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CENTER VS. PERIPHERY: THE STRUCTURE OF THE GERMANIC COSMOS

This article was intended as a study of cosmography in Anglo-Saxon epic and mythological poetry; however, upon reading K. Wanner's '*Off-Center: Considering Directional Valences in Norse Cosmography*' (Wanner 2009), I decided to narrow it down to discussing the central statements of Mr. Wanner's paper. This seems to me a good vantage point for recreating a model of the Germanic Cosmos.

Mr. Wanner bases the starting arguments of his article on the premise that the Norse 'world model' may be presented in two ways. The first one, stemming from observations made by A. Ya. Gurevich (Гуревич 1984), incorporates a concentric model with Midgard in the center of the cosmic structure both vertically and horizontally. The ocean and the serpent Jörmungandr enclose it, forming a circular boundary beyond which lie the other 'worlds' of the horizontal plane.

The second model, suggested by Mr. Wanner in the first part of his paper, considers the horizontal plane of the Norse world model as an expanse of space divided across the middle by an 'inner' boundary separating the world of gods and men (located roughly in the west) from that of the giants and monsters (primarily in the north-east). The article argues that the name 'Midgard' denotes this boundary rather than the space it delineates. Thus, the article concludes, the pagan cosmology of the North essentially reflects the physical and political reality of

Scandinavia as it was perceived by its inhabitants: settled by familiar Germanic tribes in the west and bordering on the unknown and dangerous to the east.

The first question under consideration here is the relation between the physical reality of the world and its limits, on the one hand, and the conceptualization of the world as a mythological and psychological reality, on the other. Which is primary and which secondary? Do we structure our cosmos on the basis of physical reality alone? Or is it our evaluation of the physical reality that is conditioned by our cosmological views?

There is much supporting evidence in favor of the latter. First of all, due to the complexity of early European history and the absence of written records of the time before the Germanic tribes came into contact with Rome, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Southwest-Northeast bias can be traced reliably to a geographical location. Scant linguistic and archaeological data suggests that the Teutons, like other Indo-European tribes, originated in an area between the Black and the Caspian seas and from there migrated to the north of Europe, occupying what is now roughly the territory of Denmark, northern Germany, the south of the Scandinavian peninsula and the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. The system of Germanic mythology may have originated in any of these locations, or all of them. Since the geographical domain of the Teutons of old included diverse landscapes occupying different positions in relation to the rest of the continent, directional valences of the Norse cosmos, especially the relative location of the domain of gods and men, can hardly be attributed directly to geography.

I suggest that we consider the Norse world model in terms of the structure of sacral (mythopoetical) space developed, among others, by V. N. Toporov¹. The term 'sacral' is encountered in the works of C. Levi-Strauss (Левин-Строс 2001) and M. Eliade, whose main preoccupation was with the human myth, the 'sacral history of society' (Элиаде 1994, 1995 etc) which explains the past, legitimizes the present and is a means of shaping a cosmologically harmonious future. A world

¹ The model is concisely presented under the entries on World Model, Space, and World Tree in Mify Narodov Mira (Мифы народов мира 1991). More detail on applying the model was published in (Топоров 1995). It has since been applied in a number of studies, including my recent paper (Слухай 2009).

viewed under the 'sacral' aspect retains its connections with powers and laws beyond the mundane and beyond man's rational understanding. It is governed by laws of magical sympathy and contiguity, not the laws of science; is subordinated to a circular, not linear, development scheme; is based on the language of symbols where the 'profane' world operates with signs.

The essence of sacral space is determined by the opposition of Cosmos and Chaos, order and havoc, entity and origin. This opposition is realized within five characteristics essential to the existence of sacral space: chronotope, order, things, boundaries, and center (*arbor mundi*). The spatial elements situated closest to the center of sacral space are the most significant and laden with positive symbolic connotation. Typically, space unfolds outward from the center: one's own space is followed by the City, its center, the Temple, the Altar and finally the sacrificial offering, from which a newly created world is spawned (Топоров 1995: 455-515).

This model, though virtually unknown in the English-speaking scientific world, has been used successfully to chart and compare world models in different cultures, the bottom line of all research being that world models generally must conform to the definition of sacral space provided above. However, it is through the *mode* of their conformity that the ethnic originality and uniqueness of each model can be identified.

