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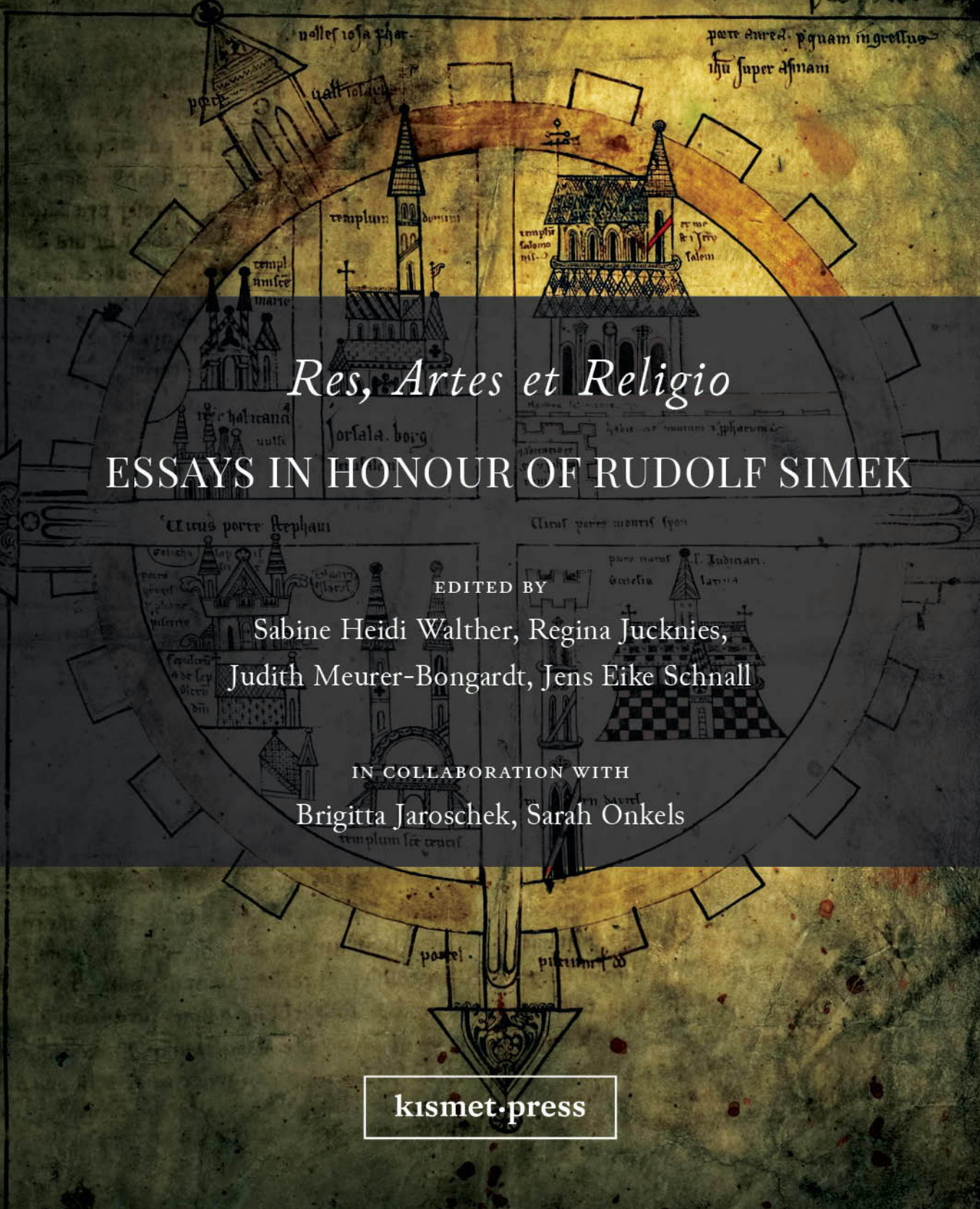
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Res, Artes et Religio

