

# *Hymiskvida* and *Gylfaginning* 48: Is Thor's Meeting with Midgardsorm an Astral Story?

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The classical Greek mythology enumerates transformations of many characters into stars or constellations. In Babylonian sources the constellations are very important in theological speculations. Also in many other cultures the religious imageries of stars appear abundantly. Instead, in Scandinavian heathen mythological lore the interest in heavenly bodies seems to be more than modest. Only twice the etiology of stars is given, unfortunately without particulars enabling their modern identification. The heaven, the sun, and the moon appear in some passages, but even in cosmological context their importance is not stressed. Then, the question can be asked whether Scandinavians did not set store by the stars or the astral imagery was expressed in not direct, i.e. symbolic way. Most scholars assume the first option true. Contrarily, Bjorn Jonsson claimed in his book that all motifs in Scandinavian mythology have astral background (Jonsson 1997).

In the present paper the possibility of astral interpretation of one selected Scandinavian myth will be discussed. More precisely, the story about Thor's journey to the giant Hymir is related. During this journey Thor met Midgardsorm, the serpent encircling our world and Thor's antagonist during the final battle *Ragnarok*. This story has been interpreted by Bjorn Jonsson as an allegory of Jupiter and Saturn looping in the proximity of *Cetus*, in 233 or 1085–87 AD (Jonsson 1997: 108–114). Jonsson's interpretation is very unlikely and grounded in no original sources, thus it will be not discussed here. However, in the story one can find some elements which are obviously associated with the heaven. One can then ask whether those elements are sufficient to acknowledge the whole story as a kind of astral etiological myth or not.

## The Background

The practical observations of stars for navigational purposes or for calendrical use are documented very scarcely in Scandinavian sources (Vilhjalms-son 1991, 1997). Also in mythology the references to stars are unfrequent. In both *Eddas*, main sources for the research on Scandinavian heathendom, only two etiological stories can be found. Main character in one of them is the giant Thiazi. Deceitfully he kidnapped the goddess Idunn, whose apples had ensured the eternal youth of gods (i.e. *Ćsir*). With assistance of trickster god Loki, the *Ćsir* lured Thiazi to their abode. He came flying in the

shape of a great eagle and has been killed within the gates. Odin, in order to compensate this death for Thiazi's daughter Skadi, took the giant's eyes and threw them up into the sky as two stars (*Skaldskaparmal* 56). This Storri Sturluson's version, related in *Prose Edda*, slightly differs from that included in older *Poetic Edda*, where Thor boasts of killing Thiazi and turning his eyes into two stars (*Harbardsljod* 19). The story was known as early as in the 9th century and appeared in *Haustlong*, a description of scenes depicted on a shield belonging to the poet Thjodolf or Hvini.

The second etiological myth concerning a star is preserved in Snorri's *Prose Edda* only. It seems to be a reference to a longer story which unfortunately is lost. After a combat against the giant Hrungrnir, Thor suffered from a piece of whetstone which had stuck in his head. The sorceress Groa decided to help the god who in return told her that "he had waded south across the Elivag river carrying [Groa's husband] Aurvandil in a basket south of Giantland". One of Aurvandil's toes had got frozen during this journey, Thor broke it off and threw up into the sky as a star called *Aurvandils t a* (Aurvandil's toe). Unfortunately, equally as in case of Thjazi's eyes, the identification of Aurvandil's toe is not possible (*Skaldskaparmal* 17). The name is related to Old English Earendel, a name of morning star (Simek 1996: 24), but this relation should not be overestimated.

Various names of the heaven, the sun, and the moon can be found in the lists of *kennings*, sophisticated figures of speech used in skaldic poetry (*Skaldskaparmal* 59; *Alvismal* 11–16). Snorri Sturluson gives also a list of nine heavens, although it seems to be his own invention (*Skaldskaparmal* 75). Summarizing it all, the scope of explicit astral symbolism in Scandinavian mythological lore is rather poor, but the existence of two etiological stories concerning stars enables us to assume that other motifs of that kind could have been known.

## Thor's Meeting with Midgardsorm

The tale about Thor fishing Midgardsorm is known in two different versions given by *Poetic Edda* (*Hymiskvida*) and Snorri's *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 48). It may be assumed that it was widely known among the Scandinavians, since three depictions on the runic stones are witnessed as well as two references in skaldic poetry from the 9th and 10th centuries (Simek 1996: 215).

In *Poetic Edda* the story begins with the trouble of Ógir. The Ósir obliged this giant to set a banquet for them. It is easy to understand that he was not content with this request and tried to escape the duty. He told the gods that he has no cauldron large enough to brew beer for all guests. Fortunately for Ósir, Tyr revealed to Thor that a cauldron one league deep belongs to the giant Hymir, Tyr's father, who dwells east of Elivag, at the edge of heaven (*Hymiskvida* 5). Both gods departed and after two days of journey came to Hymir's house. The giant was not happy with this visit, but treated the gods to three roast oxen. Since this meal made the pantry empty, Hymir and Thor had to go fishing the next day. Thor got a bait, black bull from Hymir's herd. He broke the root of its horns (*Hymiskvida* 19). Two fishermen sailed away and, although Thor wanted to keep rowing, Hymir stopped the boat and they began fishing. The giant hooked two whales, and afterwards Thor's bait has been caught by Midgardsorm. The god drew the serpent out to the board and attacked it with his hammer (*Hymiskvida* 24). Unfortunately, the next two stanzas are broken. In the preserved passage it was stated that the earth trembled and next the serpent fell down back to the sea. The last part of the story relates that Hymir put Thor to the tests and ultimately he was forced to give the cauldron to the Ógir. Thor and Tyr returned and from that time unhappy Ógir is forced to organize a banquet for the gods every winter.