The structure of the Norse cosmos proposed by Gurevich and hitherto accepted by most scholars reflects conforms to the model of the sacral space. It is defined by the dichotomy of Cosmos (roughly, Midgard, Asgard and Hel) and Chaos (the outlying worlds, the outer sea, the primal void Ginungagap from which all being arose). Its temporal and spatial structures are linked: Hel represents the past and oblivion, Midgard the present, and Valhalla the glorious future. Within the worlds where 'cosmic', not chaotic, tendencies prevail, there is a natural and social order. Then, each world is a container for its own creatures, artifacts and spatial structures: the four deer of Yggdrasil live closest to Asgard, and could never be identified with Hel since they are part of the upper world symbolically.

Mythologies envision the boundary as the shell of the Universal Egg, a Wall, a Snake (*Uroboros*), the intertwining bodies of the anthropomorphic Heaven and Earth². All human effort in delineating ‘one’s own’ space, including monumental undertakings such as the Great Wall of China, Hadrian’s Wall, the great Snake Wall of the Kyivan Rus – are imitations of the primary cosmological act of separating ‘one’s own space’ from ‘the other’, and were viewed as such by their creators. Similarly, reinstating or establishing order in daily contexts was imagined as a reproduction of the cosmological order – a connection that is manifest in the complex ritual and superstitions surrounding the *landnama* in Iceland, including lighting fires to cleanse the land and placate the local spirits³.

The Scandinavians saw the world as encircled by the Serpent, its great body clasping Midgard in its coils and marking the world’s boundary on the horizontal plane. Jörmungandr is one of Loki’s children. After the Aesir had set him loose in the Great Ocean, he grew until he was able to bite his own tail reaching around Midgard (Sturluson: 37). It is said that when Jörmungandr lets go of his tail, the world will come to an end (Poetic Edda). Thus, the existence of a boundary, in this case the world serpent, is a prerequisite to the world’s existence.

The existence of boundaries is equally characteristic of the separate worlds of the Norse cosmos: to mention but a few examples, Asgard is ringed about by a wall for whose construction the help of giants is enlisted, and Hel is represented as closed confines behind whose doors not even Balder can escape. The ‘closed’, markedly ‘separate’ nature of both Hel and Valhalla can be supported etymologically: both are derived of the common Indo-European root *kel, which carried the meaning of ‘hiding’ and ‘concealment’ (Online Etymology Dictionary). The semantics of ‘apartness’ of the ‘own’ from the ‘other’ is also found in the German *dorf*, which was used to denote both large settlements and hamlets, the differentiating characteristic being the presence of a hedge, a boundary (Гуревич 1984). M. Eliade, too, remarked upon the fact that long before boundaries, hedges,

² The world is spawned from an egg in the mythologies of India, China, Egypt and Greece; the Uroboros is attested as world boundary and symbol of infinity in China, Greece, Egypt and Scandinavia (Cooper 1978).

³ See the chapter on the settlement of Iceland in (Strinnholm 1954).

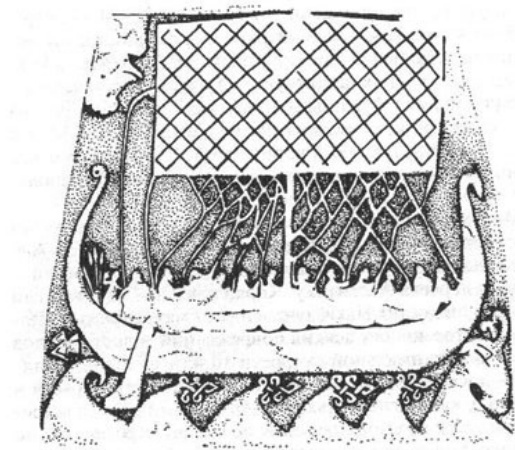
walls and ramparts acquired military significance, they were perceived as a means of magical protection against the realm of the 'other' (Элиаде 1999).

As concerns the *arbor mundi*, it is a universal symbol that both represents and encapsulates the world model. It has been envisaged as a Tree (of this type Yggdrasil is an excellent specimen), a Column (the Irminsul reportedly worshipped by the pagan Germanic tribes on the Continent), a River, a Mountain, a Castle and many other images that are symbolically effective carriers of the idea of the center, serving both as support to the universal order, the 'bar of justice' (Bauschatz 1982), the source of life and development and the medium of all mystical journeys. According to Mircea Eliade, the Tree owes its sacrality to the fact that it is vertical and that it grows, shedding leaves and sprouting new ones every year. Thus, it undergoes continual resurrection and through its power to sustain life and reproduce it, embodies what the ancient mind perceived as intrinsic to the existence of Cosmos (Элиаде 1999).

