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Odin and Merlin

Threefold Death and the World Tree

LAWRENCE ESON

ABSTRACT

The present work expands upon Donald Ward's work on the Threefold Death in Odinic narratives to demonstrate significant parallels between the myths of the Norse god Odin and the corpus of work concerned with the Welsh wild man Merlin. In both the Norse and Celtic material, the parallels are identified in the motif of sacrifice on the World Tree, along with a form of the Threefold Death, as a means of accessing otherworldly mantic knowledge. KEYWORDS: Odin, Merlin, shamanism, World Tree, threefold death

A number of remarkable parallels may be adduced between the Norse god Odin and the Welsh poet-prophet Merlin and his fellow Celtic wild men: the Irish Suibne Geilt ('Sweeney the Mad') and the Scottish Lailoken. Among a number of corollaries that could be cited, perhaps the most remarkable one between the Norse deity and the Welsh forest madman lies in their mutual connection with a special tree of the cosmic variety, which will be designated here the "World Tree," or, alternatively, by the synonymous term, the "Cosmic Tree." We are able to identify a common pattern in both the Old Norse myth of Odin's self-sacrifice and in the various legends of the exile and madness of the Celtic wild man, in which the gift of mantic knowledge is conveyed to the initiate through a torturous process of ritual death and rebirth on the World Tree. In both mythic traditions, the motif of the threefold death may be seen to play a central role in the initiatory procedure. In the case of Merlin the Mad (Myrddin Wyllt in Middle Welsh) and his congeners, the importance

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of the threefold death motif in some of the narratives concerned with wild man figure has long been acknowledged by Celtic scholars (see, for example, Jackson 1940; Carney 1955, chap. 4). Significantly absent from the debate in Celtic circles, however, is a recognition of the primacy of the World Tree as an agent of the wild man's phenomenal transformation from wretched forest exile to magnificent poet and prophet.

The situation would appear to be reversed in the scholarly discussion of the Old Norse myth of the self-sacrifice of Odin, which is found in the section of the Elder Edda poem *Hávamál,* called the *Rúnatals þáttr,* and is commonly known as "The Rune Poem." In Old Norse studies, it has always been perfectly clear that Odin "hung on the windy tree/nine full nights," sacrificing himself to himself "on that tree of which no one knows/from what roots it rises"–in other words, on a Cosmic Tree, one which is almost certainly to be equated with the well-documented World Tree known as Yggdrasil.

It was not, however, until the appearance of Donald J. Ward's pioneering 1970 article, "The Threefold Death: An Indo-European Trifunctional Sacrifice?" that the full significance of the threefold death motif in Norse Odinic narratives, and, more generally, in Indo-European literature as a whole, became clearly established in the scholarship. In the present essay, it remains for us to apply Prof. Ward's conclusions to the cross-cultural comparison of Odin and the Celtic wild men, especially Merlin, and to clarify the signification of the World Tree, and its human-fashioned corollary, the sacrificial stake, in the Celtic material. First, however, it is necessary for us to examine some of the more general parallels to be found between Odin and Merlin in order to more fully explicate the scope of our discussion.

PARALLELS BETWEEN ODIN AND MERLIN IN RELATION TO THE ATTAINMENT OF MANTIC KNOWLEDGE

Odin and Merlin are both masters of occult knowledge who are able to communicate with demonic spirits and the dead or to speak from the grave. In the Eddic poem Baldrs Draumar ("Balder's Dreams"), for example, Odin rode his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, far into the underworld called Hel and awakened a dead völva, or seeress, from her grave in order to gain esoteric knowledge about the death of his murdered son Balder and the future of the gods (Kuhn and Neckel 1983, 1:277-79). And in Snorri Sturluson's Ynglinga Saga, Odin is said to call the dead from their graves and meet with the hanged (Snorri Sturluson 1941, 1:Chapter 7, 18).

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In the *Historia Regum Brittaniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1136) and in the French romance *Merlin*, attributed to Robert de Boron (ca. 1200), Merlin is identified as the son of an incubus demon and a virgin mother, a parentage which is said to account for both his demonically inspired knowledge of the past and his divinely gifted awareness of future events (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1985, 1:72, §107; Paris and Ulrich 1886, 1:28-29). And in the early Welsh poems *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd y Chwaer* ("The Conversation of Myrddin and his Sister Gwenddydd") and *Gwasgar[d]gerd Vyrdin yn y bed* ("The Separation Song of Myrddin in his Grave"), both from the late fourteenth-century Red Book of Hergest but perhaps dating in their present form to the tenth century, Myrddin (Welsh for "Merlin") appears to be speaking from the grave about his divine inspiration, his own death, and the death of his brothers, as well as uttering prophecies about future events (Evans 1911:4-5, cols. 583-84).

In addition, Odin and Merlin are both shapeshifters who are able to send their spirits forth on ecstatic journeys like the shamans of Siberia and Northern Scandinavia. In the *Prose Edda*, Odin transforms himself into an eagle in order to steal the Mead of Poetry from the giants for the use of mankind (Snorri Sturluson 1954:102-03). He could also send off his soul in animal form as a means of gaining knowledge of things far away. Snorri offers the following depiction of the god in Ynglinga Saga:

> Odin could change himself. His body then lay as if sleeping or dead, but he became a bird or a wild beast, a fish or a dragon, and journeyed in the twinkling of an eye to far-off lands, on his own errands or those of other men. (Davidson 1964:145)[1]

Odin's ecstatic abilities are also reflected in the names and actions of his two ravens, Hugin and Munin ('Thought' and 'Memory'). Snorri, who based his account on a passage in the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* (see Kuhn and Neckel 1983, 1:61), describes these creatures in the following manner:

> Two ravens sit on his shoulders and bring to his ears all the news that they see or hear; they are called Hugin and Munin. He sends them out at daybreak to fly over the whole world, and they come back at breakfast-time; by this means he comes to know a great deal about what is going on, and on account of this men call him the god-of-ravens. As it is said:
>
> Over the world every day
> fly Hugin and Munin;

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> I fear that Hugin will not come back,
> though I'm more concerned about Munin (Snorri Sturluson 1954:63-64).[2]

H.R. Ellis Davidson says of these birds that they "are symbols of the mind of the seer or shaman, sent out over vast distances. It seems that the connection between the god and his ravens is older than the Viking Age. He is depicted on his horse with two birds flying above him on a seventh-century helmet from Vendel, Sweden" (Davidson 1964:147; see also Turville-Petre 1964:57-58).