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF RUDOLF SIMEK

EDITED BY

Sabine Heidi Walther, Regina Jucknies,
Judith Meurer-Bongardt, Jens Eike Schnall

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THE ÆSIR: AN OBITUARY

Frog

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ALTHOUGH HE SURELY HAS NO recollection of it, my first encounter with Rudy Simek was, after a fashion, my initiation into the field of Old Norse studies. It was my first conference presentation, and I had been scheduled to follow one of the biggest names in the field at the International Saga Conference. This was back before session-hopping was a norm, so, rather than a mass exodus during the change of speakers, everyone watched as I got up clumsily and looked out over a room packed with scholars whose names I associated with the dates of their publications. While reading, I took shelter in a progression of familiar words, but

they could not last forever and ultimately the chair opened the floor to questions. Simek stood up near the back; he planted both hands squarely on the table in front of him and leaned in closer toward me. His massive beard trembled as he spoke, hypnotizing me as he outlined the widespread problem of mixing up mythology with written literature. I will never forget how that beard rumbled with his words. And then... everything was silent. Everyone was waiting. And I realized, to my absolute horror, that I didn't understand the question. He clearly thought I had mixed mythology with literature or vice versa—but which!?!

We all start off simply reading scholars' works, analysing sources and formulating arguments about them, and we all come to the threshold of stepping off the sidelines and entering into the field through active engagement with other scholars. For me, it happened in this encounter—criss-crossing views and negotiating them in discussion with Simek and his massive, shaking beard. The issue that Simek raised that day is a serious one. The Old Norse corpus is filled with representations of mythology, but these are of all sorts, with different types of knowledge or agendas behind them. If we conflate such texts with the mythology of lived religion, the resulting images of the mythology can end up completely off track, taking constructs of Christian authors and scribes for non-Christian tradition. Simek has taken on this problem in diverse cases, but one in particular struck a nerve in the international community and has become what is arguably the most controversial topic in Norse mythology research of the past several decades: the Vanir Debate. It is into this current, lively exchange of views that I step with the present paper, having my own modest beard at the ready.

The conventional view of scholarship has long been that the Norse divine community is comprised of two subgroups or races of gods identified as the 'Æsir' and the 'Vanir.' In his article "The Vanir: An Obituary," Simek argues that use of *vanr*, pl. *vanir*, to refer to a distinct category of god is a construct of medieval mythology that has

been adopted by scholarship. In other words: our 'Vanir' has no historical basis in vernacular religion. Here, I take up the other side of the question, assessing the background and validity of *áss*, pl. *æsir*, as a corresponding category. Scholarship's current view is that the two categories of gods were combined following a war between them. Dividing the divine community into 'Vanir' and 'Æsir' presumes that all gods should be identified with the collective identity of one or the other. If scholarship's model is accurate, then the bipartite division should not only be reflected in use of *vanr* but also in use of *áss* in the sources. Findings about *áss* will not, of course, demonstrate anything about use of the term *vanir* in non-Christian religion, although the review brings some aspects of the use of *vanr* into focus that had not previously been observed. However, if *áss* is not used for the subgroup of gods currently called 'Æsir,' scholarship's bipartite model will emerge as a construct that is not based on language use in the sources. As with 'Vanir,' the crucial problem concerns the categories through which we think about the mythology. While 'Vanir' has become a convenient term to refer collectively to Njǫrðr and his children, Freyr and Freyja, as the representatives of that tribe or race, 'Æsir' has been negatively defined as 'not-Vanir.' As a consequence, all gods not in Njǫrðr's family have been viewed as sharing a common identity constructed especially around the family of Óðinn and Þórr. Scholars occasionally consider that two or three additional gods might in fact be 'Vanir' rather

than ‘Æsir,’ but never that there may be additional significant subgroupings in the divine community.

