

# THE NUMBER NINE IN THE TRADITION OF THE NORSEMEN

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## 1. Introduction

Number nine is a symbolic number in many cultures, frequently due to most general association with the duration time of the pregnancy, or because it is triplication of the three. Both those natural peculiarities of number nine explain why the number can more easily be included in cosmological (threefoldness of time and space) as well as anthropological (birth and metempsychosis) symbolism easier than other numbers. In the culture of pagan Scandinavians the symbolic meaning of number nine was particularly rich and differentiated. This number played similar part as the seven in Middle East: it served as a designation of a complete size, time, or length, very frequently as a specific symbolic pattern, with no deeper meaning. In Scandinavian sources one may find very easily the answer for the question why number nine became such a standard. First, it relates to the division of whole reality into nine worlds. Second, number nine was particularly connected with Odin, or rather with his valkyries and with the course of human life, which is practically delimited by valkyries. Number nine occurred in numerous cosmological passages and for that reason it was fixed in the culture as a distinguished number, used for a denotation of all absolute and sacred values.

The present paper, a tribute to the works of Andrzej Wierciński dedicated to traditional numerologies and their place in the religion, contains an outline of the symbolism of number nine in the culture of pagan Norsemen, against comparative background. Two most important sources, with many references to the symbolic nine, are *Eddas*, which present most exhaustive vision of the religion of Norsemen before the Christianity. Also some sagas will be quoted, especially *The Völsunga saga* and *The Ynglinga saga*, containing more particulars on religion than others, as well as some writings of Christian historiographers, Adam of Brema and Saxo Grammaticus. One part of the paper presents a short comparison of symbolism of number nine in medieval Scandinavia and ancient Greece, and the final discussion concerns the heritage of a part of this symbolism in contemporary Neo-Pagan and Left-Hand Path movements in Western world.

## 2. Norsemen and their literature

The contemporary mass culture fixes the stereotype of a Norseman as a bearded and aggressive barbarian with horned helmet, interested only in rape, violence, plunder, and

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gorging. Such an image is true only in part. Indeed, the Norsemen behaved not very elegantly towards the victims of their plundering expeditions. However, not the plundering was their all-important purpose, but the acquisition of good fame, fixed in the stories and the verses. The reasons of many of them, who left their family farms and decided to lead a warrior's life, was the will of activity, the will of exercising the courage and of testing one's luck in various circumstances. Simultaneously they appreciated the wisdom very much and well informed men with the skill of elocution were treated with great honor.

Medieval Iceland, the place where the great majority of sources for the studies on culture of Norsemen came into existence, differed strongly from other parts of Europe of those days. As late as in 13<sup>th</sup> century it continued to be a republic ruled by *althing* — the annual meeting of free farmers. All quarrels were judged according to the rules of law, first kept in the memory of following elected Lawspeakers (*lögsögumaðr*), later written down in a codex called *Grágás*. The Icelanders, in spite of the life in hard environment, were ardent lovers of literature. The large majority of skalds, whose compositions are still preserved, originated from Iceland. This island was also the place of birth of Snorri Sturluson, the author of the handbook of skaldic art, containing not only a classification of metrical systems, but also a description of poetic language, as well as an exposition of pagan religion. The skaldic poems were very complicated, filled with metaphors and allusions to the stories about the gods, which were often completely obscure for unprepared listener. The writing of Snorri, later called *Prose* or *Younger Edda*, is one of two basic sources for the research studies on the religion of Norsemen. The second source is *Elder* or *Poetic Edda* — the collection of verses dedicated to the gods and heroes, composed by unknown skalds in 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> and written down in 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Besides *Eddas* and skaldic poetry, also many narrations about deeds of outstanding men and about history of great families from various regions of the island came into being on Iceland. Such stories are called sagas. Contrary to the skaldic poetry, they are written in simple and terse language. Among them *The Heimskringla* has a special place, a collection of sagas about kings of Norway by Snorri Sturluson, and *Völsunga saga*, which refers to the heroic poems of *Elder Edda* and tells the stories about semi-legendary tribal rulers from the times of migration of nations in Europe. The Icelanders imported books from continental Europe and very frequently the influence of ancient Greek and Roman literature can be observed in their native workings — for example Snorri stated that Æsir were the descendants of king Priam and he identified the goddess Sif with Greek Sybilla. From 13<sup>th</sup> century on, after incorporation of Iceland to Norway, the Icelanders did not lose their interest in literature, but the later poetry and sagas have almost no value for the students of culture and religion of pagan Scandinavia. All particulars concerning deepest symbolic meaning of number nine are present in *Elder* and *Prose Eddas*. Other sources, chiefly some sagas, bring only examples of standard use of this number.