Merlin also appears to take on the form of a bird of prey. He is described as a "white hawk" (*hebawc gwynn*) in the Welsh Myrddin poem *Peiryan Faban* ("Commanding Youth"), a gnomic work containing prophetic elements that is attested only in an early fifteenth-century manuscript:

> Myrddin son of Morfryn was a white hawk
> when the mighty battle would be fought,
> when there would be joyful death, when there would be a broken shield,
> when there would be heart's blood before he would flee.
> Because of the memory of Gwenddolau and his kinsmen (?),
> great misery to me for my death—how slowly it comes.[3]

The word *hebawc* can be defined as a literal "bird of prey" or may be taken in the figurative sense of a "great warrior" (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*: sv *hebog* [a] 'hawk, falcon'; [b] 'brave fighter, champion, hero'). While Myrddin is clearly characterized in these lines as a martial figure, the generally heroic tone of the poem as a whole is interrupted here by the disturbing fact that he flees during the heat of battle. It seems clear that what we find in the *Peiryan Faban* passage, rather than some sort of traditional depiction of Myrddin as a hero, is actually an alternate version of the episode that relates how the Celtic wild man went mad in battle and fled to live a life of exile in the woods.

Although Merlin does not grow feathers and have the power of levitation like his Irish counterpart, Suibne Geilt, in the prosimetric saga *Buile Shuibhne* (ca. 1200, but found only in much later manuscripts), his own bird-like nature is further revealed in two references found in early Arthurian literature. First, in the *Didot-Perceval* (ca. 1200), perhaps the work of Robert de Boron, a passage tells of Merlin's entrance into a dwelling called the *esplumoir* outside of Perceval's otherworldly palace, after which time he was never seen again:

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> Then Merlin came to Perceval and to his master Blaise and took his leave of them. He said that Our Lord did not want him to appear to people again, but he would not die until the end of the world.
>
> "But then I shall live in eternal joy. Meanwhile I shall make my dwelling-place outside your house, where I shall live and prophesy as Our Lord shall instruct me. And all who see my dwelling-place will call it Merlin's *esplumoir*."
>
> With that Merlin departed; and he made his *esplumoir* and entered in, and was never seen again in this world." (Bryant 2001:171-72)[4]

In the slightly later French romance *Meraugis de Portlesguez* by Raoul de Houdenc, the hero Meraugis discovers twelve prophetic maidens sitting underneath a laurel tree—a tree of prophecy in classical tradition—atop the summit of an inaccessible crag called the *esplumöer*, or also the *esplumöer Merlin*, the site of the Arthurian hero Gauvain's imprisonment (Raoul de Houdenc 1897, 1:101-02, lines 2633-59).[5] Although Merlin does not appear as a living character in *Meraugis*, his powerful presence is still felt in the name of this mountaintop.[6]

The obscure word *esplumoir* has been posited by Foerster to derive from the Latin *ex-plumare* 'to pluck out feathers', and is defined by William Nitze as a "falcon's mew," meaning a cage in which a hawk is kept, especially during molting season (Nitze 1943:71). Nitze also suggests that the origin of the term *esplumoir Merlin* may lie in the similarity between the name *Merlin* and that of the small but aggressive European hawk, the merlin. The similarity of the names, it should be noted, is purely coincidental, and is not based on any etymological relationship. Nitze goes on to say, "Had Robert known of an *esplumoir merilun* (*merlion*, *merlin*) or 'falcon's mew,' it might readily have come to his mind in thinking of the emprisonment of Merlin. Falconry was current in England and France at the time he was writing, and we cannot assume that he was ignorant of this favorite medieval sport" (*ibid.*:72). While this suggestion is certainly correct in placing the *esplumoir* in the same category as Merlin's other imprisonments in Arthurian literature, at a more profound level it is apparent that we are concerned here not only with the jargon of medieval falconry, but also with an archaic stratum of narrative preserving shamanistic elements. The *esplumoir* may perhaps be interpreted as the site at which Merlin transformed into the shape of a bird of prey as a means of journeying to the Otherworld to obtain esoteric knowledge.

A passage in the *Vita Merlini* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1150) indicates a further correspondence between Merlin and magical flight

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in bird form. After Merlin is finally cured of his madness by the salient effects of a drink from a miraculous healing spring, he discusses his former condition in a manner that is remarkably similar to accounts of the magical flight of the shaman's soul in animal form:

> I was taken out of my true self, I was as a spirit and knew the history of people long past and could foretell the future. I knew then the secrets of nature, bird flight, star wanderings and the way fish glide. This distressed me and, by a hard law, deprived me of the rest that is natural to the human mind. (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1973:115, lines 1161-66)[7]

In a final comparison, mention should be made of the important role of sacred mead in narratives concerned with both Odin and Merlin. Odin, of course, is responsible for stealing the Mead of Poetry from the giants and placing its inspirational power at the disposal of the human poet. And the god also takes a drink of "the precious mead" and is sprinkled with the mead of *Óðrerir* in the myth of his self-sacrifice, whereby he gains the runes and learns "Nine Songs of Power" (see below). In the Welsh poem *Cyfoesi*, Myrddin's sister Gwenddydd claims she saw her prophet brother "nourished on mead" (*aweleis yn ueduaeth*; Evans 1911:581, lines 11-15), presumably during their childhood together.

