

Thor and Loki, Sun and Moon, and Santa's Reindeer: the Female Kin Coalition model and Norse mythology

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Abstract

This paper looks at the syntax of Norse myths, comparing it to the mythic syntax of Chris Knight *et al*, itself a development of Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* syntax. By reviewing the framework of Norse mythology in general, and considering one myth in detail, this paper argues that the Norse mythic tradition offers us a window on Palaeolithic and Mesolithic culture. It reveals a society in transition from a matrifocal hunter-gatherer system, through a patrilocal pastoralist system into a patriarchal agriculturalist system. The Norse cosmology offers a particularly good example of this transition, being the product of a largely pastoralist society, and it shows us one way in which the hunter-gatherer cosmology could mutate into that of a pastoralist society.

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Introduction

The Norse myths have long held a fascination for the British. The Norse were the last non-Christian invaders of these islands, and they have left their stamp on our literature, both in our traditional stories and in our modern tales: J R R Tolkien, Alan Garner, David Gemmell and many others have designed fictional societies based on Nordic mythic structure. Further afield in the Nordic World, Wagner, Sibelius and Grieg have all used the myths of the Northlands as inspiration for their music; Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger built philosophical positions based on the psychology of the Nordic mythic hero; and darker forces, such as Heinrich Himmler's Schutzstaffel (SS), used Norse mythology both as inspiration and as justification for their inhumanities. The Nordic myths have clearly had an effect on the psyche of Northern Europeans; but are these myths a special, local phenomenon with no wider significance, or are they part of a larger – possibly global – mythic structure?

One approach to Nordic – or any –myths is to see them as purely a product of their time and culture. This approach is productive for literary analysis of the texts of myths, but it

avoids some of the more difficult anthropological questions: why are these stories considered so important that they are learned, remembered, and transferred down the generations? Why are there common themes in the myths of cultures that have been separated for decamillenia? And what part do these myths play in our understanding of being human, as well as cultural, beings? Only a comparative analysis of different mythic structures, combined with more detailed examination of particular cultural myths, can help us with these questions.

To comparatively analyse Norse myths against other mythologies, a mythic syntax is needed. This syntax needs to have been proven as an effective analysis tool in a range of other mythologies, and needs to provide simple rules which can be applied to the Norse myths. In this paper, the mythic syntax of the Female Kin Coalition (proposed by Chris Knight, extended by Camilla Power, Ian Watts, Lionel Sims and others, and based on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss) will be used as a basis for the analysis of Norse myths. It is a syntax of oppositions and gender relationships which attempts to address not only the reason for global mythic themes, but also the much bigger anthropological question, *how did we come to be human?* It has been successfully applied to a range of myths from different cultures, including Amerindian¹, Australian² and African³ ritual stories, and Western European folk tales⁴. The Norse myths, however, have not yet been addressed in detail. The purpose of this paper is to begin to remedy this situation.

In this paper, Norse mythic forms are related to the Female Kin Coalition syntax both in terms of mythic cycle and in terms of individual myths. One myth, the journey of Thor and Loki to the court of Geirrodd, is reviewed in some detail. It is hoped that the arguments made here will show that the Norse myths can be seen as part of the worldwide mythic forms which were generated by the Female Kin Coalition social structure and by its subsequent collapse, but that they also demonstrate a specifically Norse cultural approach to that mythic form.

First, however, the Female Kin Coalition theory itself needs to be explained. While this theory is consistent with what we know of human prehistory, it is not universally familiar; and it remains only one of several alternative approaches to the problem of how we became human. It does, though, provide a firm basis for the analysis of Norse myths – and it does provide reasonable Darwinian explanations for what we find in those myths. The next section will therefore provide a short overview of the Female Kin Coalition model.

¹ **Chris Knight**, The Wives of the Sun and Moon. In *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* vol.3.1, 1997.

² **Chris Knight**, ch13: The Rainbow Snake. In *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*. Yale University Press: London, UK.

³ **Camilla Power & Ian Watts**, The Woman with the Zebra's Penis: Gender, Mutability and Performance. In *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* vol.3.3, 1997.

⁴ **Chris Knight**, Decoding Fairy Tales. An extract from *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, (1987). University of East London: London, UK.

The Female Kin Coalition – Becoming Human?

The Female Kin Coalition model was first proposed by Chris Knight⁵, and subsequently expanded by Camilla Power⁶, and evidenced by Ian Watts⁷. The theory, as redefined by Knight, Power and Watts⁸, has proved useful in interpreting myths across the world⁹; it has also been productive in the study of human origins, helping to explain how features such as ritual¹⁰ and language¹¹ may have emerged. In the study of current hunter-gatherer societies it has proved both explanatory and predictive¹².

The basics of the theory can be described simply as follows. Many features of being human seem to involve a very high level of co-operation and trust between individuals; but co-operation and trust are only explicable in evolutionary terms if the individual has paid a high cost “up front” to show that co-operating with them will be productive. There must be a costly signal that says “you can co-operate with me, I value co-operation so highly that I have made this costly sacrifice to prove I am trustworthy”¹³.

The Female Kin Coalition theory is an explanation of what this costly signal could be. The theory is based around a ritualised monthly lunar calendar that dictates and constrains the lives of individual males and females to maximise group reproductive capacity. The ritual cycle has no beginning or end, but for the purposes of this paper the lunar calendar will be described as starting at dark moon. The women come together at the time of dark moon, which is also a time for ritual rejection of mundane partners and actual menstruation. The Moon himself “leaves the sky” and comes to “live among” women as their moontime husband. Mundane partners are chased away by the females acting in coalition – forming a “monster” or a “giant snake” or a “dragon”. The men are forced to organise a hunt, and they are only allowed back among the women if they bring back a large enough propitiatory gift of meat.

The hunt itself takes place around full moon, the time of maximum light in the night sky. Because the moon is full, and (in the tropics, at least) it rises as the sun sets and

⁵ **Chris Knight**, *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture: A reconsideration of Lévi-Strauss's work on symbolism and myth*. Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University College London

⁶ **Camilla Power**, *Beauty Magic: the origins of art*. In Robin Dunbar, Chris Knight & Camilla Power (eds), *The Evolution of Culture*, ch6

⁷ **Ian Watts**, *The Origin of Symbolic Culture*. In Robin Dunbar, Chris Knight & Camilla Power (eds), *The Evolution of Culture*, ch7

⁸ **Chris Knight, Camilla Power & Ian Watts**, *The Human Symbolic Revolution: a Darwinian account*. In *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 5:1 1995, pp 75-114

⁹ **Chris Knight**, *Menstrual Synchrony and the Australian Rainbow Snake*. In Thomas Buckley & Alma Gottlieb (eds), *Blood Magic: the anthropology of menstruation*

¹⁰ **Camilla Power & Ian Watts**, *The Woman with the Zebra's Penis: Gender, Mutability and Performance*. In *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Sep97, Vol. 3 Issue 3, pp537-560.

¹¹ **Chris Knight**, *Ritual/Speech Coevolution: a solution to the problem of deception*. In James R Hurford, Michael Studdert-Kennedy, Chris Knight (eds), *Approaches to the Evolution of Language: social and cognitive bases*

¹² **Camilla Power**, *'Beauty Magic': deceptive sexual signalling and the evolution of ritual*. PhD dissertation, University College London

¹³ **Amotz Zahavi & Avishag Zahavi**, *The Handicap Principle: a missing piece of Darwin's puzzle*

sets as the sun rises, there are 36 hours of continuous light. This means that it is possible to pursue and harry prey, even large prey, to exhaustion. Menstruation and the withdrawal of women at dark moon therefore mean that hunting is able to coincide with the best time for hunting, and fertility occurs when the men are coming back from the hunt, hopefully laden with meat.