The idea of the central significance of Yggdrasil, which will survive Ragnarök to support the new world even as most Aesir won't, is the pillar upon which the Northern cosmos rests. In *The Well and the Tree* Paul Bauschatz, describing the pagan Northern worldview in terms of cosmos (the Tree) and chaos (the Well), observes that *'the Germanic cosmos is configured by the world tree and the wells at its base ... Men live within the realm of the tree, which configures what we may now call 'created' reality. It is a realm of things, objects, relations and their actions. It is ... physical and real'* (Bauschatz 1982). The Well, on the other hand, is the source of all things and their final destination: *'The realm of the well... contains additionally other portions of the cosmos to which access is denied to the beings whose present existence is restricted to the realm of the tree. ... Within the well, the power of all events past still surges, writhes, twists, whelms and weaves the whole of this greater reality 'out'* (Bauschatz 1982: 83). Thus, together the Well and the Tree ensure consistency of development and a circulation of energy that nourishes life and supports the universal order.

Like all other images of the *arbor mundi*, Yggdrasil is a medium that permits communication between the vertical tiers Asgard, Midgard and Hel by itself and via the rainbow bridge of Bivröst. This peculiar propensity of the *arbor mundi* to function as the connecting link between worlds sometimes likens its symbolism to that of the world's boundary. The name Jörmungandr contains important clues in this respect: the two roots of the name, *jörm-* ('great') and *gand-* 'staff', link it etymologically to the other *arbor mundi*, Irminsul (Irmin=Jörmun); similarity of form and function link the image of the staff (wand) to all symbolic aspects of the World Tree. Likewise, the nomination *Miðgarðsormr* is free of negative connotation and may point to an earlier cosmology in which the Serpent's role was primarily one supportive of the universal order (Мифы народов мира 1991: 436).

The idea of the *arbor mundi* as center of the sacral space is present implicitly or explicitly in the sacral language of works less related to the subject of pagan mythology. In *Beowulf*, the world is centered round the image of the mead-hall. The movement is either towards the mead-hall, the purpose being to cleanse it or destroy it, or away from it, in which case the movement stands for mystical journeys, heroic trials and other modes of initiation. The hero's activity is directed at 'cosmologizing' the space in which manifestations of Chaos are a threat to the established way of things. The mead-hall is the evaluation scale against which the accomplishments of humans are measured: the ones whose virtues earn them most familiarity with it, become the *heorþgeneatas* (hearth-companions), those who are farthest removed from it are the exiles. Removal from the mead-hall and the joys it brings is a source of existential sadness to the Anglo-Saxon; the ability to bask in the light of its glory is a source of equal pride and contentment.



For the Vikings, the most familiar isomorph of the *arbor mundi* is the image of a ship. A. Strinnholm tells us of the warriors whose sole domain and fief was the sea; and the ship was their home (Strinnholm 1841). Its hull was likened to

the bosom of earth; its mast to the world tree, its sail to the expanse of heaven. This is the symbolic meaning that dominates the well-known image of the ship carved on a stone in Gotland. Thus, we make the conclusion that the idea of the centrality, both symbolic and literal, of the world tree image, was a constant presence in the minds of Anglo-Saxons and Northmen alike; a choice of lifestyle and value system could change its outer shape, but not its essence.

One of the first preoccupations in Mr. Wanner's article was with the name Midgard, which is rightly translated as 'middle enclosure', but understood as the wall that slices across part of the world in a semi-circle, separating the gods and men from the giants. To support the statement that Midgard might have been a boundary rather than a territory, the evidence of the Snorra Edda is called upon: *'The name Uðgardr occurs exactly once in the corpus of medieval Norse texts; it is used by Snorri Sturluson in his Edda... to refer not to a region or a territory, but to the 'borg', the 'fortress or fortification of a being called Uðgarda-Loki, Loki of the Outer Yards'* (Wanner 2009: 39).

It is my opinion that this quotation, rather than compromise the understanding of Midgard as territory, supports it. To come to terms with the chaotic nature of those areas of cosmos that man could not understand rationally, he structured them in terms of the 'own' space, albeit in a negative and symbolically antonymic aspect. This epistemological approach created the image of the Tree of Evil alongside the Tree of Good, the hall of the sea-monster in *Beowulf* where there could have been none were it not for the need to offer a symbolical antonym to Heorot, the place of light and a 'beacon of civilization that shines over many lands' (Halverson 1969).

