

NORSE BURIAL PRACTICES AND MEDIEVAL FEAR OF REVENANTS IN THE RAGNARÖK SAGA

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ABSTRACT

After the introduction of the Christian religion, a traumatic shift took place in the Viking approach to death rituals. Transition went with strains between the ancient era of cremation and the new inhumation period. We argue that the Ragnarök saga, written after Icelandic Christianization, might refer to the Norse mythical past of funeral pyres as opposed to the Christian funeral practices. We provide novel insights about the role of Odin, who is swallowed by Fenrir as if he has been buried in the ground, and of Surtr, who burns the world to restore the purifying role of the flames. Yet, the fear among Norse people for dead revenants can be traced in the Ragnarök myth, in which malevolent and benevolent characters return from death. Ragnarök sets out how to cope with revenants either to keep them quiet, or counteract their evil powers, or fully remove their menace. Concerns about revenants were more compelling for Medieval Northmen after Christianization, when the corpses could not be any longer destroyed/purified by the fire, but rather had to lie in the earth with easy access to return from death. Summarizing, we argue that: a) Ragnarök outlines the transition from Viking to Christian burial practices and the ways Northmen coped with this trauma; b) Ragnarök is also a history of revenants, in which the Vikings strive to deal with the uncanny powers of dead. Besides, we provide a new version of Ragnarök that merges excerpts from both the Eddas in chronological order.

KEYWORDS: Edda, Snorri Sturlson, Völuspá, cosmogony, Ahmad ibn Falan, Baldr funeral.

INTRODUCTION

The Norse myth of the end of the world, namely the Ragnarök saga, portrays the twilight and the fate of the Vikings' gods (Schjødt 2019). The main sources are the Poetic Edda, sections Völuspá and Vafþrúðnismál, and the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturlson (1179–1241), section Gylfaginning (Sigurðsson 2013). The dating of the Eddas is a vexed question (Gunnell and Lassen, 2013). It has been hypothesized that Voluspa was composed before the 11th century, partly based on older material from oral tradition (Ólason 2013). The final rendering of the myth, e.g., the extant Eddas, were compiled in a Christian milieu by Icelandic Authors around the first half of the 13th century, a few centuries after the Viking golden age (Conti 2021). Iceland was legally converted to Christianity around the year 1000, but Scandinavian pagan beliefs survived for long periods (Aðalsteinsson 1971). It is not known whether Ragnarök had been slightly or heavily influenced by Christian thinkers. Also, it is unclear whether the saga portrays the 13th-14th century Icelandic viewpoint on the preceding pagan history (Kanerva 2018). It has not been decided whether there ever was a coherent Ragnarök tradition (Schjødt 2020), although the archeological record uncovers various 10th-11th century carved crosses and stones depicting events from Ragnarök (Bailey 2002; Kermodé 2005; Schulte 2007).

The analogies between Ragnarök and Christian sources – i.e., the Old Testament, the Book of Revelation (Schjødt et al., 2020), the 8th century Wessobrunn Prayer, the 9th century poem Muspilli (Pakis 2009), the 9th century poem Heliand and the medieval liturgical homilies – suggest that the saga could be an example of cultural transferring or syncretic superposition between the ancient Norse and the late Medieval European Christians (Schjødt 2019). Similarities have been reported between the Ragnarök and various eschatological traditions, including early Judaism, Graeco-Roman myths, Sybilline Oracles (Bugge 1867), ancient Iranian traditions. Some authors hypothesize for Ragnarök an Indo-European pre-Christian background handed down in a Christian medieval context (Hultgard 2022). The purpose of the Eddas' writers has been harshly contended. Did they want to preserve for posterity the original Pagan poetry, or defend the Norse beliefs paganism by countering the advance of the new religion (Stern 2016)? Alternatively, do they want to match the old beliefs with the new ones, assimilating the pagan past with the Christian message (Samplonius 2013)? Scholars decode Ragnarök as a mythical account of cyclic natural events like the daily rotation of the sun or the succession of the seasons, while others suggest a poetic rendering of the geothermal events occurring in the inhospitable Icelandic inland (Patel, 2017; Conti 2021) or during the catastrophic volcanic winter of 536 AD (Gräslund and Price, 2012).

In this manuscript, we take a different stand on the Ragnarök saga. We start from the traumatic passage occurred in Norse death rituals after Christianization around the 10-13th century, when burials were imposed and replaced the ancient funeral pyres that took place on the decks of the ships. We argue that Ragnarök might describe the contrast between the new inhumation rites dethroning the century-long pagan burial practices. Further, we argue that Ragnarök might describe the fear of revenants coming back to life and the ways to counteract or neutralize their malevolent influence.

PREPARATION FOR DEATH: VIKINGS VS. CHRISTIANS

In the European Medieval times, preparation after death was both a spiritual and a material affair deemed to be crucial both for the physical afterlife of the deceased and the well-being of who outlived him (Caciola 1996; Simpson 2003). The funerary practices in Viking Age are testified by the archaeological evidence of many burials (Roderick Ellis 1977; Steinsland and Meulengracht, 1998) and by literary sources, e.g., the Ahmad ibn Falan's impressive account of 922 AD (Brøndsted 1965) and the description of the Baldr funeral in the prose Edda (Sturlusson 1916). It is noteworthy that preparation for death and afterlife has been extensively studied in the 13th Iceland, i.e., in the historical, cultural and religious milieu in which the Eddas and the Ragnarök were compiled.

