

Gardens of the Old Gods: Ecocriticism of Yggdrasil in the Eddas

By James Renger

Precariously perched straddling the three planes of existence, the great tree Yggdrasil binds the worlds together. The heaven, the earth and “Hel” all serve as the mooring for the ancient tree; however, the connection between Yggdrasil to the environment is most clearly demonstrated through the careful construction of the Norse mythology in which it is depicted. The gods and mythology are represented by the heavens, the underworld being the home to all that has come before and middle earth representative of the world which we now know. Yggdrasil transcends and roots itself in them all as a representation of nature, biological processes and the environment. Through this metaphor, the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* depict the great connection across metaphysical and historical planes with Yggdrasil, “the Ash-tree of Existence” (Nixon).

The *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda* serve as the primary texts from which we draw our modern understanding of ancient Norse mythology. Central in these myths is the role of nature, which is depicted in a ways that are closely associated with contemporary understandings of the world in which we live, and there is no better demonstration in of the ecological concepts in these tales than Yggdrasil. By understanding the ecological connections in ancient Norse mythology through the Yggdrasil imagery, it is possible to make the eco-critical analysis of the mythology while shedding light on the very real contemporary environmental threats to the basis of one of the central images of their mythology.

While the Eddas are ideal for eco-critical examination, it is crucial to establish the scope of this eco-critical view. The role of eco-critics is explained in Greg Gerrard’s *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*, “Ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyze and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad

range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiation of nature and culture take place” (Gerard 5). That is exactly the intent of this study, to understand the values attributed to nature through one of the few remaining elements of ancient Norse Culture, the mythology.

The *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* are two separate collections of tales that catalogue the mythology of pre-Christian Scandinavia (Larrington xi). The *Prose Edda* is believed to have been written by Snorri Sturleson, an Icelandic Chieftain, who lived from 1178-1241 CE. During his life as a law speaker, Snorri had access to previous works of history and poetry that he recorded through his travels (*Prose Edda* xi-xii).

The *Poetic Edda* is apocryphal, but believed to have been written in 1270 CE, and is contained in the larger work *The Codex Regius* (Larrington xi). Nearly all of the primary source documents are incomplete. As a result, the contemporary understanding of the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* are both supplemented by cross referencing one another, as well as drawing reference from the *Codex Upsaliensis*, *Codex Trajectinu* and the *Codex Wormianus* (*Prose Edda* xxxiv).

In the prelude of the *Prose Edda*, we are presented with an insightful commentary on the Norse views of the earth. Snorri Sturleson wrote:

[The Norse] understand that the earth is alive and has a life of its own... It gives birth to all living things and claims ownership over all that dies. For this reason, they gave it a name and traced their origins to it. (*Prose Edda* 2)

The Icelandic people serve as an excellent example of a culture that had evolved and practiced a polytheistic religion with a critical link to the environment, prior to their Christian conversion.

While they recognized the significance of the earth, it serves primarily as a representation and an allusion to their greater appreciation for the natural world.

There is no better demonstration in the Eddas of the reverence for the natural world than the world tree, Yggdrasil. Not only does Yggdrasil serve as one of the central reoccurring figures, but it serves to frame many of the most significant events. Thomas Carlyl describes this representation of Yggdrasil in the Eddas best when he wrote, "Its boughs, with their budding and disleafings, - events, things suffered, things done, catastrophes, stretch through all lands and times. Is not every leaf of it a biography, every fiber there an act or word? Its boughs are Histories of Nations"(Nixon.) This speaks to the role of Yggdrasil as the source of the greatest feats of learning in the Norse mythologies. The actual importance of Yggdrasil is clearly demonstrated in the Gylfaginning, the second section of the *Prose Edda* where it explicitly stated as the most sacred of places, and the court of the gods (*Prose Edda* 25). However, the theme of being linked to pivotal points of the eddic stories goes far beyond Yggdrasil's pronounced title as the most sacred of places.