THE VANIR DEBATE

In a *Festschrift* not unlike this one,¹ and much more briefly in conference proceedings the following year,² Simek put forward a strong argument that the ‘Vanir’ as the tribe of gods discussed in scholarship today is an invention of Snorri Sturluson. The argument builds on Lotte Motz’s study that contested viewing ‘Vanir’ and ‘Æsir’ through a Dumézilian tripartite model and identifying the former as gods of farmers and fertility and the latter as gods of warriors and kings.³ Motz found this simple opposition inconsistent with the gods identified in the sources, where ‘Vanir’ were more commonly associated with royalty and ‘Æsir’ with generative or creative powers.⁴ Simply put, Motz argued that the way scholars think about the ‘Vanir’ is a construct that is not consistent with the primary sources. Simek took up the question of ‘Vanir’ as a construct and turned a critical eye to use of the word for a tribe or race of gods. He groups the Old Norse word *vanr*, *vanir* with

other collective words for ‘deities’ in poetry and shows that scholarship’s category ‘Vanir’ is almost entirely dependent on the *Prose Edda* and chapter 4 of *Ynglinga saga*, both attributed to Snorri Sturluson. These sources provide the lens through which obscure verses of eddic poetry are interpreted and their representation is bolstered by some additional learned discourse dependent on them. Simek argues that Snorri constructed ‘Vanir’ as a tribe or race of gods associated with the place name *Vanabeimr* ‘Realm of *vanir*,’ extrapolating, within his mythographic and euhemerist projects, a complex scenario from obscure references in eddic poems. Simek asserts that no one in Viking Age Scandinavia understood *vanir* as referring to a race or tribe to which certain gods but not others clearly belonged; it was just one among several poetic terms for ‘gods.’

If Simek is correct that ‘Vanir’ is a construct of Snorri and of modern scholarship, questions of whether other gods like Heimdallr or Ullr are ‘Vanir’ or ‘Æsir’ become moot, while questions are opened about the so-called ‘Æsir’–‘Vanir’ war⁵ and Njǫrðr’s entry into the community of gods as a hostage.⁶ I avoid the terminological issue here by referring to Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja with the vernacular term *Njǫrðungr*, n.pl. *Njǫrðung*

1 Simek, “The Vanir” (2005).

2 Simek, “The Use,” 379–80.

3 Motz, *The King*, 103–24.

4 Motz, *The King*, 123–24. For a critical review of Motz’s study and its handling of primary sources, see Schjødt, “New Perspectives.” It may be noted that Motz’s study is basically a counter-argument to what today seem simplistic mappings of Dumézil’s tripartite system onto the Old Norse corpus, whereas Schjødt’s critique focuses on the over-simplification of Dumézil’s ‘functions.’

5 *Vǫluspá*, st. 24 (all eddic poems are cited according to Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*); Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 23; Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 3; Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I: 12–13.

6 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 39; *Lokasenna*, st. 35; Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 23; Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I: 12.

(i.e. including Freyja), m.pl. *Njörðungar*. This word can be interpreted as a dynastic term for Njörðr and his descendants.⁷ Although it is not attested outside of poetry, I find *Njörðung* far more likely than *vanir* to have been used collectively for Njörðr and his descendants, and it avoids the connotations of a broader race or tribe.

Simek's argument received little attention before "The Vanir: An Obituary" was republished in the pilot issue of *RMN Newsletter* in 2010, where it immediately sparked responses⁸ that soon spread to other venues.⁹ Recently referred to as "a now-famous 'obituary' for the Vanir,"¹⁰ the Vanir Debate is even surveyed on Wikipedia.¹¹ Simek asserts that "we should accept the *vanir* as a rare collective term, but bury the Vanir as a family of gods."¹² This assertion is directed against the terminological issue that "modern scholarship has accepted the name Vanir for Njörðr's family,"¹³ which, in its turn, becomes an issue of categorical thinking. The idea that Snorri asserts new mythic races in *Edda* is not new. The categories of *dökkálfar* 'dark elves' and *ljósálfar* 'light elves' are gener-

ally accepted as his invention,¹⁴ use of *bergrisi* 'mountain-giant' in the mythological sphere has been considered his innovation,¹⁵ as has use of the poetic word *brímþurs* 'rime-giant' as an ethnonym;¹⁶ the same seems likely for *Múspells synir* 'sons of Múspell,' which is simply a kenning in the poetry.¹⁷ However, these are all peripheral categories for scholarship whereas the bipartite model of the divine community has become fundamental to thinking about the mythology today.

