

# DRINKING FROM ODIN'S PLEDGE

On an encounter with the fantastic in *Völuspá* 28–29

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A seeress or *völva* performs an *útisetá*, a ritual of sitting outdoors, during which she has an encounter with the fantastic: A god, Odin, comes to her. She tells him that she knows where he put his eye – in that famous Well of Mímir – and every morning, Mímir drinks mead from the pledge of Odin. Then Odin chooses rings and necklace for her, and the *völva* starts to prophecy about *Ragnarök*.

Why does the *völva* tell Odin about his eye and pledge in particular? And why does this particular information make him choose rings for her, leading to her prophecy? Scholars have suggested many answers to these questions, and I am going to offer yet another idea. At my presentation at the Saga Conference in Durham, I shall also take a look at the overarching implications for the mythic poem in which we find this encounter between the *völva* and Odin.

The encounter is described in *Völuspá* 28–29, and the pledge of Odin is also mentioned in the preceding stanza, *Völuspá* 27. Snorri's *Edda* does not report on the encounter, but mentions the myth to which the *völva* is alluding – the myth within the myth. According to *Gylfaginning* ch. 15, the Well of Mímir contains wisdom and intelligence, and Mímir drinks of his well from the Gjallarhorn. Odin came to have a drink from the well, but had to pledge his eye in order to have one. Snorri cites the last half of *Völuspá* 28 as his source. So Snorri identifies Odin's pledge with Odin's eye, but does not have Mímir drinking from it, while the poem has Mímir drinking from Odin's pledge, but does not identify it with Odin's eye (or anything else). What exactly does the *völva* refer to when she mentions Odin's pledge?

Before an attempt at answers, here are the texts in question with my literal translation, including a few of the alternatives that may be of importance:

## *Völuspá*

27

*Veit hon heimdallar  
hlióð um fólgið  
undir heiðvönom  
helgom baðmi  
á sér hon ausaz  
aurgom forsi  
af veði valföðrs  
vitoð ér enn eða hvat.*

She knows Heimdall's  
hearing (alt.: horn) is placed  
beneath clear-wanted  
holy tree.  
She sees stream is drawn (alt.: On her she is showered)  
in dreggy cascade  
from Valfather's pledge.  
Do you know yet, or what?

## 28, 1–6

Ein sat hon úti  
þá er inn aldni kom  
yggiungr ása  
ok í augo leit  
hvers fregnið mik  
hví freistið mín

Alone she sat outdoors  
when the old one came,  
awe-striker of gods,  
and into eyes peered.  
What do you (pl.) ask of me?  
Why do you (pl.) test me?

## 28, 7–14

*allt veit ek óðinn  
hvar þú auga falt  
í inom mæra  
mímis brunni  
drekkr miðð mímir  
morgon hverian  
af veði valföðrs  
vitoð ér enn eða hvað.*

All (alt.: Quite) I know, Odin,  
where you placed eye:  
in that famous  
Well of Mímir.  
Mímir drinks mead  
every morning  
from Valfather's pledge.  
Do you know yet, or what?

## 29

*Valði henni herföðr  
hringa ok men  
fé spiöll spaklig  
ok spá ganda  
sá hon vítt ok um vítt  
of veröld hveria.*

Warfather chose for her  
rings and necklace,  
wealth of wise spells  
and prophecy-spirits.  
She saw far and afar  
over every world.

## Gylfaginning, chapter 15:

*En undir þeiri rót er til hrímþursa horfir, þar er Mímis brunnr, er spekð ok mannvit er í fólgtit, ok heitir sá Mímir er á brunnin. Hann er fullr af vísindum fyrir því at hann drekkur ór brunninum af horninu Gjallarhorni. Þar kom Alföðr ok beiddisk eins drykkjar af brunninum, en hann fekk eigi fyrr en hann lagði auga sitt at veði. Svá segir í Völuspá: [st. 28,7–14].*

And under the root [of the Ash of Yggdrasil] that reaches toward the frost-giants, there lies Mímir's well, which has wisdom and intelligence placed in it, and he is called Mímir who owns the well. He is full of insight because he drinks of the well from the horn Gjallarhorn. Allfather came there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get one until he deposited his eye as a pledge. Thus it says in *Völuspá*: [here follows st. 28, 7–14, see above] (The Old Norse texts above are from Neckel 1927 – sans the interpretative punctuation – and Faulkes 1982/88.)

