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# Bors synir “þjöðum ypptu”- or did they?

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

# Bors synir “bjöðum ypptu” – or did they?

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In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson describes the creation of the world according to the sources he knows: the poems *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál*. With regard to the narrative in question, one of these poems (*Völuspá*) does not quite correspond to the other two, and Snorri seems to have taken it upon himself to merge the information in the three poems into one coherent narrative. In accordance with *Völuspá*, he states that the sons of Borr are the creators of the world; from the other two poems he takes the myth about the world being created from the body of the giant Ymir.

In this paper I will first reflect upon the identity of the sons of Borr; secondly whether it was correctly understood by Snorri that they were the ones who were believed to have created the world from Ymir's body.

For comparison, we will first look at Snorri's narrative:

Ok þá er mættist hrímin ok blær hitans, svá at bráðnaði ok draup, ok af þeim kvikudropum kviknaði með krafti þess, er til sendi hitann, ok varð manns líkandi, ok var sá nefndr Ymir, en hrímþursar kalla hann Aurgelmi, ok eru þaðan komnar ættir hrímþursa.

... [Búri] ... gat son þann, er Borr hét, hann fekk þeirar konu, er Bestla hét, dóttir Bölþorns jötuns, ok fengu þau þrjá sonu. Hét einn Óðinn, annarr Vili, þriðri Vé, ok þat er mín trúá, at sá Óðinn ok hans bræðr munu vera stýrandi himins ok jarðar.

... Synir Bors drápu Ymi jötun, en er hann féll, þá hljóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum hans, at með því drekkðu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komst undan með sínu hýski. Hann kalla jötnar Bergelmi. Hann fór upp á lúðr sinn ok kona hans ok helzt þar, ok eru af þeim komnar hrímþursa ættir ... [Borssynir] tóku Ymi ok fluttu í mitt Ginnungagap ok gerðu af honum jörðina ... (Snorri Sturluson, 1988, p. 10-11).

Moving on to *Völuspá*, what the *völva* tells us about the beings we generally accept as being so-called *jötnar* is principally that they are of great age:

Ek man iötna  
ár um borna,  
þá er forðom mik  
fædda höfðo;

(Jón Helgason, 1951, p. 1)

She calls them “ár um borna” which Dronke interprets as “the first inhabitants of the cosmos” (Dronke, 1997, 31). The meaning of the word *ár* as “in the beginning (of the world)” is moreover emphasized in the next strophe which begins: “Ár var alda”, translated by Dronke as “It was early in the ages” (Dronke, 1997, p. 8) and Larrington as “Young were the years” (Larrington, 1996, p. 4). In the *völva*'s recital, she thus connects the great age of the *jötnar* inextricably to the world's beginnings. The paradoxical conclusion that can be drawn here is that the *jötnar* she refers to are so old that they existed very early or in the very beginning of the world as it is known to men, perhaps even before the world came into existence. This is further emphasized in the next strophe where the creature Ymir is introduced in the context of the as yet non-existent world:

Ár var alda  
þar er Ymir byggði,  
vara sandr né sær  
né svalar unnir,  
iörð fannz æva  
né upphiminn,  
gap var ginnunga,  
en gras hvergi.

(Jón Helgason, 1951, p. 1)<sup>1</sup>

Apart from this mention of Ymir, no information is given in *Völuspá* about his identity or role in the creation; he just seems to have been there in the nothingness of the non-existent world. It nonetheless seems logical to surmise that he played some part in the creation of the world since his name is mentioned in such close connection with the description of the aforementioned nothingness that existed before the world was created, and then as part of the story of the creation itself (Jón Helgason, 1951).

Since *Völuspá* does not give any indication of who Ymir or what his purpose was, we have to look elsewhere to learn more about this. As noted before, the two other poems that tell of the creation of the world are *Grimnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. It is possible that the creation stories of *Grimnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* on one hand and *Völuspá* on the other may originate in different traditions (see e.g. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 1962; Vésteinn Ólason, 1992), but the ideas would seem to be clearly related, if only because the name of Ymir appears in all three.

The other two poems both relate that the world was created from Ymir's body, but only *Vafþrúðnismál* states explicitly that he was a *jötunn*:

Ór Ymis holdi  
var iörð um sköpuð  
en ór beinom biörg.  
Himinn ór hausi  
ins hrímkalda iötuns  
en ór sveita síor.

(Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 4)

*Vafþrúðnismál*'s designation of the *jötun* as being *hrímkaldr* may relate him to the special kind of *jötnar* called *hrímpursar*, "såkaldt på grund af urjætten Ymers tilblivelse af de frosne rimdråber, idet disse smeltede" (Finnur Jónsson, 1966, p. 285). This interpretation is allegedly also based on *Vafþrúðnismál* 33. However, the feature can not be taken for granted: the word *hrímkaldr* may be chosen just for alliteration's sake. Nevertheless, according to *Vafþrúðnismál*, Ymir's identity as some kind of *jötun* seems clear.

Ymir is not mentioned again in the *Völuspá*-version of the creation. Indeed, contrary to the creation story as it appears in *Vafþrúðnismál* (see below) and Snorri's narration, he does not seem to be a necessary antedecent for the process or beings that come after. All the same, the word "[á]ður" in the beginning of the fourth strophe of *Völuspá* clearly denotes some continuity between the strophes, and thus there must be good reason to assume that Ymir is unquestionably connected to the *Völuspá*-creation of the world, along with some other figures:

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<sup>1</sup> Snorri's version of the strophe in *Gylfaginning* does not contradict this state of a yet uncreated world; indeed, its "þat er ekki var" rather emphasizes it (Snorri Sturluson, 1988, p. 9).

Áðr Burs synir  
biððom um ypðo,  
þeir er miðgarð  
mæran skópo;

(Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 1)

Once again, nothing is revealed here about the racial identity of these new characters. Again it is necessary to go to other sources to find out something about Burr and his sons. “Burs/Bors son” is mentioned in three other places in poetry: in two kennings (one in *lausavísa* 21 by the early 10<sup>th</sup>-century scaldic poet Egill Skallagrímsson; the other in a fragment by the 12<sup>th</sup>-century scaldic poet Þórvaldr blönduskáld), and in *Hyndluljóð*, 30 (Finnur Jónsson, 1912; Jón Helgason, 1952).<sup>2</sup> In all three cases, the reference is to Óðinn. The only information we get here is that Borr is the father of Óðinn and the son of a Búri of whom nothing more is told in poetic sources. Etymology does not get us much further: Ásgeir Bl. Magnússon says both names of an unsure origin but is in agreement with other scholars of etymology (e.g. de Vries, 1977; Finnur Jónsson, 1966; Fritzner, 1973; La Farge and Tucker, 1992;) that the most probable meaning of Borr is ‘son’, Búri then being ‘father’, although it could also carry the meaning ‘roar, scream’ (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, 1989; Finnur Jónsson, 1966; de Vries, 1977). This last meaning might indicate a *jötnar*-like nature as noise is a common feature in names of *jötnar* (Finnur Jónsson, 1966; Motz, 1987), but this is very tentative. We know very little about the nature of this father and son, and nothing explicit about Borr having any other sons than Óðin.

In *Lokasenna* 26 (Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 51) Frigg is called “Viðris kvæn”, i.e. the wife of Óðin, and Loki suggests she took Vili and Véi to her bed. The 9<sup>th</sup> century poet, Þjóðólfr úr Hvini, mentions a “Vilja bróðir” in *Ynglingatal* 3. (Finnur Jónsson, 1912, p. 7), which is one of Snorri’s main sources for his *Ynglinga saga*. This person certainly is a personification of death, but it is not clear that it is Óðinn who is meant. In another contemporary source in which Óðinn plays a role of some consequence, Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* (also at least partly based on poetry), there is however, no mention of ‘Odinus’ having had any brothers (see Davidson, 1998). In short, Snorri is the only one to state that those three are brothers (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 1988). The question arises as to whether such an interpretation may be too far fetched when there is so little to support it. Rudolf Simek nonetheless says that:

sögnin um Óðin, V[ilja] og Vé[a] sé svo forn að orðmyndin Wodan hafi verið  
gild og nöfnin þá öll hafist á sama hljóði (og stuðlað) (Simek, 1993, p. 257).

The element of alliteration (Wotan; Vili og Vé) certainly suggests that the parties may have been connected, and it is quite feasible that Snorri may have heard about the three being brothers (it seems that, apart from *Ynglingatal*, he knew at least some version or individual verses of *Lokasenna*). We nonetheless come back to the fact that the poetic sources never state conclusively that the Vili and Véi of *Lokasenna*, nor the Vilji of *Ynglingatal*, were the brothers of Óðinn; Frigg’s being Óðinn’s wife, and Óðinn being the recipient of those who fall in battle, seems to be the only motivation for the interpretation of them being Óðin’s brothers. Also, when it comes down to it, there is no clear indication that Óðinn, if he was the son of a “Bur/Borr”, was of *jötnar*-kin. It remains uncertain exactly who the so-called “Burs/Bors synir” are, even though it seems that Óðinn was seen as being one of them.

