



Völuspá (Prophecy of the Volva, Prophecy of the Seeress) is the first and best known poem of the Poetic Edda. It tells the story of the creation of the world and its coming end related by a völvu or seeress addressing Odin. It is one of the most important primary sources for the study of Norse mythology. The poem is preserved whole in the Codex Regius and Hauksbók manuscripts while parts of it are quoted in the Prose Edda.

We have seven English Translations of the Völuspá available on the Temple of Our Heathen Gods resource website:

[Auden & Taylor](#)

[James Chisholm](#)

[Benjamin Thorpe](#)

[H.A. Bellows](#)

[Lee Hollander](#)

[Olive Bray](#)

[Patricia Terry](#)

It can be immensely interesting and instructional to read and compare two or more translations, stanza by stanza, in order to identify the differences in meaning that each translation may contain. We've built whole Kindred study group sessions out of this activity, but a Heathen individual or family could do this as well.

Preservation

Völuspá is found in the Codex Regius manuscript (ca. 1270) and in Haukr Erlendsson's Hauksbók Codex (ca. 1334), and many of its stanzas are quoted or paraphrased in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda (composed ca. 1220, oldest extant manuscript dates from ca. 1300). The Codex Regius version consists of 63 fornyrðislag stanzas, but the order and number of the stanzas varies from manuscript to manuscript. Some editors and translators have further rearranged the material, in an attempt to improve its meaning or form.

Synopsis

A Short Synopsis: The prophecy commences with an address to Odin. The seeress then starts relating the story of the creation of the world in an abridged form. She explains how she came by her knowledge and that she understands the source of Odin's omniscience, and other secrets of the gods of Asgard. She deals with present and future happenings, touching on many of the Norse myths, such as the death of Baldr and the binding of Loki. Ultimately the seeress tells of the end of the world, Ragnarök, and its second coming.

A Longer Synopsis: The poem starts with the seeress requesting silence from "the sons of Heimdallr" (human beings) and asking Odin whether he wants her to recite ancient lore. She says she remembers giants born in antiquity who reared her.

She then goes on to relate a creation myth; the world was empty until the sons of Burr lifted the earth out of the sea. The Æsir then established order in the cosmos by finding places for the sun, the moon and the stars, thereby starting the cycle of day and night. A golden age ensued where the Æsir had plenty of gold and happily constructed temples and made tools.

But then three mighty giant maidens came from Jötunheimar and the golden age came to an end. The Æsir then created the dwarves, of whom Mótsognir and Durinn are the mightiest.

At this point 10 of the poem's 66 stanzas are over and six stanzas ensue which contain names of dwarves. This section, sometimes called Dvergatal (catalogue of dwarves), is usually considered an interpolation and sometimes omitted by editors and translators.

After the Dvergatal the creation of the first man and woman are recounted and Yggdrasill, the world-tree, is described. The seeress recalls the events that led to the first ever war, and what occurred in the struggle between the Æsir and Vanir.



The seeress then reveals to Odin that she knows some of his own secrets, of what he sacrificed of himself in pursuit of knowledge. She tells him she knows where his eye is hidden and how he gave it up in exchange for knowledge. She asks him constantly if he would like to hear more.

The seeress goes on to describe the slaying of Baldr, best and fairest of the gods and the enmity of Loki, and of others. Then she prophesizes the final destruction of the gods where fire and flood overwhelm heaven and earth as the gods fight their final battles with their enemies. All this is forecast, this the "fate of the gods," the Ragnarök. She describes the summons to battle, the personal struggles of the gods. She tells of the tragic endings of many of the gods - and how Odin, himself, is slain.

Finally a beautiful reborn world will rise from the ashes of death and destruction where Baldr will live again in a new world where the earth sprouts abundance without sowing seed.



Note by H.A. Bellows

The following introductory note was written by H.A. Bellows at the beginning of his translation of the Völuspá, which he refers to as the "Voluspo." I've included them here, because I thought they were interesting.

The Wise-Woman's Prophecy

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

At the beginning of the collection in the Codex Regius stands the Voluspo, the most famous and important, as it is likewise the most debated, of all the Eddic poems. Another version of it is found in a huge miscellaneous compilation of about the year 1300, the Hauksbok, and many stanzas are included in the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson. The order of the stanzas in the Hauksbok version differs materially from that in the Codex Regius, and in the published editions many experiments have been attempted in further rearrangements. On the whole, however, and allowing for certain interpolations, the order of the stanzas in the Codex Regius seems more logical than any of the wholesale "improvements" which have been undertaken.