The debate has been incensed by interpreting Simek's argument as challenging the validity of Njörðr's family as a group among venerated agents in the mythology.¹⁸ This view is rooted in two places in discussion. In the concluding paragraph of the "Obituary," Simek makes a provocative shift from talking about the 'Vanir' as a tribe or race to state that "we should [...] bury the Vanir as a family of gods."¹⁹ A following statement acknowledges a connection between the three gods identified as 'Vanir,' but implicitly suggests that their relationship warrants critical reassessment no less than the term with which they have been customarily identified: "Whatever the connecting link between the important

7 As far as I have found, earlier scholarship has treated *njörðungr* as a poetic equivalent of the name *Njörðr*, if analysing it at all. See Jónsson and Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum*, 429, s.v. 'njörðungar'; cf. de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, 411, s.v. 'njörðungur.'

8 E.g. Frog and Roper, "Verses"; Tolley, "In Defence."

9 Schjødt, "New Perspectives."

10 Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur," 113.

11 Wikipedia, "Vanir."

12 Simek, "The Vanir" (2010), 18.

13 Simek, "The Vanir" (2010), 18.

14 E.g. Holtsmark, *Snorres mytologi*, 37; see also Bonnetain, *Loki*, 36–43; Hall, *Elves*, 24–25.

15 De Boor, "Die religiöse Sprache," 140 note 126; Schultz, *Riesen*, 44–45.

16 Frog, "The (De)Construction," II.

17 Cf. Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 173, s.v. 'Múspell.'

18 Terry Gunnell, for example, recently framed Simek's argument as contesting "the idea of a special family of gods called the Vanir" ("Blótgyðjur," 114); see also Tolley, "In Defence"; Schjødt, "New Perspectives."

19 Simek, "The Vanir" (2010), 18.

gods Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja was, it was not the name Vanir.”²⁰ The question of whether this group of gods should be considered distinct is connected with Simek’s earlier statement that Motz “was able to show that there is no inherent difference between the gods ascribed to both groups [‘Vanir’ and ‘Æsir’] by Snorri.”²¹ This assertion is a provocative and forceful conclusion to a section. “[N]o inherent difference” presumably refers to Motz’s finding that the gods did not seem to divide into clear and mutually exclusive categories,²² but it seems to get interpreted as “no difference.” As a consequence, discussion has come to focus on Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja as a group distinct from other gods within the mythology and religion,²³ which Simek did not review,²⁴ a turn that says more about scholars’ use of ‘Vanir’ as a practical collective designation for these three gods than

about what category was designated by *vanr* in vernacular religion. The question, which is the focus of Simek’s discussion, of ‘Vanir’ as a term for a tribe or race of gods, of which Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja are representatives, only received concentrated discussion in the first wave of responses.²⁵

Simek’s argument centers on prose, where evidence of the word *vanr* is found only in *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 4, and he brings into particular focus connections with place names and personal names in which the first element or stem is *Vana-* or *Van-*. I earlier contributed to the Vanir Debate with Jonathan Roper,²⁶ testing Simek’s proposal that *vanr*, *vanir* was a poetic collective term for ‘gods’ through a review of the few poetic sources. We found no positive evidence to contradict Simek’s argument: the word *vanr*’s usage is almost exclusively formulaic rather than being used freely in eddic verse, suggesting it was primarily a poetic term and potentially an archaism. However, *vanr* also seems not to have been used as an equivalent for *goð* outside of *Þrymskviða*, where it appears in semantic parallelism with *áss*.²⁷ The present study builds on an observation made in the course of that research: unlike *vanr*, *áss* seems to operate in poetry as a simple poetic equivalence term for *goð* used to meet vocalic alliteration, while *goð* was the primary word for ‘god(s)’ where alliteration did not drive word choice, consistent with its use as

20 Simek, “The Vanir” (2010), 18. In “The Use and Abuse of Old Norse Religion,” Simek’s condensed phrasing of this conclusion sounds more challenging to the family identity, although the sentiment seems to be the same (p. 380).

