



The late Iron Age Worldview and the Concept of 'Utmark'

Our concern here is the 'utmark' or outfield, the outer areas of the farmstead, cultivated and explored by men. It is not the empirically experienced outfield that will be in focus, but rather the ideas and symbolism created around it. There are no obvious sources that give us immediate access to the ideology of the outfield as such. The question is whether it will be acceptable to consider the cosmological worldview of the Viking period as a doorway to the ideas of the outfield.

The cosmology of the Viking period contains a mythological domain that may be characterised as a sort of 'outfield'. Within the mythological texts, the outer sphere of cosmos is called *Utgard*, 'the home/farm outside', the areas outside the fence. The question is whether the ideas connected to that cosmological domain may be transferred to the concepts of outfield or 'utmark' surrounding the farmstead.

In the study of the history of religion, it is commonly assumed that there are parallels between the cultural classifications on the cosmological and the empirical level. This presupposition is, however, a hypothesis that has to be further investigated. This broader task is not going to occupy us as such; it is a rather huge challenge that has to be handled in an interdisciplinary way. I will concentrate on the narrower question, whether it is possible to argue that there were some sort of parallels between the ideas of the outfield on the microcosmic level and *Utgard* on the macrocosmic level. The question presupposes that there is a sort of discernible worldview of the Viking period. As we will see, it is not easy to present a comprehensive and universally acceptable picture of the pre-Christian cosmology.

The pre-Christian worldview

Sources for the Norse pre-Christian cosmology are mainly the mythological texts, the Eddaic poems, the scaldic poetry and the learned *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson of the thirteenth century. It has been taken for granted that these sources mould the contours of a pre-Christian cosmology, and are reliable representations of the Viking period mentality.

Scholars working within the field of the history of religion usually refer to a basic, fairly well-accepted model of Viking period cosmology. From a multitude of source information, a circular model where one domain encloses the other in three concentric circles seems to be discernible. In other fields, however, the interpretation of the worldview of the Viking period points in other directions. It is my impression that the structuralistic way of interpretation has dominated the interdisciplinary field for some decades now, and that the hegemony of this school is still existent. But let us first of all take a look at a model of cosmology currently accepted in the field of history of religion.

The cosmos, created by the gods in primeval time, has a marked centre called *Asgard*, 'the home/farm of the gods'. This is the holy centre of the cosmos, from where energies, order and will are constantly radiating towards its peripheries. Around the holy abode in the centre, the territory of man stretches out, it is called *Midgard*, 'the home/farm in the Middle'. The name of this domain points to important conditions of human beings. The outermost circle is *Utgard*, 'the home/farm outside'. This is where the giants and other chaotic beings live, forming a counter-culture to the gods and their world.

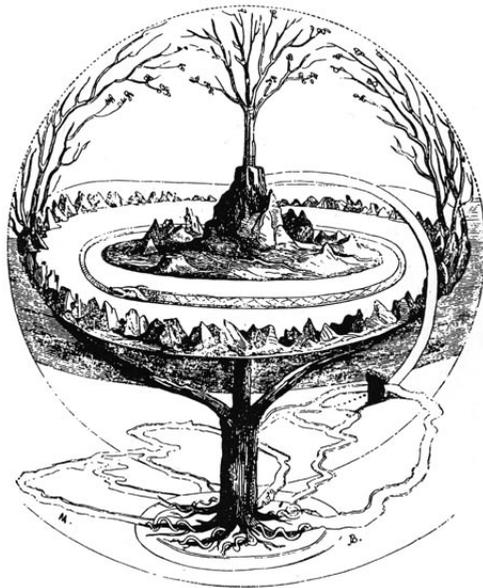


Figure 1. Drawing made by the Danish professor Finn Magnussen, transferred by the French author Paul Gaimard in 1840. It corresponds fairly well to the modern interpretation of the pre-Christian worldview. Hastrup 1990:27.