What makes this model successful in Darwinian terms is the fact that *Homo sapiens* is a species that reproduces much more successfully in social groups than as individuals. This, by itself, means that co-operation is a fit strategy; but how can co-operative individuals prevent exploitation by cheats, who take advantage of the co-operation of others without themselves co-operating? How, in other words, could co-operation ever have begun without a mechanism to suppress cheating?

In the Female Kinship Coalition, cheats cannot prosper. Females who attempt to circumvent the withdrawal of sex by females at dark moon – the sex strike – risk expulsion from the coalition if discovered; and, outside the coalition, survival and reproduction are risky and difficult. There has to be, therefore, a willingness among females to altruistically punish cheats: women must be willing to suffer a personal cost in order to ensure a higher cost is paid by the cheats. Altruistic punishment is, however, subject to a second level of cheating: women who don't cheat in the sex strike but also don't help in the altruistic punishment would seem to get the best of both worlds. It is therefore necessary for the females to demonstrate a solidarity with their sisters against cheats – females must be seen to be “moral” in their treatment of cheats. A system of altruistic punishment therefore needs a high level of co-operation, not just in identifying cheats but in punishing them; and we humans do seem to be particularly co-operative in our willingness to punish those who offend us¹⁴. This level of solidarity is exceptional in the rest of nature – although it is not unknown¹⁵.

It is not just women who altruistically punish in the Female Kin Coalition model. Males must co-operate in the hunting of megafauna to ensure that the gift of meat to the women is as large as possible; so males who do not co-operate in the hunt must be prevented from enjoying the fruit of the hunt – which, for the men, is not meat but sex. Males must altruistically punish cheating males, and females must collude in this: the male who tries to get sex without providing meat is as dangerous to the female coalition as the female who provides sex without demanding meat. The Female Kin Coalition thus produces a society driven by a collective economic morality of exchange between the sexes.

So the costly signal in the Female Kin Coalition, the signal that says “you can co-operate with me”, is the only signal that works to show that I, the signal sender, am co-operative: it is the actual act of me co-operating with you. The exchange of co-operative acts becomes a recursive, reciprocal signal – we co-operate because both of us are co-

¹⁴ **Ernst Fehr & Simon Gächter**, Altruistic Punishment in Humans. In *Nature*, vol 415, 10 January 2002, pp137-140

¹⁵ **Elizabeth A Tibbetts & James Dale**, A Socially Enforced Signal of Quality in a Paper Wasp. In *Nature*, vol 432 11 November 2004, pp218-222

operating with each other within the collective social group. The costly signal that maintains co-operation in this coalition is, therefore, a mutual willing surrender of personal autonomy to the coalition.

The story – or basic myth – of the Female Kin Coalition is therefore cyclical: first, separation of the sexes at dark moon, accompanied by hunger, noise and blood; next, the waxing moon time, when the sexes remain segregated, women are ritually (and probably actually) infertile, and the men are preparing for and beginning the hunt; third, the culmination of the hunt at full moon and the return of the men; and finally the fertile time of the waning moon, with feasting and sex. Waning moon then gives way to dark moon, and a new cycle begins. It is the mythic structure that would emerge from this cycle of ritual that informs the analysis made here.

The Cosmology of the Northlands

On first consideration, Norse mythology is a strange choice for analysis in terms of the Palaeolithic mythic structure of the Female Kin Coalition: it is not, for a start, Palaeolithic. Norse mythology is a product of a bardic tradition which can be traced back to the Indo-European culture, which was the source of most of Europe's and South Asia's myths. This source culture is thought to have originated at the time of the Mesolithic-Neolithic boundary, about 8,500 years ago¹⁶, and to have entered Scandinavia about 5,500 years ago¹⁷ – at most, then, Norse mythology can be traced to the very late Mesolithic.

The late Mesolithic is, however, an especially interesting time in the history of myth: the ancient hunter-gatherer culture was giving way to pastoralism and early agriculture; mobile populations were beginning to become geographically fixed; and the long-term possession of land and cattle, by groups and by individuals, was becoming a source of conflict¹⁸. The stories told around the campfire would have been changing to meet this new reality, and to adjust the old wisdom to meet the demands of the new culture. If Lionel Sims is correct then this cultural adjustment would not have been easy: the collapse of the monthly big-game hunt, due to lack of megafauna, would have fatally compromised the lunar-based culture that had served humans for decamillenia¹⁹. The cultural system of the Female Kin Coalition, which had enabled us to become symbol-using animals²⁰, was also collapsing, possibly simultaneously in many different places around the world. What was going to replace the matrifocal Palaeolithic culture was, at the time, still subject to uncertainty; and this uncertainty seems to have become the cause of often brutal negotiation within and between social groups. It is in this environment that the Norse myths we know today would have been created and refined.

¹⁶ **Russell D. Gray & Quentin D. Atkinson**, Language-tree divergence times support the Anatolian theory of Indo-European origin. In *Nature*, vol 426, 27 November 2003, pp435-439

¹⁷ **Einar Østmo**, The Indo-European Question in a Norwegian Perspective. In *The Indo-Europeanization of Northern Europe: Monograph No.17, The Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series*, edited by Karlene Jones-Bley and Martin E. Huld. 1996.

¹⁸ **V Gordon Childe**, *Social Evolution*, pp67-69

¹⁹ **Lionel Sims**, *The sun is the moon; the moon is the sun: manipulated knowledge at Stonehenge*. Anthropology Occasional Paper number 1, University of East London, May 2004.

²⁰ **Chris Knight**, *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*

Norse mythology, as part of the Indo-European mythic structure, shares a common thread with many western mythic traditions: it remained bardic for some considerable time after the introduction of writing to the culture. The myths were only written down when the culture they supported was already fading, and they were written down not by adherents of the culture to which the myths belonged, but by adherents of a new and very different culture. The Norse mythology we know today is, therefore, largely the record of a small number of written texts. The first main writer is Snorri Sturluson in Iceland, who is believed to have written the *Younger Edda* or *Prose Edda*, based on an earlier work known variously as the *Codex Regius*, the *Elder Edda* or the *Poetic Edda*²¹. The second main writer is a Dane known as Saxo Grammaticus, a cleric who wrote the *Gesta Danorum* (Acts of the Danes)²². Both of these writers were Christians writing in the early thirteenth century. What they have written is therefore a product of thirteenth century Christianity as well as of the earlier bardic tradition. Yet in Iceland, and to a lesser extent in Denmark, there was a strong local tradition of secular reading and writing which created a demand for non-religious texts. Both the *Eddas* and the *Gesta Danorum* represent a record of a pre-Christian age which largely respected the integrity of the pre-Christian myths²³.

The Norse did not appear in Scandinavia until about 3,500BCE, when they replaced earlier cultures of hunters and reindeer herders²⁴. The Norse were the northernmost branch of the Indo-European expansion, and brought cattle farming (pastoralism) to the area. Because of climactic and geographic conditions, the area largely resisted the advance of agriculture and retained a strong hunter-gatherer tradition of sea-fishing. The Norse, as part of the Indo-European expansion, shared a common heritage with the southern Indo-Europeans, so there should be identifiable similarities between the two groups of myths, despite the different emphasis on agriculture. However, although comparisons can be drawn between Norse and Southern mythic structures, there are some notable differences.

