

Snorri Sturluson

A photograph of a bridge over a river at dusk. The bridge is on the right side of the frame, with a decorative railing and a patterned arch. In the background, a tall, dark spire rises against the sky. The water in the foreground is dark with some reflections.

Prose Edda

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1. King Gylfe ruled the lands that are now called Svithjod (Sweden). Of him it is said that he gave to a wayfaring woman, as a reward for the entertainment she had afforded him by her story-telling, a plow-land in his realm, as large as four oxen could plow it in a day and a night. But this woman was of the asa-race; her name was Gefjun. She took from the north, from Jotunheim, four oxen, which were the sons of a giant and her, and set them before the plow. Then went the plow so hard and deep that it tore up the land, and the oxen drew it westward into the sea, until it stood still in a sound. There Gefjun set the land, gave it a name and called it Seeland. And where the land had been taken away became afterward a sea, which in Sweden is now called Logrinn (the Lake, the Malar Lake in Sweden). And in the Malar Lake the bays correspond to the capes in Seeland. Thus says Brage, the old skald:

Gefjun glad
Drew from Gylfe
The excellent land,
Denmark's increase,
So that it reeked
From the running beasts.
Four heads and eight eyes
Bore the oxen
As they went before the wide
Robbed land of the grassy isle.

2. King Gylfe was a wise man and skilled in the black art. He wondered much that the asa-folk was so mighty in knowledge, that all things went after their will. He thought

to himself whether this could come from their own nature, or whether the cause must be sought for among the gods whom they worshiped. He therefore undertook a journey to Asgard. He went secretly, having assumed the likeness of an old man, and striving thus to disguise himself. But the asas were wiser, for they see into the future, and, foreseeing his journey before he came, they received him with an eye-deceit. So when he came into the burg he saw there a hall so high that he could hardly look over it. Its roof was thatched with golden shields as with shingles. Thus says Thjodolf of Hvin, that Valhal was thatched with shields:

Thinking thatchers
Thatched the roof;
The beams of the burg
Beamed with gold.

In the door of the hall Gylfe saw a man who played with swords so dexterously that seven were in the air at one time. That man asked him what his name was. Gylfe answered that his name was Ganglere; that he had come a long way, and that he sought lodgings for the night. He also asked who owned the burg. The other answered that it belonged to their king: I will go with you to see him and then you may ask him for his name yourself. Then the man turned and led the way into the hall. Ganglere followed, and suddenly the doors closed behind him. There he saw many rooms and a large number of people, of whom some were playing, others were drinking, and some were fighting with weapons. He looked around him, and much of what he saw seemed to him incredible. Then quoth he:

Gates all,
Before in you go,
You must examine well;
For you cannot know
Where enemies sit
In the house before you.

He saw three high-seats, one above the other, and in each sat a man. He asked what the names of these chiefs were. He, who had conducted him in, answered that the one who sat in the lowest high-seat was king, and hight Har; the other next above him, Jafnhar; but the one who sat on the highest throne, Thride. Har asked the comer what more his errand was, and added that food and drink was there at his service, as for all in Har's hall. Ganglere answered that he first would like to ask whether there was any wise man. Answered Har: You will not come out from here hale unless you are wiser.

And stand now forth
While you ask;
He who answers shall sit.

3. Ganglere then made the following question: Who is the highest and oldest of all the gods? Made answer Har: Alfater he is called in our tongue, but in Asgard of old he had twelve names. The first is Alfater, the second is Herran or Herjan, the third Nikar or Hnikar, the fourth Nikuz or Hnikud, the fifth Fjolner, the sixth Oske, the seventh Ome, the eighth Biflide or Biflinde, the ninth Svidar, the tenth Svidrer, the eleventh Vidrer, the twelfth Jalg or Jalk. Ganglere asks again: Where is this god? What can he do? What mighty works has he accomplished? Answered Har: He

lives from everlasting to everlasting, rules over all his realm, and governs all things, great and small. Then remarked Jafnhar: He made heaven and earth, the air and all things in them. Thride added: What is most important, he made man and gave him a spirit, which shall live, and never perish, though the body may turn to dust or burn to ashes. All who live a life of virtue shall dwell with him in Gimle or Vingolf. The wicked, on the other hand, go to Hel, and from her to Niflhel, that is, down into the ninth world. Then asked Ganglere: What was he doing before heaven and earth were made? Har gave answer: Then was he with the frost-giants.

4. Said Ganglere: How came the world into existence, or how did it rise? What was before? Made answer to him Har: Thus is it said in the Vala's Prophecy:

It was Time's morning,
When there nothing was;
Nor sand, nor sea,
Nor cooling billows.
Earth there was not,
Nor heaven above.
The Ginungagap was,
But grass nowhere.