Ancient Viking funerals. Viking funerals were intense events involving narrative performance of rites and rituals to honor the deceased and facilitate his journey to the realm of the gods. Practices varied widely across the Viking world, based on the social status, local customs and religious beliefs. Cremation and inhumation were both common. According to Snorri, cremation was favored by early Vikings, who believed that the fire's smoke would carry the deceased's spirit to the afterlife (Sturlusson 1916). Odin wanted the dead warriors being burned together with all their goods on the decks of the ships to take them in the Valhalla, the boat symbolizing the journey to the afterlife and the flame representing transformation and renewal from life to death (Brøndsted 1965). The wealthiest and eminent Vikings were clothed in fine garments and placed on top of their boats hauled ashore, surrounded by rich foods, strong drink, everyday items, gaming sets, sailing equipment, weapons, jewelry and even livestock and slaves "volunteered" to be slain and burned together with their masters. The act of lighting the pyre was an important ritual, performed by the dead man's nearest kinsman. Then people came, each bringing a burning brand and throwing it on the pyre. Massive and grim women called "the Angel of Death" are credited as having key roles in these ritualistic practices. The funeral could be drawn out for days, consisting of commemorative rituals, feasts and games. Places like lakes, clearings and around large trees could serve as the central location (Anders 2005). Then, the burned ashes were either thrown in sea or taken to a burial, where large mounds of stones were raised (Kanerva 2013). Most Viking funerals involved cremation or inhumation on land, an exception being the Baldr's funeral, in which the flaming ship was pushed out to sea. When many warriors died together, several bodies were laid out in the hull of the largest ship, with their leader and his weapons in the centre (Ratican 2020).

Viking Funerals in Ragnarök. In the Ragnarök myth, there is a plenty of references to the ancient Viking funerals and burials. For instance, the boats symbolizing the journey to the afterlife are well represented in Ragnarök, carrying the Gods' enemies to the final battlefield: "Naglfar shall be loosened, the ship which is so named. Yet in this sea-flood Naglfar shall float (Gylfaginning, 51e). "O'er the sea from the north | there sails a ship With the people of Hel, at the helm stands Loki; After the wolf | do wild men follow, And with them the brother | of Byleist goes (Völuspá, 51)." In the same way that the Viking funerals usually took place on the ground, also the gods' death occurs on the land. As the funeral boats were hauled ashore during Viking cremations, during Ragnarök the evil passengers were disembarked to reach the fated battlefield. Just like large clearings served as the central location for the Viking burial rituals, the final battle in Ragnarök takes place in a huge esplanade: "Vígríðr hight the field | where in fight shall meet Surtr and the cherished gods; An hundred leagues | it has on each side (Gylfaginning, 51f)".

According to the Viking *weltanschauung*, no one can escape the fate, including gods themselves. Throughout the Norse poetry, there are constant reminders of the threat of Ragnarök (Lassen 2021). Gods are fully aware that they are doomed to die, so much that Odin himself obsessively tries to pursue knowledge of the cause of his own death (Swain, 2016). Despite fate is sealed, gods' bravery enables them to face the death with dignity (Wijianto 2020). They are fully aware of the continuous cycles of birth, death and rebirth occurring in the cosmic history. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that Odin marches willingly towards death. He behaves as if he was preparing his own funeral. Like the wealthiest dead Vikings were clothed in fine garments, the most eminent among the gods is dressed to die before the final battle: "rides first with the gold helmet and a fair birnie, and his spear, which is called Gungnir (Gylfaginning, 51h)". Also the other gods and the human warriors from Valhalla have fine clothes: "Then shall the Æsir put on their war-weeds, and all the Champions (Gylfaginning, 51g)". The fact that they, like Odin, are preparing for their own death recalls the historical fact that the bodies of many warriors who died together were laid out in the hull of the largest ship, with their leader in the centre (Ratican 2020). Odin offers his body as a sacrifice for the rebirth of the world, his death being glorified as the result (Wijianto 2020). We suggest that, like the servants who wish to die with their chieftain, Odin goes voluntarily towards the death, playing the role of the slave "rewarded" for his faithful service.

The pyre of Viking funerals symbolizes the transformative power of fire seen as the vehicle to carry the deceased to their final destination in the afterlife (Conti 2021). It is mandatory that the world burns to be born again, the fire having a purifying and regenerative double valency. He who burns everything in the end is Surtr: "then straightway shall Surtr cast fire over the earth and burn all the world". "Fierce grows the steam | and the life-feeding flame, Till fire leaps high | about heaven itself (Völuspá, 57)". Despite Surtr is one of the main opponents of the gods during Ragnarök, he is not a fully negative character: "his sword is exceeding good: from it radiance shines brighter than from the sun". We believe it is not a case that the final fire is caused by him: since the central ritual of lighting the Viking funeral pyre was performed by the dead man's nearest kinsman, we speculate that Surtr could be much closer to Odin than currently believed. In Scandinavian folklore, possibly due to the weathering action of the tides, fire must be symbolically

