

# The Askr and Embla myth in a comparative perspective

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What makes the Scandinavian myth about the origin of mankind so intriguing is its enigmatic and incomplete character being attested only in two allusive and partly obscure stanzas of the poem *Völuspá*. These stanzas are briefly retold and complemented with new details by Snorri Sturluson in his Prose Edda ch. 9. In addition, the context in which to interpret the *Völuspá* stanzas is far from clear and the first line of stanza 17 seems to need a textual emendation in order to convey a satisfactory meaning. The anthropogonic motif connects human beings with trees or wood, but explicitly so only in the version of Snorri. This mythic theme will be in focus in the present study.

## Problems of interpretation

### *Völuspá*

Let us first summarize the contents of the myth in its two variants and at the same time point out the problems of interpretation. Beginning with *Völuspá*, stanzas 17–18 relate that the gods, the mighty and loving *Æsir*, found Askr and Embla *á landi* “on (the) land”, they had little power and were without destiny (*orloglausa*). They had no breath of life (*and*), no mind (*óðr*) neither blood (*lá*) nor voice (*leti*) nor good appearance (*litu góða*). We should note that the precise meaning of the terms here rendered by “mind”, “blood” and “voice” is disputed<sup>1</sup> and that the palaeography of the manuscripts also allows for the reading *litu góða* “appearance of gods” (Steinsland 1983:81; Mundal 2001:204). We are then told that Odin gave Askr and Embla the breath of life, Hönir gave mind and the third god, called Lóðurr, gave blood, and good appearance (or “the appearance of gods”) but *leti* is not repeated here. A god Lóðurr is otherwise unknown but the name is attested twice in a kenning for Odin as “friend of Lóðurr”.<sup>2</sup> The reading “appearance of gods” in stanza 18 is used by Steinsland (1983 and 2001) to support the presence of an *imago dei* motif in *Völuspá*. According to Kees Sampsonius (2003) this idea cannot be based on stanza 18 since the traditional reading “good appearance” is after all more convincing. On the other hand he suggests with reference to stanza 1 and mankind as *helgar kindir* and *Heimdallar megir* that the *imago dei* motif “was part of the poet’s inventory, but only indirectly”, and that the background should be sought in Christian medieval theology. That background was also used by Meyer (1891:109–115) to explain stanza 18.

It is not stated which form Askr and Embla had when they were discovered by the gods. With reference to stanza 10, which describes how the dwarves produced “manforms”

*manlíkon*, it has been suggested that Askr and Embla already had human shape when found (Nordal 1980:47; Steinsland 1983:86). The place where the gods found them is vaguely indicated as “on (the) land”, *á landi*, which here could mean “on the shore” as seems to be the traditional interpretation (Nordal 1980; Dronke 1997). The meaning “on the ground” is in my opinion also possible, however (cf. also Steinsland 1983:88). There is a connection with the preceding lines where it is said that the *æsir* came “to a house”, *at húsi*; the meaning of the expression here is obscure and has aroused different explanations, none of them entirely convincing.<sup>3</sup>

The setting of stanzas 17 and 18 in *Völuspá* presents a particular problem. The prevailing opinion is that the entire or largest part of the section which stands between stanza 8 (or 9–10) and stanza 17 constitutes an interpolation (e.g. Gering 1927; Jónsson 1932; Nordal 1980; Dronke 1997). Stanza 8 describes the arrival of three mighty giant women and stanzas 9–10 deal with the origin of the dwarves. The section contains mainly a list of dwarves, the so-called Dvergatal, present in both main manuscripts (R and H). It is further argued that the interpolation caused the loss of one or two stanzas that would have been the prelude to the anthropogony described in stanzas 17–18. Admittedly stanza 17 begins abruptly with the words “until three came out of that company”, which in the present context has no clear point of reference. By contrast some scholars propose to retain the Dvergatal (or part of it) as an integral part of the poem (Steinsland 1983:86, 2001:248; Clunies Ross 1994:168; Pálsson 1994:46) albeit from different viewpoints. This has consequences for the interpretation of the anthropogonic stanzas 17–18. Steinsland suggests that the creation of man is accomplished in at least two stages; the first consists of the making of many “man-forms” (*manlíkon*) by the dwarves, next follows the discovery of two of these “man-forms” by the gods who animated them into living beings by endowment of life-generating qualities (Steinsland 1983, 2001). Clunies Ross (1994:59, 181f) emphasizes the parallelism between the creation of dwarves and humans both having their origin in male pseudo-procreation. Some commentators link stanzas 17–18 to the descriptions of the world tree and the emergence of the three norms from the waters of Urðr in 19–20 who determine fate (*lög*), life (*líf*) and destiny (*orlög*) for men (Steinsland 1983, 2001; Dronke 1997; Johansson 2000). They suggest in different ways that this act also includes the first two humans and thus brings about the completion of the creation of mankind. The problem is however that the connection of stanza 20 with what is said about Askr and Embla in stanzas 17–18 is rather loose and more of the associa-