Cosmology is a kind of mental map of the world. The three encircled cosmological domains form a huge, horizontal, flat plane. On this plane, the gods are constantly travelling, and any intervention into *Utgard* is always filled with great dangers, the gods have, from time to time, to cross the borders of *Asgard*.

Surely, the Viking period man also experienced cosmos as a vertical plane, as up and down, as height and depth. The mythological vertical axis of cosmos is primarily expressed in the symbol of the world tree, Yggdrasil, which grows in the middle of the world. The roots of the world tree stretch down into the underworld, where the powers of destiny, the *norns*, live. The trunk of the tree rises through the domain of human beings; its branches reach high up into the sky. Yggdrasil is constantly nourished by water from the well of the *norns*. The world tree may be seen as an ecological symbol of unity, the tree in the middle of the world bringing nourishment to the whole cosmos. Along the two cosmological axes, the horizontal one and the vertical one, the complex history of cosmos is unfolding, of which several stories are reflected in mythological sources.

Structuralistic models and some critical views upon them

In recent decades, analyses of Old Norse mythology have attracted attention especially from the field of social anthropology or ethnology. For the most part, it has been structuralistically inspired scholars who have worked on this topic. One can draw a common thread of thought from the Russian scholar Aron Gurevich's works in the late 1960s, through Eleazar Meletinskij in the 1970s to the Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup and her elaboration of a structuralistic analysis of Norse cosmology in the early 1980s. My impression is that the work of Kirsten Hastrup has had a lasting impact on the scholarly literature, perhaps particularly in the field of archaeology.

The structuralistic analysis of Norse cosmology was criticised by the Danish historian of religion Jens Peter Schjødt in 1990. To some extent, the Australian philologist Margaret Clunies Ross followed up this criticism in 1994. Still, it seems that these objections have not been noted, and have not led to any further debate worth mentioning.

Aron Gurevich (1969) took for granted that there is a correspondence between the cosmological conceptions of the Norse culture and the empirical, human world. In his article, he sees the farmstead as a prototypical model of the universe. The mythological contrast between *Midgard* and *Utgard* is paralleled by the concepts *innangards* and *utangards*, 'inside the fence' and 'outside the fence', concepts which contain both a territorial and a legal meaning. The single farmstead with its infields and outfields was comprehended as a limited, localised 'universe'. Topographical space was at the same time religious and mythological space. Though Gurevich is looking for a system, he is mindful of the problem of source criticism. For instance, he points out some of Snorri Sturluson's obviously erroneous assumptions.

The ideas of Aron Gurevich were elaborated upon by Eleazar Meletinskij (1973). The title of his two-part essay in *Journal of symbolic anthropology* is characteristic: 'Scandinavian mythology as a system.' Meletinskij argues that the structuralistic method of Claude Lévi-Strauss may be applied to Norse mythology. The semantic oppositions life-death, north-south, nature-culture, chaos-cosmos, familiar-foreign, land-water, male-female and so on, are in his opinion very well suited for the Norse material.

Meletinskij's viewpoints and conclusions were accepted by Kirsten Hastrup and used in her own research in several articles from the 1980s and onward. But strangely, a number of the reservations Gurevich made as early as the 1960s concerning source criticism have disappeared along the way. Here, I will refer to Kirsten Hastrup's article 'Cosmology and society in medieval Iceland', first published in 1981, later in the book *Island of anthropology* (1990). In the common structuralistic way, Hastrup assumes a basic division of cosmos into two parts.