associated with water to have a termination effect (De Ceglia 2023). That's why the burned ashes were sometimes thrown in sea. In the same way, during the Ragnarök, everything sinks into the water: "The sun turns black, | earth sinks in the sea (Völuspá, 57)". The Massive and grim women having key roles in Viking funerals are also present in Voluspa, where "The giantess old | in Ironwood sat, In the east, and bore [the brood of Fenrir; Among these one | in monster's guise Was soon to steal | the sun from the sky (Völuspá, 40)". The offspring of this terrific woman is linked with the deaths of the gods: "There feeds he full | on the flesh of the dead, And the home of the gods | he reddens with gore (Völuspá, 41)". The funeral ritual could be drawn out for days, consisting of commemorative rituals, feasts and games. Likewise, the gods survived to the final destruction of the old world gather to remember old times: "After that Baldr shall come thither, and Hödr, from Hel; then all shall sit down together and hold speech. with one another, and ... speak of those happenings which have been before (Gylfaginning, 53b)." "The gods in Ithavoll | meet together, Of the terrible girdler | of earth they talk, And the mighty past | they call to mind, And the ancient runes |of the Ruler of gods (Völuspá, 60)".

In sum, our textual reading suggests that the Ragnarök saga describes, among other topics, the ancient Viking funerals in which the eminent chieftain was ultimately burned.

Towards Christian burials. Pagan funeral practices shifted over time throughout Northern Europe, especially once Christianity began to impact the Viking beliefs. As the centuries wore on and the new religion took hold, funerals begun to combine both Norse and Christian practices. The elaborate Viking procedures became simpler and more practical as Christianity crept across Scandinavia, cremation being gradually replaced with burial as the primary funerary method (De Ceglie 2023). When someone converted to Christianity, their offspring could remain pagan and bury them in a pagan fashion. Alternatively, Christian offspring could bury their pagan parents in a Christian fashion. For instance, when his son converted to Christianity, the powerful king Gorm was exhumed from his enormous burial mound and reburied beneath a Christian church (Kanerva 2018). Around 900, an Icelandic female character wished to be buried at the floodmark because she did not want to be interred in unholy ground, as the land was still pagan (Kanerva 2018). Hybrid burials between pagan and Christian traditions have been uncovered in the United Kingdom, indicating shifts in ritual practice as the Scandinavians incomers slowly assimilated to these new regions (Paterson 2017). While Viking graves were usually full of fine jewelry and weaponry, the Christian burials, much smaller and modest, were restricted to clothing accessories.

A slow transition did occur between the earliest Norse period called by Snorri Sturlson the "cremation age" and the more recent times of the burial mounds (Hollander 2010). The ensuing evolution of funeral practices towards Christian burial innovations could have been traumatic, possibly leading to resistance to novelty by large selections of Viking population. It has been suggested that a tense longing for flames crosses the Norse sagas, were the characters look back with regret on a mythical past in which the evil is destroyed by the walls of the funeral pyres' fire (De Ceglia 2023). For instance, it has been contended that Vikings are used to burn their beloved quickly such that they go to afterlife that very moment, while Arabs (and Christians) throw them to the ground where they are devoured by maggots (Brøndsted 1965).

Therefore, the Ragnarök saga might reflect the radical transition from Viking to Christian burial practices, depicting how the Norse people dealt with the trauma. In touch with this hypothesis, some verses in the Eddas point towards the description of Christian burials. An event occurring during the Ragnarök's final battle could be correlated with the historical introduction of Christian burials in the Norse society. In the same way that a Christian burial requires inhumation, Odin is swallowed by Fenrir and vanishes from the world: "The Wolf shall swallow Odin; that shall be his ending (Gylfaginning, 511)" and "The wolf shall fell | the father of men (Vafþrúðnismál, 53)". Odin, who was preparing his own funeral as the final sacrifice to purify the world, is unexpectedly eaten, disappearing as if he was buried in the ground. Instead of being cremated on the ground of a ship, Odin finds himself interred in the Christian way. The fact that Odin's son Vithar avenges his father by slaying the Wolf does not imply that the Viking tradition of the ancient funeral pyres has been restored. Everything falls into place only when Sutr burns the whole world, allowing the ancient funeral pyres to regenerate the world.

In sum, a few clues in the Ragnarök saga suggest that the authors intended to make a connection between the ancient, magnificent pyres and recent, controversial inhumations practices.

MEDIEVAL, ICELANDIC REVENANTS

Revenants, i.e., reanimated corpses revived from death, were regarded as part of the natural world in the Scandinavian Medio eve (Tomaini 2018). It was believed that a kind of vitality remained in the human corpse, being the dead embedded in a liminal space from where they could still enter the world of the living (Kanerva 2011; De Ceglia 2023). Communities dealt with their dead as continual, albeit non-living members, imbued of mythic and symbolic functions. Despite their fondness to go to battle, and despite their religion provided a noticeable psychological support for the fearless warriors eager to reach Valhalla (Lindow 1997; Schjødt 2011), Vikings were nevertheless fearful of the mysteries of death. We have knowledge of Norse dead people who did not rest in their graves as far as it is written in the medieval Icelandic Family Sagas (Clover 1985). Undead subjects appeared to Northmen in dreams and visions not as ethereal ghosts as in other Medieval contexts, rather in physical recognisable bodies, often looking ominous and frightful (Merkelbach 2012). Revenants could have both benevolent and malevolent behaviour and effects. The restless evil individuals haunted their own families and neighbors especially at night, causing fear, illness, insanity and death, until the nearby places become deserted (Kanerva 2018). “Whenever birds landed on Þórólfr’s grave, they fell down dead (Martin 2005)”. Night and darkness are especially scary. In the sagas, it is very dangerous to go out after sunset. Many events concerning malevolent undead took place in the autumn: as winter approaches, people believe that dead have begun to walk again, causing the livings all sorts of trouble (Kanerva 2013): shepherds who did not come home could be found dead, completely coal-black, every bone broken (Martin 2005). The revenants in medieval sagas could even act as agents of order, whose restlessness is connected to past deeds of those still living that have caused psychosocial conflicts and social disequilibrium within their community (Kanerva 2011). Alive people had to be very careful in performing funeral rites to put a brake to evil revenants.

