

# **VOLCANOES IN OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY**



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# **VOLCANOES IN OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY**

**MYTH AND ENVIRONMENT  
IN EARLY ICELAND**

by  
**MATHIAS NORDVIG**

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN ICELAND WAS settled in the beginning of the ninth century,<sup>1</sup> the migrating Scandinavians realized that the landscape was different from their places of origin. Their cultural background came primarily from pre-Christian Norway. Only a handful of them were Christian. This means that the majority of early Icelanders probably would have made sense of their new lands in context of pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology. If we are looking for early Icelandic conceptualizations of the environment, we should look towards Old Norse mythology in the *Edda*, in Eddic and skaldic poetry. Their perspective on the world did not fundamentally distinguish between nature and the human, in a spiritual sense. Our modern tendency to separate culture from nature has emerged with industrialization.<sup>2</sup> This way of thinking about the world was only in its infancy in the medieval period, when Old Norse mythology was being written down. In Old Norse literature it is possible to detect two modes of thinking: one is based on an indigenous worldview, which can be characterized as holistic and integrative, another is based on the Latinate script-world that arrives with Christianity and establishes a new hierarchy of knowledge.

Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* is a treatment of oral indigenous knowledge about life in Iceland in the knowledge hierarchy of the Latinate script-world. On the one hand, it relies on older oral narration; on the other, it subordinates this narration to learned Christian philosophy. When its content is compared to similar indigenous narrations from other cultures, it is possible to discuss how early Icelanders conceptualized their environment through a coherent cosmology, which is tied to volcanism. I argue that the *Edda* is an expression of environment-based narration in early Iceland. It establishes a mythology based on cultural material from Scandinavia, and devises a cosmology complete with social structures, which has been impressed by the experience of volcanism. The creation myth refers social structures based on group competitiveness to primordial volcanic processes. This group competitiveness is replayed in multiple myths. In the mead myth, the Ragnarök myth, and the myth about Þórr duelling Hrungnir, the pattern is realized in volcanic contexts. This locates my analysis in the realm of geomythology.

Geomythology was conceived of by geologist Dorothy B. Vitaliano in her 1973 book *Legends of the Earth*. Vitaliano compiled a catalogue of myths and legends in which different peoples' narration of environmental features are represented. Many of these

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1 See recent news regarding the site at Stöðvarfjörður, which antedates the earliest settlement in Iceland to ca. 800 AD: *Guide to Iceland*; Agnes Stefánsdóttir and Ásta Hermannsdóttir, *Yfirlit yfir fornleifarannsóknir*, 76.

2 See Shaffer and Young, *Rendering Nature*, especially chap. 1, "The Nature-Culture Paradox," 1–20.

narrate the experience of volcanism in terms of mythological and legendary dramas. Elizabeth W. Barber and Paul T. Barber have since devised a complimentary method for analyzing the vocabulary of myths as expressions of geologic conceptions in their book *When They Severed Earth from Sky* from 2004. While useful to my investigation of early Icelandic conceptualizations of the environment, both Vitaliano's theory of geom mythology and the premise for Barber and Barber's method are flawed. In both cases it is assumed that there is an etiological relationship between myth and geologic phenomena. I disagree with that. Myths can incorporate geologic events but do not exist to explain them and cannot be said to originate in them. I argue that geologic phenomena may be included in mythologies in a reflective relationship as cosmologies are created. This is what my comparison between the Icelandic material and Vitaliano's catalogue of volcanic geom mythology demonstrates.

For Old Norse mythology this means that the environment of Iceland must be taken into consideration when myths are analyzed. Iceland is geologically the most active region in the world. Multiple eruptions occurred from the beginning of the ninth century to the middle of the tenth century, the period that is called the settlement era.<sup>3</sup> The most imposing ones were the Eldgjá eruption in 934–940 and the one in Langjökull that created Hallmundarhraun in the middle of the tenth century. These eruptions had serious impact on life in Iceland and Eldgjá may even have contributed to the conversion to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> From a comparative perspective of myths and legends from the Pacific Ring of Fire, not least Hawai'ian mythology, the notion that early Icelanders would formulate myths and cosmologies that included volcanism is straightforward. Our primary example is the skaldic poem *Hallmundarkviða*, which provides a full description of a volcanic eruption in a mythological language. When its vocabulary is compared with geom myths from the Pacific Ring of Fire and other regions of the world, a pattern for what I call an indigenous theory of volcanism emerges. This pattern is replicated in the creation myth, the mead myth, the Ragnarøk myth, and the myth about Þórr duelling Hrungnir, including later folktales. This mythic pattern is a cosmology: a system that makes sense of the social and physical world.

Pre-Christian authorities of the tradition, skalds and knowledgeable individuals, reinterpreted older mythic patterns in a way that was appropriate to their environment. They established a social memory about life in Iceland, which was later codified in literary form. This social memory was an expression of life-situations in an animistic perspective, where the mind does not distinguish sharply between social life and environmental surroundings. Social life and environment in myth and legend were instead mutually supportive. Actions in the community had responses in the environment vis-à-vis environmental actions having impact on social life. This is a mitigation of the trauma from experiencing environmental upheaval. The cosmology functions as relief for emotional stress and has taken form as a result of the migration to Iceland.

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3 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Iceland," 571–72.

4 Oppenheimer et al., "The Eldgjá Eruption," 369–81.



Old Norse mythology is an expression of Icelandic social structures that rests on ancient Scandinavian and Germanic culture. This means that I address the myths as a deep-time perspective that understands medieval Icelandic literature as the latest expression of structures that can have persisted in Nordic culture for centuries before codification. This is a *longue durée*-treatment of Old Norse mythology.<sup>5</sup> I address the texts in Old Norse literature as codified expressions of indigenous oral knowledge and discuss the implications of the foreign knowledge hierarchy in the Latinate script-world from the point of view of indigenous scholarship. I argue that Iceland's pre-literary narration of the world was centred around memory spaces, which often highlighted environmental features. I suggest that this mode of thinking produced a cosmology based on the experience of Iceland's volcanism in the early period of Icelandic culture.

### Translations, References, and Special Characters

Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own. The references to primary sources in prose follow the chapters given in the standardized versions of the medieval texts. For primary sources in poetry the references in this book list the title of the poem and the stanza given in the standardized versions. For both prose and poetry, the standardized versions that I use are the ones that are considered the most comprehensive editions. For this reason, prose texts and poems are listed individually in the bibliography with reference to the standardized edition. In cases where I discuss commentaries made by the editors of the standardized medieval texts, reference will be made to the page number in the edition.

For references to secondary literature it is important to note that this study bridges multiple disciplines. Therefore, in accordance with the tradition of research in Old Norse literature, Icelandic scholars in this discipline are listed by their first name. Danish scholars, including some non-Nordic scholars, in the cases where this is common practice, are listed by their middle name in the bibliography. In accordance with the tradition of research in geosciences, Icelandic geologists and volcanologists will appear in the bibliography in accordance with their patronyms or matronyms.

### Special Characters

All spelling of Old Norse follows the edition from which the text comes. This means that the characters "œ," "ø," "ø," and "ö" will be used in this work. For modern Icelandic the "ö" is used consistently in accordance with contemporary Icelandic orthography. The use of contemporary orthography also applies to Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian in all cases where these languages occur in a context after 1800. In all other cases standardized spelling and characters are applied in accordance with the editions that I have used.

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<sup>5</sup> Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences sociales," 725–53.