The general plan of the Voluspo is fairly clear. Othin, chief of the gods, always conscious of impending disaster and eager for knowledge, calls on a certain "Volva," or wise-woman, presumably bidding her rise from the grave. She first tells him of the past, of the creation of the world, the beginning of years, the origin of

the dwarfs (at this point there is a clearly interpolated catalogue of dwarfs' names, stanzas 10-16), of the first man and woman, of the world-ash Yggdrasil, and of the first war, between the gods and the Vanir, or, in Anglicized form, the Wanes. Then, in stanzas 27-29, as a further proof of her wisdom, she discloses some of Othin's own secrets and the details of his search for knowledge.

Rewarded by Othin for what she has thus far told (stanza 30), she then turns to the real prophesy, the disclosure of the final destruction of the gods. This final battle, in which fire and flood overwhelm heaven and earth as the gods fight with their enemies, is the great fact in Norse mythology; the phrase describing it, ragna rök, "the fate of the gods," has become familiar, by confusion with the word rökkr, "twilight," in the German *Göterdämmerung*. The wise-woman tells of the Valkyries who bring the slain warriors to support Othin and the other gods in the battle, of the slaying of Baldr, best and fairest of the gods, through the wiles of Loki, of the enemies of the gods, of the summons to battle on both sides, and of the mighty struggle, till Othin is slain, and "fire leaps high about heaven itself" (stanzas 31-58). But this is not all. A new and beautiful world is to rise on the ruins of the old; Baldr comes back, and "fields unsowed bear ripened fruit" (stanzas 59-66).

This final passage, in particular, has caused wide differences of opinion as to the date and character of the poem. That the poet was heathen and not Christian seems almost beyond dispute; there is an intensity and vividness in almost every stanza which no archaizing Christian could possibly have achieved. On the other hand, the evidences of Christian influence are sufficiently striking to outweigh the arguments of Finnur Jonsson, Müllenhoff and others who maintain that the *Voluspo* is purely a product of heathendom. The roving Norsemen of the tenth century, very few of whom had as yet accepted Christianity, were nevertheless in close contact with Celtic races which had already been converted, and in many ways the Celtic influence was strongly felt. It seems likely, then, that the *Voluspo* was the work of a poet living chiefly in Iceland, though possibly in the "Western Isles," in the middle of the tenth century, a vigorous believer in the old gods, and yet with an imagination active enough to be touched by the vague tales of a different religion emanating from his neighbor Celts.

How much the poem was altered during the two hundred years between its composition and its first being committed to writing is largely a matter of guesswork, but, allowing for such an obvious interpolation as the catalogue of dwarfs, and for occasional lesser errors, it seems quite needless to assume such great changes as many editors do. The poem was certainly not composed to tell a story with which its early hearers were quite familiar; the lack of continuity which baffles modern readers presumably did not trouble them in the least. It is, in effect, a series of gigantic pictures, put into words with a directness and sureness which bespeak the

poet of genius. It is only after the reader, with the help of the many notes, has--familiarized him self with the names and incidents involved that he can begin to understand the effect which this magnificent poem must have produced on those who not only understood but believed it.



Note by Patricia Terry

The following note was written by Patricia Terry at the end of her translation of the Völuspá. I've included it here, because I thought it were interesting...

This translation of Völuspá is based on an edition of the text recently published by Paul Schach. Meaningless passages have been omitted, and what seems a more satisfactory order has been restored. In addition, Professor Schach's explanatory notes have provided many valuable interpretations, including indications of probable gaps in the narration, shown here by large spaces between stanzas.

I have preferred to return to the Norse title of this poem because the supernatural being, the völvá, who reluctantly speaks prophetic words to Odin, cannot really be named in English. "Witch" would perhaps be closest, but, despite Macbeth, it primarily suggests evil rather than prophecy. "Sibyl" is too tame, too intellectual, coming from Greece. I have also restored the pronouns by which the original text refers to the völvá, sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third. This leaves open the possibility, incorporated into the Vigfusson-York edition, that there is more than one narrator. It also makes a connection with the final "she" of the poem, the völvá who "sinks down" into her shadowy dark domain.

These notes, in addition to the glossary of proper names, will provide information about Norse mythology. But understanding of the underlying cosmology simply brings the mysterious to a deeper level. The inseparability of chaos and form is the very subject of the poem, the doom of creation inherent in the violence of the beginning. The battle is lost in advance, Ragnarök, the doom of the gods, the battle for which the warriors were brought by the valkyries to Valhalla, because it cannot be won, is the ideal of Germanic heroism.