How to prevent posthumous evildoers. Many of the funeral rites described in the Icelandic tales were intended to provide to the deceased a quiet afterlife. When the character died well-prepared, he continued to peacefully take part in the lives of the living with protective and benevolent functions (Kanerva 2013). In turn, some individuals were anticipated to return posthumously with evil intentions. The potential candidates included strong-minded charismatic persons, subjects died in angry emotional states or with unresolved conflicts, strange-looking and awkward evildoers, individuals skilled in witchcraft or equipped with supernatural skills such as being capable of becoming berserkers in battle, people provided with extraordinary appearance such as wolf-grey hair, or females of remarkable size (Kanerva 2015).

The anticipated posthumous restlessness could be prevented by preparing the corpses with the appropriate rituals (Ólason 2003). Only persons with high social status were able to inactivate posthumous restlessness and control the authority of the dead (Kanerva 2013). The preparation of the corpse was carefully disposed. Dead might be approached from behind, sometimes by the shoulders. The head might be covered with a cloth so that nobody could accidentally look into the dead’s eyes, being the glance of the dead harmful. The eyes, mouth and nostrils might be closed and fingernails cut (Sturlusson 1916). The corpse might be carried out through an opening created in the wall of the house, so that the deceased would not know its way back (Kanerva 2013).

Once the corpse reached the final destination, other control practices might help prevent further restlessness. The body could be physically hindered through obstacles like stones, intended to prevent dead evildoers from exiting their mound. Other times, the wall of the mound of stones was built so tall that only a bird could fly over it (Kanerva 2013). Distance was reputed a foremost factor in determining the power of the dead, who was sometimes buried in a place so remote that the men must stay overnight on their trip. In the Arctic Circle, the rituals neutralize revenants were much more physical than the Continental ones. In Icelandic sagas, the hero had to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the restless dead, who frequently has superhuman strength (Thorsson 2005). When somebody did not accomplish alone the removal of a perilous revenant, he might request help also from his reluctant rivals, since the law required that they agree to help with the burial (Kanerva 2013). If all the above-mentioned control procedures fail, the best effective methods of disposing of a revenant was to decapitate the body with a sword, or to burn his body (Kanerva 2013).

In the next paragraph, we will discuss the occurrence of potential revenants in the Ragnarök saga.

Revenants in the Ragnarok saga. In Eddic poetry, the dead could be waked up against their own will by heathen gods and goddesses. In the same *Völuspá*, Óðinn wakes up a *völva* (Kanerva 2013). Characters returned from death are widely mentioned in the Ragnarök saga, where both benevolent and malevolent revenants come back to life. The evildoers, i.e., the people from Hel, and the gods’ Champions, i.e., the warriors of Valhalla, return from death to fight each other: “51. Over the sea from the north | there sails a ship With the people of Hel, at the helm stands Loki (*Völuspá*, 51)” “Then shall the Æsir put on their war-weeds, and all the Champions, and advance to the field (*Gylfaginning*, 51g)”. After the end of the world, a few gods will be back from death. Baldr, who sat in the Hel-hall after his death, turns back to life. While Odin was associated by the Medieval Christian audience with God and Loki with Satan or the Antichrist, Baldr was associated with prosperity and fertility of the spring season, in the same way as the second coming of Jesus Christ will wash away of the old, flawed gods (Swain 2016).

Vikings believed that dead individuals were embedded in a liminal space from where they could still escape. Death did not come suddenly, rather was a continuous path where the boundaries with life are blurred and slippery. This seems to recall the fact that the gods were sleeping at the beginning of Ragnarök: “then shall Heimdallr rise up and blow mightily in the Gjallar-Horn and awaken all the gods; and they shall hold council together (Gylfaginning, 51g)”. It is tempting to speculate that the gods were suspended between life and death before being reanimated by the Heimdallr’s horn (Kozák 2021). The same seems to hold for dwarfs: “*How fare the gods? |how fare the elves? All Jotunheim groans, |the gods are at council; Loud roar the dwarfs |by the doors of stone, The masters of the rocks* (Völuspá, 48). Just like the revenants try to leave their tombstones, the dwarfs groan at the stone doors.