## Odin's Pledge

Most mythologists want to have their cake and eat it too. We accept the poem's information about Mímir drinking from Odin's pledge, and we accept Snorri's identification of Odin's pledge with his eye. But how can Mímir drink mead from an eye?

According to *Völuspá*, Mímir drinks from Odin's pledge, and some dreggy liquid is drawn or showered from it. These descriptions apparently do point toward some sort of container of a liquid. Mímir's well is such a container, but Odin did not pledge a well, and a pledge can hardly denote its depository as suggested by van Hamel (1925: 299). The Gjallarhorn mentioned in *Gylfaginning* is another container candidate. It is associated with Heimdall (*Völuspá* 46) and may be identical with *Heimdallar hlióð* (*Völuspá* 27). The placing of the *hlióð* is clearly a parallel to Odin's placing of his eye and thus could be seen as another pledging (Nordal 1927: 64). It does explain why Snorri would bring up the Gjallarhorn, but unless we

identify Odin with Heimdall (which may make a lot of sense – but that is for another paper), it does not make the horn a pledge of Odin.

*Heimdallar hlióð* is usually understood as Heimdall's hearing. The hearing and the eye are also parallels, both concerned with senses of perception or observation. Though the two interpretations of *hlióð* – hearing and horn – are normally seen as contradictory (Nordal 1927: 64), they can be argued to be two expressions of the same idea, a conscious poetic use of the meanings of *hlióð* (Dronke 1997: 49). A similar double meaning for *auga* has been suggested – a well may be called an eye (Fleck 1971: 400) – but this is not a use attested in Old Norse (Lassen 2003: 98). Still, an eye actually can be perceived, at least poetically, as a container of a liquid – namely tears. Is Odin's pledged eye crying over the approaching Doom of *Ragnarök* in a dreggy cascade of mead that is drunk by Mímir, the scornful giant? However attractive this thought may seem from a poetical point of view, we would have to invent a new myth to support it.

In order to get away from the idea of the eye as a container, Sigurður Nordal pointed out that Old Norse *drekka af* does have other possible translations than 'drinking from'. It could mean 'drinking the liquid made from [...]' – in this case made from Odin's eye (Nordal 1927: 66). Taking Nordal's cue, we may consider the other possible meanings of Old Norse *af*, of which Fritzner's dictionary lists twenty-five. In number 17 of these, *af* translates into 'because of, as a consequence of'. Accepting this meaning, Odin's pledge would be a cause rather than a container – a source of a less literal nature. Because of Odin's pledge, a stream is drawn (or the *völva* is showered) in dreggy cascade – implying that until then, there was no stream or showering, or it was not 'dreggy', filled with material from the bottom of the well. Because of Odin's pledge, Mímir now drinks mead every morning – implying that until then, he just drank plain water? If Odin's pledge is his eye, how can it cause these events? What are these obviously parallel events about? If both events are a consequence of Odin's pledge, we may expect them to relate somehow to the reason why Odin made his pledge in the first place.

Odin pledged his eye in order to get a drink from the well of knowledge, according to Snorri's *Edda*. This makes it part of a greater theme in Old Norse mythology, that of Odin's quest for knowledge. In several variants of this mythic theme, Odin seeks and obtains knowledge from the part of the Old Norse cosmos associated with either death or the giants (or both), usually situated 'below'. This knowledge of chthonic origin is of a numinous and occult nature, often described as *rúnar* (secrets, runes), which may have the form of spells or magic songs, and often symbolically represented by a drink, in particular a drink of mead. Mímir's well fits perfectly in this context. As a well it reaches down below and forms a link to the cosmic underworld. And apparently the liquid in the well of Mímir is (or becomes) mead.