THE THREEFOLD DEATH MOTIF IN THE CELTIC WILD MAN LEGEND

Now that some initial parallels between the Norse and the Celtic material have been established, we may turn to an examination of the threefold death motif itself and its relationship to sacrifice on the World Tree, first, in the Celtic wild man corpus and, in the following section, in Odinic narrative.

The threefold death is a commonly occurring international folk motif in medieval and modern narratives, which plays an important role in the Celtic wild man legend. In his groundbreaking 1940 article "The Motive of the Threefold Death in the Story of Suibhne Geilt," Kenneth Jackson summarizes the main elements of the threefold-death tale as follows:

> A prophet foretells that a certain man will die in three different ways (generally including by fire and water). This is thought to be incredible and to prove him no true seer, so that the man feels quite secure. In the sequel the prophecy comes true. (Jackson 1940:535)

In a more recent article, entitled "The Significance of the Threefold Death in Celtic Tradition," Joan Radner outlines the morphology of the

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motif in greater detail, identifying five distinct stages that frequently occur in Celtic narratives of this kind:

1) The future victim commits an offense.
2) There is immediately a prophecy, almost always delivered by a cleric, that the offender will be punished for his offense by a threefold death.
3) Disbelief in the prophecy is expressed.
4) The events of the story bring about a reversal, and *belief* may be explicitly expressed.
5) The prophecy is fulfilled and the offender/victim is killed. (Radner 1983:183-84; see also Ó Cathasaigh 1994)

The Scottish version of the Celtic legend centers on the wild man Lailoken, the tales about whom have likely been preserved because of their close association with St. Kentigern of Strathclyde. The figure of Lailoken (or Lailochen) appears in two tales (in Latin) found in the fifteenth-century MS Cotton Titus A xix that are generally referred to respectively as "Lailoken and Kentigern," or Lailoken A, and "Lailoken and Meldred," or Lailoken B.

In the first text, "Lailoken and Kentigern," the saint, while praying one day in the woods, meets a naked, hairy wild man, who tells him that he had been driven mad during a great battle on the plain between Liddel and Carwannok. During the fight, the sky had opened above him and a thunderous voice from the heavens had accused him of causing all the slaughter there:

> "Lailoken, Lailoken, because you alone are guilty of the blood of all those that have been killed, you alone will pay the penalty for the sins of all. For you will be handed over to the angels of Satan and you will consort with wild beasts until the day of your death." (MacQueen and MacQueen 1989:83)[8]

He then saw a frightening vision in the sky, consisting of a blinding light and a numberless host of fierce warriors who shook their flashing weapons at him. An evil spirit then seized hold of the madman and drove him into the forest to live among the wild animals. After relating his story to Kentigern, Lailoken leaps up and runs off into the deepest part of the forest. He later appears on several occasions perched on a rock above the place where the saint held his mass, where he utters obscure prophecies, some of which are written down. One day, he interrupts one of the saint's services and requests that he be given the *viaticum*

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(the Eucharist traditionally given to a dying person). At this time, he prophesies his own threefold death, which will occur, he claims, on that same day by means of his being simultaneously stoned, pierced by a stake, and drowning. The saint is skeptical about his claim, but nevertheless accedes to his wish to receive the final sacrament. The improbable prophecy later takes place just as the madman has predicted: the forest wretch is beaten to death with stones by a group of shepherds, and then tumbles down the bank of the River Tweed, where he is impaled on a stake and simultaneously drowned. It should also be noted that the writer of the tale tentatively equates Lailoken with Merlin: "Certain people say that he was Merlin who was regarded by the Britons as unique in his powers of prophecy, but the identification is uncertain" (*quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlynum, qui erat Britonibus quasi propheta singularis, sed nescitur*; *ibid.*:77,83).

The briefer tale of "Lailoken and Meldred" takes place several years before Lailoken's meeting with St. Kentigern. Here, the forest wild man has been captured by a certain King Meldred (unknown elsewhere in the literature) and held bound in thongs at his fort of Dunmeller. The prophet laughs sardonically when he sees the king pluck a leaf from the wimple of his queen. After posing a series of puzzling riddles, Lailoken, in exchange for his freedom, reveals to Meldred that his laughter stems from his knowledge of the queen's adultery with an unnamed lover in the garden. It is the leaf caught in her hair that has betrayed her infidelity.

Lailoken also prophesies his own threefold death before the king, requesting that he be buried "on the eastern side of the town at a place suitable for the funeral of a dead believer, not far from the turf where the burn Pausayl runs down into the river Tweed" (*ad partem huius opidi orientalem in loco funeri fidelis defuncti competenciore haut longe a cespite ubi torrens Passales in flumen descendit Tuedense*; *ibid.*:81, 88). The narrative ends with an intriguing distich that echoes the statement made in the first tale that Lailoken and Merlin are one and the same figure:

> Pierced by a stake, and having endured stoning and drowning,
> Merlin is said to have undergone a three-fold death. (*ibid.*:89)[9]

The triple death of Lailoken sheds considerable light on the mystery surrounding Merlin's own death, an event that receives no mention in either the Myrddin poems or in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. In the latter text, the motif of the threefold death appears merely as a prophecy that Merlin utters about a lad in three different guises. The lad

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is deceitfully sent before him by his sister Ganieda who seeks vengeance for her betrayal to the king (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1973:68-73, lines 305-46 and 391-415) Here, the motif has lost its original connection with the death of the wild man himself.