Professor Schach gives convincing reasons for deleting the reference to Ymir which occurs at the beginning of *Völuspá* in other editions. This has the disadvantage, however, of making the creative activity of "Bur's sons" seem more peaceful than it was. Contemporary readers, being familiar with Norse cosmology, would have known what Snorri Sturluson already felt it necessary to explain in his thirteenth-century handbook for poets. According to Snorri, Ymir was the first creator, himself created out of the union of opposites, frost meeting warmth in the primordial void. No deity was involved in this quite modern idea of life's beginning. Descendants of the Frost Giant, "Bur's sons," one of whom was Odin, killed Ymir and created the world: its waters from his blood; earth from his flesh; mountains from his bones; Midgard, the home of humans, from his eyebrows. It is clear that "giants" (jotuns) and "gods" (the *Æsir*) are interrelated, but giants, as seen by the gods, are evil. The *völva*, a giant, and constrained to speak by Odin's superior powers, is thus a precarious source of knowledge.

The sea that surrounds Midgard is the home of the Serpent who will ultimately emerge to participate in Ragnarök. Beyond the sea is Jotunheim or Utgard, home of the giants. Below Midgard is Niflheim, "Mist-home," the realm of the dead, ruled by Loki's daughter Hel. In the center of Midgard is Asgard, dwelling place of the *Æsir*. The *Æsir* created the human race from two trees. One is, like the World Tree, an ash; the identity of the "Embla" is uncertain. Heimdall, mentioned in the beginning of the poem as the father of humans, has a prominence not far from Odin's. He too made a sacrifice for wisdom, leaving his particularly acute hearing, or an ear in some readings, in Mimir's Well where Odin left his eye. In contrast, the principal attribute of Thor, defender of humans against the giants, is unthinking strength.

Odin grew old and anxious about the fate of the gods, although he must already have known their future when he consulted the *völva*. She hints at possible causes, the recurrence of evil in the relations of the *Æsir*, warrior gods, with the Vanir, the older fertility gods who win a temporary victory through magic. There is also the attempt to kill Gullveig, who may be the sorceress casting her evil spells in the next stanza. Her name, however, refers to the power of gold.

Later, when the *Æsir* and Vanir have been united, the goddess Freyja is promised to a giant by Loki who then

breaks his word. Thor's Hammer completes the betrayal. Loki's crimes were of such magnitude that they could be evoked by brief allusions now quite obscure. In fact, he is evil itself, sometimes in the disguise of simple mischief. Although he often acts as the ally, even the intelligence, of the gods, he is a giant whose offspring, in addition to Hel, include the Wolf and the Serpent. Loki not only finds a way to kill the god Balder, protected by all living things except the mistletoe, but uses as his agent Balder's brother, the blind and innocent Hod. Snorri describes Balder as the best, the wisest, and the most beautiful of the gods. Loki is punished, but the ordering moral factors in society break down. The valkyries assemble, the warriors in Valhalla hear the cocks crowing to announce the final battle. Naglfar, the Ship of the Dead, begins its mysterious journey; the Wolf and the Serpent are free.

The Ash Tree referred to in the beginning of the poem is difficult to locate even in mythological space. Everything is in some sense "below" it: the home of giants; Midgard, Middle Earth, the home of men; and Hel. Below it also live the Norns, the source of human destiny. These may be the giant maidens whose arrival is the first indication that the tranquility of the Æsir will not be permanent. The Tree, Yggdrasil, is also called the World Tree. Its Norse name means "Odin's Horse," in reference to Odin's hanging himself on the Tree in order to obtain secret runes of wisdom, a story related in "Sayings of the High One." The Ash Tree is also life itself, its greenness in opposition to the "nowhere green" of the primordial void. According to recent, and compelling, readings of the text, it remains visible, like a flaming torch against the sky, after the earth and the stars have been destroyed.

When the earth rises again from the waters, the Æsir, but not their opponents, reappear. Balder lives again, at peace with Hod. There are people again as well, some of them destined, by their virtue, to live in a hall called Gimlé in happiness forever. Snorri refers to this as a pagan heaven; more recent commentators see here, and elsewhere in the poem, a Christian meaning. These will be more inclined to accept as genuine the defective stanza which follows the present stanza 49 in one manuscript, and which Schach includes. A literal translation carries so many inevitable, but perhaps inappropriate, connections with Christian terminology that I prefer to place it here. It seems in any case hard to fit into the chronology and what seems to me the spirit of the poem, at least without the lost passages which must have accompanied it.

**The mighty one comes down on the day of doom,
that powerful lord who rules over all.**

The final stanza has also been the subject of much conflicting interpretation, in which the dragon is seen in a variety of functions from purifying to threatening. Like Peter Hallberg and Paul Schach, I see its presence as a

reminder that good cannot be disentangled from evil; to separate light from the darkness is to intensify the darkness.

Sources: [Wikipedia](#) and The Poetic Edda at [Sacred Texts](#).

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