tive nature than forming stages of a coherent anthropogonic myth. The destinies determined by the norms in *Völuspá* are more likely to be interpreted as referring to the newborn children of mankind (cf. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I, 2–3).

Another problem is that the manuscripts read *unz þriár kvómo*, “three” by its feminine form here referring to female beings, which is difficult to reconcile with the appearance of the three *asir* told in the following lines of the same stanza. In general, therefore, scholars agree that the feminine form *þriár* has to be changed into the masculine, *þrír*, taking it to refer to the *asir* mentioned. Still the *því* in *ór því liði* lacks a clear antecedent (cf. Jónsson 1932). Combining the feminine *þriár* and the reading *þussa meyar* of Hauksbók, “until three came, giant maidens”, Else Mundal argues that the creation of new species, dwarves and humans, needs co-operation from both gods and giant women (Mundal 2001).

### *The Prose Edda of Snorri*

The version found in Snorri (*Gylfaginning* ch. 9) may simply be a retelling of *Völuspá* 17–18 with some changes and additions that stem from Snorri’s own hand, as argued by Anne Holtsmark (1964). However, some of the differences between *Völuspá* and the version of Snorri could also be explained in a different way. According to Snorri, the gods, *Bors synir*, were walking along the sea-shore (*at sævurströndu*) and found “two trees” (*tré tvau*); *tré* may here mean “tree trunks” or “wooden pieces”. They picked them up and created human beings from them (*tóku upp tréin ok skopuðu af menn*) by endowing them with qualities that seem to be interpretations of the ones mentioned in *Völuspá* 18. The gods gave them the names Askr and Embla and – what is not in *Völuspá* – they also provided them with clothes (*klæði*). Although the imagination of Snorri in shaping the text cannot entirely be ruled out, the setting of the myth in a coastal environment, the explicit mention of the tree shape or wooden shape of Askr and Embla prior to their transformation into real human beings, as well as the clothes they receive, suggest that, besides *Völuspá*, Snorri knew another variant of the anthropogonic myth (cf. Steinsland 1983:92–100; Clunies Ross 1994:170–172). For the clothing of Askr and Embla reference has been made to stanza 49 of *Hávamál* in which Odin (or the poet) says that he gave his clothes to two wooden men (*trémenn*) on the field. As pointed out by some scholars (Nordal 1980; Steinsland 1983), this may echo an anthropogonic myth; Holtsmark thinks that the *Hávamál* stanza directly influenced Snorri’s version.

### *The names Askr and Embla*

The close relationship between man and tree/wood that underlies the anthropogony in Snorri and probably that of *Völuspá*, is traditionally considered to be expressed also in the names of the first human pair. In creation accounts of other cultures in which a sexually differentiated human pair appears, there may be or not be a correspondence between the name-giving and the material out of which the first humans are shaped. In the older creation story of Genesis (2, 5–25), for example, it is told that when Jahve Elohim made earth and heaven there was neither shrub nor plant on the earth, nor was there any man (Hebr. *’ādām*) to till the ground (Hebr. *’ādāmā*). He then formed the first man *’Ādām* from the dust of the ground (*’āfār min ha-’ādāmā*) and the woman who was built up from the

rib of the man was called “woman” (Hebr. *’iššā*) because she was taken from man (Hebr. *’iš*). By contrast the Iranian creation account describes the first human pair as emerging in tree shape from the earth (see below) but they are called *Māšē* and *Māšāni* (normalized forms) meaning simply “mortal (man)” and “mortal (woman)”. Seen from a comparative perspective it appears that the correlation between names and creation material is sometimes present and sometimes not.