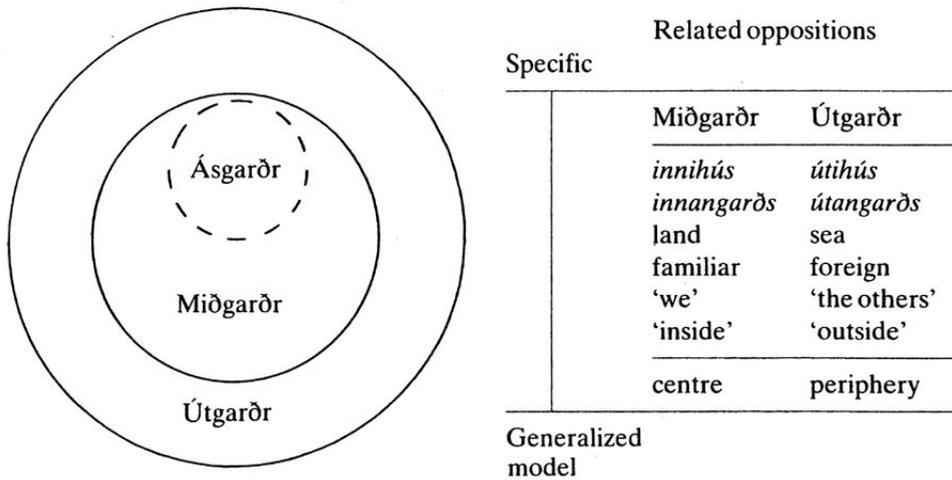


Figure 2. The cosmological model of Kirsten Hastrup. Hastrup 1990:29.

To be able to work with two poles in the cosmology, Hastrup has to unite the abodes of gods and human beings into one: *Midgard*. This domain is seen as opposed to *Utgard*, where giants and forces of chaos dwell. This basic division of the world into an opposition between cosmos and chaos, order and disorder, is paralleled in the microcosms of the farmstead, where *innangards*, the *inside*, is seen as the opposite of *utangards*, the *outside*. Topographically, the contrast can be seen in the opposition between land and water. Hastrup even argues for the same twofold basic opposition in the social sphere, in the ideas about *us* and *the others*.

Coexisting with this horizontal model, Hastrup also notes a vertical model, symbolised by the world-tree, Yggdrasil. Along the vertical line between 'up' and 'down' she places the gods and the powers. The gods' domain is in the top of the tree, in heaven, Odin's place, for example, is in the top of the world tree, together with the eagle residing there. Humans have their place in the middle of Yggdrasil's trunk; while the norns, the snake and the abode of Hel with the dead are placed at the roots of the tree.

In this way, the distinction between 'up' and 'down' is laden with value, while it simultaneously contains a gender opposition: male gods have their place 'up there', in heaven, while female powers of death have their place 'down there', in the underworld.

The world-ash, Yggdrasill

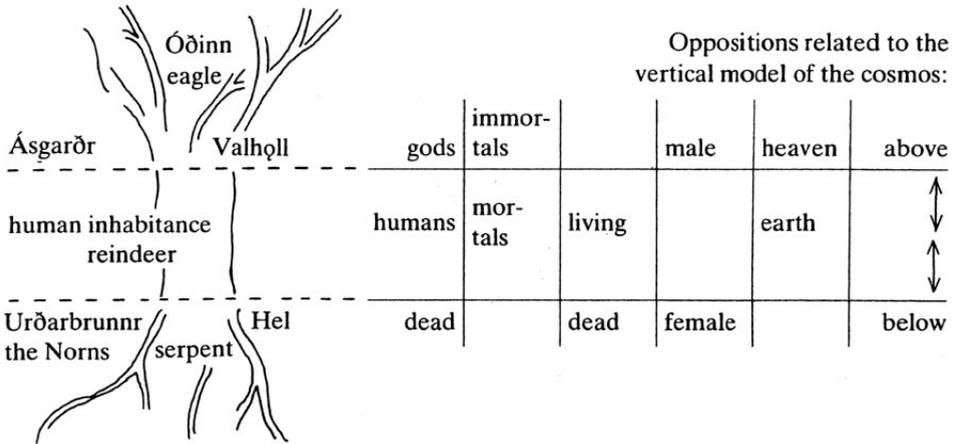


Figure 3. Kirsten Hastrup's model for related oppositions. Hastrup 1990:31.

The feminine as such becomes linked to the underworld, to death and darkness.

Testing analytical models is interesting, but we ought to remember that a model may become a sort of straitjacket. For a historian of religion, Hastrup's binary analytical scheme turns out to be very problematic. Some of our objections concern source criticism, others concern the interpretation of central mythological themes.