### 3. The nine worlds

Usually the works concerning the Norse religion contain the information that in the Eddaic cosmology the reality was divided into nine worlds. However, the only direct mention of the nine worlds appears in the *Völuspá*, the verse opening the *Elder Edda*. Odin wakes a sorceress who declares: "I remember the nine worlds and the nine roots of the sacred tree" (*Völuspá* 2,3–4). The names of these worlds are not given here. Other songs of Edda mention only seven of them: Alfheim (the world of elves), Asgard (the abode of Æsir), Jötunheim (the abode of giants), Midgard (the world of mankind), Muspell (the world of fire), Niflheim (the Underworld), Vanaheim (the abode of Vanir).

Snorri adds to this list the land of frozen giants — Hrimthursheim, and the world of dwarfs. Also the particulars on the position of these worlds are scattered. According to the name Midgard (ON “middle world”) is in the middle, Asgard can be located above Midgard and Jötunheim east to Asgard, behind an iron forest. Farther, Niflheim is placed lowest of all, Muspell south to Midgard, and the land of frozen giants in the north. The world of dwarfs can be found below the ground or in mountains. In the song of Grímnir it was stated that the ash Yggdrasill has not nine roots, but only three, covering Niflheim, Midgard and the land of frozen giants (*Grímnismál* 31). The same text contains also the information that the gods dwell a place separated from the ash by rivers and that they possess twelve palaces (*Grímnismál* 4–17). It might be expected that each palace should be connected to one of Æsir, but actually among Æsir listed by Snorri only Thor, Ull, Frey, Odin, Heimdall, Forseti, Niörd, and Vidar have their own palaces (*Skaldskaparmál* 55). Bragi, Vali, Hönir, and Loki are not mentioned in the song of Grímnir, the remaining two abodes are ascribed to Odin (together with Saga) and Frey, third one belongs to Baldr, fourth one — Thrymheim — to the giant Thjazi and next to his daughter Skadi.

It is well known that both *Eddas* contain various traditions, in many cases not consistent with each other. Thus, the lack of homogenous cosmological scheme is not unexpected. It may be added here that the song of Grímnir itself states that the world has been created from seven parts of the giant Ymir: earth from his body, sea from his blood, mountains from his bones, forests from hairs, sky from the skull, Midgards from the eye–lashes, the clouds from his brain (*Grímnismál* 40–41). It is difficult to state unequivocally whether the conception of nine worlds was common in the culture of pagan Norsemen or it was only one of many traditions. Not only *Völuspá*, but also Snorri mentions the nine worlds and calls Hel or Niflhel lowest of them all (*Gylfaginning* 3). In other passage this author states that Odin thrown the goddess Hel down to Niflheim and gave her the control over nine worlds (*Gylfaginning* 34). It is not clear, however, whether the nine worlds can be taken into account here or only nine regions of the Underworld itself. This last possibility seems to be pointed out by another passage mentioning Niflheim as a land which had existed before Midgard was created. In Niflheim the well of Hvergelmir is established, the source of eleven rivers: Svol, Gunnthra, Fiorm, Fimbulthul, Slidr and Hrid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leiptr, Gioll (*Gylfagynning* 4). It appears that Slidr and Hrid, as well as Sylg and Ylg can be treated together, and thus the number of rivers would be reduced to nine; each of them could be then related to one of the regions of Underworld. It is worth noticing that Snorri enumerated 20 names including two pairs on the list of mythical rivers, which is the doubling of the previous record (*Skaldskaparmál* 75). However, the names recur only in part and it is difficult to draw any conclusion about relation between these two lists. The last river of the Underworld, Gjoll (ON “the noisy one”) appears in the story about the journey of Hermod for Baldr’s rescue. For nine days Hermod had travelled in complete darkness before he reached this river and the gate to Niflheim next to it (*Gylfaginning* 49).

In other place Snorri enumerates the nine heavens: Vindblain (“wind–dark”) called also Heidthornir (“clouded–brightness”) or Hregg–Mimir (“storm–Mimir”), Andlang (“extended”), Vidblain (“wide–dark”), Vidfedmir (“wide–embracer”), Hriod (“coverer”), Hlyrnir (“twin–lit”), Gimir (“fiery”), Vet–Mimir (“winter–Mimir”) and, at last, Skatyrnir (“rich–wetter”), which is above the clouds and beside all worlds (*Skaldskaparmál* 75). The names of particular heavens are rather an artificial idea of Snorri, while their number surely relates to the previous cosmological symbolism of number nine. It is very interesting that the name of Mimir appears twice in the list. Mimir was the god of wisdom, whom Odin gave one eye for a possibility of drinking from his well of knowl-

edge (*Gylfaginning* 15). Maybe the simple association with the water is suggested here, maybe in that way Snorri intended to underline the scholarly character of his list.