Jafnhar remarked: Many ages before the earth was made, Niflheim had existed, in the midst of which is the well called Hvergelmer, whence flow the following streams: Svol, Gunnthro, Form, Finbul, Thul, Slid and Hrid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leipt and Gjoll, the last of which is nearest the gate of Hel. Then added Thride: Still there was before a world to the south which hight Muspelheim. It is light and hot, and so bright and dazzling that no stranger, who is not a native

there, can stand it. Surt is the name of him who stands on its border guarding it. He has a flaming sword in his hand, and at the end of the world he will come and harry, conquer all the gods, and burn up the whole world with fire. Thus it is said in the Vala's Prophecy:

Surt from the south fares
With blazing flames;
From the sword shines
The sun of the war-god.
Rocks dash together
And witches collapse,
Men go the way to Hel
And the heavens are cleft.

5. Said Ganglere: What took place before the races came into existence, and men increased and multiplied? Replied Har, explaining, that as soon as the streams, that are called the Elivogs, had come so far from their source that the venomous yeast which flowed with them hardened, as does dross that runs from the fire, then it turned into ice. And when this ice stopped and flowed no more, then gathered over it the drizzling rain that arose from the venom and froze into rime, and one layer of ice was laid upon the other clear into Ginungagap. Then said Jafnhar: All that part of Ginungagap that turns toward the north was filled with thick and heavy ice and rime, and everywhere within were drizzling rains and gusts. But the south part of Ginungagap was lighted up by the glowing sparks that flew out of Muspelheim. Added Thride: As cold and all things grim proceeded from Niflheim, so that which bordered on Muspelheim was hot and bright, and Ginungagap was as

warm and mild as windless air. And when the heated blasts from Muspelheim met the rime, so that it melted into drops, then, by the might of him who sent the heat, the drops quickened into life and took the likeness of a man, who got the name Ymer. But the Frost giants call him Aurgelmer. Thus it is said in the short Prophecy of the Vala (the Lay of Hyndla):

All the valas are
From Vidolf descended;
All wizards are
Of Vilmeide's race;
All enchanters
Are sons of Svarthofde;
All giants have
Come from Ymer.

And on this point, when Vafthrudner, the giant, was asked by Gangrad:

Whence came Aurgelmer
Originally to the sons
Of the giants? - thou wise giant!

he said

From the Elivogs
Sprang drops of venom,
And grew till a giant was made.
Thence our race
Are all descended,
Therefore are we all so fierce.

Then asked Ganglere: How were the races developed from him? Or what was done so that more men were made?

Or do you believe him to be a god of whom you now spake? Made answer Har: By no means do we believe him to be god; evil was he and all his offspring, them we call frost-giants. It is said that when he slept he fell into a sweat, and then there grew under his left arm a man and a woman, and one of his feet begat with the other a son. From these come the races that are called frost-giants. The old frost-giant we call Ymer.

6. Then said Ganglere: Where did Ymer dwell, and on what did he live? Answered Har: The next thing was that when the rime melted into drops, there was made thereof a cow, which hight Audhumbla. Four milk-streams ran from her teats, and she fed Ymer. Thereupon asked Ganglere: On what did the cow subsist? Answered Har: She licked the salt-stones that were covered with rime, and the first day that she licked the stones there came out of them in the evening a man's hair, the second day a man's head, and the third day the whole man was there. This man's name was Bure; he was fair of face, great and mighty, and he begat a son whose name was Bor. This Bor married a woman whose name was Bestla, the daughter of the giant Bolthorn; they had three sons,---the one hight Odin, the other Vile, and the third Ve. And it is my belief that this Odin and his brothers are the rulers of heaven and earth. We think that he must be so called. That is the name of the man whom we know to be the greatest and most famous, and well may men call him by that name.

7. Ganglere asked: How could these keep peace with Ymer, or who was the stronger? Then answered Har: The sons of Bor slew the giant Ymer, but when he fell, there

flowed so much blood from his wounds that they drowned therein the whole race of frost-giants; excepting one, who escaped with his household. Him the giants call Bergelmer. He and his wife went on board his ark and saved themselves in it. From there are come new races of frost-giants, as is here said:

Countless winters
Ere the earth was made,
Was born Bergelmer.
This first I call to mind
How that crafty giant
Safe in his ark lay.

8. Then said Ganglere: What was done then by the sons of Bor, since you believe that they were gods? Answered Har: About that there is not a little to be said. They took the body of Ymer, carried it into the midst of Ginungagap and made of him the earth. Of his blood they made the seas and lakes; of his flesh the earth was made, but of his bones the rocks; of his teeth and jaws, and of the bones that were broken, they made stones and pebbles. Jafnhar remarked: Of the blood that flowed from the wounds, and was free they made the ocean; they fastened the earth together and around it they laid this ocean in a ring without, and it must seem to most men impossible to cross it. Thride added: They took his skull and made thereof the sky, and raised it over the earth with four sides. Under each corner they set a dwarf, and the four dwarfs were called Austre (East), Vestre (West), Nordre (North), Sudre (South). Then they took glowing sparks, that were loose and had been cast out from Muspelheim, and placed them in the midst of the boundless