Incidentally, the Anglo-Saxons, who share the foundations of mythology with the Northmen, freely used *middangeard* to mean 'middle-earth' in their poetic works. Mr. Wanner makes mention of this fact in the beginning of his article, but to be conclusive, we must provide some contexts of this *nomen sacrum* in *Beowulf*:

75 *manigre mægpe geond þisne middangeard*
 æfre mærdā þon ma middangeardes

505 *gehedde under heofenum þonne he sylfa):*
750 *Sona þæt onfunde fyrena hyrde*
 þæt he ne mette middangeardes.
1770 *weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac*
 manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard
2995 *landes ond locenra beaga (ne ðorfte him ða lean oðwitan*
 mon on middangearde), syððan hie ða mærdā geslogon

In each of the cases, *middangeard* clearly suggest a territory as its denotation. ‘Middle-earth’ also occurs twice in the metrical charms *For Loss of Cattle*, denoting simply ‘the world’, which has Jerusalem as its center owing to the distinct Christian coloring of these two charms.

In other words, the concept of Utgard as a fortification, and a metonymy for the respective territory, only accentuates the image of Midgard as a ‘land’, not as a ‘boundary’, though one view need not exclude the other. Utgard as fortress signifies an attempt to understand ‘other’ in terms of ‘self’. A good illustration to the principle was provided by A. Gurevich: in legal Scandinavian texts, the names ‘*innangarðs*’ and ‘*utargarðs*’ were used in the same understanding as their cosmological equivalents, meaning ‘inner territory fit for habitation and economic activity’ and ‘outlying territory, which is not to be cultivated’, respectively (Гуревич 1984: 30).

The image of the all-encircling ocean is what we must consider next: ‘*While þorr is said in a number of... sources to cross a river before entering the lands of the giants or trolls, he is never, other than in Snorri’s tale, said to cross an ocean*’ (Wanner 2009: 40). The evidence against accepting a river as the only possible boundary between the worlds of men and giants is supplied by the poetic language of the age. In my research of Anglo-Saxon sacral language, I mark the abundance of poetic synonymy in Northern literatures as a manifestation of the isomorphism (equivalence) of mythological forms, when similarity or contiguity of objects leads them to be perceived as the same.

Of course, skaldic poetry, which offers especially loose boundaries for poetic synonymy, belongs to a much later era than the creation of the Norse myth and its directional bias. Still, there is evidence that this fondness for synonyms, on a level related to Frazer’s conception of homeopathic and contagious magic (Frazer 1963),

was part of the Germanic poetic language long before that. To name several examples directly relevant to the image of the sea, in *Beowulf* the abode of Grendel's mother is described as a *firgenstream* – 'mountain stream' in one place, as a fen, and as a sea in others. Similarly, the expression *bi sœm tveonum*, used more than once in *Beowulf* in the sense of 'in the whole wide world', should be understood as 'between the two shores of the Great Ocean' rather than merely as 'between the Baltic and Norwegian seas'. R. Meissner provides an extensive list of synonyms generally denoting 'bodies of water' in skaldic verse in his book on kennings (Meissner 1984). In other words, Snorri, whose writings reflected the poetic traditions of his time, may well have written 'river' and also meant 'ocean', just as other poets have before him. In a sum, the signs interpreted by Mr. Wanner as evidence against a concentric model and in favor of Midgard as 'the fence down the middle', seem to me to suggest a rather different interpretation.

Separate attention must be given to the 'directional valences' themselves, since to support the concentric model we need first to prove that each of the four cardinal directions are sufficiently marked as 'other' to make the true center of the circle 'self'; in this way restoring the idea of them being grouped around a center as equally meaningful constituents of the world model.

There is ample evidence that in the Northern tradition, cardinal directions were experienced as axiological markers and structural metaphors rather than accurate reflections of a real-life situation. Something in remotest history made the pagan Teuton relinquish worship of the East as part of all traditional sun cults, and cosmologically link it to Hel, the downpoint of the axiological scale. Similarly, Asgard, located in the top tier of the World Tree, was 'consigned' to the west of the world not because it necessarily was in the west, but because west was associated with good, just as east was not. In this way, the semantics of cardinal directions supports the symbolic meaning attached to the other binary opposition of Norse cosmography – the 'up-down' scale. As P. Bauschatz puts it, *for the Germanic peoples, there seems to have been no directional, no up-down connotational prejudice* (Bauschatz 1982: 25). This is indeed the case in the most

ancient mythologies, which develop a vertical value scale only after the original horizontal one has exhausted its potential of charting new social and psychological realia. In the Scandinavian cosmos, both the vertical and horizontal scales are present. However, worlds are described as located on the junction of these scales – Hel in the east, Asgard in the west – because the vertical scale still needs the symbolic support of the horizontal one to enhance the ideas behind it.