It is rather clear that number nine occurs in different cosmological schemes, in spite of their variability and frequent discordances. One may assume then, that even before the oral tradition was written down in the poetry of *Elder Edda* and in the narratives of *Prose Edda*, this number had been associated with most general structure of the world, irrespective of how actually this structure had been presented. The relation between number nine, the heaven, and the Underworld can be also motivated in the runic magic. The names for both parts of the world begin with the consonant h (*himinn* and *hel*), and in the elder Scandinavian futhark the rune Hagalaz, which denoted this phone, occupied the ninth position. Of course, the direct proof for existence of such association at Norsemen is not available, but taking into account the alliterative character of skaldic poetry and the actual indications of the magic of the runes, such interpretation cannot be excluded.

#### 4. Odin, valkyries, and On's sacrifice

In the mythology of Norsemen Odin is the god searching for wisdom, the protector of kings, as well as the ruler of Valhalla, where a part of killed heroes is gathered in order to prepare a troop for the final combat against the monsters which threaten this world. Some contemporary authors treat him as the shaman-god who initiated and sacrificed himself for control over all worlds. In *Elder Edda* Odin prides himself that for nine days he hanged on the tree Yggdrasill and mastered nine verses (*Hávamál* 137–138). Later they are described in detail, but in dual number — the last eighteenth verse is reserved only for Odin and his wife Frigg, all other ones can be used by the mankind as magical incantations (*Hávamál* 146–165). The number nine occurs also in the description of other adventure of Odin, which aimed at the increase of his knowledge. When the god wanted to drink the mead of poetry controlled by the giant Suttung, he offered the latter's brother Baugi the work of nine men for half year (*Skaldskaparmál* 58).

Also the three is associated with Odin and with the skill of magic, which was this god's main attribute. The spells were repeated three times (*Skirnismál* 34–37; cf. *Völuspá* 21), Odin created three components of human being together with Hönir and Lothur (*Völuspá* 18). It may be added that the number of gates leading to Valhalla is  $540 = 9 \times 60$  or  $18 \times 30$  (*Grimnismál* 23; *Gylfaginning* 40), the double approximate length of pregnancy time. According to the genealogy of gods presented in Snorri's prologue to Edda, Odin was the descendant of Thor, son of Priam, in 18<sup>th</sup> generation (*Prologue* 9–10). The last associations of Odin with number nine and its multiplication are not so important, but nine days spent on the tree and nine verses seem to refer to the presented above cosmological symbolism of number nine.

According to the beliefs of the Norsemen, the killed heroes were took out from the battlefields and directed to Valhalla by the valkyries. Also the valkyries serve them at the tables of Odin. The nature of the valkyries is unclear, they are associated on one side with *disir* or *fylgjar* — protective spirits of the mankind — on the other with Norns, the primeval beings who designate the destiny of both mankind, gods, and other races. The most exhaustive list gives the names of thirteen valkyries serving the heroes (six pairs plus one) as well as three more who are responsible for selecting the warriors who would be killed. One of the latter is Skuld, the youngest Norn (*Gylfaginning* 35). Thus, together there are seven pairs and two single valkyries. Nine valkyries are explicitly mentioned in the verses concerning Helgi. This hero was lazy in his youth, until the moment when nine valkyries visited him, among them Swawa the most beautiful (*Helga kvida*

*Hjörvardssonar* II i 6). Later three times nine valkyries lead by Swawa protected the fleet of Helgi (*Helga kvida Hjörvardssonar* 28). When Helgi Hjörvardsson was reborn as Helgi Sigmundsson and Swawa as Sygrun, the latter appeared together with eight other valkyries during the storm harassing the fleet of Helgi and they calmed the weather (*Helga kvida Hundingsbana* II 16). A thing of some importance is that the only mention of metempsychosis in Scandinavian texts appears in the cycle of verses concerning Helgi: the hero is reborn three times under the same name, while Swawa as Sygrun and Kora (*Helga kvida Hjörvardssonar* 43; *Helga kvida Hundingsbana* II 4, 50). It may be related to Helgi's three threads of destiny hung over East, West, and North (*Helga kvida Hundingsbana* I 4). The description of the return of Helgi from the hereafter and his departure to the West gives no information concerning his succeeding incarnations and possible relation of Odin to the metempsychosis (*Helga kvida Hundingsbana* II 39–48). It was stated only that more particulars were included in now lost *Lay of Kora*.

The *Lay of Völund* tells about three valkyries, Orlun, Alvit, and Svanhvit (ON “the bright swan”), who took off their swan garments in order to take a bath in a lake. Völund and his two brothers hid the garments and forced the valkyries to marry them. The valkyries stayed with the brothers, but after nine years they eventually regained the swan garments and flew away (*Völundarkvida* 4,1–3; cf. Guerber 1909:175–176; Słupecki 1998:160). The swan garments seem to play important part in this story. According to the *Prose Edda* the pair of swans live near the well of destiny, where the Norns decide about the fates of the worlds — all the birds of this species on the earth are the descendants of these swans (*Gylfaginning* 17). The relation of number nine and the swans associates with the attribution of Apollo; it will be discussed later. Concerning the Norns, they are usually three in number: Urd, Werdandi, and Skuld. However, Snorri seems to suggest that the number of Norns may be nine: three from the Æsir, three from the race of elves, and three of the dwarfs (*Gylfaginning* 8; cf. *Fáfnismál* 13; Słupecki 1998:177). Thus number nine could be associated both with valkyries and with Norns.