It was not uncommon that bodies changed their features because of the intense frost. The corpses are described in sagas as turning black, swollen and very heavy (“His body became too heavy for the two oxen and men transporting the corpse to carry”), suggesting an emotional condition of anger that is still present in the corpse, ready to go out in revenants (Kanerva 2018). Likewise, the Midgard Serpent was described as exceptionally heavy, such that no god possessed the strength to lift him (Gylfaginning, 47h). Also, the fact that the more frightening beasts are freed might suggest that they were imprisoned in a sort of limbo between life and death. “all fetters and bonds shall be broken and rent. Then shall Fenris-Wolf get loose; then the sea shall gush forth upon the land, because the Midgard Serpent stirs in giant wrath and advances up onto the land (Gylfaginning, 51d)”. Fenris’ regained freedom and the Midgard Serpent’s lethal raid might remind the return from the exile of death of malignant corpses, carrying pestilence and death. Nobody was safe from revenants, especially in the dark of the Northern frozen nights. In Ragnarök, “...the Wolf shall swallow the sun; and this shall seem to men a great harm. Then the other wolf shall seize the moon, and he also shall work great ruin; the stars shall vanish from the heavens (Gylfaginning, 51d)”. The frightening situation in which both sun and moon are devoured, followed by a frozen dark, is the best background for dead people to come back from death (Schjødt 2019).

When a Viking died well-prepared, he continued to provide peace and security to his community. This is also the case of Baldr, who benefitted from an elaborate funeral. Accordingly, some events in Ragnarök remind the Viking procedures to prevent dead individuals to come back to life. The corpses were carried out through an opening created in the wall of the house, so that the deceased would not know their way back to the house. This brings to mind that “The Sons of Múspell ride thence: Surtr shall ride first... when they ride over Bifröst, then the bridge shall break (Gylfaginning, 51f)”. The destruction of Bifröst, the bridge used by gods to travel between the Realms, forces them to stay still in one place, no way to get back.

In Icelandic sagas and in Ragnarök, the fingernails of the dead individual must be cut to help the gods before their final battle. A ritual precept by the Pythagorean school (VI sec. B.C) states: “Spit on your hair clippings and nail parings”. The precept might concern the magic powers of hair and nails that permit people to exert power on other individuals (Pitagora 2018). After the Odin’s death, Vidarr blocks the Fenrir’s lower jaw with his foot: “...shall Víðarr stride forth and set one foot upon the lower jaw of the Wolf: on that foot he has the shoe. ... With one hand he shall seize the Wolf’s upper jaw and tear his gullet asunder; and that is the death of the Wolf (Gylfaginning, 51l, 51n)”. This reminds us that the bodies of individuals with anticipated posthumous restlessness were physically hindered through stones to prevent them from exiting their mound. The final battle with the mutual slaughter of humans, gods and monsters recalls the heroes of the Northmen sagas who had to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the restless and strong dead. In case of obstinate restlessness, one of the best methods of disposing of a revenant was to decapitate the body with a sword. In touch with this observation, Vithar breaks Fenrir’s jaws and then pierces with a sword: “In the giant’s son | does he thrust his sword Full to the heart: | his father is avenged (Völuspá, 54)”. In the Norse sagas, when a character did not accomplish alone the removal of a perilous revenant, he might request help also from his rivals. In touch with this observation, the gods require the final assistance of none other than their most perilous enemy, i.e., Surtr, who burns the world and puts an end to all the restless dead.

The fear of death is not fully removed even after the destruction of the restless’ undecayed corpse. When the revenant’s ashes were thrown to the sea, it might occur that they fled to the mainland. It happened once in an Icelandic saga that a cow licked some of it from a stone and subsequently gave birth to a bull that killed one of the characters (Kanerva 2013). Accordingly, the threat of terrific attacks is not over in Ragnarök, even after the magnificent rebirth of the world and the gods. Indeed, the last verses of Voluspá portend the comeback of evil even in the new peaceful world: “From below the dragon | dark comes forth, Nithhogg flying | from Nithafjöll; The bodies of men on | his wings he bears (Völuspá, 66)”. This means that the battle against the revenants is won, but not the war.

In sum, revenants are everywhere in Ragnarök, representing one of the greatest fears of the valiant Northmen warriors. We are entitled to hypothesize that the events described in the Ragnarök saga set out how to cope with revenants either to keep them quiet, or to counteract their evil powers, or to fully remove their menace.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ragnarök saga is still an enigma, starting from the dispute over its date. It is not known whether the myth is based on older material from oral tradition and how much it has been influenced by Christian thinkers through cultural transferring or syncretic superposition (Wijianto 2020). There is disagreement regarding the alleged relationships between Ragnarök, Christian sources and ancient eschatological traditions from all over the world (Samplonius, 2001). It is not even clear the purpose of the writers, whether they want to maintain the original Pagan poetry, or countering the advance of the new faith, or integrate the pagan folklore with the Christian lesson, or describe Icelandic geothermal events (Mallory and Adams, 1997). In this manuscript, we provide an effort to build a new perspective that might shed new light on the meaning of the Ragnarök saga. We present excerpts dedicated to Ragnarök from both the Edda books. The excerpts from the Prose Edda, from the section Gylfaginning, are provided in the translation of Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur (Sturlusson 1916), while the excerpts from the Poetic Edda, from the two poems Völuspá and Vafþrúðnismál, are provided in the translation of Henry Adams Bellows (1923).

Going through both the Eddas, we argued that many verses and phrases might be interpreted as the description and illustration of ancient Viking funeral practices. We provide many examples in the two books suggesting that the authors remain torn between the ancient funeral practices and the new burial rituals which become widespread during Northmen Christianization. Furthermore, we proposed a fresh interpretation about the main characters - in particular Odin, Fenrir, Surtr and Baldr - inserted in the context of the ancient and new death rituals. In our approach to the Ragnarök saga, the fire of the funeral pyres takes a constructive role that permits the regeneration of the gods and the world, as opposed to the inhumation practices imposed by the early Christianization of Scandinavia and Iceland.