Although Lailoken does not actually die in a tree, his impalement on a stake in a fish weir should be viewed as equivalent to a death in the World Tree. The equation of a stake—an object of human craftsmanship—and the living Cosmic Tree should not be considered problematic, given that many other examples of this identification, taken from a wide variety of world cultures, can be noted. The World Tree is a multivalent symbol that is often conceptualized and physically manifested as a pillar, stake of wood, or even stone within a wide variety of Eurasian cultures. Among the numerous examples that may be cited are the Germanic World Pillar, called the *Irminsul*, and the "Golden Post" of the Siberian Tungus-Orotshons (Davidson 1964:195-96; Harva 1927:333). The identification of Lailoken's fish-weir stake with the World Tree or World Pillar finds a particularly important Indo-European analogue in ancient Indic ritual practice. This identification is clearly exhibited in the symbolism associated with the sacred stake used for animal sacrifice, known as the *yūpa*:

> In Indic sacrificial texts the *yūpa* or stake, to which the creature to be immolated is bound, can be a specially selected tree still in the forest, which is prepared for use in the ritual. The cosmic axis that...can be visualized as a leafy, growing tree or as a simple shaft, is symbolized in the *yūpa*. In the *Rig-Veda*, the Āpri hymns, which are ritually connected with animal sacrifices, refer to or address the *yūpa* as *vanaspati*. It is quite clear that the *Rig-Veda* comprehends the *yūpa* as *vanaspati*. The *vanaspati*...is itself the *aśvattha*, or terrestrial avatar of the cosmic tree. The *yūpa*, as the symbol of the cosmic axis, is the necessary locus of the human and animal sacrifice and is simultaneously an alternative form of the tree of life. (Sauvé 1970:183)

In early Ireland, too, there is evidence that the stake and the sacred tree were considered in some special way to be equivalent. A.T. Lucas relates a hagiographical account of a marvelous tree that is referred to as a "stake":

> When Colgan, in the 17th century, wrote his life of St. Colman Mac Duach, who gives his name to Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway, there was growing near the church a tree, reputed to have been planted by the saint and known as *Cuaille Mhic Duach* or "Mac Duachs' [sic] Stake." The wood

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> of this tree was supposed to have miraculous power and Colgan tells the story of a condemned man who concealed a piece of the wood in his mouth and emerged alive from three successive hangings, only to die in the fourth after the executioner had detected the wood in his mouth and removed it. The tree was still growing there when Bishop Pococke visited the place in the middle of the 18th century and observed that portions of it were taken by the people as relics. (Lucas 1964:32-33, citing *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* 246 and *Pococke's Tour in Ireland in 1752*:109)[10]

Like the *yūpa* of Indic tradition, "Mac Duach's Stake" reveals a fluid conception of the World Tree, one that can manifest itself as both a living, leafy tree and as a stake or post fashioned as some kind of functional cultural object. Colgan's story of the condemned man who avoids hanging three times by virtue of the miraculous piece of wood in his mouth, but dies on the fourth attempt, likely contains a faint echo of an earlier tradition that connected the "stake tree" with hanging and the threefold death.

Perhaps the most important Welsh testimony for Myrddin's own suffering and death on a form of the World Tree—the fish-weir stake—appears in a later source: the bardic poetry of the *cywyddwyr*. This group of poets of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries often refers to Myrddin as an unfailing speaker who uttered his famous prophecies while he was *ar bawl* 'on a stake' (MW *pawl* 'stake, pole', showing initial mutation after the preposition *ar*, a borrowing from L *pālus* 'stake, picket'). An example of the "Myrddin-ar-Bawl" motif is found in a *cywydd marwnad*, or elegiac poem, by the sixteenth-century poet Tudur Aled:

> Myrddin, in distress, cold I was yonder,
> Son of Morfryn, concerning his long terror,
> while in my battle, with the end of my right mind—
> where a stake pierced through me. (Jones 1926:322) [11]

The harsh ordeal of another figure in relation to a stake is depicted in a remarkable Irish anecdote from the Book of Leinster, entitled "Moling and Mael Doborchon," which provides us with the clearest example we possess of the Celtic wild man's sacrifice on the World Tree. Of great significance in the passage is the description of the tree as a combination of thorn brake and pole, a neat synthesis of Cosmic Tree and stake:

> Once Moling was in the millpond when he saw Mael Doborchon, the son of Cellach, coming towards him seeking his horses.

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> The house of Mael Doborchon was a guest house for many.
>
> He was also kind to Moling especially, because he was his confessor—he saluted Moling. "I am on a search, o cleric," said Mael Doborchon. "On the search for Christ, I hope," said Moling. "That was an awful crime that the Jews did, to crucify Christ." "I should have done my utmost to save him," said Mael Doborchon. Moling gets him into the midst of a brake of thorns, and places his cowl on a pole in the midst of the brake. "Now if that thing yonder were Christ, how would you save him?" Mael Doborchon strips off his garment and puts the brake aside with his two hands, until he reached the cowl and held it between his two hands. "Thus would I save him," said he. And streams of blood were running from his vitals. "That was glorious, o Mael Doborchon!" said Moling. "Christ will reward thee for it. The men of Hell shall not draw blood from thee till Doom, nor shall the demons argue for thy soul." "Get up, o monk yonder," said Moling to the little rag, "and help Mael Doborchon to seek." The little rag moved before them and settled on the haunches of the mare where she was; so that Mael Doborchon brought his horses home with him. (Meyer 1893:189-90)[12]

The Mael Doborchon ('Slave of the Otter' or perhaps 'Bald Otter') of this tale is a little-known figure, but the available information allows us to place him clearly within the orbit of the Celtic wild man legend. His resemblance to Myrddin's Irish counterpart, the wild man Suibne Geilt, who also claimed St. Moling as his confessor, and also had associations with a helpful otter (*dobarchú*), is readily apparent (Nagy 1985-86:126-27). In a passage in *Buile Shuibhne*, for example, Suibne is also wounded in a thorn brake out of which projected a wooden object—in this particular case a tree branch (O'Keeffe 1975:12, §18, lines 345-54).