The early origins of Norse cosmology are uncertain; there are few clues left from early Norse settlement or from the cultures they replaced. Nordic cosmology does have a clear regional “feel”, however: a frozen North where the dead live (Niflheim); a land of fire in the South (Muspellheim) which is home to the Fire Giants; and the land of humans between them (Midgard)²⁵. A further six lands existed in the cosmology, making a total of nine (three-times-three is a significant number for the Norse). These other realms were Alfheim, Svartalfheim and Nidavellir, homes of the Elfs, Dark Elfs

²¹ Various translations of the Eddas have been used in preparing this paper

²² The English translation referred to here is of the first nine books only, translated by **Oliver Elton** (published by Norroena Society, New York, USA, 1905). No longer available in print, it can be found at <http://omacl.org/DanishHistory/>

²³ **Preben Meulengracht Sørensen**, Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c.870-1400) and their relations to Literary Productions. In Margaret Clunies Ross (ed), *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

²⁴ **Ari Siiriäinen**, The Stone and Bronze Ages. In Knut Helle (ed), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I, Prehistory to 1520*, ch2

²⁵ **Alice S Hoffman**. 1913. *The Book of Sagas*. Ernest Nister: London, UK. p13-15

and Dwarfs respectively; and Asgard, with Vanaheim to the West and Jotunheim to the East, which were the homes of the Aesir gods, the Vanir gods and the Giants²⁶. Most of the legends take place in this last triad of realms. The first triad of realms figures in the creation and destruction myths, while the mythic syntactic significance of the second triad seems to be obscure. There do seem to be correspondences, however, between the Elfs and the Vanir, the Dwarfs and the Aesir, and the Dark Elfs and the Jotuns. Midgard, possibly the central world if the third triad is seen as above and the second as below, is the mundane world of humans, the “real” world. Midgard does mean middle world, which would support this hypothesis of three triads of realms on three levels²⁷.

Two aspects of Norse cosmology are particularly unusual. First, there are two tribes of gods, Aesir and Vanir. They initially fought each other, but formed a truce based on exchange of kin. Frey and Freyja are named as moving from Vanir to Aesir, while Mimir (keeper of the well of wisdom) and Hoenir (god of wise counsel) are named as moving the other way. Frey and Freyja became an established part of the Aesir pantheon, but Mimir was sacrificed by the Vanir after his failure as a leader²⁸. This dual-deity model does not have parallels in either of the other two main mythic threads in Europe, that of Classical Greece and Rome, and that of the Celts. In Irish-Celtic mythology, the Tuatha de Danaan defeat the Fomorians and Fir Bolg in two battles, driving them from Ireland²⁹. In classical mythology the Titans are overthrown by the gods in three battles: the first against the Titans themselves, the second against the Giants, and the third against the dragon, Typhon³⁰. The implacable nature of the Tuatha de Danaan and the Olympian gods in dealing with their foes is somewhat similar to the relationship between the Aesir and the Jotuns, but even here the Norse myths contain a constant negotiation which is missing from the other two mythic traditions.

²⁶ There is no direct evidence for the location of Vanaheim, but there is an indication that it lays sunsetwards of Asgard (The Song of Ravens, verse 24, in *The Poetic Edda*). There is more indication that Jotunheim is to the East: Thor’s forays against the Giants are described as war against the East (The Song of Harbard, in *The Poetic Edda*).

²⁷ **Kevin Crossley-Holland** (*The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: gods of the Vikings*, pp2xx-xxv) proposes a different division of the Realms: Asgard, Vanaheim and Alfheim on the top level; Midgard, Jotunheim, Nidavellir and Svartalfheim on the middle level, and Niflheim (World of the Dead) and Hel (Realm of the Dead) on the lower level. This, however, breaks the “3 x 3” symmetry of the realms, it ignores the realm of Muspellheim, and it divides the realm of the dead somewhat arbitrarily into two. Crossley-Holland recognises the last two issues, but dismisses them as problematic in the “tridentric structure of the universe”. Crossley-Holland’s model may, however, owe more to 20th century ideology than to Norse mythology. “Hell below” is far from a universal cultural concept and, in the light of the accepted Norse creation myth placing Muspellheim to the South of Midgard and Niflheim to the North, it does not seem to be part of the Norse model. The placement of the Elfs on the top tier probably owes more to J R R Tolkien’s depiction of Elves than to the traditional role of Elfs.

²⁸ **M. W. MacDowall**, *Asgard and the Gods: The Tales and Traditions of our Northern Ancestors*, adapted from the work of Dr. W. Wägner, p182

²⁹ The Book of the Takings of Ireland. In **Richard Barber**, *Myths and Legends of the British Isles*, pp12-18

³⁰ **Michael Trapp & Piers Vitebsky**, *The Glories of Greece and Rome*. In C Scott Littleton, *Mythology: the illustrated anthology of World myth and storytelling*, p146-149

The two tribes of Norse gods do not represent a good versus evil dichotomy, but rather a hunter-warrior versus pastoralist-agriculturalist division. In Claude Lévi-Strauss' syntax³¹, the Aesir clearly represent hot and dry aspects (covering such areas as fire, lightning and knowledge), while the Vanir are cold and wet (representing the sea, fertility and magic). However, the monstrous and uncooked aspects of Lévi-Strauss' model are represented by the Jotuns, to which the Aesir provide the human and cooked contrasts. Chris Knight's more formal syntax of oppositions³² is therefore present, but split between two groups of entities in opposition to the Aesir. This seems to reflect the fact that the Norse were largely a transitional culture of pastoralists, caught between the agriculturalists of the future (the Vanir) and the hunter-gatherers of the past (the Jotuns). This may also reflect the fact that the Aesir sit between the two states of women in Knight's syntax: the Vanir wives of waning moon and the Jotun monsters of waxing moon. The Norse mythology therefore reveals a culture of the divided woman, reflecting the old cyclical metamorphosis between male-friendly women (Vanir) and male-unfriendly women (Jotuns).

The other unusual aspect of Norse cosmology is that it is foreshadowed: the whole story is already known, from creation to Ragnarok and beyond³³. Unlike the Christian Revelation of St John³⁴, which is a promise for the future, Ragnarok is an event which will happen and already has happened: the pre- and post-Ragnarok worlds are both worlds of the here-and-now. There is clearly a cyclical nature to Norse cosmology, and it is a cycle which closely follows Knight's proposed lunar cycle of ritual³⁵. Creation corresponds to dark moon and new moon – as it does in most mythologies. It seems to be common in creation myths that there is move from darkness to light, from unformedness to form, and from timelessness to a heroic mythic time^{36 37 38 39}. The Norse creation follows this established pattern, and leads into a heroic time when gods and monsters walk the realms. Humanity is largely suppressed in this heroic era, or merely a backdrop for the divine drama. The age of heroes therefore corresponds to the waxing moon in Knight's model, when the mundane is abandoned: women cease to be wives and withdraw from men; and men cease to be husbands and prepare for the hunt. The heroic time ends with Ragnarok, the hunt itself, and the overthrow of the gods and monsters. This is followed by the age of humanity, the waning moon or honey moon,

³¹ **Claude Lévi-Strauss**, 1981. *The Naked Man: Introduction to a Science of Mythology IV*

³² **Chris Knight**, *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*, pp494-503

³³ Völuspá, The Sybil's Prophecy. In **Elsa Brita-Tichenell**, *The Masks of Odin: wisdom of the ancient Norse*.

