost branches of the tree, unborn human souls, who were occasionally seen to fall towards earth, as meteors (falling stars). The cock operates as a symbol of the Tree's crown and all who dwell there.

In Fjölsvinnsmal 28, the watchman informs Svipdag that he who wishes to obtain the weapon capable of felling the golden cock perched on the world-tree must repair to the underworld with a gift for the ash-colored giantess, Sinmara (v. 24), designated in this verse as Eiri Aurglasir, the Eir of Aurglasir.

Aftur mun koma,  
 sá er eftir fer  
 og vill þann tein taka,  
 ef það færir  
 sem fáir eigu  
 Eiri Aurglasis..

He who seeks the sword  
 and desires to possess it,  
 shall return,  
 only if he brings

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below ground. Therefore Sinmara is an underworld divinity, a "goddess of Mud-Glasir."

Sinmara may further be seen as its Eir, i.e. physician, ensuring its well being. Aur- signifies the richness of moist soil as a source of growth and fertility. In Völuspá 19, the Norns lave the tree, drenching it with white mud, *ausinn hvíta auri*. This is supported by Snorri's account in *Gylfaginning* 16, which states:

Enn er þat sagt, at nornir þær, er byggja við Urðarbrunn, taka hvern dag vatn í brunninum ok með aurinn þann, er liggr um brunninn, ok ausa upp yfir askinn, til þess at eigi skuli limar hans tréna eða fúna. En þat vatn er svá heilagt, at allir hlutir, þeir er þar koma í brunninn, verða svá hvítir sem hinna sú, er skjall heitir, er innan liggr við eggskurn, svá sem hér segir:

"It is said that the Norns, who dwell by Urd's well, take water from the well each day, and with it the mud that lies around the well, and pour it over the tree, so that its branches may not rot or decay. This water is so holy that all things, which come into contact with it, turn as white as the membrane called skjall that covers the inside of an eggshell." (Björnsson tr.)

The allusion of the eggshell may be intentional, considering the rooster imagery. This would also explain why the Tree cannot be seen with the naked eye. It is transparent. The imagery is thus consistent with the mythological environment attributed to Yggdrasil. It would seem that in *Fjölsvinismál*, *Svipdag* is standing at Asgard's gate.

In symbolic terms, Mimir's grove and Valhalla are reflections of one

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of kennings.

Many scholars, such as Ursula Dronke, take Heimdall as a personification of the Tree. This explains Loki's comment in Lokasenna, about Heimdall ever standing vigilant with a wet-back. The norns constantly lave the Tree with water from their well, thus it is always wet. He sits at the top of the world-tree, protecting Asgard, with his keen senses. Odin also has a chair there from which he can see all the worlds. The ideas are parallel. Odin has an eye hidden in Mimir's well at the base of the Tree, and Heimdall hlod (his hearing, an ear?) is also found there according to Voluspa 28.

As Rig in Rigsthula, Heimdall sleeps between the man and wife of three households and sanctifies the three classes of mankind: jarls, karls, and thralls. This may explain his close connection to Mimir and Odin in this poem. The world-tree is the origin of all life. It springs from the same place life originated. It is Mimir's Tree, and stands over Mimir's well which is loctaed "where Ginnungagap once was" according to Gylfaginning. Heimdall is the link between the current race of mankind and the future race of man after Ragnarok, just as he is the link between the upper world (Valhalla) and the lower world (Mimisholt).

At the end of Hrafnagaldur Odins, Heimdall is portrayed blowing his horn at dawn. Elsewhere, he blows his horn at the beginning of Ragnarok.

1 Risu raknar, The gods arose,  
 2 rann álfröðull, álfröðull ran,  
 3 norður að Niflheim njóla advanced  
 4 njóla sótti; north towards Niflheim;

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njóla. A name of the night, according to Alvíssmál 30.

Úlfrún. One of Heimdall's nine mothers, according to Völuspá in Skamma 7, 9.

Himinbjarga. Heimdall's abode near the northern end of the great bridge, Bifröst.

Árgjöll is apparently a variant name of Gjallarhorn, "the early-loud-sounding". This same horn will be used to signal the advent of Ragnarök, which the events of this poem forebode, and the poet surely alludes to this. Here Heimdall is depicted as announcing the arrival of day, and the sound of the horn is equivalent to the cock's crow.

Clearly, the imagery is akin to that of the golden cock in Völuspá 43. Heimdall has golden-teeth and rides the horse Gold-top. His name can be interpreted literally as the "Light of the World."

Your thoughts?

Wassail, William

**Carla O'Harris**

Oct 14, 2008

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Hej William,

This is a really *masterful* investigation.

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**William Reaves**

Message 3 of 3 , Oct 14, 2008

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Hi Carla,

It's a culmination of a number of things. Some of it is from the commentaries on Eysteinn's former Fjolsvinsmal and Hrafnagaldur sites; and some of it is from things I have recently read and researched, and things I am writing.

Amazingly, most commentators do not know what to make of this verse. They consider it obscure. As I have shown, I think there is an ample amount of associated imagery which can be brought to bear on an interpretation of this verse.

I believe that the soot-red cock and the golden cock are reflections of one another, and that both are signalling the dawn of a new era. Saxo's tale of the cock in Hel and Fjolsvinsmal's use of the golden cock at the top of the Tree demonstrate to me that these were not one-time symbols created by the poet for this poem, as some commentators suggest..

Wassail, William

Author of:

Our Fathers' Godsaga by Viktor Rydberg, Illustrated by John Bauer  
Translated by William P. Reaves (iUniverse, 2003)

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