Yet, we focused on the unnoticed occurrence of benevolent and malevolent dead revenants in the Ragnarök myth. References to burial practices and ways to cope with corpses are scattered throughout the whole manuscripts. We suggest that this was kind a way to exorcize the fear of death that was always present in Vikings' folklore, despite their fearless warriors' look. We argue that the Ragnarök tale hints at the ritual practices used by Northmen to ward off the negative influence of restless dead. This might represent an attempt by Viking people to make peace with their own nightmares and the frightening darkness of the cold Scandinavian nights. This issue was even more compelling for Medieval Northmen after Christianization, when the corpses could not be any longer destroyed (and/or purified) by the fire. Having to lie on the ground instead of being burned to ashes, the dead could easily come back from death. It has been pointed out that undead characters appeared mostly in Northern sagas narrating the Christian conversion of prominent Icelanders, in a context in which the tensions between the old and the new religion were relentlessly mounting (Merkelbach 2012). It's no coincidence that, after the advent of Christianity, the first Iceland revenants were described as hell-bound pagan souls raising from their burial grounds (De Ceglia 2023).

We conclude that the Ragnarök myth can be read and interpreted at various levels, but the social, cultural, political and religious milieu of the Christian Medieval Iceland in which it has been written must be always taken into account.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author warrants that the article is original, does not infringe on any copyright or other proprietary right of any third part, is not under consideration by another journal, and has not been previously published.

The Author does not have any known or potential conflict of interest including any financial, personal or other relationships with other people or organizations within three years of beginning the submitted work that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence, their work.

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APPENDIX: MERGED EDDAS

Here we present an annotated mixed version of the Ragnarök saga divided by topic and in chronological order of the events, including excerpts from both the Edda books. The excerpts from the Prose Edda, from the section Gylfaginning, are provided in the translation of Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur (Sturlusson 1916). The excerpts from the Poetic Edda, from the two poems *Völuspá* (italics) and *Vafþrúðnismál* (italics and bold), are provided in the translation of Henry Adams Bellows (1923).

Fibulwinter

51a. Then said Gangleri: "What tidings are to be told concerning the Weird of the Gods? Never before have I heard aught said of this."

51b. Hárr answered: "Great tidings are to be told of it, and much. The first is this, that there shall come that winter which is called the Awful Winter: in that time snow shall drive from all quarters; frosts shall be great then, and winds sharp; there shall be no virtue in the sun. Those winters shall proceed three in succession, and no summer between; but first shall come three other winters, such that over all the world there shall be mighty battles. In that time brothers shall slay each other for greed's sake, and none shall spare father or son in manslaughter and in incest; so it says in *Völuspá*:

*45. Brothers shall fight | and fell each other,
And sisters' sons | shall kinship stain;
Hard is it on earth, | with mighty whoredom;
Axe-time, sword-time, | shields are sundered,
Wind-time, wolf-time, | ere the world falls;
Nor ever shall men | each other spare.*

The wolves

51d. Then shall happen what seems great tidings: the Wolf shall swallow the sun; and this shall seem to men a great harm. Then the other wolf shall seize the moon, and he also shall work great ruin; the stars shall vanish from the heavens.

*40. The giantess old | in Ironwood sat,
In the east, and bore | the brood of Fenrir;
Among these one | in monster's guise
Was soon to steal | the sun from the sky.
41. There feeds he full | on the flesh of the dead,
And the home of the gods | he reddens with gore;
Dark grows the sun, | and in summer soon
Come mighty storms: | would you know yet more?*

The cocks

*42. On a hill there sat, | and smote on his harp,
Eggther the joyous, | the giants' warder;
Above him the cock | in the bird-wood crowed,
Fair and red | did Fjalar stand.
43. Then to the gods | crowed Gollinkambi,
He wakes the heroes | in Othin's hall;
And beneath the earth | does another crow,
The rust-red bird | at the bars of Hel.*

Fenris and the Serpent get loose

51d. Then shall come to pass these tidings also: all the earth shall tremble so, and the crags, that trees shall be torn up from the earth, and the crags fall to ruin; and all fetters and bonds shall be broken and rent.

Then shall Fenris-Wolf get loose; then the sea shall gush forth upon the land, because the Midgard Serpent stirs in giant wrath and advances up onto the land.

Fenris-Wolf shall advance with gaping mouth, and his lower jaw shall be against the earth, but the upper against heaven,—he would gape yet more if there were room for it; fires blaze from his eyes and nostrils. The Midgard Serpent shall blow venom so that he shall sprinkle all the air and water (*Una pestilenza?*); and he is very terrible, and shall be on one side of the Wolf.

*44, 49, 58. Now Garm howls loud |before Gnipahellir,
The fetters will burst, |and the wolf run free
Much do I know, |and more can see
Of the fate of the gods, |the mighty in fight.*

The Naflgar ship

51e. Then that too shall happen, that Naglfar shall be loosened, the ship which is so named. (It is made of dead men's nails; wherefore a warning is desirable, that if a man die with unshorn nails, that man adds much material to the ship Naglfar, which gods and men were fain to have finished late) Yet in this sea-flood Naglfar shall float. Hrymr is the name of the giant who steers Naglfar.