21 Simek, “The Vanir” (2010), 13.

22 An extended quotation from Motz’s conclusion, which refers to differences she observed in associations of these groupings of gods, precedes Simek’s statement on the same page. On this topic, see also Schjødtt, “New Perspectives.”

23 Gunnell (“Blótygðjur,” 114) states in his response that he will not address the question of the word *vanr* at all, directing the reader to Tolley’s discussion on that topic (“In Defence”). Cf. Schjødtt, “New Perspectives”; see also Tolley, “In Defence.”

24 In the place of such a review, Simek (“The Vanir” (2010), 13) defers to Motz’s study (*The King*), which is problematic (for discussion, see Schjødtt, “New Perspectives”).

25 Frog and Roper, “Verses”; Tolley, “In Defence.”

26 Frog and Roper, “Verses.”

27 *Þrymskviða*, st. 15.3–4.

the normal word for ‘god(s)’ outside of poetry.²⁸ Making reference to Simek’s contestation of the term ‘Vanir,’ Terry Gunnell has challenged ‘Æsir,’ but as a “goðafjölskylda” or “family of gods” rather than as a tribe, race or ethnos.²⁹ Gunnell’s concern is for whether these gods formed a regularly structured and organized divine community rather than whether the word *áss* designates a particular subgroup of gods.³⁰ Referring specifically to uses of *áss* in the text of *Snorra Edda*, Anthony Faulkes, on the other hand, observes that “it does not seem that Snorri intended to distinguish *Æsir* from other gods (i.e. Vanir), though the exclusion of the latter (i.e. Njörðr and Freyr).”³¹ The purpose here is to explore whether scholarship’s category ‘Æsir’ is developed from uses of *áss* in the sources or has been constructed as a category in relation to ‘Vanir’ as part of developing a systematic overview of the mythology.

THE WORD *ÁSS/ÓSS, ÆSIR*

There are several words for ‘god’ in Old Norse (ON), which form a context for considering *áss* (/ *óss*). Most are collective terms belonging to poetic vocabulary, not all of which are

equally well attested.³² Some of these have a symbolic or metaphorical background, such as neuter *regin* ‘powers,’ *bönd* ‘bonds’ or *hopt* ‘fettters,’ which appear particular to Scandinavian tradition.³³ Masculine *týr* ‘god,’ pl. *tívar*, with continuity from Proto-Indo-European **deiwós* ‘god, one of the sky,’ is an archaism found only in poetry and as the personal name of a particular god, Týr.³⁴ Other terms are more obscure, such as masculine *vanr*, which has not been confirmed outside of ON.³⁵ As discussed below, in prose outside of *Snorra Edda*, neuter *goð/guð* ‘god’ is the most commonly attested word for non-Christian gods. *Goð* is a common Germanic word reconstructed back to Proto-Germanic (PG) **gudaz* ‘god,’ although its etymology remains otherwise uncertain.³⁶

In verse, the most common collective term for ‘gods’ is *æsir*, found with slightly greater frequency than *goð* and about twice as often as *regin*, which is the next most com-

28 On the role of alliteration in lexical choice and its impact on the evolution of a poetic lexicon, see Roper, “Synonymy and Rank”; see also Frog, “Registers.”

29 Gunnell, *Eingyðistrú*; Gunnell, “Pantheon?”

30 In later work, Gunnell conditions the first uses of ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir’ with the epithet “so-called” (“Blótgyðjur,” 114) before shifting to conventional use of the terms for two groups of gods.

31 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 63.