As a structuralist, Hastrup sticks to a binary division of the world, she places gods and humans into one compartment. This does not, however, agree with the textual sources that all express a basic difference between gods and human beings. As a result of the mixture of gods and human beings in Hastrup's interpretation, the gods lose their position as the very centre of the world. The necessary communication between human beings and gods is eliminated. Thus, the importance of the sacred places in the empirical landscape, somewhere delimited as a holy sphere, is lost as well. The very name *Midgard*, as a domain 'between' the holy centre of the world and the opposite forces in the outerworld, becomes meaningless when the primary abode, *Asgard*, is diminished.

The vertical axis along Yggdrasil is not satisfactorily interpreted either. Placing *Asgard* and the gods in heaven simply does not fit. The ethnologist builds this model, without looking to any source criticism, on Snorri's late information about the pre-Christian worldview. No scaldic or Eddaic poem places the world of the gods in heaven. Only Snorri does so, in his thirteenth-century *Edda*. We then have to ask whether the holiness of Heaven was something that arrived in the North with Christianity.

Neither the polarity between male and female, placed 'up' and 'down' respectively, seems to agree with what the sources tell us about male and female powers. I myself cannot see why the female powers should be confined to the underworld. When mythology places the norns beneath the roots of the world tree, it does not mean that the powers of fate belong to the sphere of death.

Indeed, it seems rather problematic to read a deeper code of meaning into the vertical axis. Of course, humans experienced the cosmic space both as a flat plane and as a vertical space, but according to the sources that reflect the Viking period mentality, the vertical axis does not seem to contain any deeper, hierarchic meaning. Heaven was empty, for the Viking period the sky was just a territory of transport, for gods as well as for other beings. We may conclude that the horizontal, circular cosmic plane is the primary in the Norse worldview of the late Iron Age.

One conclusion is that the synchronic, structuralistic analysis does not fit the sources. A source critical, historical and hermeneutic perspective on the textual sources is necessary.

The structuralistically inspired model of Norse cosmology which was presented by, among others, Kirsten Hastrup, has been criticised by Jens Peter Schjødt and to a certain degree by Margaret Clunies Ross. Schjødt (1990) maintains that the vertical axis of Norse mythology was not imbued with meaning and symbolism until Christianity brought a new cosmology to the North. It is in the Christian framework that 'up' and 'down' become terms laden with value. Therefore it is not reasonable to place the pagan gods in heaven, as Hastrup does. Though his research is structuralistically inspired, Schjødt warns us that the structuralistic model may become a compulsory system because it so easily ignores historical developments. Source criticism is a very necessary element.

Margaret Clunies Ross (1994) maintains that Hastrup's mainly structuralistic analytic model is so simple that it blurs the variety of Norse cosmology rather than clarifies it. Ross regards the sources as historical entities when she argues that the horizontal, circular cosmic plane is primary in the Norse worldview. She thinks that Norse cosmology is more appropriately analysed in connection with social hierarchies in the worlds of gods and humans. Clunies Ross agrees with Hastrup in viewing the opposition between male and female as a basic cosmological opposition between superior male creative power and the female connection to chthonic forces and death. In my view, this too, is an oversimplification of what the sources tell us about the spheres of influence of male and female powers.

The limits of this paper do not permit any discussion of the basic assumptions of structuralism itself, namely that human beings will, independent of time and space, always think in binary oppositions, and that the same basic oppositions may be found underlying every mythology, every social system, no matter how different they may seem. Here, I will only briefly call attention to the fact that some researchers in the field of society and culture are not convinced by the basic theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973).

Thus far, we must conclude that Norse cosmology and its world of forces are so diverse that no one has yet succeeded in developing a fully satisfactory, simple model of the pre-Christian worldview. So far, the circular, horizontal model where one 'home' encloses the other in concentric circles, with energies radiating outwards from the cosmic centres from where the gods are situated and to the outmost spheres, seems to me to be the best illustration of the complex Norse worldview.

What can we say about the mental experience of the outfield?