The drink is not the only form in which Odin obtains knowledge from Mímir. In another myth, Mímir's knowledge is expressed as tidings from other worlds, telling of hidden things, truthful speech and advisory talk – all of it spoken words. In *Ynglingasaga* ch. 4, Snorri tells a myth of the war and peace between two groups of gods, the *æsir* (Odin's group) and the *vanir* (who are possibly chthonic, cf. Schjødt 1991). Hostages were exchanged, among these Mímir was sent by the *æsir*. But the *vanir* felt cheated. The saga goes on:

*Ynglingasaga*, chapter 4

*Þá tóku þeir Mími ok hálshjoggu ok sendu höfuðit ásum. Óðinn tók höfuðit ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum leynda hluti.*

Then they took Mímir and decapitated him and sent the head to the æsir. Odin took the head and embalmed it with herbs so it would not decompose, and sang magic chants over it and worked magic in such a way that it spoke to him and told him hidden things.

– The saga adds in chapter 7:

*Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum tíðendi ór öðrum heimum.*  
Odin had Mímir's head with him and it told him tidings from other worlds.

Mímir's head as a transmitter of knowledge to Odin is confirmed by the mythic poetry, where it is called the Mím's head:

**Völuspá 46, 7–8**

*mællir óðinn  
við míms höfuð*

Odin consults  
with Mím's head

**Sigrdrífumál 14, 4–6**

*þá mælti míms höfuð  
fróðlíkt it fyrsta orð  
ok sagði sanna stafí.*

then spoke Mím's head  
wisely the first word  
and said truthful speech.

Mímir being dead, killed while a hostage with the chthonic *vanir*, associates him closely with the underworld. At this stage, his knowledge is also 'dead' or passive and would be lost if it were not for Odin's magic. This reflects a paradigm found throughout the Old Norse myths. The underworld represents a 'raw material' of passive resources, which the gods obtain in various ways and turn into culturally useful objects, concepts and abilities. This also includes intellectual resources such as knowledge (Clunies Ross 1994: 68). The giants memorize and store a wealth of knowledge, but all they do is sit on it. For instance, they do not drink the mythic 'mead of poetry' (a symbol of the knowledge of composing poetry), but hide it in a cave beneath a mountain. Only when Odin steals it, the mead is processed and passed on and drunk, and its potential for inspiring poetry is activated.

Mímir's knowledge is a similarly passive potential, represented in the form of the dead and decapitated Mímir. The act of Odin's magic turns the passive potential into active knowledge, expressed in words spoken by Mímir's head. In a detailed and thorough analysis, Jens Peter Schjødt (2003: 138–161) demonstrates a close structural parallel between this and the other myth about Mímir. In the case of Mímir's well, the active knowledge is expressed not in words, but in the form of a drink – the single drink that Odin obtains or the mead drunk every morning by Mímir. The well, then, becomes a symbol of the passive potential, the latent knowledge. Schjødt declares that it is not possible to reach an even remotely reliable interpretation of Odin's pledge itself – but here he is the width of a hair from reaching one himself.

Odin's pledging parallels his act of magic in the reviving Mímir's head. Placing his eye in Mímir's well is what transforms it into active knowledge, expressed as a drink, the mead that is drunk (perhaps only once) by Odin and every morning by Mímir. The latent knowledge of the well (and possibly of Mímir) does not manifest itself until Odin pledges his

eye. Odin's pledge functions as an investment. As a pledge (as opposed to a payment or a sacrifice) the eye is still his and works to his benefit, even though it may be permanently deposited in a foreign place. When Odin consults the Mímir's head, he reaps the knowledge obtained every morning by Mímir.

The decapitation of Mímir transforms him into 'pure intellect' expressed in the physical metaphor of a bodiless head (Schjødtd 2003: 156). If Mímir is the pure intellect, the analytical mind, Odin invests his experiential insight, his eye and what it has seen. In return he gets – through a drink or the words of Mímir – useful knowledge or wisdom upon which he can act. Mímir's head is the fountainhead of thought.

The mead of Mímir's well is used in the same metaphorical way as the mead of poetry, called *Óðrærir* 'mind-mover', which Odin gets or steals from the giants. Snorri tells a perhaps overly elaborate version of this myth in his *Edda* (cf. Frank 1981), but the poem *Hávamál* also alludes to the myth in several places. In stanza 140, Odin describes the effect of obtaining the mead:

**Hávamál 140, 4–6:**

*ok ek drykk of gat  
ins dýra miaðar  
ausinn óðreri.*

and drink I got  
of that precious mead,  
showered with *Óðrærir*.