The valkyries are not mentioned in the sagas. Instead, there are some passages concerning *fylgjar* — the protective spirits. Thorstein Síðu-Hallson three times had a dream that three women visited him and warned that a slave would try to kill him (Słupecki 1998:24). These women were *fylgjar*. Much more interesting is the story about Thidrandi, other Síðu-Hall's son. During the festival of *Dísarblót* Thorhall organised a feast. Since he predicted a disaster, prohibited the guests to leave the house. At night there were three knocks on the door. Young Thidrandi did not hold out, took the sword and went out. Outside he saw nine women in black arriving from the North with swords in their hands and the same number of women in white arriving from the South. Thidrandi decided to withdraw but the women in black reached him and wounded him fatally. In the morning Thorhall said that they were not real women but *fylgjar* of gathered guests. The religion is expected to be changed and the new religion will be better. The pagan *fylgjar* forecasted this and took out Thidrandi as their funeral offering. These in white garments wanted to help him, but they failed. Since Síðu-Hall was the supporter of Christianity in Iceland, the murder of his son by pagan *fylgjar* was fully understandable. It is worth noticing one more detail: in the moment of death Thidrandi was eighteen years old (Słupecki 1998:159). *Fylgjar* in this story resemble valkyries — they come with armour, take the killed man and they are nine in number. It may be assumed that the traditional motif was used for symbolic presentation of the struggle between Christianity and Paganism at the end of 10<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland.

The last association of Odin and number nine is suggested in the story about the king On, one of Ynglings (*Ynglinga Saga* 29). In the age of sixty years On came to Uppsala and made a sacrifice of his own son for Odin, begging for additional sixty years

of life. After 75 years he sacrificed the second son, begging for another 60 years, but this time Odin responded that he would live until his sons were sacrificed in ten years period and that their number give the name for the provinces of his country. Although On was growing weaker and weaker, he sacrificed nine sons altogether. But when he intended to kill the tenth one and give his kingdom the name of Ten Lands, the Swedes did not permitted it. On eventually died and his survived son took the power. Another version of the same story has been mentioned by Snorri in his *Edda*. According to this one, the king Halfdan the Old performed a great sacrifice during the winter solstice, in order to acquire 300 years of life. The killing of sons is not mentioned here. Halfdan had 18 sons, among them nine born at the same time. Their names are significant and associated to the kingship. Other sons of Halfdan established nine dynasties of kings, among them Nibelungs, Ynglings, and Budlungs (*Skaldskaparmál* 64). The story about On's sacrifice relates to the actual sacrifices in Uppsala, which according to the testimony of Adam of Bremen took the place each nine years during spring equinox in the temple of Thor, Odin, and Frey. For nine days one male from nine species was killed and all their bodies were hung near the temple. Also human sacrifices were performed. Thietmar of Merseburg describes in short analogical sacrifices in Leire (Simek 1993:233). It is possible that they could be symbolically associated with the self-sacrifice of Odin.

## 5. Nine as a distinguished number

In many passages in both *Eddas* number nine appears as a special number, but with no precise relation to the symbolism presented above. Successive examples can be enumerated *ad nauseam*. The god Heimdall is the son of nine sisters, daughters of Ægir and Ran (*Gylfaginning* 27; *Skaldskaparmál* 16, 24, 61; *Völuspá en skamma* 37–38). During the final battle Thor would leave the body of killed Midgardsorm for nine steps and fall poisoned by its venom (*Völuspá* 55–56; *Gylfaginning* 51). Skadi and Niörd spend in turn nine days in their abodes Noatun on the sea and Thrymheim in the mountains; when they return, Niörd says: “I hate mountains — not long was I there, just nine nights: wolves’ howling I thought ugly compared with the swans’ song” (*Gylfaginning* 23). The golden ring Draupnir each ninth night breeds eight copies; it received such peculiarity after Odin put it on the funeral pyre of Baldr (*Gylfaginning* 49; *Skaldskaparmál* 35; *Skirnismál* 21). For nine nights Frey had to wait for his marriage with Gerd (*Skirnismál* 40–42; *Gylfaginning* 37). Hymir’s mother had 900 heads, Hymir owned nine cauldrons from which only one persisted when Thor visited him (*Hymiskvida* 8, 13). Menglod had nine maidservants (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 35), Groa expressed nine spells (*Gróugaldur* 6–14), Sinmar’s chest had nine closures (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 26), giantesses Fenja and Menja for nine years lived under the ground (*Grottasöngur* 11; *Skaldskaparmál* 43), the giantess Hrimgerd lived nine leagues under the ground (*Helga kvida Hundingsbana* I 16), Thor killed the nine-headed giant Thrivaldi (*Skaldskaparmál* 4), the creature Mokkurkalfi created against him by the giants had nine leagues of height (*Skaldskaparmál* 17), in *Völuspá* the giantess nine times repeats: “do you know it?” (cf. Słupecki 1998:60).