Óðinn’s maternal family tree does not yield much information either about the species in question. Snorri’s statement that Óðinn is the son of Bestla (Snorri Sturluson, 1988) is in all probability based on kennings used by two 10<sup>th</sup> century poets:

<sup>2</sup> Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lv.* 21 (“Bors niðr”); Þórv. blönduskáld, fragm. (“bur[...] Bors, Búra arfa”); *Hyndluljóð* 30 (“Var Balds faðir/Burs arfþegi”).

Steinnarr Sjónason (lausavísa 2: “Bestlu niðr”) and Einar Helgason *skálaglamm* (*Vellekla* 4: “Bestlu sonr”) (Finnur Jónsson, 1912, p. 89, p. 117). *Hávamál* 140, the only other poetic reference to Bestla, does not state clearly a kinship between her and Óðinn. Whatever may be said about the male genealogy in *Hávamál* 140,<sup>3</sup> it at least seems clear from there that Bestla was believed to be the daughter of a Bölþorn/Bölþór, but Snorri’s designation of him as being a *jötunn* (Snorri Sturluson, 1988) does not receive any support here; indeed, it seems somewhat unfounded. The name’s meaning does not provide any further information in that direction: according to Finnur Jónsson (1966, p. 75) it means “egl ulykkens torn”, while after Gering, Jan de Vries gives the meaning “klotzige, gewalttätige person” (1977, p. 70). Hunke’s interpretation of Óðinn as having been born out of a tree does not add support to the idea of him being a *jötunn*-kin on his maternal side (Hunke, 1952).

In short, if judged on the basis of the poetic sources alone, it may be said that even if “Burs/Bors synir” actually are the brothers Óðinn, Vili and Véi, and the sons of Bur/Borr and Bestla, there is nothing to suggest that they were of undoubted *jötunn* kin, paternally or maternally.

Furthermore, it is *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda* that explicitly state that “Burs/Bors synir” are the originators of the world (Jón Helgason, 1951; Snorri Sturluson, 1988), and apart from the suggestion that they lifted lands, there is no description in *Völuspá* of how or if they proceeded further than this. The picture that *Völuspá* presents to one’s imagination is that of already formed lands being lifted up, presumably out of a primal sea.<sup>4</sup>

It thus seems that according to *Völuspá*, only one *jötunn* had any real part in the drama of creation: the one named Ymir, who must have been some sort of a primal being which existed in the nothingness before any real creation took place. The “Burs/Bors synir” of *Völuspá*, apparently Ymir’s companions in this void can thus neither be said certainly to be of *jötunn*-kin nor the undisputed creators of the world.

*Völuspá* is generally thought to have been composed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in all probability before the year 1065, and most scholars nowadays are in agreement that the poem is infused with Christian ideas and influences (see e.g. Dronke, 1996, 1997; McKinnell, 2011; Pétur Pétursson, 2004, 2006; Steinsland, 2006; Vésteinn Ólason, 1992). As we know, Snorri composed *Gylfaginning* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, more than two hundred years after Christianity was legally accepted in Iceland. Even though these two works are of different type, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Christian morality and ideology may have been of some consequence in the conceptual foundation of both. This is undisputed in the case of *Snorra-Edda* (see Faulkes, 1988; Sverrir Tómasson, 1992) and John McKinnell, (2011) has recently shown how the *Völuspá*-poet(s) probably got much of the imagery from hearing Christian sermons at Easter, Christianity already being well established in Northern Europe at the time of the poem’s composition (2008). If it can be surmised that Snorri often modified his narrative to suit Christian ideals, it is also feasible to imagine that the *Völuspá*-poet(s) may have been thinking along similar lines.

The idea of lands being lifted out of primal waters is certainly more in accordance with the story of *Genesis* (*Biblían*, 2007, 1. Mós) than the butchering of a monstrous primal giant. It is quite possible that the poet(s) of *Völuspá* found it more appropriate to leave Ymir relatively unexplained, even though he had to be mentioned in a general time-sense, and formed the poetic narrative on the basis of new ideas which were beginning to take hold at that time. The same can be perhaps said about the mention

<sup>3</sup> Fimbulliód nío/nam ek af enom frægja syni/Bölþórs, Bestlo föður ... (Jón Helgason, 1951); the *frægi sonr* has usually been thought to be Óðinn’s maternal uncle, or even Óðinn himself (see e.g. Gísli Sigurðsson, 1998; Turville-Petre, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> This has been surmised from strophe 59 in *Völuspá* when the new world rises.

of “Burs/Bors synir” – if the *Völuspá*-poet(s) knew about brothers called Óðin, Vilji and Vé, or an ancient story about the world being created from the body of a primal giant, it would have been more in accordance with these new ideas to leave such figures unexplained, presenting only an ambiguous power reflecting the Christian god of the Old Testament wafting his creating hand over the void.