³⁴ The Book of the Revelation of St John. In *The Christian Bible*

³⁵ **Chris Knight**, *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*, ch11

³⁶ The Book of Genesis, chs1-2. In *The Christian Bible*

³⁷ **Chris Knight**, 1987. *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture: A reconsideration of Lévi-Strauss's work on symbolism and myth*. Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University College London, ch8

³⁸ **Tim Loughton**, MesoAmerica's Gods of Sun and Sacrifice: The Earth is Born. In C Scott Littleton (ed), *Mythology: the illustrated anthology of World myth and storytelling*, p518. (From the Popol Vuh, the sacred text of the Quiche Maya).

³⁹ **Roy Willis**, Origins of the World: Africa's creation myths. In **Roy Willis** (ed), *World Mythology: the illustrated guide*, pp266-267

when the new gods take a back seat to mundane human activities. Seen in this light, the timelessness of Ragnarok is explicable: it is past and future because it is cyclical; and it is cyclical because it is calendrical.

Sun and Moon

A feature of note in Norse mythology is the gender status of sun and moon. In hunter-gatherer cultures there seems to be a tendency for the sun and moon to be gender-ambivalent: the moon in particular is the lover of all human women during dark moon, when the women themselves are gender-ambivalent. The sun and moon have roles to play – and a presence – in the mundane lives of humans, and there is a constant movement of both humans and the celestial orbs between the mundane and the magical worlds. This is a movement not just between worlds but between gender roles, too; so, as with humans themselves, there is no need for the sun and moon to be assigned fixed genders.

For pastoralists, on the other hand, there seems to be a separation of the realm of the gods from that of humans. If the gods are to retain a role in the mundane human world then an *as-below-so-above* model of the Universe is needed. The gods have to be recognised by humans as emulating the details of their daily existence, allowing a tenuous equivalence to be drawn between humans and gods. In the mundane world, pastoralism initiates a sharp increase in possessions, the possibility of exchanging those possessions, and the commoditisation of possessions by exchange. This, in turn, brings about the innovation of bride-price: fertile females become valuable to their family as units of permanent exchange. This means that a human woman becomes the property of a permanent human husband, and there is officially no role for supernatural husbands in her life. To retain the *as-below-so-above* equivalence, the two celestial orbs must follow the mundane model of fixed genders and humans having property rights in each other. One of the spheres must therefore become male and the other female, to provide a celestial counterpart to monandrous marriage, which allows a woman only one husband at a time.

For pastoralists, unlike agriculturalists, the sun seems to have less calendrical significance than the moon – the sun dictates times of cold and warmth and breeding, but not necessarily times of feast and famine; the light from the moon, on the other hand, dictates when predators are most dangerous to herds and flocks – at dark moon predators can see considerably better than humans. The significance of the moon as the dark-time lover of women is also likely to remain a strong theme from hunter-gatherer times, despite any male-dominated counter-mythologising against it: menstruation remains a monthly physical event. The hunter-gatherer moon still takes over when the women are on their “Moontime”, and this is a brute, physical fact of the Palaeolithic mythic system which can be ritually suppressed in the new belief systems, but which cannot be actually suppressed. In the pastoralist cosmology, therefore, the moon provides a more virile model of male sexuality than the sun and would seem to be the more obvious choice as the male. It may be significant that a male moon is a feature of both Norse and Japanese Shinto⁴⁰ cosmologies, and these cultures also share a strong

⁴⁰ Arthur Cotterell, *A Dictionary of World Mythology*, p97-99

remnant hunting culture of sea fishing. ("The Man in the Moon" remains a feature of English mythic culture, too.)

With the increasing significance of agriculture, and the annual cycle of sowing, growing, reaping and dying, the role of the sun grows and the role of the moon diminishes. In an agrarian culture, the sun is the calendrical arbiter; the moon becomes a mere heavenly artefact. In turn, the extensive forward planning required by an agrarian culture leads to a further growth of property rights in land, goods and other people; and this in turn leads to a hierarchy of social power, with some individuals having control of the productive capacity of others⁴¹. Traditionally this hierarchy has placed the male, as the herd-owner or land-owner, above the female. The increasing importance of the roles of both the sun and of males is likely to reverse the female-Sun/male-Moon model, giving us the standard European agriculturalist cosmology of a male sun and a female moon.

The gender of sun and moon is clearly related to the significance and role of women in a culture. In a hunter-gatherer culture, where the women have a privileged role at the heart of the social group, the moon, as the partner of women, is also privileged over the sun. The moon is the basis of the hunting calendar, and it is both esoteric – part of the magic of the world – and exoteric – a mundane form within the world. In other words, it is no different to humans themselves. In contrast, the sun has the mainly mundane roles of signalling daytime and indicating time of day. In the tropics, where day length remains virtually constant through the year, the sun is a reliable but largely unremarkable chronometer. Like the moon it is cyclical, but it does not have complexity. In contrast to the sun, the moon rises and sets, but not at the same time every day (it has a daily cyclicity of about 24 hours 50 minutes); and it changes its presentation almost every day, from dark to full and back again. The moon not only signals mundane and sacred times, it is implicated in the change between the mundane and sacred worlds.

In a pastoral culture, the mundane and the sacred have become separated. The celestial orbs are no longer anthropomorphised objects dictating the cyclical flow of both mundane and sacred cultural life, there is now a separation of roles. The sun and moon have a continuing mundane role as calendrical devices; and they have a continuing sacred role as anthropomorphised beings who can be petitioned for favour. The roles are no longer separated in time, however, they are separated by the viewpoint taken. The anthropomorphic nature of the celestial orbs can no longer be preserved by the fact that they follow the same monthly cyclical flow as human culture – human culture itself no longer follows this flow. Instead, the humanity of sun and moon is preserved by the fact that they follow the same social mores as their earthly followers. The celestial orbs no longer rely on regular cyclical intrusion into the mundane world for their sacredness; instead, it is the fact that they are simultaneously the same as and different to humans that creates a paradoxical mystery. In this pastoral culture of paradox we would expect somewhat arbitrary relationships between the celestial orbs and humans to appear, such

⁴¹ **Frederick Engels**, Chapter IV: The Greek Gens. In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*

as one day in seven being Sunday and one Monday; or the attempted reconciliation of a quarterly solar year with a twelve- or thirteen-month lunar year, resulting in a twelve-month soli-lunar compromise.

The increasing specialisation of roles in an agriculturalist culture meant that the definition of roles by gender alone became insufficient. Different classes of specialist artisan (potters, carpenters, priests, stone workers, etc.) had started to appear, and each new role required its own cosmology. The cyclical division between males and females on all levels would have been affected by this and, as the old male-female cosmology broke down, it seems to have been replaced by a relatively more distant pantheon of specialist gods and goddesses. This certainly seems to be the case in agriculturalist cosmologies around the world, with the Hindu model as perhaps the best current example⁴².

With the Norse, we see a culture in slow transition from hunter-gatherer status through pastoralism into agriculture. We would expect, therefore, the mythology to reflect this range of influences, but to retain a strong tradition of hunter-gatherer mythic forms. As we have seen, the overarching creation, destruction and rebirth myth does indeed seem to reflect the hunter-gatherer moon-based cyclical mythology of waxing hunter's moon and waning honey moon. Can other Norse myths be analysed in terms of the Female Kin Coalition myth structure, which has been proposed by Chris Knight as being at the heart of hunter-gatherer societies?⁴³

Thor and Loki

To examine Norse mythology in more detail, one particular myth will be considered in relation to the Female Kin Coalition mythic structure: the story of Thor, Loki and the Giant Geirrod (Geirrod means *spear-reddener*). First, though, a little must be said of the roles that Thor and Loki play in Norse mythology so that their actions in this myth can be placed into context.