Number nine appears a few times in the story about Völsungs. Völsung had ten sons, Sigmund and his nine brothers. All of them were captured by Siggeir and for nine nights an old she-wolf devoured one of them. When Sigmund’s turn came, he played a trick and was able to survive (*Völsunga saga* 5). Sigmund and his son Sinfjötli for a certain time were turned into wolves and killed the men; Sinfjötli boasted that he had been the father of nine wolves (*Völsunga saga* 9; *Helga kvida Hundingsbana* I 41). Also the association of number nine with wolves and lycanthropia was present in the ancient

Greece; it will be discussed later. An influence of Christianity can be perceived in the story about Völsungs, among others by the underline of the number seven. Sigmund and Sinfrjötli alone could defeat seven enemies (*Völsunga saga* 8); after Sigurd's death Gudrun for seven seasons lived in Denmark, she travelled three times for seven days (*Völsunga saga* 34). The mixture of two traditions can be observed here; the pagan nine appears only in those passages which were directly related to the elder oral tradition presented in some of the verses of Elder Edda. The seven and the twelve as the distinguished numbers are testified also in Snorri's work (cf. *Gylfagynning* 2, 3).

Number nine appears also in Icelandic laws. The whole island was divided into four districts and 39 subdistricts. In the North there were 12 subdistricts, in other districts nine respectively; *godi* from each one was a member of Law Council. Additionally three men from each three districts except the northern one were elected during the althing and the general number of members of the Council amounted 48 (*Grágás*, p. 7, 189). Also in Norwegian thing at Gula the Council consisted of twelve representatives of each three districts. According to the Icelandic law there were nine kinds of assault: five with three-years exile penalty and four with full exile penalty and confiscation of all properties. There are successively: "if a man cuts at a man, or thrusts at him, or shoots or throws at him, or strikes at him" (lesser ones) as well as "when a man fells another, (...) when one man shakes another, (...) when a man wrests something from another's grasp, (...) if a man throttles someone" (greater ones). If someone accomplished a manslaughter or other crime, was obligated to immediately inform nine neighbours who later, during the trial, fulfilled the duties of witnesses (*Grágás*, p. 149, 169). If the guilty person did not fulfil this obligation, he was treated as a murderer and an outlaw. In case of lesser crimes, with fine penalty, only five witnesses were obligated to testify (*Grágás*, p. 48). Nine witnesses should assist also exhumation and transportation of corpse into other place (*Grágás*, p. 31). Numerous examples of the application of this law concerning witnesses are included in *Njal's saga* (59, 64, 111, 134, 141, 143).

In some passages the killing of nine enemies in a single combat or with one comrade was presented as an example of exceptional courage and martial art (*Kormaks saga* 19; *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 45). According to Saxo Grammaticus the jarl Swarin had seven legitimate and nine illegitimate sons. All the latter was killed by Gorm, the king of Dunes in a single combat (*Saxo* 1). Also Hakon boasted of the killing of nine kings (*Heimskringla:Olaf Trygvason* 56). Farther, Helgi and Starkad came into conflict with nine sons of a certain prince from Zealand (*Saxo* 6). Nine killed men are mentioned also in other sources, but the number in those cases can be real, not symbolical (cf. *Heimskringla:Hakon Herdebreid* 12; *Heitharviga saga* 32).

According to the *Wilibrord's life* Radbod, the ruler of Frisians, for three following days three times each day tried to obtain a prediction of saint's death, but did not succeeded at all (*Stupecki* 1998:106). Gorm, the king of Dunes, had a dream of three white, three red, and three black oxen coming out from the sea and ravaging all the land — it was interpreted as the forecast of a famine (*Stupecki* 1998:33). In both cases it is rather clear that in the foretelling number nine was recognised to be a distinguished number as the triplication of three. In Greenland nine sisters of the seer Thorbiorg were mentioned as the women skilled in foretelling (*Eiríks saga rauda* 4; cf. *Stupecki* 1998:80). In *Heimskringla* Snorri related that Harald came barefoot on nine glowing plowshares and confirmed his rights in that way (*Heimskringla:Sigurd* 34).