*50. From the east comes Hrym | with shield held high;
In giant-wrath |does the serpent writhe;
O'er the waves he twists, |and the tawny eagle
Gnaws corpses screaming; | Naglfar is loose.
51. O'er the sea from the north | there sails a ship
With the people of Hel, at the helm stands Loki;
After the wolf |do wild men follow,
And with them the brother |of Byleist goes.*

Surtr and the sons of Muspell

51f. In this din shall the heaven be cloven, and the Sons of Múspell ride thence: Surtr shall ride first, and both before him and after him burning fire; his sword is exceeding good: from it radiance shines brighter than from the sun; when they ride over Bifröst, then the bridge shall break, as has been told before.

*52. Surt fares from the south | with the scourge of branches,
The sun of the battle-gods | shone from his sword;
The crags are sundered, | the giant-women sink,
The dead throng Hel-way, |and heaven is cloven.*

The gods awaken

51g. When these tidings come to pass, then shall Heimdallr rise up and blow mightily in the Gjallar-Horn, and awaken all the gods; and they shall hold council together. Then Odin shall ride to Mímir's Well and take counsel of Mímir for himself and his host. Then the Ash of Yggdrasil shall tremble, and nothing then shall be without fear in heaven or in earth.

51o. So is said in *Völuspá*:

*46. Fast move the sons |of Mim, and fate
Is heard in the note |of the Gjallarhorn;
Loud blows Heimdall, |the horn is aloft,
In fear quake all |who on Hel-roads are.
47. Yggdrasil shakes, |and shiver on high
The ancient limbs, |and the giant is loose;
To the head of Mim |does Othin give heed,
But the kinsman of Surt |shall slay him soon.
48. How fare the gods? |how fare the elves?
All Jotunheim groans, |the gods are at council;
Loud roar the dwarfs |by the doors of stone,
The masters of the rocks: |would you know yet more?*

Gathering to Vigridir

51f. The Sons of Múspell shall go forth to that field which is called Vígrídr, thither shall come Fenris-Wolf also and the Midgard Serpent; then Loki and Hrymr shall come there also, and with him all the Rime-Giants. All the champions of Hel follow Loki; and the Sons of Múspell shall have a company by themselves, and it shall be very bright. The field Vígrídr is a hundred leagues wide each way.

And here it says yet so:

Vígrídr hight the field | where in fight shall meet Surtr and the cherished gods;

An hundred leagues | it has on each side:

Unto them that field is fated.

51g. Then shall the Æsir put on their war-weeds, and all the Champions, and advance to the field.

51h. Odin rides first with the gold helmet and a fair birnie, and his spear, which is called Gungnir. He shall go forth against Fenris-Wolf, and Thor stands forward on his other side, and can be of no avail to him, because he shall have his hands full to fight against the Midgard Serpent.

The fall of Freyr and Tir

51i. Freyr shall contend with Surtr, and a hard encounter shall there be between them before Freyr falls: it is to be his death that he lacks that good sword of his, which he gave to Skírnir

53. Now comes to Hlin | yet another hurt,

When Othin fares | to fight with the wolf,

And Beli's fair slayer | seeks out Surt,

For there must fall | the joy of Frigg.

51j. Then shall the dog Garmr be loosed, which is bound before Gnipa's Cave: he is the greatest monster; he shall do battle with Týr, and each become the other's slayer.

Thor and the Serpent kill one each other

51k. Thor shall put to death the Midgard Serpent, and shall stride away nine paces from that spot; then shall he fall dead to the earth, because of the venom which the Snake has blown at him.

55. Hither there comes | the son of Hlothyn,

The bright snake gapes | to heaven above;

.....

Against the serpent | goes Othin's son.

56. In anger smites | the warder of earth,--

Forth from their homes | must all men flee;-

Nine paces fares | the son of Fjorgyn,

And, slain by the serpent, | fearless he sinks.

Deaths of Odin and then Fenrir

51l. The Wolf shall swallow Odin; that shall be his ending but straight thereafter shall Víðarr stride forth and set one foot upon the lower jaw of the Wolf: on that foot he has the shoe, materials for which have been gathering throughout all time. (They are the scraps of leather which men cut out: of their shoes at toe or heel; therefore he who desires in his heart to come to the Æsir's help should cast those scraps away.)

51n. With one hand he shall seize the Wolf's upper jaw and tear his gullet asunder; and that is the death of the Wolf.

52. Othin spake: "...What shall bring the doom /of death to Othin,

When the gods to destruction go?"

53. Vafthruthnir spake: "The wolf shall fell | the father of men,

And this shall Vithar avenge;

The terrible jaws | shall he tear apart,

And so the wolf shall he slay."

54. Then comes Sigfather's | mighty son,

Vithar, to fight | with the foaming wolf;

In the giant's son | does he thrust his sword

Full to the heart: | his father is avenged.

Surtr burns the world

51n. Loki shall have battle with Heimdallr, and each be the slayer of the other.
Then straightway shall Surtr cast fire over the earth and burn all the world.
*57. The sun turns black, | earth sinks in the sea,
The hot stars down | from heaven are whirled;
Fierce grows the steam | and the life-feeding flame,
Till fire leaps high | about heaven itself.*

Earth's rebirth

Othin spake:

**50. "...Who then shall rule | the realm of the gods,
When the fires of Surt have sunk?"**

53 Then spake Gangleri: "Shall any of the gods live
[1. Strand of the Dead.] then, or shall there be then any earth or heaven?"