32 E.g. de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 1–9; see also Marold, “Die Skaldendichtung,” 705–707; Simek, “The Vanir” (2010), 10–11; Frog and Roper, “Verses,” 30–31.

33 De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 1–3.

34 On the Indo-European etymology and theonym Týr, see Frog, “Language,” 101; see also de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 4–5; de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, 603, s.v. ‘týr’; in prose, cf. the lack of entries under ‘týr’ in *ONP* and also Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 415–416, s.v. ‘týr,’ 514, s.v. ‘Týr.’

35 Tolley suggests that cognates of *vanir* might still be found in Old English, e.g. in personal names (“In Defence,” 20).

36 De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 4–5; de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, 181, s.v. ‘goð, guð’; Kroonan, *Dictionary*, 193, s.v. ‘*guda-.’ Masculine *goð* is rare and used only in connection with Christian religion (*ONP*, s.v. ‘goð 1’).

mon such word. In eddic verse, *æsir* carries alliteration nearly 100% of the time. This contrasts sharply with the more commonplace term *goð*, which carries alliteration in nearer 50% of examples. Like *goð* and *týr*, *áss* belongs to a common Germanic vocabulary, reconstructed to PG **ansuz* ‘god.’ This word is attributed with continuity from Proto-Indo-European as a divine epithet ‘lord,’³⁷ but the relationship to other Indo-European vocabulary is not straightforward.³⁸ The overwhelming majority of evidence for this word is from ON, whereas evidence in other Germanic languages is predominantly as a component in personal names, complemented by Jordanes’ Latinized *anses*, translated as *semidei* ‘demi-gods.’³⁹ The Old English rune name *ōs* is commonly accepted as a cognate,⁴⁰ as is the plural *ēse* in ordered parallelism with *ælfe* ‘elves’ in a metrical charm, where use is consistent with the well-attested ON *æsir-álfar* ‘æsir-elves’ collocation.⁴¹ The rune name and poetic collocation both tend to be interpreted as evidence

stemming from a common language phase of PG **ansuz* or Northwest Germanic **ansur*, with the rune name presumably becoming established near the beginning of the present era. The rune name is also of interest because quite basic nominal vocabulary was used as emblematic of runes’ phonemes (‘stallion,’ ‘hail,’ ‘joy,’ ‘lake,’ etc.). A number of these are connected with mythology or cosmology, such as the probable theonyms PG **Tiwaz* > ON *Týr* (or PG **tiwaz* > ON poetic *týr* ‘god’) and PG **Ingwaz* > ON *Yngr*, and agents or forces in the world like PG **mannaz* > ON *maðr* ‘man,’ PG **þurisaz* > ON *þurs* ‘ogre,’ PG **naudiz* > ON *naud* ‘need, compulsion (illness agent),’ and PG **sōwilō* > ON *sól* ‘sun.’⁴² The mythology certainly changed across the millennium between the establishment of names for the runes and the Old Norse written sources.⁴³ A Proto-Indo-European etymology of *áss* presents one of three primary scenarios for consideration. If *æsir* and *vanir* were complementary categories of gods, it suggests that, at some point, a development occurred specifying *æsir* as gods of a certain type within the category *goð*. If *áss* was not distinguished as a subcategory of *goð* but was instead a primary word for ‘god,’ it may have

37 See de Vries *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 7–10; de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, 16, s.v. ‘*áss* 1’; Calin, *Dictionary*, 137–140, s.v. ‘lord.’

38 *Áss* and words in other Indo-European languages with which it is compared do not reconstruct to a single form (Watkins, *How to*, 8; Kroon, *Dictionary*, 30, s.v. ‘*ansu-’): at best, they would present a family of related vocabulary. The proposed Hittite cognate meaning ‘king’ may have an independent etymology while the Indo-Iranian cognates may derive from a stem referring to the vital, animating force of a being, i.e. a type of spirit or soul (see West, *Indo-European*, 121, esp. note 6).