Some other examples of treating number nine as the distinguished number can be enumerated here. The age of nine years used to be recognised as sufficient to decide about oneself (*Vatnsdaela saga* 19; *Heimskringla:Sigurd* 41). The king Olaf Haraldsson took a part in nine struggles (*Heimskringla:Olaf Haraldsson* 14), Olaf Trygvason was

nine years old when came to Russia and for nine years he stayed with the king Valdemar (*Heimskringla:Olaf Trygvason* 7). The king Harald thrown out nine wives in order to marry Ragnhild (*Heimskringla:Harald Harfager* 21). It may be added here that Saxo Grammaticus divided his history of pagan Denmark into nine books.

Of course, some of these nines can be the real numbers, not symbolical ones. In the sagas nine (*Ere-dwellers* 37, 45), ninety (*Heimskringla:Harald Harfager* 12; *Heitharviga saga* 24; *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 10, 16) or even nine hundred men (*Laxdaela saga* 27) are mentioned, as well as nine ships (*Heimskringla:Magnus the Blind* 10, *Hakon the Good* 24). Otkell gave Runolf nine-year old black ox (*Njals saga* 52), in the ashes of Njal's farm the remains of nine persons were found (*Njals saga* 131), Hardbeen was nine feet tall (*Saxo* 7) and Thorstein for nine years remained in Norway (*Grettirs saga* 90). Egil had 18 men on his ship when escaped from the king Eirik (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 57–58). All these nines and their multiplications have clearly no symbolic meaning and mark the real numbers. Number nine is a number of colleagues according to the list of numbers in Snorri's handbook of skaldic poetry (*Skaldskaparmal* 66).

In the same handbook one can read that in *dróttkvaett* metrum first and third verse of a stanza can contain at least nine syllables, while second and fourth verse at least seven (*Hattatal* 8). It is not clear whether these numbers possessed symbolical, or only practical meaning. Nevertheless, in the works of Snorri they were both the distinguished numbers, number nine in mythological contexts, number seven in sagas — for example in the story about the king Ingjald, who had erected a hall with seven daises (*Ynglinga saga* 40). Third distinguished number in the Scandinavian tradition is the number twelve, which still appeared much less frequently than number nine. Snorri enumerated twelve *Æsir*, twelve berserks belonged to the king's troops (*Egils saga* 9).

## 6. The parallels in other cultures

Number nine is the distinguished number not only in the culture of pagan Scandinavians. It is enough to recall the enneads of gods in ancient Egypt (Niwiński 1992:63), nine-year long service of Kumarbi in the Hittite story about generations of gods (Cinal 1997:87), nine-day long wrestling in Mesopotamian city of Uruk for the memory of Gilgamesh (Cohen 1993:319–320), or nine sons of Kingu in an Assyrian ritual (Cohen 1993:325–326). Very important number in Indian *Upanishadas* is 108 = 9x12 (Kempiński 1993:256), 99 names of God are enumerated by the Muslims, the word *amen* in Greek *izopsefia* possesses the same numeral value (Forstner 1990:50). Pseudo-Dionisios divided the angel choirs into triplets of triplets. Number nine divided in the same way is also testified in the European tradition of magic, for example in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, where three witches assign their magical circle three times in one direction, three times oppositely and three times in return (*Macbeth* I 3). In Saxony a vampire used to be called Neuntoter ("nine-killer"), because the dead became dangerous nine days after the death.

The symbolism of the numbers three and nine, analogous to the Scandinavian one, can be found also in sparse sources describing the tradition of pagan Slavs. According to Adam of Bremen there were nine gates in Radogost, Thietmar testifies only three (Łowmiański 1986:174). The god Tryglaw, whose sanctuary took the place in Szczecin, according to Ebo's words looked into three kingdoms — heaven, earth, and Underworld. Also in Gardziec three gods were worshipped in three places (Łowmiański 1986:198). Herbord relates that the forecasting in Szczecin was performed with the use of a horse which three times passed over nine spears and if it touched no one, the



sign was favourable (Ślupecki 1998:147). A. Kempieński suggests that in Indoeuropean languages number nine could open a new group of numerals. It might be testified by the homophony and possible etymological association of the words “new” and “nine”, for example in Latin *novus* — *novem* (Kempieński 1993:256).

The similarity of symbolical usage of number nine by the Norsemen and north-western Slavs is not surprising if the contacts between these two nations are taken into account. In turn, the parallels with farther cultures arise only from the general and widely recognised properties of number nine. Moreover, number nine was never so distinguished in Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Christianity, as in medieval Scandinavia.