Given the evidence adduced here, it may be said that Mael Doborchon's sacrifice for Christ on a stake inside a thorn brake would appear to owe more to the pre-Christian traditions surrounding the Celtic wild man than it does to accounts of Christ's Crucifixion (for more on Mael Doborchon, see Nagy 1997:278-81; Eson 2004:432-39). In the Christian context of the narrative, Mael Doborchon wins heaven for his harrowing deed in rescuing the saint's cowl. By this act, however, he also recovers his lost horses, a detail which connects him with Odin, who also sacrificed himself on a tree. Odin was also closely associated with the horse as shamanic animal and representative of the Norse World Tree Yggdrasil.

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ODIN'S SELF-SACRIFICE AND YGGDRASIL

Like Myrddin's agonizing initiatory experience while impaled on the stake, Odin's own torturous experience while hanging on the "windy tree" is also drawn out for a lengthy period of time—in this case for nine days and nights. The well-known episode of Odin's self-sacrifice, as mentioned above, is found in the Eddic poem *Hávamál,* which appears in the thirteenth-century Codex Regius MS (Kuhn and Neckel 1983, 1:40-44, strophes 138-64). The *Rúnatals þáttr* section of *Hávamál* is purported to be a record of the god's own words. The core of the myth is contained in the first four strophes:

> I know that I hung on the windy tree
> nine full nights,
> wounded with a spear and given to Odin,
> myself to myself,
> on that tree of which no one knows
> from what roots it rises.
>
> With a loaf they did not comfort me, nor with a drinking horn;
> I gazed down,
> I took up the runes, screaming I took them;
> I fell back from there.
>
> Nine songs of power I learned from the famous son
> of Bölthór, father of Bestla,
> and I got a drink of the precious mead,
> I was sprinkled with *Óðrerir.*
>
> Then I took seed and began to grow,
> and to be fertile and to flourish;
> word from word sought from me another word;
> deed from deed sought from me another deed.[13]

This mysterious "windy tree" on which Odin hung, and which is commonly equated by scholars with the ash tree Yggdrasil, has strong equine associations. The generally accepted etymology of the latter name is "The Horse of Ygg"— *Yggr* being one of Odin's names, meaning "The Terrible One" (de Vries 1937:176, 403-04; Davidson 1964:194; Turville-Petre 1964:48). In sayings found in both Norse and Old English tradition, the gallows is referred to as the "hanged man's horse" on which the victim was thought to ride (Höfler 1934,1:234;

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Davidson 1964:194; Turville-Petre 1964:48). In the ninth-century Norse poem *Ynglinga Tal*, for example, the gallows is called *hábrjóstr hörva Sleipnir* ('high-chested rope-Sleipnir'), an allusion to Odin's magnificent horse (Turville-Petre 1964:48, 56, and 292, note 35, citing *Ynglinga Tal* 14, in Finnur Jónsson, ed., [1912-1915], *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* B, I, 9, 14).[14]

The horse also plays a part in another Old Norse account of sacrifice in the branches of trees. In his description of the pagan festival at Uppsala in Sweden, the eleventh-century writer Adam of Bremen describes the bloody sacrifices performed there over a period of nine days as follows:

> The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death and putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men. A Christian seventy-two years old told me that he had seen their bodies suspended promiscuously. (Adam of Bremen 1959:208)[15]

And a scholion to this passage offers the following remarkable parallel to Odin's unnamed tree:

> Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted. (Adam of Bremen 1959:207, note a)[16]

The similarity of this tree to the "horse-tree" Yggdrasil ("The Horse of Ygg") with its three springs (Snorri Sturluson 1971:17-18, §15), is palpable and reinforces a powerful dual image of Odin, the god of the dead and the hanged, who simultaneously hangs on the World Tree like one of his own victims and rides on a shamanic "horse" in search of hidden knowledge and power.

Odin's self-sacrifice on the tree also may be seen as a threefold death in attenuated form. He hangs from the tree, spears himself, and, after a drink of the sacred mead, is sprinkled with *Óðrerir*–a name for the sacred Mead of Poetry—an act that may plausibly be interpreted as a weakened form of drowning. This reconstructed form of tripartite death would then coincide exactly with the typical Germanic form of

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the threefold death of hanging, wounding, and drowning, as adduced by Ward (1970:131, 141). Other Norse accounts of the threefold death of a king or other heroic figure almost invariably include the element of drowning in a vat of beer or mead, as Ward has clearly demonstrated. The significance of the reference to Odin's sprinkling with *Óðrerir* is clarified in the Prose Edda's account of the god's theft of the Mead of Poetry from the giants, in which Odin is said to swallow the entire contents of three vessels containing the divine elixir. The first vessel mentioned in the tale is the cauldron *Óðrörir*, which he drains in a single draft (Snorri Sturluson 1971:83). Later in the story, Odin changes himself into the form of an eagle and, with the stolen mead, flies back to Valhalla, the home of the gods, thus providing the gods and humankind with the gift of poetic inspiration (*ibid.*:83-84).

THE THREEFOLD DEATH MOTIF AND THE SACRIFICE OF KING VIKAR TO ODIN

Ward has also discussed the existence of the threefold death motif as it is found in two narrative accounts of the death of the Danish King Víkar, a figure whose ritual sacrifice to Odin appears to reflect actual sacrificial practices related to the cult of the Norse god of magic and death (1970:139-41). Of the two extant prose versions of the tale, one appears in the twelfth-century Danish history of Saxo Grammaticus in Latin and the second in the Old Icelandic *Gautrekssaga*. A fragmentary third version in verse form is the *Víkarsbálkr*, which is contained within the *Gautrekssaga*.