39 Jordanes, *Getica*, 76.

40 E.g. McKinnell and Simek with Düwel, *Runes*.

41 E.g. Hall, *Elves*.

42 See e.g. McKinnell and Simek with Düwel, *Runes*, 17–25.

43 This can be seen in the case of PG **þurisaz*, which both named a rune and is among the earliest Germanic loans into Proto-Finnic, but shows up in medieval sources as the peripheral and semantically indistinct ON word *þurs* (Frog, “The (De)Construction,” I: 53–54). It is interesting to observe that PG **gebō* > ON *gjǫf* ‘gift’ is found for /g/ rather than PG **gudaz* > ON *goð*, and also that there is no evidence of a word for *vanr* being used for a rune.

been superseded by another word for ‘god,’ pushing it into, or in the direction of, primary use in more specialized registers of discourse such as poetry, as happened to *týr*. A third possibility is that PG **ansuz* initially designated another significant type of supernatural agent and its use as a term for ‘god’ was driven by needs in alliterative poetry.

ÁSS IN RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS

Áss is not prominent in runic inscriptions. I am aware of only five potential examples. Of these, two are improbable. The proposal that áss appears with the word *goð* on a Viking Age or later inscription on a dirham from Kiev, **a s kuþ**, is uncertain owing to the spacing of the runes.⁴⁴ The marks interpreted as the rune **a** with elongated lines can also simply be interpreted as a cross.⁴⁵ Although inscriptions of *goð* are common, inscriptions of áss are not, while an inscription áss, *goð* would seem to present two words for the same thing. It seems more likely that the runes **a** and **s** were not intended to form the word áss, and still more probable that the first of these is not an **a** but a cross. I reject the reading of áss here.⁴⁶ Also problematic is Bohuslän inscription Bo NIYR5;224, dated to during or near the Viking Age: **asa**, separated by a large space from **fuuar**, could represent a genitive

or accusative plural *ása*,⁴⁷ but the interpretation of the second word and any syntactic relation to the first is uncertain.⁴⁸ As áss is rare in inscriptions, **asa** more probably reflects the personal name Ása,⁴⁹ while the interpretation of the whole inscription remains unclear.⁵⁰ This leaves three more probable examples. The third-century Vimose bronze buckle presents the sequence **asauwija**, which can be read as a dative form of *a[n]sur* (> áss) followed by a third person singular of *wihjan-* (> *vígja* ‘hallow, consecrate’).⁵¹ If it indeed reflects a form of *ansur*, the inscription would be consistent with this as a word for ‘god’ or equivalent supernatural being, and may date from a period when the word’s use was more prominent outside of verse. The Engstad whalebone pin, dated to the ninth century, is inscribed **karþas**, apparently *garðáss*.⁵² If interpreted correctly, *garðáss* ‘áss of the yard / settled space’ seems to refer to a supernatural agent of a local farm. The reading is less problematic, but áss would seem to refer to a local supernatural agent rather than to a god of cosmological proportions. Schleswig rune stick DR SCHL3 is a verse inscription dated to the eleventh century, which includes the

44 McKinnell and Simek with Düwel, *Runes*, 128–129, #O20.

45 Düwel and Kuzmenko, “Runic Inscriptions,” 346.

46 I would like to thank Barbora Žiačková for her help with this inscription.

47 Boije, “Bohusläns runinskrifter,” 283–84.

48 The commonly accepted reading is **fuþar**, *fuþar*[k] (Olsen, *Norges innskrifter*, 224), the name of the runic alphabet (Boije, “Bohusläns runinskrifter,” 283–84), but the runes read **fuuar** (Nordén, “Magiska runinskrifter,” 187) or perhaps even **fliuar**.