Obtaining the mead and the knowledge it represents is like being showered, soaked in mind-moving wisdom. The same word, *ausa*, is mentioned in context with Odin's pledge in *Völuspá* 27, 4–7. According to the traditional translation, the *völva* sees a stream gushing forth (*ausaz*) from Odin's pledge in a dreggy or muddy cascade, understood as a reference to Snorri's account in *Gylfaginning* ch. 16 of the three norns showering the Ash of Yggdrasill with muddy waters from the well of Urðr (Nordal 1927: 65). This version of the *völva*'s vision does not give much meaning to the context of the poem, an odd bit of stray information. However, it is possible to translate the lines in a different way, as suggested above.

The liquid in question is described as *aurugr*, full of *aurr*, which denotes the sedimentary gravel or mud at the bottom of a body of water. This reference to the bottom may indicate the ultimate source of whatever is showered. If it is knowledge, it originates from the depths, the chthonic spheres of death and giants. The *völva* knows that Heimdall placed his hearing beneath the clear-wanted, heaven-wanted, holy tree – the world tree that connects the various worlds of the Old Norse cosmos. Heimdall invested his attention in the underworld. Perhaps he discovered something that led to Odin pledging his eye? In any case, the result follows: In a way similar to that of Odin in *Hávamál*, the *völva* describes how she is showered in a cascade of numinous knowledge. She is soaked in wisdom – as a consequence of Odin's pledge. The following stanzas have been left out of the version of the poem found in *Hauksbók*, perhaps because they add no more substance to this mythic theme? They do, however, add more details.

## The Encounter with Odin

In most modern readings of *Völuspá* 28–29, Odin is portrayed as a failure and a loser. This goes back to the (probably Christian-inspired) idea that the event of *Ragnarök* is the fate or the Doom of the gods. According to this reading – starting with Snorri's *Edda* and elaborated all the way up to the present time – the gods caused an irreparable damage to the cosmic

order by committing the cardinal sin of breaking an oath to a giant. Though the effect was slow in coming, it could not be averted. As a consequence, Odin started a ‘mission impossible’ of gathering intelligence about the giants and the coming Doom. He sacrificed (!) his eye in order to get information, but lost an important tool for his quest in the bargain and played his eye into the hands of the enemy: It is Mímir who benefits from it now. On this (incredibly improbable) background the encounter is usually interpreted.

Odin is seen as the ‘doubter’ and the ‘fearful brooder’ filled with dread over the fate of the gods, while the *völva* is ‘gigantic in knowledge’ (Nordal 1927: 17, 65–66). This is why Odin seeks her out while she performs an *útisetá*, a ritual of sitting outdoors. (The original reason for the ritual remains undisclosed.) Odin tries to intimidate her by glaring into her eyes. The all-knowing *völva* refuses the challenge – ‘Why do Ye test me?’ she asks, desperately according to Jan de Vries (1931: 48), but scornfully according to everybody else. To gain an equal footing with the sovereign god of wisdom, she immediately goes on: ‘All I know, Odin,’ and then she reveals her knowledge of his most ‘terrifying secret’, the pledging of his eye (Nordal 1927: 67). What a sorry excuse for a god, indeed!

Apparently this encounter between *völva* and god has proved irresistible to mythographers (perhaps in particular among the ladies?) as demonstrated by these wonderful snippets by Ursula Dronke (1997: 50–51, my underlining):

‘The *völva*’s sardonic tone borders on insult when she tells Óðinn that she knows where he has ‘hidden’ his eye [...]. There is no suggestion in her words (28/7–13) that Óðinn’s act was either laudable or fruitful.’

‘[...] the bitterest variant of the legends of Óðinn’s acquisition of wisdom, the forfeit of his eye [...].’

‘[...] a grotesque image of his futile sacrifice, *veð Valföðrs*, the eye in the well.’

‘Óðinn has given half his sight to gain knowledge, and yet here he comes to the *völva* (28), craving her knowledge and her foresight, because his own fails him.’

‘The attack of his glance she encountered with a taunt of words, the betrayal of his secret.’

‘Mimir can breakfast every morning from that mead, a single sip of which cost you—Óðinn!—your eye. That is the tone of her raillery.’