Thor is the god of thunder, usually seen as having red hair and beard. He is known as *Thunor* in old English, and *Donar* in old Dutch and old German. Thor is therefore clearly the root of our modern English word *Thunder*, and the modern Dutch and German words *Donder* and *Donner*. Thor was the son of Odin and Jorth (from which we get our modern English word *Earth*), and was perhaps the most commonly worshipped of the Norse gods. He is also associated with pastoralism and agriculture. He was seen as a straightforward, no-nonsense god by the Norse, which meant that he was always liable to be hoodwinked by cleverer minds (such as the giant Skrymir, and constantly by Loki). His enormous strength, however, ensured that he normally won his battles despite being misled.

Thor's weapon is a mace, or warhammer, called Mjollnir. It is the hammering of this weapon that creates the thunder associated with the god. He also has a girdle of great

⁴² *The Rig Veda*, translated by T H Griffith, Book 2, Hymns 30-43. Available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/>

⁴³ Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*, ch14

strength, named Meginjord, and special iron gloves, Jarn Griep. It is a strange feature of Norse godhood that the powers of the gods are often not inherent but lie in the artefacts they possess. Many commentators state that the Norse gods are not divine but exceptional humans⁴⁴, and some of the myths seem to support this. When Iðunn is abducted by the Jotuns she is unable to keep the gods supplied with the apples of immortality, and the gods begin to age towards death. It is not their inherent divinity that makes them immortal but the artefact of the apples.

Thor is killed at Ragnarok by his long-time foe, the Midgard Serpent, or Jormundgandr, who is one of the monstrous offspring of Loki. He kills the serpent but takes only nine steps before being overcome by the serpent's poison⁴⁵. Thor's position as the enemy of the World Snake (and so of the hunter-gatherer Female Kin Coalition) is therefore clear. His role as hero in the basic Indo-European myth, which can be expressed as "a hero kills a dragon with a mace"⁴⁶, is also clear.

Loki is a much less straightforward figure than Thor. He is the offspring of the Jotuns Farbauti and Laufey, so is himself a giant and not Aesir; but he is also the adopted brother of Odin, which gives him his place in Asgard. Loki is usually viewed as the trickster god of the Norse pantheon, or the Father of Strife, and he is certainly involved in much mischief against the gods. He destroys the hair of Sif, the wife of Thor, but replaces it with spun gold; he arranges for the Jotuns to steal the goddess Iðunn, but steals her back again for the Aesir; and he arranges for the sun and moon to be given to the giant commissioned to build the wall around Asgard, but seduces his horse so that he cannot complete the task on time.

Loki's mythic role is, however, also considerably more sinister. He is the father of Jormundgandr, Fenris and Hel, the banes of the gods. He also arranges the death of Baldur, and then becomes the only creature who refuses to weep for him, thus preventing Baldur's return from death. For this the Aesir bind Loki to a rock until Ragnarok, at which time he breaks free and leads the armies of the Jotuns against the gods.

Loki is a shape-shifter, becoming various animals in his adventures: a horse, a salmon, and various birds, among others. He is also gender-ambivalent, becoming a giantess on more than one occasion; and, as the mare that seduces the giant's horse in the Walls of Asgard story, he becomes the mother of Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse. Because of his association with quick-wittedness, his name (Loki means fire), and the fact he often accompanies Thor, Loki has also become associated with lightning. So Thor and Loki together form the stormy combination of thunder and lightning.

⁴⁴ **Viktor Rydberg**, *Teutonic Mythology: Gods and Goddesses of the Northland*. Vol 1, part 2

⁴⁵ Voluspá, verse 55. **Rasmus B Anderson** (ed). *The Elder Eddas of Saemund Sigfusson, translated from the Original Old Norse Text into English by Benjamin Thorpe; And The Younger Eddas of Snorre Sturleson, translated from the original Old Norse text into English by I.A. Blackwell*, p7

⁴⁶ An incisive summary provided by Lionel Sims

Loki is often the companion of Thor on his adventures in Jotunheim. They travel together to Skrymir's castle, where they are both deceived; they also travel together to the court of Thrym, who has stolen Thor's hammer Mjollnir so that he can demand Freyja as his bride; and, of course, they travel together to the court of Geirrod. Some versions of this story give Thor's companion on this journey as Thialfi, his male servant. But, as we will see, this is not a significant change: the role of Loki is concerned with persuading Thor to go to Geirrod's court, and his companion on the journey plays only a small part in the story.

There are at least three versions of the Geirrod legend surviving today: Skaldskaparmal in Sturlusson's *Prose Edda*, a version by Saxo Grammaticus in Book VIII of the *Gesta Danorum*, and a separate work by Eilif Guthrunarson, a Skaldic poet of the late 10th century. This last version, usually referred to as *Thorsdrapa*⁴⁷, has some differences from the other two (which are themselves not consistent). The base form of the tale is, however, evident in all three versions: Loki persuades Thor to visit Geirrod; they cross a river where the flow has been augmented by one of Geirrod's daughters; Thor enters the household of Geirrod and sits in a seat which is propelled upwards by Geirrod's daughters; he prevents them from crushing him against the roof, breaking their backs in the process; Geirrod throws a glowing coal at Thor, who catches it and throws it back, killing Geirrod.

The analysis of the tale set out here will start with a version of the tale picked somewhat randomly from the Internet. If this was a literary, textual analysis then it would be necessary to start with the original texts of Sturlusson, Guthrunarson and Saxo Grammaticus. The language in these versions is, however, culturally bound, and is in many places difficult for a modern reader to understand. As this is an anthropological analysis of the story itself, a version which sets out the story in simple, clear, modern language has been chosen. Several versions of the story are available on the Internet, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. The version use here has the advantages of including all the events without an extensive narrative, and of being usefully short. It is also a version of the story largely faithful to Sturlusson's *Skaldskaparmal*⁴⁸.

Thor and Loki, and Their Visit to Geirrod's Court

One day Loki was flying through the wood in the form of a falcon when he was captured by the giant, Geirrod. Geirrod confined Loki within a chest for three months, almost starving him to death. Geirrod refused to release Loki until his prisoner agreed to persuade Thor to come to his domain.

Thor unsuspectingly agreed to go to Geirrod's court without his magic hammer (Mjollnir), his girdle of might (Megingjord), or his iron gauntlets (Jarngreipr). Fortunately, on the way to Geirrod, Thor and his companion spent the night in the home of a friendly giantess named Grid. Grid told Thor that Geirrod

⁴⁷ Eilifur Godrunarson, *Thorsdrapa*. See **Bjorn Eysteinn** at <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/thorsd00.html>

⁴⁸ *Scandinavian Classics Volume V: The Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson*. Translated from the Icelandic with an introduction by **Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur**, PhD, pp121-128

intended to kill him. Grid gave Thor her unbreakable magic staff and her own girdle of might and iron gloves.

Thor and Loki tried to cross the river of Vimur, but the water kept rising, preventing them from crossing. Thor's companion was at this time holding on to Thor's girdle of might. Thor realised that a giantess named Gialp, daughter of Geirrod, was causing the river to rise. Thor threw a rock at Gialp to stem the river flow. Reaching the riverbank, Thor pulled himself (and Loki) out of the water using the branches of a rowan bush.