Looking at the other two versions of the creation myth which may be said to reflect most closely the ideas of Old Norse people about the world, its shape and structure, the image of the creation looks different. Scholars consider *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* to be older than *Völuspá* (see e.g. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 1962; Vésteinn Ólason, 1992). Here we find nothing about any sons of Bur/Borr lifting lands (“bjöðum um ypptu”). It is noteworthy that neither poem seems to provide any definite information about who or which powers exactly were the active party in the creation, even though both state explicitly that the world was created from Ymir’s body and describe that process in some detail. Ymir plays rather a tragic role, being nothing but the provider of the material from which the world was created. He has been compared with Tuisto whom Tacitus says was born of earth and became the forefather of men (Meyer, 1907, 1909; Tacitus, 1928) this may be of comparative value, but the difference in context here is that Tuisto was not killed in order to create the world.

As mentioned above, *Vafþrúðnismál* 21 offers no doubt that Ymir was a *brímkaldr jötunn*, but in the poem others of the same kind seem to keep him company. In *Vafþrúðnismál* 28, Óðinn asks a question in a peculiar way; he asks:

...  
hverr ása elztr  
eða Ymis niðja  
yrði í árdaga.

(Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 5)

Without going into the absurdity of Óðinn asking about something he should already know himself (if he and his brothers were actually there), we will instead look at the terms *ás* and *Ymis niðja* which are used here. It is unclear whether Óðinn looks upon these as two separate entities or as beings of the same kind; indeed, it is not obvious whether he is asking about one person or more. *Vafþrúðnir*, on the other hand, is quite explicit in his answer that there was only one person that could be referred to: Aurgelmir, father of Þrúðgelmir, father of Bergelmir (Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 5). According to this (and bypassing Ymir for now), Aurgelmir is seen as being both the oldest of the *ásir*, and the oldest of the *jötnar*-kin and *Vafþrúðnir* certainly does not seem to distinguish between the two. Looking at this wording, the question unavoidably springs to mind of whether at one time no distinction existed between these two types of supernatural being (in the belief expressed here).

Here it may be relevant to look at Mediterranean mythology telling of sons maiming or killing their primal and titanic fathers: Zeus is the son and killer of Cronos, who in his turn castrated his father Uranos (Guirand, 1968). Keeping the comparison in mind, there is reason to ask, first of all, who the three generations that *Vafþrúðnir* so definitely declares as being the oldest beings in the world are; secondly, why all three of them are mentioned here so clearly, with such an emphasis being placed on their genealogy?

Most older scholars seem to be in agreement that Aurgelmir is just another name for Ymir, a notion based first of all on those other parts of *Vafþrúðnismál* that treat the beginning and creation of the world (strophes 20-21; 28-33), and Snorri’s narration of the same in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson, 1988) although some people have considered this as being due to Snorri’s efforts to systematize (Finnur Jónsson, 1966; Lindow, 2001; Sijmons & Gering, 1927; Turville-Petre, 1964). It seems to me,

however, quite possible that Vafþrúðnir's reply can be seen as a straightforward answer to Óðinn's question: Bergelmir and Þrúðgelmir being the *Ymis niðjar* in question, and Aurgelmir the *ása elztr*, in other words Aurgelmir/Ymir can thus be termed as an *áss*, a subject which will not to be discussed here.

Turning to Óðinn's next question about the origin of Aurgelmir, Vafþrúðnir's narrative encompasses Aurgelmir's coming into existence from the frostdrops of Élivogar, his begetting a man and a woman by himself and also a six-headed son. The question arises if either of those males could be the Þrúðgelmir mentioned in strophe 29; that notion might get reinforcement from the fact that shortly after this, attention is suddenly called again to the third generation, Bergelmir, in an obscure strophe (35) which still has not been explained satisfactorily.

In order to clarify my interpretation of this strophe, I quote it here in full:

Ørófi vetra  
áðr væri iörð um sköpuð,  
þá var Bergelmir borinn;  
þat ek fyrst um man  
er sá inn fróði jötunn  
var á lúðr um lagiðr. (Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 6)

In connection with this, it is important to keep in mind that this strophe is Vafþrúðnir's answer to Óðinn's explicit question about what Vafþrúðnir "fyrst man eða fremst um veit" (Jón Helgason, 1952, p. 6), which follows their questions and answers about Aurgelmir, both the first *jötunn* and *ás*.