If we follow the structuralists, the outfield stands opposed to the infield as chaos does to the cosmos. The symbolic values of the outfield then turn out to be darkness, death, female powers, anti-life and destruction. If we, on the other hand, take a hermeneutic approach to the mythology and the texts on a source-critical basis, this conclusion turns out to be completely wrong.

If we assume possible parallels between macrocosm and microcosm, *Utgard* and the outfield, the outfield is on the contrary filled with potential resources. We have to take a look at the mythology presented in the texts, at the world of powers and the activity within the domains of the gods and the giants as well.

The pre-Christian gods were neither almighty nor all-knowing. As creators in primeval time they had created a world according to their own will and vision, but as a matter of fact they struggled hard to maintain the cosmic balance necessary to secure the future of the world. Experience showed that the cosmos was full of different powers, not only gods. It was, in particular, the giants who were the opponents of the gods. But – and that is an important lesson from Norse mythology – the antagonism between gods and giants cannot be explained as a parallel to the Christian dichotomy between God and the Devil, good and evil, light and darkness. In a way, life was much more complicated. The gods needed the giants, their knowledge, their competence and their powerful objects, just as the giants for their part desired objects belonging to the gods. Gods and giants interacted constantly, they exchanged objects, they celebrated great cultic feasts together, for instance an annual drinking party at the abode of Ægir, the sea-giant. We may just remind ourselves that the huge cauldron in which the gods used to brew the holy drink, the ale, was kept by the giant Hymir during the rest of the year (*Hymiskviða*).

Though the interaction between gods and giants is partly peaceful, lives may be at stake. Thor is constantly going east with his hammer, ready to keep giants at bay so they will not become too many and thus disturb the balance of cosmos. He is also a short-sighted spitfire who easily lets anger and macho-temper carry him away. Men knew this, and were even able to laugh at Thor, the very guardian of the cosmos. Odin is a more cunning figure; he gains the love of giantesses, steals the golden mead from the mountain as well as the art of mastering runes from the giants.

It may be in this context of interaction between gods and giants that we should interpret that which the literary sources tell us about cultic places related to female giants. A parallel is the mythical story about Njorðr spending one half of the year high up in the mountains, in the home of his wife, the giantess Skaði.

We could go on listing fragments of myths that show how essential the contact with *Utgard* was for the gods. Interaction and exploration are keywords to understand these stories. The mythologies of the ruling families of Norway contain the same insights. Both the earls at Lade and the kings of the Ynglinga family descend from a sacred couple where the husband and the wife are of very different origins. The prototypic ruler is the offspring of a god and a giantess. The Ynglinga kings seem to descend from Freyr and Gerðr, the earls of Lade from Odin and Skaði.

It is the crossing of borders, the negotiations and agreements, the mixture, which is the clue. The energy and the potential for life seem to lie at the crossing-points between *Asgard* and *Utgard*.

The same wisdom is the basis for all human activity concerning the outfield. The outfield had resources to exploit, although not easily uncovered. Great efforts and skill would be required to bring them into the light of day and safely home. Therefore, one had to consort with the powers of the outfield just as carefully as one consorted with the gods of the infield, through rites and magical undertakings.

A number of more recent sources tell about rites and cults in the outfield: to giants, land spirits, dwarfs, elves and so on. These customs and beliefs lived on for a long time, almost into our own times (see for instance Bø 1987). How can we explain this continuity, despite the change of religion in the late Viking period? An explanation may be that the Church focused on the struggle against paganism as a struggle against the pagan gods. The pagan pantheon, Odin, Thor, Freyr and Freyja and the rest of the gods were first demonised and later on euhemerised by the Church. Both strategies were used to deprive the pagan gods of their power. The more unspecified collectives of powers dwelling in the outer domains of the old cosmos were mostly left alone, as these minor powers did not threaten the God of the Christian Church. The Church concentrated on eradicating the official pagan sacrifices and the public worship. Thus, giants and land spirits, dwarfs and elves, which were gradually transformed into wood nymphs, fairies and pixies, survived throughout the centuries.