The circumstances of Thor's stay at Hymir's house is different in *Prose Edda*. The god, under appearance of a young boy, visited the giant at nightfall and stayed for the night. Next day Thor and Hymir went fishing, although the giant sceptically evaluated the skills and powers of the young boy. Thor "asked Hymir what they were to use as a bait, but Hymir told him to get his own bait. Then Thor went off to where he could see a certain herd of oxen belonging to Hymir. He took the biggest ox, called Himinhriod, and tore off its head and took it down to the sea". Two fishermen launched the boat and rowed forth until Hymir said "they had gone so far out that it was dangerous to be further out because of Midgardsorm". Thor, however, disregarded this caution. Eventually they stopped and Thor fastened Himinhriod's head to the hook and threw it into the sea. And "Midgardsorm stretched its mouth round the ox-head and the hook stuck into the roof of the serpent's mouth". The combat begun and, as Snorri reports, "one can claim that a person does not know what a horrible sight it is who did not get to see how Thor fixed his eyes on the serpent, and the serpent stared back up at him spitting poison. It is said that then the giant Hymir changed colour, went pale, and panicked when he saw the serpent and how the sea flowed out and in over the boat. And just at the moment when Thor was grasping his hammer and lifting it in the air,

the giant fumbled at his bait-knife and cut Thor's line from the gunwale, and the serpent sank into the sea. But Thor threw his hammer after it, and they say that he struck off its head by the sea-bed. But I think in fact the contrary is correct to report to you that Midgardsorm lives still and lies in the encircling sea".

This Thor's meeting with his enemy was not the only one. Previous passages in *Prose Edda* inform us about the god's visit in the abode of giant and sorcerer Utgard-Loki. The host put the guest to three tests, apparently easy but actually impossible to pass. In one of these tests, Thor had to lift up a grey cat. However, although he reached as high up as he was able, the cat raised only one paw. At the farewell, Utgard-Loki informed Thor that it was an illusion, a result of sorcery. In fact the god tried to lift up Midgardsorm and he almost reached the sky (*Gylfaginning* 46–47). The last meeting of Thor and Midgardsorm will happen during the final battle, when almost all gods, men, giants, and monsters will fall. After killing the serpent with his hammer, Thor will go back nine steps and die poisoned by the venom (*Voluspá* 56, *Gylfaginning* 51).

### Astral Evidences, Possibilities, and Speculations

For someone not enthusiastically disposed towards astral mythology, it will be difficult to find any stars or constellations in the story about Thor and Midgardsorm. However, let us turn our attention to four elements of the story: the river Elivag, the ox Himinhriod, the serpent Midgardsorm, and the final passage of *Hymiskvida* relating that every winter Ógir organizes a feast for gods.

The name of Elivag appears only in four passages in Scandinavian mythological sources. The name can be translated as "the stormy sea" (Simek 1996: 73). As a river separating our world from the realm of the giants it appears in already mentioned stories about Aurvandil's toe and about Thor's and Tyr's journey to Hymir. However, there are also two other passages which present Elivag as a primeval river of fundamental importance in cosmology. According to *Poetic Edda* version, this river was a source of poison drops, from which the giant Aurgelmir arose. Aurgelmir, known also as Ymir, is a primeval being, the ancestor of all frozen giants and other races of living beings (*Vafthrudnismal* 31). Much more details are provided in Snorri's *Prose Edda*. According to this source at the very beginning there was nothing except Niflheim, the hell, and Muspell, the land of fire. Elivagar (plural form) is a collective name of 11 rivers which source is Hvergelmir, located near the gates of Niflheim. The number and names of the rivers are likely Snorri's invention. The rivers flew

far away and froze, and “the vapour that was rising from the poison froze on the top in the same direction and turned to rime, and this rime increased layer upon layer right across Ginnungagap”. Thus, Elivagar filled the northern part of the primeval chasm with ice and rime, “and there was vapour and a blowing inwards from it”. Instead, the southern part of Ginnungagap “cleared up in the face of the sparks and molten particles that came flying out of the world of Muspell”. Niflheim was then the source of the cold, Muspell was the source of the warmth, and “Ginnungagap was as mild as a windless sky”. When the cold and the warmth met in the midst of Ginnungagap, they “thawed and dripped” and gave origin to the life shaped in the form of the giant Ymir – Aurgelmir (*Gylfaginning* 3–4). When the gods killed Ymir, they put his body in the center of Ginnungagap and formed the middle world from it (*Gylfaginning* 8). In *Prose Edda* there are two more particulars concerning the primeval chasm: it is a *kenning* for the middle sky (*Skaldskaparmal* 59), and Snorri relates that it was located in the place where now the land of frozen giants takes place (*Gylfaginning* 15).