Completely different results arise from the comparison of the tradition of the Norsemen with ancient Greek sources. In that case the parallels are much deeper. First of all, in ancient Greece number nine as a symbolical number occurred much more frequently than in the Middle East (cf. Kopaliński 1991:237). Moreover, it occurred chiefly in the context of Apollo and metempsychosis, in the works of authors more or less clearly relating to the esoteric Orphic doctrine. In one of his verses Pindar stated that “in ninth year Persephone would restore for the sun the souls of these who gave her compensation for their previous guilts. The famous kings, the ones powerful by the strength or by the wisdom arise from these souls; they are always worshipped by the mankind as the sacred heroes”. Thus the second incarnation follows after nine years. Also the length of life of nymphs and demons according to Plutarch and Hesiod (9729 years) or Callimachos (9720 years) is the multiplication of number nine, similarly as the number 729, which in Plato’s theory separates the king-philosopher from the tyrant on the scale of justice (*Republic* IX 587–588) and which is the square of square of number nine. Plato justified this number with use of numerology: it should be the number of days and nights in the year. In the dialogue *Critias* he wrote that Atlantis sank 9000 years ago. As Seneca wrote, Plato died in age of exactly 81 years, which has been interpreted as the square of nine, the sacred number of Muses. For that reason it was said that the Magi, who stayed in Athens in that time, made an offering for him as a *heros* (*Letters* VI 158). All works of Plato have been divided into nine tetralogies as early as in antiquity.

The symbolical number nine appears also in the works of Pythagoreans. According to them a man is a chord consisting of eight sounds, with the deity added as the ninth. The Orphic and Pythagorean conceptions of the soul and the metempsychosis were presented by Empedocles in the form of nine statements. Number nine is also the sacred number of Apollo, whose animal attribute is a swan, *nota bene* associated by the Greeks with Hyperborea, the North. Some disciples of Pythagoras considered him to be the incarnation of Apollo, according to a legend Plato appeared in a dream of Socrates in the shape of a swan. Leto gave birth to Apollo for nine days and nights, because envious Hera suspended the goddess of birth and only a necklace of nine-feet thickness persuaded her to release. In the moment of birth of the god some sacred swans appeared above the island and flew by in seven circles (it was the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month Targelion). Next Zeus gave his son a chariot harnessed in the swans and then Apollo went to the North, to Hyperboreans (cf. Sołtysiak 2002). The association of Apollo with the swans was noticed by Plato who commented it in the dialogue *Phaedon* in that way: “The swans, seeing that their death is coming, sing as before; but in that moment they sing most for joy that they have to go to the god, whom they serve” (*Phaedon* 85).

The coincidence of the metempsychosis, number nine, and the swans in the Orphic tradition, which was developed both by Pythagoras and by Plato, associates with the symbolical complex related to the valkyries in the culture of the Norsemen. Apollo as the god of inspiration, whose animal attributes were, besides a swan, also a crow and a wolf, resembles to some extent Odin. Moreover, nine Muses correspond with nine valkyries. There is also a certain similarity in the cosmological symbolism, since also in Greek ideas

nine rivers flow in the Underworld. The parallel between Scandinavian and Greek traditions is so deep that it hardly could be treated as completely accidental. Although the influence of ancient tradition on the authors of the verses of *Elder Edda*, and first of all to Snorri Sturluson, cannot be excluded, however in that specific case it would be of small probability. It should be rather assumed that the Orphic conception of the metempsychosis and symbolical complex related to it had been in some way adopted and modified by the Germans as early as in antiquity. The hypothesis of origins of this conceptions in the times of postulated Pre-Indoeuropean community would be hard to prove, because there are no its clear traces in other European and Indo-Aryan peoples. The explanation of so detailed and not evident similarity in the symbolism of number nine at Normans and Greeks seems then impossible in that moment. Finally, it may be added that also the association of number nine with lycanthropy in the story about Völsungs has a certain Greek parallel. As Plinius the Elder wrote, in Greece a representative of one generation of a certain kin was forced to become a wolf for nine years (*Historia naturalis* 8,34).

## 7. The continuation: Neo-Paganism and Satanism

Number nine as a distinguished number still exists in new religious movements related directly or indirectly to the pagan religion of the Norsemen. First of all, Ásatrú should be mentioned, the religion based on contemporary reconstruction of German pagandom. The core of the ethics of Ásatrú is the list of nine virtues: courage, truth, honor, faithfulness, discipline, hospitality, industriousness, independence, and perseverance (Sołtysiak 1999a:274). In the Raven Kindred Association, one of Ásatrú groups in United States, during the ceremony of introduction of a new member to the community, all its members propose a toast dedicated to the particular virtues (Sołtysiak 1999a:281). In other organisation named The Troth each group should organise at least nine ritual meetings during each year (Sołtysiak 1999b:140). Number nine is also associated with the birth and the death: a child receives a name and acceptance of the family nine days after the birth; the kinsmen of the deceased are obligated to erect a monument in his memory in nine months after the death (Sołtysiak 1999a:282, 287). Until now, in Ásatrú there is a lack of interest in the meaning of number nine in *Eddas* and this number is used only as a symbolical standard.