In the saga version, it is recounted that King Víkar and his war party, after undertaking a seagoing expedition, are delayed on an island by unfavorable winds. Through the casting of sacrificial chips they determine that one of their number, chosen by lot, is to be sacrificed to Odin. Much to his men's dismay, King Víkar is chosen to be the sacrificial victim.

During the night, Odin, under the assumed name *Hrosshársgrani* ('Horsehair-Bearded'), appears on the scene and charges the hero Starkaðr (or Starkadr, Starkather) with the task of "sending" Víkar to him. In addition to receiving other marvelous benefits from Odin for his loyalty, including three spans of life, Starkaðr is granted the gift of poetry, meaning the ability to compose verse as fast as he could speak. This gift, however, is mitigated by one of the counter-judgments of the god Thor, Starkaðr's enemy, who proclaims that the hero will never remember afterward what he has composed. The following morning the

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warriors decide, on Starkaðr's advice, to stage a token sacrifice. Nearby stands a small fir tree, from which stretches a slender branch. The story then continues:

> The servants prepared food for the men. A calf was slaughtered and disemboweled; Starkaðr had the intestines given to him. Then Starkaðr climbed onto the stump, bent down the slender branch, and tied the calf intestines around it. Thereupon Starkaðr said to the king: "The gallows are now prepared for you, my king; it certainly does not appear to be very dangerous. Come here now, I will place the noose around your neck." The king said: "If this contrivance is not dangerous for me, as it appears, I believe that it will not harm me. Otherwise, I wish fate to decide what will happen." Then he climbed onto the stump; Starkaðr placed the rope around his neck and climbed down from the stump. Starkaðr then pricked the king with the stick [a reed given him by Odin] and said: "Now I consecrate you to Odin." Then Starkaðr released the fir branch. The reed wand transformed into a spear and pierced the king. The stump fell away from under his feet, the calf intestines changed into a strong neck-iron. The branch sprang up into the air and dispatched the king high up into the branches. He died there. Since that time the small island has been called "Víkar's Islet."[17]

The account by Saxo Grammaticus of King Víkar's death differs in a few particulars from the saga version. Ward argues that Odin's malicious intent in bringing about the death of Víkar through the agency of his chosen favorite, Starkaðr, is made more explicit than in the saga and is also tied more clearly to Odin's gift of three spans of human life to his hero in payment for carrying out his divine will (1970:140). And the motif of the reed that becomes a spear is replaced by Starkaðr's treacherous use of a sword to finish off the king:

> Ancient tradition says that Starkather, whom I introduced earlier, devoted his initial career to pleasing the gods through the murder of Vikar, king of Norway. Some narrate this version of the affair: Odin once desired that Vikar should come to a dismal end, but did not wish to effect this openly. He therefore made Starkather, already remarkable for his unusual size, famous for his courage and his artistry in composing spells, so that he could use the man's energies more readily to accomplish the king's death. Odin hoped that this was how Starkather would show his thanks for the privileges bestowed on him. To this end he also gave him three times the span of mortal life, in order that he might perpetrate a proportionate number of damnable deeds, and crime accompany his prolonged existence.

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> He soon came to Vikar and for some time lodged with him in his palace, devising a trap during his attendance on the king. Eventually they embarked together on a pirating expedition but arrived at a place where they were troubled by a long spell of violent storms. The gales interrupted their voyage and made them spend a major part of the year doing nothing, till they decided that the gods must be appeased by human blood. Lots cast in an urn showed a demand for a royal victim. Starkather then twined round the king's neck a noose he had made of osier, pretending to offer the appearance of an expiation merely for a moment. But the tightness of the knot fulfilled its function and cut short Vikar's breathing as he hung there. While he was still panting Starkather tore out the remnants of life with his sword, and when he should have lent relief disclosed his treachery. I cannot entertain the view of one version which relates that the soft osiers hardened as they suddenly gripped and acted like a halter of iron. (Saxo Grammaticus 1979, 1:171-72)[18]

Ward has identified in the saga version of this tale three simultaneous events that result in the death of the Danish king, and, in turn, correlate to the three spans of life granted to Starkaðr:

> The reed becomes a spear and wounds the victim, the stump falls over, the pine twig flies up, and the king is strangled by the entrails that have become a strong willow branch. It is thus probable that one is here confronted with a variant of the theme of the threefold death. This contention is supported by the account in Saxo's history. Saxo states specifically that Odin is using Starkadr as a tool to acquire the life of Víkar, and he grants to the hero the life-span of three human lives. The payment of the threefold death is thus a threefold life, and with this payment a kind of divine balance of life and death is maintained. (1970:141)

Ward also notes the probability that the means of execution employed in the tale of Víkar's sacrifice was originally hanging, drowning, and stabbing–as we have noted above, the three elements usually found in the Germanic version of the threefold death. Evidence he has adduced from a later Low German variant of the story—featuring the simultaneous hanging and drowning death of a child prophesied to die in this manner—supports Ward's contention that the motif of drowning has been weakened in the Víkar tale to the mere act of falling from a stump (*ibid.*:139-41).

CONCLUSION

It may be inferred from the evidence presented here that the well-known pattern of sacrificial initiation on the World Tree that has been

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clearly identified in Norse mythology also looms large in medieval Celtic literature. If we view the various strands of the fragmentary Merlin-Myrddin material as part of a mythic/legendary complex centered on the British wild man, then it is possible to identify a number of significant corollaries to the myth of Odin's self-sacrifice. Lailoken, as Merlin's alter ego, undergoes a threefold death, and in this we may also find parallels in Odin's ritual death on the windy tree, in the sacrifice of victims near the great tree at Uppsala, and in the sacrifice of King Víkar to Odin. Like Odin, Merlin also fasts as an apparent prelude to mantic activity—in his case, however, for three days, not nine nights (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1973:56, lines 70-71; see also van Hamel 1932:267-75). And both of these figures are closely aligned with mead (Middle Welsh *medd*; Old Norse *mjöðr*) as the sacral drink of inspiration.