In the Scandinavian anthropogony the correlation seems clear with respect to one member of the pair, even if it be in a figurative sense. Thus, the identification of the name Askr with the ash-tree or ash-wood (*askr*) is generally accepted. The poet of *Völuspá* may further have seen a parallel between the ash *Yggdrasill* as the parent tree and its human branch, the first man Askr, as suggested by Dronke (1997:39). By contrast the etymology of Embla and the symbolism inherent in the juxtaposition of Askr and Embla are disputed, and none of the explanations so far proposed is immediately evident (cf. also de Vries § 578). The background against which to set the myth of the primordial couple is mostly seen to be fire-making rituals in archaic cultures where the technique is to bore with a hard spike of wood into a softer wooden block (e.g. Sperber 1910; Gering 1927; de Vries § 578; Dronke 1997; Josefsson 2001; this is thought to be illustrated in the pictures of the Kivik tomb). The fire-making procedure could be conceived of as simulating sexual action and might have been symbolically enacted in a ritual celebrating the life-giving powers. The idea of the sexual union between Askr and Embla is thus considered to be implied also in the name-giving.

As for the meaning of Embla, three lines of interpretation can be distinguished. Two of them build on the supposition that Embla is derived from a plant name, the third attempts to explain Embla in a different manner. According to some scholars Embla is a feminine diminutive with the suffix *-la* (< *\*ilō*) added to the name of the elm-tree assuming the following development: *\*almilō* > *\*elmla* > *\*emla* > *embla*. This interpretation was first proposed by Sophus Bugge, and is also favoured by Georges Dumézil (2000:61), Dronke (1997:123), Mastrelli (1990:339), and with some hesitation by Steinsland (2001). Dumézil further points to the formation of Eddic mythic proper names like *Hyndla*, *Bestla*, *Beyla* and to the parallelism between the pair *Byggvir-Beyla* and *Askr-Embla*. The second “plant” explanation, suggested first by Sperber in 1910 and followed notably by Gering 1927, Schröder 1931 and Nordal 1980, derives Embla from the Greek word *ampelos* which denotes a twining plant, usually the vine; Sperber connects it with a woman’s name *Embila* found in an eleventh-century Old High German source. The underlying image, it is argued, is that of the woman climbing and twining herself around the man, the erect and stout ash-trunk. This explanation conveys the impression of a commonplace rather than a reality in the text.

Other commentators do not take Embla as a tree or plant name but propose different etymologies as part of the symbolic context in which to put both Askr and Embla. For Karl G. Johansson (2000) they are considered to represent, on the microcosm level, the male and female elements involved in the creation of mankind. On the macrocosm level we have *Yggdrasill* and the Well of *Urðr*. Embla corresponding to the Well of *Urðr* could be derived from a Latin word with the root *am-* (as in ON

*emberi* from *amphora*) and mean “water-pot” thus alluding to its cosmic counterpart. This etymological track is followed also by Henning Kure (2002) in a study of the kenning “*emblas ask*” (*af emblu aski*) in a *lausavísa* of Egill Skallagrímsson. Kure suggests that in the anthropogonic context the names *askr* and *embla* refer to the sexual organs of man and woman. *Embla* may be a feminine variant form of ON *ampli* (small water-pot) from Latin *ampulla* and mean “vagina” whereas *Askr* would allude to the male organ (in the kenning used by Egill the words stand for “sheath” and “sword” respectively). Seeing in *Askr* and *Embla* two wooden pieces that represent the two halves of wood used for fire-making, Gunlög Josefsson (2001) explains the name of *Embla* as “fire- or smokemaker” assuming the derivation: *embla* < \**emla* < \**eim+la*.