The meaning of number nine as a magical number associated with the occult sciences was strengthened in the Christian Europe under influence of both Greek tradition and Scandinavian pagandom. Such meaning is willingly used by the representatives of contemporary "Left-Hand Path" movement, including the Satanists. Number nine many times appears in the works of Anton Szandor LaVey, the late founder of the Church of Satan. His first book, *The Satanic Bible*, has been dedicated among others to number nine Unknown Men — it is allusion to the testimonies of the slave Tituba from Salem. She said that during a sabbath she had met a man in black from Boston, who possessed a black book with nine names. LaVey used the same motif appointing the Council of Nine in his group, intended to be a highest authority of the Church. LaVey expressed the basic elements of his doctrine in form of nine statements. Later he added the list of Nine Satanic Sins (stupidity, pretentiousness, solipsism, self-deceit, herd mentality, lack of perspective, lack of historical perspective, unproductive pride, lack of esthetics), as well as nine pieces of advice how to avoid pseudo-Satanists. The group Infernal Garrison, relating to LaVey, proposed also a list of nine infernal laws. Number nine is the ordinal number most frequently used by LaVey. It appears also in ritual context: during the black mess the celebrant chimes a bell nine times. LaVey took over Howard Lovecraft's idea of the Ceremony of Nine Angles, the five angles

of the pentagram and the four angles of the trapezoid. Most interesting, however, is the conception of the cycles of time which has been presented by LaVey as an appendix to one of his books (LaVey 1972:219–220). The history in LaVey's opinion consists of succeeding Ages of Ice and Ages of Fire, ruled accordingly by God and Satan (it is clearly the continuation of the theory of "fire and ice" presented by Hans Hörbiger). Their cycles are dependent of the Law of number nine, which was called the number of Satan by LaVey. In each smallest cycle 9 years of reaction follow 9 years of action, such 18 years makes a Working. Nine such Workings make an Era, nine Eras make an Age, and nine Ages make an Epoch (13122 years). The last Age of Ice was closed in the year 1966, the year of establishment of the Church of Satan; at present according to LaVey we enter gradually the Age of Fire. Its main peculiarity is that everyone can indulge oneself with no limitations.

In 1975, after the split in the Church of Satan (nine years after its founding!) the Temple of Set appeared, the religious organisation relating distinctly to the Gnosticism. Its founder, Michael Aquino, still as the member of the Church of Satan, used the symbolism of number nine in his list of the Princes of Hell: Satan, Belzebub, Azazel, Abaddon, Asmodeus, Belial, Leviatan, Astaroth, and Anton LaVey. The Council of Nine was appointed also in the Temple. However, the symbolism of number nine is used only by some Orders of the Temple (about the Orders: Soltysiak 1998:133–134), especially by the Order of the Trapezoid founded by Michael Aquino and developed by Stephen Flowers, who under the name of Edred Thorsson is also one of ideologists of Ásatrú and the creator of specific system of runic magic. The main symbol of initiation in the Order is a trapezoid with a pentagram inside. Nine angles of both figures are said to have specified meaning, for example the ninth angle represents the Black Flame, i.e. the self-consciousness in the terminology of the Temple of Set. The term of office of the Grand Master of the Order counts nine years. In the Order of the Sepulcher of the Obsidian Masque, which is involved in the experience of the transition through death, the list of key elements consists of nine items. There are: life, death, love, fear, immersion, embodied Essence (as a result of initiation), spontaneity, self-examination, energy.

In Great Britain a satanistic group named the Order of the Nine Angles has been founded about dozen years ago; the reference to the fantasies of Lovecraft is evident in this name. Number nine as the number of Satan sometimes appears in the texts of black metal bands. One of records of Norwegian band *Emperor* has been entitled "IX Equilibrium". In the text it was explained as the name of Satan: "in the name of Nonus Aequilibrium I am yours IX times IX...". The concept seems to refer to the symbolism of number nine in LaVey's system. However, since the band origins in Scandinavian country and its members refer to the pagandom of Norsemen in other texts, it cannot be excluded that the allusion concerns Odin, identified with Satan by some Norwegian satanists.

## 8. Conclusion

The conception of nine worlds testified in *Völuspá*, although maybe not very popular in Norse tradition, surely was related to more general association of number nine with the division of world into heaven, earth, and Underworld, the division mentioned also by Snorri. The cosmological symbolism thus accounts for the specific significance of number nine, analogically as in the Middle East the seven was distinguished as the number of planetary spheres. Here and there the distinguished number was used for definition of various symbolical values, often not related to the cosmology at all. The second aspect of the Norse symbolism of nine refers to Odin and his valkyries — here number nine associates with the initiation, the cycles of life and death, as well as magic.

An analogous symbolic complex can be found in Orphic tradition of ancient Greece, although the direct relation between them must remain in the sphere of speculations. Finally number nine as the triplication of three is the number used in magic and divination. In that application it appears in European esoteric traditions and finally in contemporary Neo-Paganism and Satanism.

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