There is probably no scholar who has not participated to some degree in building this modern myth. I think Gro Steinsland comes closest to explaining the popularity of this theme: ‘He [Odin] does not see as far and as deeply as the *völva* herself.’ (*Han ser ikke så langt og så dypt som volven selv*. Steinsland 1999: 56). A mere human – and a woman, at that! – proves herself superior to an impotent (male) god. Odin’s humiliation becomes complete in stanza 29. He craves her knowledge to such an extent that he pays her rings and jewellery, and finally she gives in and he is given her prophecy (by way of emending the *fe* of the manuscript to *fekk*).

Well, the scorn and the sardonic tone of the *völva*, the fearfulness and impotence of Odin, the fact that his pledge is a terrible secret – or a secret at all – all of it is pure fantasy, of course. There is not a word to that effect in the source material. We need to get back to the basics, which are the texts at hand, cited above.

The *völva* performs an *útisetá*. It is a ritual of sitting outdoors with the distinct purpose of making contact with supernatural beings or the spirits of the dead in order to make them

give you wealth and/or information about the future. In a complete survey of every bit of source material concerning the *útiseti*, Gisli Sigurðsson finds no exception from this pattern and concludes that the *völva* in *Völuspá* obviously performed her ritual in order to contact Odin – not the other way around (Sigurðsson 2001). John McKinnell has reached the same conclusion and suggests that our *völva* reverses the traditional pattern: She is dead, like the giantess in *Baldur's draumar*, and is ‘sitting out’ in order to contact the living god (McKinnell 2005: 98, 200).

The result of the *útiseti* in *Völuspá* also follows the pattern attested by Gisli’s research: Odin ensures her wealth – he chooses (which is not necessarily the same as personally giving) rings and necklace for her – and he provides her with the tools, the spells and spirit helpers, that she needs in order to obtain her visions of the future. Odin is not the seeker of information in this case – he is the giver.

In the opening stanza of the poem, the *völva* declares that she speaks according to the will of Odin. ‘*Vildo at ek, Valföðr, vel fyrtelia...*’ – ‘You, Valfather, will that I well recount...’ What follows through the next twenty-six stanzas, is the history of the mythic past, the memorized knowledge of the *völva*, which she learned from her contact with the ancient giants that nurtured her spirit in the nine worlds ‘below’ – probably similar to the way the giant *Vafþrúðnir* obtained his numinous knowledge (*Vafþrúðnismál* 43). But at this point in the poem, stanza 28, the *völva* has reached her limits. She cannot see the future without help. As she acts on the will of Odin, he is naturally the one to whom she turns for assistance, which she proves able to get.

Odin is the awe-striking god, *yggjungur*, summoned by the *völva*’s ritual. He peers into her eyes, seeking to know ‘What do you people ask of me? Why do you all test me?’ (*fregnið* and *freistið* are in the plural). These are his questions, not hers (Sigurðsson 2001: 10). He might be slightly annoyed, testy – but that is just a guess.

When the *völva* replies, she does not claim to know everything. At least, that is not the most natural translation of ‘*Allt veit ek hvar...*’ which rather means something like ‘I know quite well where...’ (cf. Fritzner). Still, she does claim to know where Odin put his eye and the effect it had on the morning diet of *Mímir*. Why? Why does the *völva* choose to mention in particular her knowledge of Odin’s eye and pledge?

Well, in a situation like that, what a girl needs is a powerful spell to bend the will of the summoned god her way. The *völva* describes the effect of Odin’s pledge because that is what she needs for herself. She knows that when Odin invests his insight in the latent knowledge of the underworld, the kind of knowledge she has recited for the past twenty-six stanzas, it will transform this stored data into useful information on which you can act, plan a strategy, set some goals. By declaring her level of awareness, her knowledge of the spiritual mechanics, she proves herself worthy and thus makes the god accommodate her wish. She is showered in a dreggy cascade of numinous knowledge – because of Odin’s pledge.

The myth of Odin’s pledge tells about Odin’s acquisition of knowledge – a variant of a well-known mythic theme. But he does not gather knowledge just to passively sit on it, like the giants did. That is why *Völuspá* frames the myth within another myth about the encounter between Odin and the *völva*, possibly the grandest example of what Odin actively does with his acquired wisdom. He passes it on.

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