According to the Welsh *cywyddwyr*, Myrddin utters his famous prophecies while impaled on the stake of a fish weir, where, similar to Odin hanging on the World Tree while suffering from a self-inflicted spear wound, he is transfixed for a prolonged period of time. If Myrddin's excruciating ordeal on the stake is accepted as an example of a shamanistic journey to the Otherworld for the purpose of attaining the gifts of eloquent poetry and prophetic knowledge, then we may with some confidence compare the glorious rewards accrued to Odin in the course of his equally torturous ecstatic journey to the beyond, particularly his mastery of the powerful runes, his learning of "Nine Songs of Power," and his drink of the precious Mead of Poetry.

NOTES

1. *Óðinn skipti hömum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá gl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lönd at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna* (Snorri Sturluson 1941, vol. 1, chap. 7:18).
2. *Hrafnar .ii. sitia á öxlum honum ok segia í eyro honum öll tíðinde þau er þeir siá eða heyra, þeir heita svá: Huginn ok Muninn. þá sendi(r) hann í dagan at fliúga um allan heim ok koma þeir aptr at dögurðarmáli, þar af verðr hann margra tíðinda víss. Því kalla menn hann Hrafnaguð. Svá sem sagt er:*

   Huginn ok Muninn
   fliúga hverian dag
   iörmungrund yfir;
   óumk ek Hugin
   at hann aptr ne kome,
   þó siámk ek meir um Munin (Snorri Sturluson 1971:42, §38).

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3. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. The Middle Welsh text reads:

myrddin vab morwrynn oedd hebawc gwynn
pen vei yr rym wrthryn. ar ymdaraw
pan vei varw llonn pann vei ysgwyd tonn.
pann vei waet callonn ky noe gilyaw.
O gof gyndoleu ae gyt gynedeu.
gwae vi am angheu hwyret y daw (Jarman 1951:105, lines 28-33).

4. *Et lors vint Merlins a Perceval et a Blayse son maistre, et prist congié a els et lor dist que nostre Sire ne voloit que il se demostrast au peule, ne il ne poroit morir devant le finement del siecle; 'mais adont arai jou la joie parmenable, et je volrai faire defors te maison un abitacle, et la volrai converser, et si profetiserai çou que nostre Sire me commandera. Et tot cil qui men abitacle verront, si le clameront l'esplumoir Merlin.'*
Atant s'en torna Merlins et fist son esplumoir, et entra dedens, ne onques puis au siecle ne fu veüs (Roach 1941:278, lines 2661-70).

5. On the prophetic laurel tree in classical tradition, see Homer and Hesiod 1995, *Hymns to Pythian Apollo,* III:352-53; and Fontenrose 1978:353, Q263.

6. The fact that Gauvain and Merlin are linked together in this episode is probably not accidental. In the French Vulgate *Merlin,* Gauvain, while traveling alone in the Forest of Brocéliande, is the last person to hear Merlin's voice after the magician has been incarcerated in an invisible tower by his lady love Viviane (Sommer 1908, vol. 2:461-62).

7. *Raptuseram michimet quasi spiritus acta sciebam preteriti populi predicebamque futura. Tunc rerum secreta sciens volucrumque volatus stellarumque vagos motus lapsusque natantum, id me vexabat naturalemque negabat humane menti districta lege quietem* (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1973:114).

8. *Lailochen, Lailochen, quia tu solus omnium istorum interfectorum reus es sanguinis, tu solus cunctorum scelera punies. Angelis enim Sathane traditus usque in diem mortis tue conversacionem habebis inter bestias silvestres* (MacQueen and MacQueen 1989:78).

9. *Sude perfossus, lapidem perpessus et undam, Merlinus triplicem fertur inisse necem* (MacQueen and MacQueen 1989:82).

10. Another tree referred to as "a stake" (*cúaille*) appears in "The Annals of the Four Masters" for the year 1157 under the placename *Cuaille Cianacht,* which is translated by O'Donovan as the "Tree of Keenaght" and identified by him with the modern placename Coolkeenaght in Co. Derry (Lucas 1964:33 and note 146, citing John O'Donovan, ed. [1856] *The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters,* vol. 2:1126 and note).

11. *Merddin, drwm, oer oeddwn draw, Amhorfryn am ei hirfraw, Pan y'm cad, a'm pen o'm cof—Ple y trewis pawl trwof!* (Jones 1926:322).

12. *Fechtas do M[o]ling is' tóidin, co n-acca Mæl Doborchon mac Cellaig cuce for a íarair a ech. Tech n-óiged sochaide tech Máil[e] Doborchon. Ba maith dano*

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frim-Moling int[s]ainriuth, fobíth is é rop anmchara dó. Bennachaid do M'ling. "For íarair ataam, a chlérig," or Mæl Doborchon. "For íarair Críst ón," ar Moling. "Is mór int écht sin dorónsat Iudaidi, Críst do chrochad." "Dobérmais ar cumang ic a thessarggain," or Mæl Doborchon. Gaibthi Moling íarum immedón muine draigin, ocus dober a chocholl for cúalle immedón in muine. "Amal bad é Críst tra in sucut, cinnas donesartha?" Sréid Máil Doborchon a étach de ocus dosrála in muine secha cona díb lámaib, corroacht in cocholl co m-bái eter a dí láim. "Is amlaid seo donesarcaind-se," ar Máil Doborchon, ocus robátar a sreba fola assa innaib. "Amra sin, a Mæl Doborchon!" ar Moling. "Rotbía a lóg la Críst. Ní theilcfet fir iffirn fuil essiut co bráth ocus no-cotacérat demna fort' anmain. Airg, a manaig út," ar Moling frisin certán, "frisin n-íarair la Mæl Doborchon." remib in certán Gaibthi conforuim for dí leiss na gabra áit ir-raba, condaruc Mæl Doborchon leis a eochu dochum a thige (Meyer 1893:188-89)

13. *Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á*
nætr allar nío, geiri undaðr ok gefinn Óðni,
siálfr sjálfom mér, á þeim meiði, er mangi veit, hvers hann af rótom renn.
Við hleifi mik sældo né við hornigi,
nýsta ec niðr, nam ec upp rúnar, œpandi nam,
fell ec aptr þaðan.