Allusions to possible anthropogonic myths in which the origin of humans is associated with trees have been sought in sources other than *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*. The survival of Liv and Livthrasir during the great winter (*fimbulvetr*) in “Hoddmimir’s wood” (*Vafþrúðnismál* stanzas 44–45) was linked by F R Schröder (1931) to the idea of the world tree (Hoddmimir = Yggdrasill) as parent for the first humans, but it is far from obvious that the passage concerns the creation of mankind. Instead we should interpret the stanzas in the light of similar survival myths, eschatological or not, that tell how a few humans are saved through divine intervention from a catastrophe of cosmic proportions (e.g. the flood in Genesis 6 or the coming great winter in the Avesta, Vidēvdād 2) and then give rise to new generations of men. The notice of Tacitus (*Germania* ch. 39) that the Semnonians derive the origins (*initia*) of their tribe from a sacred grove has been considered to mean that the Semnonians descended from trees (Preller in Meyer 1891:15) and is also referred to as a parallel to the Scandinavian anthropogony by Steinsland 2001. The statement of Tacitus is open to other interpretations, however, and refers probably to the formation of the tribe and not to an anthropogonic myth. On the contrary the analogy between humans and trees that underlies many *kenningar* for man and woman may ultimately go back to creation myths describing the origin of man from trees (Mastrelli 1990).

## The comparative evidence and its relevance

When interpreting the *Askr* and *Embla* myth commentators have referred to similar accounts in other cultures, ranging from Hesiod in ancient Greece to the Sioux Indians of North America in the early nineteenth century. Here the focus will be on the stories and allusions pertaining to the origin of man from tree or wood that have been preserved, though sparsely, in mythic traditions of ancient Europe and western Asia, mainly among Indo-European-speaking peoples.

In his story of the five generations of men (*Works and Days* 109–201) Hesiod reports that Zeus created the third generation from the ash-tree, *ἐκ μελιῶν*, as a big and mighty race of men (*genos*; 143–145). This statement has received particular attention because of its relevance for explaining the name of the man in the Scandinavian anthropogony (cf. de Vries § 578; Steinsland 1983 and 2001; Dronke 1997).

Although Hesiod’s lines reflect the idea of man’s origin from tree or wood, his account is not an anthropogonic myth in the true sense of the word. Such a myth telling the origin of the

primordial couple from a tree or plant is found in the Iranian tradition and it has been referred to as a parallel to the *Askr* and *Embla* myth (Mannhardt 1875:7–8; Rydberg 1889:69–71; Schröder 1931; Ström 1967; Steinsland 2001). Since the commentators who have paid attention to this parallel lack first-hand knowledge of the Iranian texts and have in addition misunderstood some details, it may be useful to look at the Iranian myth in some detail. The myth is known through religious writings in Middle Iranian language compiled in the ninth century of our era, the most important are the *Bundahišn* (ch. 14) and the *Selections of Zādspram* ch. 3, but the compilers of these two variant accounts draw on more ancient sources which they sometimes cite and which belonged to the parts of the Avesta (itself transmitted in an Old Iranian language) that were lost. The Iranian anthropogony is part of a long cosmogonical process in which the six basic elements created by the supreme deity Ahura Mazdā – the sky, the waters, the earth, the primordial plant, the primordial bovine and the primordial man – play an important role. When the Evil powers attack the pure and perfect creation, these six basic entities try to resist in different ways and in so doing they help to continue and to differentiate the creation. For example, when the Evil Spirit brought poison to the primordial plant (the Iranian word *urwar* also means “tree”) it straightway withered but one of the divine beings took the plant pounded it and mixed it with water. Thereupon the sky god Tištrya dispersed it, letting it rain over the whole earth on which grew thousands and thousands of different species of plants and trees. Similarly, when the Evil powers attack the primordial man, Gayōmar, he emits his seed before dying, which is purified through the light of the sun. One part was received by the earth, conceived of as a goddess (*Spandarmad*) where it remained for forty years until Mašē and Mašānē grew up in the form of a single plant called *rewās* which had a stem with fifteen leaves. The Iranian word *rewās* is conventionally identified with the rhubarb plant, but it is clear from the description that it has the appearance of a tree. Another passage of the *Bundahišn* explicitly says that Mašē and Mašānē grew up in the form of a tree (*draxt*). The two were joined together having the same height and shape, and it is said that one could not distinguish the man from the woman. In the middle a divine light, the *xwarrah*, shone forth. Then they were transformed from tree-shape to human beings and the divine light entered spiritually into them and manifested itself as the life-giving and immortal element in man (*ruwān*).