The meaning of the first part of strophe 35 seems clear: Bergelmir was born before the earth was created. It is in the second part that the difficulties lie. The last line is explained by Finnur Jónsson as follows:

**Lúðr**, m, (-rs) ... enn fróði jötunn á vas 1. of lagiðr *Vafþr 35; der er her tale om, hvad Vaftrudne husker som det første; det er det at Bergelme blev lagt på lúðr (Snorres opfattelse af dette er ganske urigtig); 1. betyder her sandsynligvis enten 'rugge' (en kasse, hvori bøm lagdes, jfr Fritznens bemærkninger [udhulet stoke, trug til deri at nedlægge det nyfødte, spæde barn']) eller 'ligbære, ligkiste' (måske snarest udhulet træstamme), jfr no. lur (hvis dette står for lúðr) 'en køje eller seng i et fartøj' (Aasen); jätten siger altså, at hans bukkommelse går tilbage til Bergelmes fødsel eller død; (Finnur Jónsson, 1966, p. 384-385).*

La Farge and Tucker (1992) are of this same opinion and Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, p. 63) explains the word *lúðr* as "kvarnarstokkur, hér líklega líkbörur". Anne Holtsmark also comes to the conclusion that a coffin and resulting connection to death are definitely the right meaning of the word (Holtsmark, 1946). We may thus assume that the meaning of the last line definitely has to do with the death of the *jötunn* mentioned in line 5. The question is who is this *jötunn*? In the strophes before this one, the *jötunn* spoken of, both by Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir, is undoubtedly Aurgelmir, the oldest of beings in the world. Óðinn calls him "inn fróði jötunn" and "inn aldni jötunn" (strophes 30 & 32), and Vafþrúðnir "in[n] fróð[i] jötun[n]" (strophe 33). The use of the word *fróði* both for Aurgelmir and the dead *jötunn* add further support.

It is my view that the demonstrative pronoun "sá" in line 5 does not have to refer to the Bergelmir of line 3, as hereto has been the accepted understanding; much more likely is that this line contains a deliberate repeat of the earlier formula, that the "sá" refers to the old and wise *jötunn* talked of in strophes 30, 32 and 33, that is the Aurgelmir/Ymir who was killed and whose body provided the material for the world.

In the latter part of strophe 35, Vafþrúðnir may thus actually be saying that the first thing he remembers (or, more likely) knows of, is the death of "sá inn fróði

jötunn”, that is Aurgelmir/Ymir and consequently the creation of the world from his dead body. Such an interpretation could also explain the aforementioned and somewhat awkward emphasis on Bergelmir in strophe 29; now it may become clear why he is there given such a prominent status – and why attention is drawn to him again here. The grandson, Bergelmir, born before the creation took place (and thus on the scene of the crime), may thus have had a larger role in the world’s creation than has been previously acknowledged; in other words he may even be the one to whom the creation itself was attributed; that is to say Bergelmir is the one who killed his grandfather and created the world from his body.

Even if we take the first three lines of the strophe to be nothing more than an imitation of the first half of strophe 29, a later interpolation or misplacement, it is still hard to explain why Bergelmir and Þrúðgelmir should be given so much emphasis in strophe 29 if neither of them had any role to play in the events. Moreover, such an interpretation would even add force to the idea that “sá inn fróði jötunn” of strophe 35 should be seen as Aurgelmir, since without the first half of the strophe, there would be no one else to refer to.

Whether the father and son, Bergelmir and Þrúðgelmir, son and grandson of the *jötunn* Aurgelmir of *Vafþrúðnismál*, were the original idea behind the figures of “Burs/Bors synir” (the original “sons of the father”) in *Völuspá* and consequently in *Gylfaginning*, is, of course, hard to say for certain. Something in that direction may however have been the basis for why Snorri so definitely talks about “Burs/Bors synir” as being of *jötnar*-kin, as this is never stated directly about “Burs/Bors synir”. Many creation myths around the world involve some kind of supernatural or gigantic beings and in talking of “Burs/Bors synir” as *jötnar*, Snorri may have been following that tradition either because of some inkling he had of such ancient patterns or because when trying to make a coherent story from conflicting sources he mixed up the information he had in the poems. Whatever the case, there seems good reason to be wary of the idea that Óðinn was ever originally one of these creative figures.



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