There are three major roles that Yggdrasil serves in the mythologies beyond the court of the gods. The first is that of the site of two of the sacrifices of Odin. At the base of Yggdrasil, at the well of Mimir, Odin sacrifices his eye for a sip from the well of knowledge (*Prose Edda* 24). Odin's second sacrifice, is told by Odin in the *Poetic Edda's* "Song of the High Ones," "I know that I hung on a windy tree nine long nights "(Larrington 34). By being a crucial element in two of the most character defining moments of the central deity of the Norse mythology, it can be inferred that Yggdrasil is of great significance.

The Second major role of Yggdrasil is in defining itself as a location of ecological processes. This is seen through the description of Yggdrasil itself. Yggdrasil is defined as spanning the realms of the heavens, the living and the dead. It supports a vast array of life: the eagle, The squirrel, Ratatosk, the four harts, Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr and Durathor. Most

specifically it is sited as being the moorings of the world, the food for the animals and strongly tied to the origin of all fresh water. This is seen in "Grimnir's Sayings" of the *Poetic Edda*,

Heidrun is the goat's name, who stands on Father of Hosts' hall
And grazes Lærad's¹ branches; She will fill a vat of shinning
mead,
That liquor cannot ever diminish.
Eikthyrnir is the hart's name, who stands on Father of Hosts' hall
And grazes from Lærad's branches; And from his horns liquid
drips into Hvergelmir, From thence all waters have their flowing.
(Larrington 55)

By demonstrating that Ygdrasil is the root of all of the ecological processes in the Eddas, and the foundation of the world itself, Ygdrasil has become recognized not only as a metaphor for the environment, but a further demonstration to the values attributed to the natural environment.

The final role of Ygdrasil is in the Eddas discussion of Ragnarok, the Norse equivalent of the apocalypse. In the Eddas, Ygdrasil will serve as the vehicle of salvation for mankind as the world, Æsir and frost giants die around them (Larrington 47). This could be argued to demonstrate that the Norse mythology argued that the only means of salvation from self imposed destruction is through the environment.

With the idea that the great ash, *Fraxinus excelsior*, is the common representation of Ygdrasil, it can be extrapolated the ash is a representation which serves as both the iconic image of Norse mythology and the representation of the environment itself. However, there is an alarming real world concern for the Ash of northern Europe. In 1992, scientists identified *Chalara fraxinea*, a fungal disease which was spreading through the forests of northern Europe (*Science* 586). While its origins are unknown, its effects are very clear. With nearly 90% of the native ash population of Denmark infected, *Chalara fraxinea* stands to nearly remove *Fraxinus excelsior* from the landscape of one of the countries which used to revere the Ygdrasil imagery

¹ Lærad is an alternate name for Ygdrasil (Larrington 270).

(Eppo).

An eco-critic could then provoke the conversation, is Ygdrasil a real tree somewhere? Though with pale bark, dark leaves and small black berries, we are presented with a species that feels only slightly removed from the Gods' Wood of George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (Martin 19); No, when all has been said, we have still been examining a metaphor. While Ygdrasil is represented as *Fraxinus excelsior*, the ash of today is not the site of Odin's ritualistic supernatural suicide. They are large deciduous trees that are wider than they are tall. They grow quickly, and are appreciated for their landscape uses. They remain merely a tree.

So, somewhere on a frozen landscape, the real world representation of the Ygdrasil dies. Thousands of trees dying from a disease that came from human imports are not the whole of the problem. The problem is that we are unaware or simply don't care. We can find a different deciduous tree that will continue the aesthetic, but what will be lost is so much more than that. There is a history, a culture and a religion that surrounds these trees. People huddled in their turf homes, in long ages past, passing centuries old stories on to their children.

The purpose of this examination was not with the goal of advocating the ash, but on a much more important note, to advocate for the environment on the whole. Carlyl argued, "The Yggdrasil becomes a trope, a stand-in, a representation, of all things Icelandic ... spiritual, governmental, heroic, historical" (Nixon). I agree, but further extrapolate that it must also be understood that the representation is environmental. The environment is spiritual, governmental, heroic and historical. These trees, these stories and our environment when destroyed can never be replaced. We must study them, understand them, and give them the time, attention and respect they deserve; for, what they can add to a history of the world, a history that demonstrates a respect and understanding for the environment, is worth preserving.

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