There are some other traditions on the origin of man from trees which deserve interest but have received little if any notice in the discussion of the *Askr* and *Embla* myth.<sup>4</sup> A second-century Greek source enumerating briefly various anthropogonies reports the following on the Phrygians in Asia Minor:

The Phrygian Korybantēs were the first ones whom the sun saw grow up in the form of trees. (δενδροφυεῖς ἀναβλαστάνοντας; Hippolytus, *Elenchos* V, 7)

The Arcadians of the Peloponnese were already in Antiquity known to have preserved many ancient traditions which had been lost by other Greek tribes. As Plutarch (*Quest. Rom.* 286a) and a Hellenistic author Lykophron (*Alexandra* 480)

tell us, the Arcadians considered themselves to be descended from the oak-tree. Plutarch speaks about the kinship of the Arcadians with the oak and says further that they are thought to have been the first men sprung from the earth even as the oak was the first plant. Lykophron uses the expression “offspring from the oak” (ἔγγονοι δρυός). Arkas, the eponymous hero of the Arcadians, had as wife Dryas, a name formed on the Greek word for oak, δρῦς (Paus. 8,4,2). The idea of man’s origin from the oak goes back to the very beginnings of Greek mythic tradition. Both Homer and Hesiod refer to the idea allusively in proverbial sayings about “the oak and the rock” (cf. Nagy 1990:181–201). Penelope addressing the disguised Odysseus alludes to this anthropogonic myth with the words:

For surely you are not from the oak, as in the old stories, or from the rock. (*Odyssey* XIX, 163; transl. Nagy 1990)

The Finnic *runo*-songs recorded in the nineteenth century preserve some rare allusions to an ancient anthropogonic myth. A hero is ploughing furrows around a tuft or tree-stump which splits up and then two male children come out or grow forth (Kuusi and Honko 1983). Finnic mythology also knows the creation of man from clay (Siikala 1987). A close investigation of Latvian and Lithuanian folklore and folksongs (*dainas*) may yield further material (cf. Ruke-Dravina 1989), the more so since tree-cult with its associated symbolism seems to have been prominent in the pre-Christian religion of the Balts.

Determining the relevance of the comparative material presented above for the study of the Askr and Embla myth, we must first address the question of its specificity. Myths on the origin of mankind from trees or wood seem to be particularly connected with ancient Europe and Indo-European-speaking peoples of Asia Minor and Iran. By contrast the cultures of the Near East show almost exclusively the type of anthropogonic stories that derive man’s origin from clay, earth or blood by means of a divine creation act (cf. Bottéro and Kramer 1989; Luginbühl 1992). The relevance is further related to the way we explain the similarities between the Scandinavian myth and the comparative material. Different explanation models can be proposed. The similarities may result from (a) diffusion by cultural contacts, (b) genetic relationship and (c) independent development (the theme being considered as a *universal*). We may argue any of these models but we should be aware of the purpose for which we collect parallels.

The use of comparative materials raises many theoretical and methodological problems that cannot be dealt with in detail here. However, some remarks on the general issue of transcultural comparisons are appropriate in particular when we are faced with the interpretation of a religious tradition that has come down to us only fragmentarily, as is the case with ancient Scandinavian religion. Drawing parallels may serve various purposes:

- 1 to discern influence from one tradition upon another.
- 2 to reconstruct a common prototype or to establish some sort of genetic relationship.
- 3 to gain a better understanding of the particular myth or phenomenon with which we are primarily concerned.

- 4 to support the ancient origin of myths, ideas or rituals that are poorly or late attested in the religion studied by pointing out correspondences in earlier and more complete sources from other religions.