Fimbullióð nío nam ec af inom frægia syni
Bölþórs, Bestlo föður,
ok ec drycc of gat ins dýra miaðar, ausinn Óðreri.
Þá nam ec frævaz oc fróðr vera
oc vaxa ok vel hafaz;
orð mér af orði orðz leitaði,
verc mér af verki vercs leitaði (Meyer 1993.:40, strophes 138-41).

14. Another Old Norse example of the search for secret knowledge by means of hanging and ascetic practices is set forth by Timothy Tangherlini. He theorizes that, in strophe 134 of the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, the *þulr* ('cult leader, religious poet-prophet') appears to engage in "a type of wisdom ritual in which a ritual ascent and hanging and probably extreme heat are endured" (Tangherlini 1990:105).

15. *Sacrificium itaque tale est. Ex omni animante, quod masculinum est, novem capita offeruntur, quorum sanguine deos placari mos est. Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est templo. Is enim lucus tam sacer est gentilibus, ut singulae arbores eius ex morte vel tabo immolatorum divinae credantur. Ibi etiam canes et equi pendent cum hominibus, quorum corpora mixtim suspensa narravit mihi aliquis christianorum 72 vidisse* (Adam of Bremen 1876:175-76, §27).

16. We can only speculate as to the exact meaning of the phrase "the people's wish" (*votum populi*). The sacrifice may have been meant to uphold the integrity of the World Tree, the supporter of the known universe.

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Alternatively, the drowning of a man in the spring may have had as its object the promotion of fertility or success in war. The text reads: *Prope illud templum est arbor maxima late ramos extendens, semper viridis in hieme et aestate; cuius illa generis sit, nemo scit. Ibi etiam est fons, ubi sacrificia paganorum solent exerceri et homo vivus immergi. Qui dum non invenitur, ratum erit votum populi* (Adam of Bremen 1876:174, scholion 134).

17. My translation; I have consulted Robert Nedoma's German translation of this text: Nedoma 1990:70-71. Further discussion of the tale of Víkar's sacrifice is found in Turville-Petre 1964:44-45; and Dumézil 1970:85-86, 90-94. The Old Norse text reads: *Þá bjuggu þjónuztusveinar mat manna, ok var kálfr einn skorinn ok krufðr. Starkaðr lét taka kálfsþarmana; síðan steig Starkaðr upp á stofninn ok sveigði ofan þann enn mjófa kvistinn ok knýtti þar um kálfsþörmunum. Þá mællti Starkaðr til konungs: Nú er hér búinn þer gálgi, konungr, ok mun sýnazt ei allmannhættligr. Nú gaktu hingat, ok mun ek leggja snöru á háls þér. Konungr mællti: Sé þessi umbúð ekki mér hættligri en mér sýnizt, þá vænti ek, at mik skaði þetta eki; en ef öðruvis er, þá mun auðna ráða, hvat at gjörizt. Síðan steig hann upp á stofninn, ok lagði Starkaðr virgulinn um háls honum ok steig síðan ofan af stofninum. Þá stakk Starkaðr sprotanum á konungi ok mællti: Nú gef ek þik Óðni. Þá lét Starkaðr lausan furukvistinn. Reyrsprotinn varð at geir ok stóð í gegnum konunginn. Stofninn fell undan fótum honum, en kálfsþarmarnir urðu at viðju sterkri, en kvistrinn reis upp ok hóf upp konunginn við limar, ok dó hann þar. Nú heita þar síðan Víkars hólmar* (Ranisch 1900:30, §29).

18. *Tradunt veteres Starcatherum, cuius supra memini, in Wicari Norvagiensium regis iugulo deorum favori facinorum suorum principia dedicasse, cuius rei tenor tali quorundam assertione contexitur: Volens quondam Othinus Wicarum funesto interire supplicio, cum id aperte exsequi nollet, Starcatherum, inusitata prius granditate conspicuum, non solum animi fortitudine, sed etiam condendorum carminum peritia illustravit, quo promptiore eius opera ad peragendum regis exitium uteretur. Hanc quippe eum dignationi suæ gratiam relaturum sperabat. Quem etiam ob hoc ternis ætatis humanæ curriculis donavit, ut in his totidem exsecrabilium operum auctor evaderet. Adeo illi consequente flagitio vitæ tempora proroganda constituit.*

Qui mox Wicarum adiens inque eius aliquamdiu contubernio deversatus insidias obsequio texit. Tandem piraticum cum eo opus ingreditur. Cumque quodam in loco diutina tempestatum sævitia vexarentur, ita ventis navigationem frustrantibus, ut maiorem anni partem quieti tribuerent, deos humano sanguine propitiandos duxerunt. Itaque coniectis in urnam sortibus, regiæ necis victimam deposci contigit. Tunc Starcatherus facto ex viminibus laqueo regem implicuit, pœnæ speciem dumtaxat exiguo temporis momento daturum. Sed nodi rigor suum ius exsequens supremum pendentis halitum rapuit. Cui Starcatherus adhuc palpitanti ferro spiritus reliquias evulsit, cumque remedium afferre deberet, perfidiam detexit. Neque enim illa mihi recensenda videtur opinio, quæ viminum mollitiem subitis solidatam complexibus ferrei morem laquei peregisse commemorat (Saxo Grammaticus 1931, vol. 1, Book 6, V:152-53, §§6-7).

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