Thor and Loki arrived at Geirrod's home. They were taken to a chamber with only a single chair, which Thor sat on. Suddenly he felt the chair rising up toward the roof. Thor would have been crushed to death between the chair and roof, but he quickly put Grid's staff between the chair and a rafter. Thor heard a couple of loud cracks and screams of agony. Looking down under his seat, Thor saw Gialp and Greip, the two daughters of Geirrod, with their backs broken.

Geirrod arrived at the other side of the chamber. He picked a glowing lump of molten iron out of a fire with tongs. Geirrod threw the iron at Thor with all his might, but Thor easily caught the molten iron with the iron gloves that Grid had given him. Geirrod ran and hid behind an iron pillar for protection. Thor threw the molten iron back at Geirrod, and it punched through the iron pillar and through Geirrod, killing the giant.⁴⁹

The Analysis

This story has many features which identify it as a version of the global lunar cycle myth. First, there is movement from one world to another. In this case it is not a movement between the mundane world (Midgard) and the magical realm, it is a movement between Thor's mundane world (Asgard) and the world of the exotic other, Jotunheim. There is also the river separating the two realms and marking the change between them. This river corresponds to many other archetypes: the Greek river Styx which the dead must cross; the biblical baptismal river of St John; the sacred rivers of Hindu death ceremonies; the Kali Bein, in which the Sikh Guru Nanak is drowned before being reborn; the river in which Siddhartha almost drowned before his Great Enlightenment ... the lesson seems clear: you cannot enter the magical world without entering wetness.

Second, there is the deceiving other person, represented by Loki. This corresponds to the hero's father in Lévi-Strauss' retelling of the Bororo birdnester story⁵⁰, Nabonkitkit

⁴⁹ Source: Skaldskaparmal, from the *Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson, compiled from earlier myth sources. (adapted from the version given at <http://www.timelessmyths.com/norse/thor.html>)

⁵⁰ **Claude Lévi-Strauss**. 1970. *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology I*, pp.35-37

in the Australian Aboriginal birdnester story⁵¹, Moon in Lévi-Strauss' retelling of the Arapaho story *The Wives of Sun and Moon*⁵², and possibly the bean-seller in *Jack and the Beanstalk*⁵³. In each case the deceiver seems to have the intention of abandoning the deceived hero in the non-mundane world – but the hero always returns.

Third, there is the helpful woman, the Giantess, Grid. She provides Thor with magical items and with advice, in the same way that the old woman in *The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces* aids the old soldier with tools and advice⁵⁴, or the frog helps the Queen in *The Helpful Frog*⁵⁵. The role of the helpful woman is to provide the hero with the tools and knowledge to complete the task, despite the malevolent influence of the trickster. There certainly appears to be a dichotomy here between one type of monster, helpful to the hero, and the obstructive monster, the vanquishing of which is the heart of the story.

The phrase “causing the river to rise” is particularly interesting in terms of the Female Kin Coalition: how did Gialp do this? Different retellings of the story describe this as happening in different ways: Hilda Ellis Davidson⁵⁶ tells us that Gialp was urinating into the river to increase the flow; Arthur Cotterell⁵⁷ and Kevin Crossley-Holland⁵⁸, however say that Gialp was menstruating into the river. The original Prose Edda only states: “then Thor saw Gialp, daughter of Geirrodr, standing in certain ravines, one leg in each, spanning the river, and she was causing the spate.”⁵⁹

Margaret Clunies Ross argues that the method of causation was menstruation: rivers were considered to be the blood of Jorth, Earth goddess and mother of Thor, and Thor's crossing of the river represents a move from Mother to Wife⁶⁰. This interpretation is likely to be correct in that it involves female power invoked through menstruation, a theme common throughout the mythologies of the world. The movement from Mother to Wife is obscure, however: if Mother is Asgard and Wife is Jotunheim (the direction of movement), then Mother would appear the superior choice in this myth (and, indeed, the person/place to which Thor returns); and the flood of menstrual blood stopping the crossing should really be coming from the Mother side of the river and not the Wife

⁵¹ 'The Stone Country Devil'. Related by Nalul, Djaun tribe. Southern-central Arnhem Land. In **Roland Robinson**, 1966. *Aboriginal Myths and Legends*. Melbourne: sun Books, pp. 159-161.

⁵² **Claude Lévi-Strauss**, 1978. *The Origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology III*

⁵³ Fairy Tale 14: Jack and the Beanstalk. In **Joseph Jacobs**, *English Fairy Tales, Illustrated by Arthur Rackham*.

⁵⁴ **The Brothers Grimm**, Fairy Tale 133: The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces. In *The Complete Fairy Tales*

⁵⁵ **Charles Perrault**, Fairy Tale 13: The Friendly Frog. In *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*, A E Johnson et al (tr)

⁵⁶ **Hilda Ellis Davidson**, Sagas of the Norsemen. In C. Scott Littleton, *Mythology: the illustrated anthology of World myth and storytelling*, p299

⁵⁷ **Arthur Cotterell**, *The Encyclopedia of Mythology*, p232

⁵⁸ **Kevin Crossley-Holland**, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths*, 129-130

⁵⁹ *Prose Edda*, Brodeur translation, pp122-123

⁶⁰ **Margaret Clunies Ross**. 2005. *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*. Cambridge, UK:D.S. Brewer

side of the river. If Thor is the dragon-killer come to end the Female Kin Coalition, however, the metaphors are more straightforward: Thor is crossing into the dragon's land to kill the dragon, the dragon is trying to stop him with its greatest power, menstrual blood.

Thor's use of the rowan bush to pull himself out of the river is also important. Sturlusson states that it was because of this story that the rowan bush became known as Thor's Deliverance⁶¹. In the Norse creation myth, First-woman was made from a rowan tree (First-man from an ash tree)⁶², and the rowan has mystical significance throughout Northern Europe. For the Celts, rowan berries were seen as the food of the Tuatha De Danaan, which gives rowan berries a clear correspondence to the apples of Iðunn in Norse mythology. In the Irish tale of Fraoith, the rowan was the Tree of Life: it bore fruit every month and every quarter, and its berries had the sustaining power of nine meals, healed the wounded and added a year to a man's life. The red berries of the rowan are clearly a metaphor for blood, and they produce a black dye which was used for clothes and, occasionally, for tattooing. The rowan may therefore represent, like the giantess Grid, the woman who is helpful at a time when she should be unhelpful. In Chris Knight's syntax she would be the strike-breaker; in these stories of the overthrow of the Female Kin Coalition, she has been converted into a kindly supporter of the male hero.

So Thor arrives at the Hall of Geirrodd and sits in a chair; but why does he sit? In Voluspa verse 30 it says: "There alone was Thor, with anger swollen. He seldom sits, when of the like he hears"; and in Thrymskvitha verse 11, Thor says to Loki, "Tell me from the air the long tidings. Oft of him who sits are the tales defective, and he who lied down utters falsehood."⁶³ Thor is not a sitter, nor does he value those who sit, so why does he sit in the hall of his enemy?

The answer is likely to be in what happens next. The chair, with Thor, begins rising to the ceiling. The hero is being propelled upward, as in the birdnester stories which form a common theme throughout world mythology⁶⁴. In most of the other versions of the story, though, the hero is abandoned in the sky to die and be reborn. In the Geirrodd myth, Thor thwarts his death – and therefore his rebirth. In fact, he turns the tables and defeats the ones trying to send him to the sky. This is achieved with a rod, or mace, and without any blood being spilled. So Thor's sitting on the chair seems to be a "plot device" to show the destruction of another feature of Palaeolithic mythic structure, the bird-nester way to knowledge.