It is clear that the river Elivag holds a very important place in Scandinavian cosmology. To the modern reader of the myth it easily associates with the Milky Way dividing the heaven into two parts and resembling a chasm filled with ice and rime. Moreover, it was clearly stated in *Hymiskvida* that the giant Hymir had lived at the edge of the sky, east of Elivag. However, there is no direct evidence that Elivag was actually recognized as Milky Way and such modern interpretation must be treated in terms of possibility only.

In Snorri’s version Thor used as his bait the head of ox called Himinhryjóðr. This name can be translated as “the destroyer of heaven”. Apart from the *Prose Edda*, where it appears three times (twice in a list of ox names in *Skaldskaparmal* 58, 75), it is known also from a collection of synonyms and kennings composed by Thorgrim (Simek 1992: 148). It is likely that the name was Snorri’s invention, but the ox-head itself appears also in *Poetic Edda* and can be seen in depiction of the story on the tombstone in Gosforth, England, dated 10th century and thus elder than the *Prose Edda*. The name, even if invented by Snorri, is an indirect evidence that the ox could have been recognized as astral character, at least in Christian re-interpretation of the story. But again, there is no proof that it was associated with any constellation, including *Taurus*.

The name of Thor’s enemy is Midgardsorm (“serpent of the middle world”). It appears only in Snorri’s *Prose Edda*; skaldic verses and *Poetic Edda* call it Jormungand (“huge monster”), Orm

(“snake”) or Nadr (“dragon”). Serpent’s father is the trickster god Loki, it is the brother of the giant wolf Fenrir who will devour Odin during the final battle, and Hel, the queen of Niflheim (*Gylfaginning* 34). Just before the end of the world “Midgardsorm will spit so much poison that it will bespatter all the sky and sea, and it will be very terrible, and it will be on one side of the wolf” (*Gylfaginning* 51). The tradition of Thor’s final battle with Midgardsorm is attested as early as in the 9th century in *Ragnarsdrapa* 6 by the skald Bragi (*Skaldskaparmal* 2). In the poetry Midgardsorm is usually described as a serpent encircling our world; in later Christian sources it has been identified with Leviatan (Simek 1996: 215). In early depictions of Thor’s fishing motif, Midgardsorm was presented as a coiled serpent with no distinctive features. However, there is also late picture in the codex AM 738 4°, which shows the serpent with forelegs, long tail, bearded face, a horn, and the mouth open wide and directed towards ox-head attached to the rope. Such pattern (without the ox-head) is typical for the representations of the constellation *Hydra* in Near Eastern and classical tradition. And again this cannot be treated as a proof that Midgardsorm was associated with this constellation, because such a mode of depiction may be a result of its identification with Leviatan, which used to be related to *Hydra* in late medieval tradition.

The last interesting particular is the winter feast organized by Ógir for the gods. It seems to be an allusion to Yule, the feast related to the winter solstice. There are but few unclear references to this feast in the sources and we know only that it was considered to be important, lasted about ten days and its essence was drinking (sometimes the name “Yule drinking” appears instead of “Yule feast”). Later some elements of Yule tradition have been merged in Christmas (Simek 1996: 379–380). However, Yule is not mentioned explicitly in *Hymiskvida* and there is also the possibility that the gods simply enjoy spending the winter at Ógir.

### Is Thor’s Meeting with Midgardsorm an Astral Story?

The material has been presented and conclusions have to be drawn. It is impossible to answer univocally the question about astral symbolism in the story about Thor and Midgardsorm. There may be no allusion to the stars and it is possible that the motifs discussed above are misleading. On the other hand, however, it is also possible that the analysed tale has been an etiological explanation for the positions of constellations *Hydra*, *Taurus*, the Milky Way and for their best visibility during the winter. Thor’s cosmic battle against Midgardsorm in the context of the primeval river Elivag could have been used as a background for the feast

Yule, the feast of regeneration. The constellations *Hydra* associated with Midgardsorm, ox-head related to *Taurus* and the Milky Way separating the two parts of heaven would be then the eternal illustration of this event, well visible during long winter nights. Especially the movement of Hydra rising, then visible next to the horizon, and setting, associates strongly with the vision of Midgardsorm encircling the world. If such interpretation is true (the conditional mood of this sentence should be stressed), the next question arise, namely whether such motif was originally heathen, or had been adopted from classical tradition. It is likely that well-nformed Vikings, even heathen ones, were familiar with classical tradition, Greek uranography and Biblical imagery. So, it is equally possible that the motif could have been adopted by the heathen skalds or was a later reinterpretation of Christian authors, like Snorri Sturluson. Also the indigenous character of the symbolism cannot be excluded, as well as combination of various backgrounds.

The above discussion can be summarized in that way: the astral symbolism is possible, but it is impossible to find any direct evidence. Such lack of

certainty may result not only from incompleteness of the sources, but also from the character of Scandinavian literature, full of enigmas and riddles.

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