The existing data on Germanic rituals supports the understanding of cardinal directions as structural metaphors (Lakoff 1980) for positive/negative evaluation. F. Mone quotes the continental Germanic custom of placing a victory altar at the eastern gates of a vanquished city (Mone 1823) (cf. the gates of Valhalla opening eastward). The structure of a Viking dwelling correlates to this to the detail: the walls of the long room are lined on the northern and southern sides by feast-benches; the southern bench includes the high seats of honor (*aerdri bekk*). The other two walls contain an entrance for the lady of the house (*Kwendyr*) in the eastern wall, and one for the lord (*Karldyr*) in the western one (Strinnholm 1954). Thus, the female gender is linked symbolically with the east, i.e. the realm of darkness, night and mystique, as it is elsewhere in world culture.

Indeed, the prejudice against the east was so strong in the mind of the Anglo-Saxon that in *Beowulf*, the sun is made to rise in the south: *Woruldcandel scan, sigel suðan fus*⁴, despite the obvious astronomical fallacy.

Understanding cardinal directions as structural metaphors seems to be the key to the question of Thor's giant-thrashing quests, directed always against the north and east, never the southwest. If we perceive the cardinal directions as metaphors, with SW equaling 'good' and NE 'evil' or 'noxious', it becomes obvious that Thor ventured to the north and east not because there was nowhere else to go, but because these were the negatively marked regions most in need of his attention; the domains of the 'other' unlike the more benevolent southwest with which the Aesir themselves wanted to be associated.

⁴ *Beowulf*, line 1966.

The relative unmarkedness of the western and southern parts of the world in early Germanic literature may also be traced to their inability to bear vivid axiological markers. The human mind is disposed towards emphasizing the negative rather than the positive – in other words, the negative side of the valuation scale is both longer and more intense than the positive⁵. However, all parts of the world are attributed equal significance in Scandinavian mythology when mention is made of Austri, Norðri, Suðri and Vestri supporting the four sides of the world. These four ‘supports’ of Midgard act as safeguards against a possible shift of the symbolic world center to the west.

Another argument in favor of the concentric model is the aspect of sacral space termed ‘the boundary’ above. If Midgard is a fence running down the middle of the known world, the Cosmos loses its defining circular shape, symbolically connected with the idea of infinity and completeness, as well as its boundary, thus becoming vulnerable to the influence of Chaos ‘from without’ – a situation unacceptable in a mythology that relies so much on the idea of order.

Finally, a rejection of the concentric model entails a respective repositioning of Yggdrasil on the horizontal plane. If it was located in the west, it could no longer function as the *arbor mundi*, since the image of the World Tree is determined by its capacity as conductor of energies, artifacts and creatures between *all* the worlds of the cosmic structure: in all mythological contexts, the ‘true’ and ‘real’ world is always located in the center and in the middle of the cosmic structure, since it is only this position that can ensure a sound distribution of levels in the world model and their valences, serving as a connecting link among the three tiers of the cosmic structure (Элиаде 1994: 42).

Thus, Norse mythology belongs to the universal heritage of sacred history and, at the same time, is a work of the ethnic collective consciousness that makes it uniquely expressive. Given the traditional Northern pride in the roots, the desire to protect the *heimr* and uphold the pillars of the heroic society, it is difficult to see the Northmen perceiving themselves as ‘marginal’ or ‘peripheral’. Their

⁵ This psychological phenomenon is known as the negativity bias.

mythology and moral values speak against it, since seeing oneself as ‘marginal’, i.e. ‘other’ in relation to other societies marks the first step towards the ‘dissolution of the Cosmos’ which might have been characteristic of the age of the skalds, but hardly affected the earlier ages when mythology was dictated by ethnocentric perceptions to ensure the nation’s survival, both physical and spiritual.

Center vs. Periphery: The Structure of the Germanic Cosmos – статья, посвященная анализу новейших теорий структуры германо-скандинавской модели мира. Автор сравнивает гипотезу о концентрической структуре космоса с гипотезой К. Уоннера и с помощью инструментария антропологии, семиотики и лингвистики сопоставляет их с моделью мифопоэтического пространства, разработанной В. Н. Топоровым. Результатом исследования является подтверждение состоятельности концентрической гипотезы и подкрепление ее с помощью данных лингвистики и поэтики (концептуальная метафора, негативная пресуппозиция; теория кеннингов).

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