The birdnester myth does seem to be part of Norse tradition. Hilda Ellis Davidson describes a type of female magic called seiðr, which was practiced by the seers of the Freyja cult. A very high platform was built, on top of which a seeress, or Volva, sat.

⁶¹ **John Arnott MacCulloch**, *Eddic Mythology: The Mythology of All Races In Thirteen Volumes, Volume II*, p84

⁶² **Paul Kendall**, 2000. *Mythology and Folklore of the Rowan*. In *Trees for Life: restoring the Caledonian Forest*, at <http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/forest/mythfolk/rowan.html>

⁶³ **Benjamin Thorpe**, *The Edda of Saemund the Learned*. Voluspa, verse 30, and Thrymskvitha, verse 11.

⁶⁴ **Chris Knight**, *Blood Relations: menstruation and the origins of culture*, pp503-506

The Volva then sang spells and entered a trance state, while those below made music and sang chorally. At the end of the ritual the Volva answered questions about the future, implying that she had visited a place where these answers were known⁶⁵. The Volva, like the birdnester, rises up, dies, and comes back to Earth with new knowledge. The use of a high seat, and Thor's reaction to it, would therefore seem to have particular relevance in the Geirrod story.

So far in the story Thor has overcome menstrual blood and projection into death; all that remains is to destroy the dragon, and this last act forms the final part of the story. When Geirrod appears in the hall he throws hot iron at Thor, which Thor catches in Grid's cold iron gloves and throws back. Geirrod hides behind a cold iron pillar, but the hot iron pierces the cold iron and kills Geirrod. The dragon is slain and, presumably, no blood is spilled.

What is all this iron about, though? It clearly cannot be a feature of Neolithic legends – stories involving metal must be Bronze or Iron Age myths. Iron does seem to have a long tradition as a counter to other-worldly power, however. By the European Middle Ages, iron was traditionally seen as the enemy of all supernatural evil, which included witches: nailed to a door or buried at a lintel it prevented a witch from entering a house. Other metals also had a palliative effect on supernatural evil; hence brass and bronze being used for church bells, statuary, and decoration inside churches.

The *Malleus Maleficarum*⁶⁶ recommended a witch test in which the unfortunate person was asked if they wished to take the trial by hot iron. This trial was a recognised way of identifying guilt in Medieval Europe: if the trialled person suffered no pain, or if their injuries healed quickly, then they were innocent. The *Malleus Maleficarum* turned this on its head: if the person was willing to undertake the trial when it was offered then clearly they knew that the Devil would protect them, so they must be guilty. As the *Malleus* states: "The Judge shall ask her how she can be so rash as to run so great a risk, and all shall be written down; but it will be shown later that they are never to be allowed to undergo this ordeal by red-hot iron." For witches, therefore, it seems that cold iron is their bane, while hot iron is their tool.

This formula allows a possible new interpretation of the iron-throwing. Thor, as the dragon-slayer/giant-killer/witch-hunter, controls the defence of cold iron (Grid's gloves); Geirrod, as the witch, controls the weapon of hot iron. Clearly the offensive advantage is with Geirrod – Thor does not have his hammer and holds only tools of defence (Grid's gifts). Thor has to seize the offensive weapon of hot iron from Geirrod to win this encounter. When Geirrod throws hot iron he is using the power of the Female Kin Coalition – ritual coercion. It is a power, though, that does not work on Thor; instead, he seizes the power of ritual coercion and the ancient order is changed forever. The dragon is slain using its own power – and, once again, no blood is spilled. Instead of Thor being the ritual sacrifice it is the Female Kin Coalition that is sacrificed.

⁶⁵ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, p117

⁶⁶ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of the Witches)*, 1486, Part 3, Questions XVI & XVII. See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm/>

The role of metal in this story therefore seems to indicate that the dragon-slaying myth is a later overlay on the traditional Female Kin Coalition story (the alternating cycle of life and death, dark and light, raw and cooked). The metal also fixes this overlay as the product of an Iron Age (circa 600BCE) or, possibly, Bronze Age (circa 1800BCE) cultural transition in Scandinavia. This would, in turn, tie the dragon-slaying myth to a historical period when cultures in other parts of Europe were known to be undergoing social and cultural transition. Old orders were breaking down across Europe, and new orders of hierarchical power structures were replacing them.

In the Geirrod story, Thor defeats the giants three times: Gjalp is stopped up at the river Vimur; Gjalp and Greip are broken under the chair; and Geirrod is killed with his own weapon, hot iron. The triple defeat of the Female Kin Coalition is a common theme of dragon-slayer stories: Beowulf defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon; Cinderella defeats her two stepsisters and her stepmother; Christ refuses the three temptations of Satan in the desert. It may well have something to do with the three nights of dark moon, which are the time of the Female Kin Coalition's greatest power. To defeat the Female Kin Coalition, the power of the dark moon must be defeated in detail, one night at a time.

Several other examples can be given of female trinities in coalition: there are the Norse Norns, Urð (*the future that has been made*, "necessity"), Verðandi (*the future that is being made*, "becoming") and Skuld (*the future that will be made*, "allowed"); there are the three Fates of Greek mythology, Clotho (spinner), Lachesis (measurer) and Atropos (inevitability); there are Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth*; and there is the more recent tradition of the three-member witch coven, the maid, the mother and the crone. In the case of women it seems clear that two is company, but three is a crowd – and much more dangerous. As King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 4:12: "A three-ply cord is not easily severed."

Another feature which may be part of the Geirrod myth is the theme of the useless brother-in-law. This is best illustrated in the American Tucuna myth, *The Hunter Monmaneki and his Wives*⁶⁷, where the brother-in-law ruins the hero's magical fishing with his inquisitiveness. In the Geirrod myth the useless brother-in-law figure is Loki or Thialfi, whose only role in the visit to Jotunheim appears to be acting as a weight on Thor's belt in the River Vimur. This, however, may be one analogy too far, and should not be considered too seriously: neither Thialfi nor Loki is named as the brother of Thor's wife, Sif, nor of his giantess lover, Jarnsaxa.

The dragon-slaying hero myths of the Iron Age share a common feature which is missing from hunter-gatherer myths: they all express a clear separation between the dragon-slaying "good guy" and the dragon "bad guy". Hunter-gatherer myths are much more ambivalent about heroes and villains, a subtle ambivalence which posed a considerable problem for the simplistic moral formulae of Victorian Christian

⁶⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1978. *The Origin of Table Manners. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: III*, pp.25-28

missionaries. Even today, Hunter-gatherer myths (and Western fairy tales) allow a considerably more complex relationship between the mundane and the sacred than modern Christianity recognises, and this complexity remains an unofficial undercurrent behind the official monotheistic philosophies in many parts of the World. In Paraguay, Haiti, Mexico, The Philippines, and Congo, among others, a simple Christian black-and-white philosophy overlays an older, traditional philosophy of shifting greys, creating versions of Christianity which are often descried as heretical by more mainstream Churches.

Why, in the dragon-slaying myths, was it necessary to emphasise the heroic nature of the dragon-slayer, when for decamillenia the dragon of the Female Kin Coalition had been a necessary part of existence? Here is probably the greatest sadness of the collapse of the Female Kin Coalition. During the Upper Palaeolithic, the cyclical dragon of human existence moved from dark moon to full moon and back again, from separation to marriage and back again, from hunger to plenty, from dark to light, from the sex strike to the hunt, from raw to cooked ... This was the way Humans lived. The dragon did not need to be good or bad, there was no other way of existing that could be compared as being better or worse.