53b. Hárr answered: "In that time the earth shall emerge out of the sea, and shall then be green and fair; then shall the fruits of it be brought forth unsown.
*59. Now do I see | the earth anew
Rise all green | from the waves again;
The cataracts fall, | and the eagle flies,
And fish he catches | beneath the cliffs.*

Sun's rebirth

And it may seem wonderful to thee, that the sun shall have borne a daughter not less fair than herself; and the daughter shall then tread in the steps of her mother, as is said here:

**46. Othin spake: "...Whence comes the sun | to the smooth sky back,
When Fenrir has snatched it forth?"**

**47. Vafthruthnir spake: "A daughter bright | Alfrothul bears
Ere Fenrir snatches her forth;
Her mother's paths | shall the maiden tread
When the gods to death have gone."**

**48. Othin spake: "...What maidens are they, | so wise of mind.
That forth o'er the sea shall fare?"**

**49. Vafthruthnir spake: "O'er Mogthrasir's hill | shall the maidens pass,
And three are their throngs that come;
They all shall protect | the dwellers on earth,
Though they come of the giants' kin."**

Gods' rebirth

53. Víðarr and Váli shall be living, inasmuch as neither sea nor the fire of Surtr shall have harmed them.
Víðarr and Váli shall dwell at Ida-Plain, where Ásgard was before. And then the sons of Thor, Móði and Magni, shall come there, and they shall have Mjöllnir there.
thus is it said:

**51. Vafthruthnir spake: "In the gods' home Víðar | and Vali shall dwell,
When the fires of Surt have sunk;
Móði and Magni | shall Mjöllnir have
When Vingnir falls in fight."**

53b. After that Baldr shall come thither, and Höðr, from Hel; then all shall sit down together and hold speech. with one another, and call to mind their secret wisdom, and speak of those happenings which have been before: of the Midgard Serpent and of Fenris-Wolf. Then they shall find in the grass those golden chess-pieces which the Æsir had had.

*60. The gods in Ithavoll | meet together,
Of the terrible girdler | of earth they talk,
And the mighty past | they call to mind,*

And the ancient runes |of the Ruler of Gods.
 61. In wondrous beauty | once again
 Shall the golden tables | stand mid the grass,
 Which the gods had owned |in the days of old,
 62. Then fields unsowed | bear ripened fruit,
 All ills grow better, | and Baldr comes back;
 Baldr and Hoth dwell | in Hropt's battle-hall,
 And the mighty gods: | would you know yet more?
 63. Then Hönir wins |the prophetic wand,

 And the sons of the brothers |of Tveggi abide
 In Vindheim now: | would you know yet more?
 64. More fair than the sun, | a hall I see,
 Roofed with gold, | on Gimle it stands;
 There shall the righteous | rulers dwell,
 And happiness ever | there shall they have.

54 But the Æsir sat them down to speak together, and took counsel and recalled all these tales which had been told to him. And they gave these same names that were named before to those men and places that were there, to the end that when long ages should have passed away, men should not doubt thereof, that those Æsir that were but now spoken of, and these to whom the same names were then given, were all one. There Thor was so named, and he is the old Ása-Thor.

The novel mankind

Othin spake:

44. "...*What shall live of mankind | when at last there comes The mighty winter to men?"*

52a. Then said Gangleri: 'What shall come to pass afterward, when all the world is burned, and dead are all the gods and all the champions and all mankind? Have ye not said before, that every man shall live in some world throughout all ages?'

53d. In the place called Hoddmimir's Holt there shall lie hidden during the Fire of Surtr two of mankind, who are called thus: Líf and Lífthrasir, and for food they shall have the morning-dews. From these folk shall come so numerous an offspring that all the world shall be peopled, even as is said here:

45. "*In Hoddmimir's wood | shall hide themselves*

Lif and Lifthrasir then;

The morning dewes |for meat shall they have,

Such food shall men then find."

New Heaven

52b. Then Thrídi answered: "In that time the good abodes shall be many, and many the ill; then it shall be best to be in Gimlé in Heaven. Moreover, there is plenteous abundance of good drink, for them that esteem that a pleasure, in the hall which is called Brimir: it stands in Ókólnir. That too is a good hall which stands in Níða Fells, made of red gold; its name is Sindri. In these halls shall dwell good men and pure in heart.

New Hell

52c. "On Nástrand is a great hall and evil, and its doors face to the north: it is all woven of serpent-backs like a wattle-house; and all the snake-heads turn into the house and blow venom, so that along the hall run rivers of venom; and they who have broken oaths, and murderers, wade those rivers, even as it says here:

I know a hall standing | far from the sun,

In Nástrand: the doors; | to northward are turned;

Venom-drops fill | down from the roof-holes;

That hall is bordered | with backs of serpents.

There are doomed to wade | the weltering streams

Men that are mansworn, | and they that murderers are.

But it is worst in Hvergelmir:

There the cursed snake | tears dead men's corpses.

Conclusion

*65. There comes on high, | all power to hold,
A mighty lord, | all lands he rules.
("Rule he orders, | and rights he fixes,
Laws he ordains | that ever shall live.")*

*66. From below the dragon | dark comes forth,
Nithogg flying | from Nithaffjoll;
The bodies of men on | his wings he bears,
The serpent bright: |
but now must I sink.*