Norwegian folklore reflects an extensive tradition of mountain dairy farming (Solheim 1952). A huge corpus of folk traditions tells about the dangerous outfield and the lure and seduction by the powers that dwell there, the *hulder*, the elven people and so on. Rites and magical undertakings were enacted on the road to the summer farm in the mountains, like pouring milk and butter on offering stones for 'the other people'. 'The other people' had their own settlements, their own farms with shining fat cattle. The *hulder*, or wood nymph, tried to seduce young men, the elven king sought to marry a human girl. These are transformed versions of the old mythological tales about the wealthy giants. 'The other people' were not totally negative. Lots of gold waited in the mountains for those who were brave enough! Not until Henrik Ibsen's drama *Peer Gynt*, with *The Woman in Green* and 'Dovregubben', this rich popular religious complex of folk tales becomes wholly negative. We can say that with *Peer Gynt* the Christian dualistic view of the world and its powers triumphs. But that is another story. To sum up, there seems to be a lasting continuity in ideas and conceptions about the outfield in Nordic culture. Is this something peculiar to the North, or is it a common European tradition?

European cosmology in the Middle Ages

The Swedish archaeologist Anders Andrén published in 1999 an interesting article where he outlines the cosmology of the Middle Ages and concludes that the Christian worldview on the Continent must have differed from its counterpart in Scandinavia.

Here, Andrén is not occupied with the ideological ideas that one uses to underline the vertical and hierarchic worldview of the Christian church, in sharp contrast to the horizontal pre-Christian one. In this article, Andrén instead focuses upon the popular religion and the local society and the spatial, value-laden education that Christianity brought into European culture.

Andrén argues that local landscape was moulded according to the Christian cosmology. The church was situated in the middle of the new cosmology, symbolically centred upon the altar and the Utopia, the heavenly Jerusalem. Around the church, a new conception of space grew forth, graded from the centre to the periphery. The landscape was divided into zones with higher or lower degrees of holiness, as can be seen from the peace laws in the Scandinavian provincial codes. The laws acted as a means by which to discipline people spatially. The place *where* a criminal act was committed influenced heavily upon the punishing fine. The church with its choir and altar was the most sacred place. The same perspective was applied to the farmstead: infields and meadows were parts of the sacred landscape. The forests and the outfields, further away, did not have the same degree of holiness.

Andrén assumes that the European picture of holiness and landscape cannot correspond to conditions in Scandinavia, where economic gains from the outfield, like fur, fish, iron, and timber, were essential to permanent settlement. There is rather reason to believe that traces of pre-Christian cosmology, which was also value-laden, but on different terms than the Christian cosmology, lived on in Scandinavia into the Middle Ages. From my field of study, I agree with this assumption.

Utgard and the outfield were not emptied of holiness like the periphery in the Christian cosmology. On the contrary, the outer sphere was loaded with power and energy – but it was another power than that of the gods. Prosperity had to be taken out of the hands of the giants, transformed and brought into the domains of gods and humans.

The challenge

Consequently, the challenge we are facing is the question of whether there is any correspondence between the imaginative cosmology and the lived, everyday life. Does the cosmology really fit? And what about the problems of regional variations of landscapes when it comes to the empirical exploitation and the shaping of imaginary worlds?

It seems to me that the cosmological, mental conceptions of *Utgard* have parallels in the conceptions about the outfield. Thus, the myths and the everyday practices seem to have corresponded in some ways. However, as long as we have not undertaken a cross-disciplinary research on the topic, this hypothesis can neither be verified nor refuted. This conference makes it clear that we have some work to do together in the field of mental cosmology and the empirical use of the landscape in the Iron Age.

Summary

The article discusses whether it is possible to gain information about late Iron Age ideas around the outfield or 'utmark' by exploring the cosmology of the Viking period, as transferred in Norse literary sources. A primary task of the contribution is a discussion against the commonly accepted view upon pre-Christian cosmology, as it is interpreted by structuralistic scholars from Aron Gurevich to Kirsten Hastrup.

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