Eventually, though, the system broke down. Perhaps it was the stresses of climate change, the limits of human expansion – or, possibly, human overpopulation or overhunting – that caused the system to collapse. The megafauna certainly seems to have disappeared, so the monthly hunt could no longer provide meat for days of continuous feasting. Hunting became more opportunistic and less calendrical, and other solutions, such as pastoralism and agriculture, had to be adopted. The old way of life no longer worked and had to be abandoned. This is what makes the dragon-slayer a hero: not that he slew the dragon, but that he created the opportunity for a new way to be human. The new way was not better than the dragon in terms of being human, but it was better in a way that really mattered: in terms of survival. The dragon was not itself evil, but with its failure it had become the enemy of Humanity instead of being Humanity.

In the Geirrod myth we saw Thor, the dragon-slayer, kill Geirrod and his daughters, all giants or Jotuns. Yet they are killed not because they are Jotuns – Loki is a Jotun and a companion of Thor – it is because they are still within the dragon of the Female Kin Coalition. To see Thor as the enemy of Jotuns leaves too many questions unanswered. He is a friend of Grid, the father of Magni by the Giantess Jarnsaxa, and the son of the Giantess Jorth. It is clearly not the race of Giants, as such, that is the enemy of Thor. It is not who they are that must be challenged but what they do. It is not women who are to be punished, but women who refuse to abandon the belief structure of the Female Kin Coalition.

Abandoning a system that had worked for maybe 100,000 years – 4,000 generations – would not have been easy. It is likely that aspects of the dragon – synchronised menstruation, moods dictated by the moon, cultural differences between the sexes – would have become encoded at the genetic level. Over the decamillenia, individuals who were good at being part of the dragon would have thrived and reproduced, those who struggled against the dragon would have done less well. This Darwinian process

would have been reversed with the collapse of the dragon, but we have had less than 10,000 years to overturn the selective genetic effects – most of the effects produced by the dragon are likely to still be with us today.

Santa's Reindeer?

Only one issue remains to be addressed in this paper: what is the link between Thor and Loki and Santa's reindeer? As every young child in Britain knows, Santa Claus drives around in a sleigh filled with presents and drawn by reindeer; fewer people know that Thor drove around in a bronze chariot filled with kettles and drawn by two goats. Thor never rode a horse, he either drove his chariot or, as in the tale of Geirrod, walked⁶⁸. This however, is very thin evidence on which to posit a relationship between Thor and Santa; and as we will see, the relationship is far from a simple equivalence.

The ride of Santa Claus is almost certainly derived from the Wild Hunt legend which, in Nordic tradition, is led by Odin (there is no direct evidence for the Wild Hunt in the Norse mythological sources, but there is some indirect evidence)⁶⁹. This Wild Hunt took place around the Winter solstice, and was a fearsome thing, presaging death and misfortune. The period of the Winter solstice was known as Yule to the Norse, and one of Odin's titles was, therefore, Hjol-foðr – Yule-father, or Father Christmas (the Celtic god Cernunnos, the Horned One, played the same role as Odin in these hunts, and has come down to us in Britain as Herne the Hunter). Thus, if we are looking for equivalence between Santa and Thor, we are looking at the wrong god.

Santa's sleigh, and its reindeer team, is actually a recent addition to the Christmas myth. On 23rd December 1823 the New York *Troy Sentinel* newspaper published an anonymous poem, *A Visit from St Nicholas*. This poem is now known as *The Night before Christmas* and is attributed to one of two authors, Clement Clarke Moore or Henry Livingston. This poem is the origin of the story of Santa's sleigh, and the original 1823 version named the reindeer as follows:

Now! Dasher, now! Dancer, now!
Prancer, and Vixen,
On! Comet, on! Cupid, on!
Dunder and Blixem ...⁷⁰

Later versions of the poem changed the Dutch names to the German *Donner and Blitzen* – but, whichever version is used, two of Santa's reindeer are Thunder (Thor) and Lightning (Loki).

This is perhaps the final indignity for the eponymous hero who overturned the old order of the Female Kin Coalition: he is himself overturned. His actions ensured that the moon rituals of the Female Kin Coalition became mere stories for children. And, in turn, his own ritual-worship legends have become children's tales. The dragon slayer

⁶⁸ H A Guerber, *Myths of Northern Lands*, p64

⁶⁹ Kveldulf Hagen Gundarsson, The Folklore of the Wild Hunt and the Furious Host. In *Mountain Thunder*, issue 7 Winter 1992.

⁷⁰ See <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/donner.asp>

and the great trickster become bit-players in a legend inspired by the death and rebirth of the sun; but, by the time they are added to the myth it has already itself become a children's tale. Instead of controlling the chariot they have become mere beasts of burden to pull it; and instead of bringing fear they bring gifts of appeasement. It is the biter bit – but, in this case, literally with bells on.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this paper has had the objective of relating Norse myths to a universal world myth. This myth has been summarised as “a hero slays a dragon with a mace”. This myth, however, is a coda to the earlier world myth of the Female Kin Coalition. In this earlier myth we see a never-ending story of movement between fertile relationships and infertile withdrawal, from feasting to fasting, from light to dark. These states form a syntax of opposites when viewed as a single structure, but they form two separated groups of phenomena when viewed as a process over time. As well as the times when one or other group of phenomena dominate, there are two periods of transition, and it is these two transitions that make the Female Kin Coalition myth into a dynamic social metaphor: the change of females from wives to monsters, and their change back again. These are the times when the greatest male resistance to the coalition is likely to occur, so they are also the times when the greatest ritual emphases must be made.

The later myth of the dragon slaying must also be about this syntax of opposites and transitions, and it should follow a similar syntax; but in the dragon-slayer myth each feature of the Female Kin Coalition myth should be neutralised or reversed. In the Female Kin Coalition myth the dragon is an inevitable part of life, and the movement between mundane and sacred is cyclical and continuous. In the dragon-slayer myth, however, the movement into the sacred is opposed or blocked, and the movement out of the sacred is permanent, not cyclical. The sacred becomes removed from the world of Humanity and is only achievable in exceptional circumstances, or at death.

There seems to be a yearning for the sacred in humans which may even have a genetic basis – being good at moving between the mundane and the sacred was a feature of being a successful human for 100,000 years, enough time for it to have become encoded in the genes; and the 10,000 years since the ending of the Female Kin Coalition social model is not enough time for that encoding to be completely reversed. Our socialised religions may, as a result, be a genetic relic of a different way of life, like our appendix: no longer functional but still there.

The final questions that must be asked are, would the analysis presented here be recognisable to the Norse on some level? And would the correspondences drawn here have appeared reasonable to Norse men or women, who saw these stories not just as tales but as part of a religious cosmology? We may never have the full answer to these questions, what we know of the Norse remains largely a view from outside. We can, however, see that it is possible to view the Norse mythic structure as compatible with the Female Kin Coalition and its collapse. There is cyclicity, there are well-established themes (like the birdnester) and there is ritual blood. There is also the highly ambivalent relationship between the gods and giants – who are both the wives and the enemies of

the gods. To view this structure as representing a simplistic battle between good and evil is to distort what the stories tell us. The Norse myths tell us about rituals, secret knowledge to be won, and negotiable relationships. The Female Kin Coalition story gives us some clues as to why these should have been important issues for the Norse.

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