## A new interpretation of the Askr and Embla myth

The comparative material presented above may help to bring out a new aspect of the anthropogonic stanzas of *Völuspá* which has not previously been discussed. As already noted, *Völuspá* does not state what shape Askr and Embla had when discovered by the gods. Snorri’s remark that the gods found *tré tvau* interpreted as “two tree-trunks” or “two bits of wood” is mostly taken to apply also to *Völuspá* (e.g. de Vries § 578; Holtsmark 1964:62; Nordal 1980:46; Steinsland 1983 and 2001; Polomé 1987; Dronke 1997:122). This is further interpreted as meaning that Askr and Embla existed in the form of two pieces of lifeless wood, be it tree-trunks drifted ashore (Nordal; Polomé; Dronke) or manufactured wooden figures or pillars (Holtsmark; Steinsland). It needs to be re-emphasized, however, that *Völuspá* on this point also allows for other interpretations (cf. Johansson).

The parallels to the Askr and Embla myth adduced by commentators are used in a general manner, comparisons being limited to a mention that the idea of man’s origin from tree (or wood) is found in other traditions too. Sometimes a short summary of the contents of the parallel text is given and a few similarities pointed out. The comparison can be more specific and fruitful than this, however. The Indo-European myths to which I have drawn attention are held together by the common theme of man’s origin from trees. The way this comes about is in the Iranian and Phrygian traditions thought of as a growing up from the ground in the shape of trees. In the Greek tradition this is not explicitly stated but it is nevertheless clear that the oak or the ash from which primordial men sprang were regarded as living trees not as pieces of wood. A similar idea may lie behind stanzas 17–18 of *Völuspá*, which we have to regard as mere allusions to a more complete myth.

The statement on the Phrygians as the first humans whom the sun saw grow up in tree-shape summarizes in a few words a more elaborate creation myth. This becomes clear from the context which is a list in form of headings of various anthropogonic accounts, among them the Phrygian one, drawn by Hippolytus to show the heresy of the Gnostic sect he deals with. The mention of the sun looking at the earth is not just a rhetorical figure, it refers to a decisive moment in the cosmogonical process when the rays of the sun first gave light and life to the soil and helped to bring forth human beings in a vegetative form, as also narrated by the Iranian myth. Returning to *Völuspá*, we have to link, I suggest, the cosmic event described in stanza 4 to what is allusively told in stanza 17 of Askr and Embla. In primordial times, according to stanza 4, the sun shining on the stony ground brought forth green plants:

Sól skein sunnan  
 á salar steina  
 þá var grund gróin  
 grónom lauki

The light and warmth of the sun did not only produce the first plants but also the first human couple who grew up like two trees *á landi*, on the bare ground newly arisen from the sea. Divine intervention then turned them, as in the Iranian myth, into the full forms of man and woman. The anthropogonic myth to which *Völuspá* alludes may thus reflect mythic ideas on the origin of mankind from trees that were part of a common Indo-European heritage.

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## Notes

- 1 The most important interpretations are listed here. For *óðr* we have “tænkende sjæl” (Finnur Jónsson), “vernunft, geist” (Gering), “inspired mental activity” (Polomé 1987); “mental faculties or voice” (La Farge and Tucker); “geist, upphetsning, háftighet i rörelsen” (Josefsson). The word *lá* is interpreted as “lebenswärme” by Gering, as “blood” by Holtsmark 1964:62 and Mundal 2001; both interpretations are discarded by Samplonius and Dronke. *lati* is either taken as “stemme” (Jónsson, Nordal) or “das wechselnde mienenspiel, die geberden” (Gering).
- 2 *Lóðurs vinr* is used by Eyvindr skaldaspillir in the tenth century and in the *Isendingadrápa* of Haukr Valdísarson 1 in the twelfth century; different identifications have been proposed, ranging from Loki (Gering) to a fertility god of the *Vanir* (Polomé 1987).
- 3 Bugge (cited from Nordal 1980) saw in the expression a reference to the house in which Ask and Embla would live; Gering proposed to emend *húsi* into *hími* (“sea”); according to Nordal (1980:46), these two explanations are the only ones worth considering. However, others are equally possible, *at húsi* may indicate more vaguely the place where the dwarves produced their *manlíkon* (Holtsmark 1942:18; Steinsland 1983:86); *hús* may refer to the world, *Miðgarðr* (Clunies Ross 1994:169) or stand “proleptically for the earth that is about to be dwelt in” (Dronke 1997:122).
- 4 Mannhardt 1875:7 is, as far as I know, the first one to mention this source in connection with the Scandinavian myth (Gering 1927 has it from him).

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