49 Olsen, *Norges innskrifter*, 224.

50 I would like to thank Kendra Willson for her help with this inscription.

51 McKinnell and Simek with Düwel, *Runes*, 47, #B2.

52 McKinnell and Simek with Düwel, *Runes*, 47, #O1.

sequence **asir : a : artagum**: *æsir á árdögum* ‘*æsir* in days of yore.’ This case opens the question of whether use of *æsir* in verse may be driven by alliteration.⁵³

ÁSS IN POETIC VOCABULARY

In order to assess use of *áss* in verse, I have expanded the corpus from the earlier study with Roper to include so-called ‘skaldic’ material and poetry of the so-called *Eddica minora*.⁵⁴ The data do not include use in compound words, defined syntactically as a bare stem preceding the head-word of a noun phrase. The total is 97 examples in verse, not including 13 examples of the feminine *ásynja*. The data are organized by meter rather than genre,⁵⁵ revealing the word *áss* 49 times in *ljóðabáttr*, 32 in *fornyrðislag* and its variations, and 16 in

dróttkvætt and its variations.⁵⁶ In *ljóðabáttr*, *áss* carries alliteration in all 38 examples in long-lines and in 10 of 11 examples in *Vollzeilen* (i.e. a special type of short line that requires two stressed syllables to alliterate within it rather than one in each of two half-lines, and thus it is more probable that nouns in *Vollzeilen* carry alliteration). *Áss* carries alliteration in 27 of the 32 *fornyrðislag* verses. This means *áss* carries alliteration nearly 100% of the time in *ljóðabáttr* and almost 85% of the time in *fornyrðislag*, or a bit more than 92.5% of the time in eddic meters. Of the 16 examples in *dróttkvætt* and related meters, *áss* carries both alliteration and rhyme in 8 examples, only alliteration in 5 and only rhyme in 2: *áss* carries alliteration and or rhyme in more than 90% of the examples. *Ásynja* is used only in the plural *ásynjur* with ten examples in eddic meters (none in *Vollzeilen*), where it always carries alliteration, and three in *dróttkvætt* or related meters, where it carries both alliteration and rhyme in one, alliteration in a second, and neither in a third. Particularly in eddic verse, the frequency of alliteration is an indicator that *áss* has a functional role in alliteration and that it

53 *Runic Dictionary*, “DR SCHL3 (DR SCHL3) – Schleswig rune-stick”; see also Marold, “Der ‘mächtige Nachkomme.’”

54 Figures are based on data from Hugo Gering’s concordance used in the previous study (adding the example from *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 28.4, which Gering omitted owing to emendation) in combination with examples identified using the word-search function of the Skaldic Project database, which is not yet complete. ‘Skaldic’ verses, which include the *Eddica minora*, are cited by *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* sigla and editions currently available on the Skaldic Project website. This survey does not include examples from *rímur* poetry, where Finnur Jónsson lists seven examples (*Ordbog*, 11–12, s.v. ‘1 ás’), since the register of *rímur* and thus its conventions of word usage seem to emerge subsequent to the writing of *Snorra Edda*.

55 Word use—including meanings—can also vary by genre, which intersects with meter in Old Norse poetry (cf. Frog, “The (De)Construction,” I: 67).

56 I treat *dróttkvætt*-type meters in terms of the basic six-position verse couplets with double alliteration in odd verses and alliteration on the first phrasally-stressed position in even verses, within which use of rhyme may vary. Although distinctions of metrical form are normally made within this type of verse, language seems to operate consistently across such distinctions within the broader category (see also Frog, “Metrical Entanglement”). Verses of *Krákumál* that are commonly classed as *málabáttr* but based on *dróttkvætt* meter are included here rather than with *fornyrðislag* because language follows use in *dróttkvætt*, not *fornyrðislag*.

may belong to poetic alliterative equivalence vocabulary rather than being used as semantically distinct from *goð*.⁵⁷

One use in a compound warrants special mention: in a *dróttkvætt* stanza with which Egill Skállagrímsson curses King Eiríkr, turning the land spirits against the king, he uses the term *landáss* ‘land-áss’ following mentions of different gods as one who is angry.⁵⁸ *Landáss* is commonly interpreted as referring to Þórr, a view connected to the interpretation of *hin almáttki áss* ‘the almighty áss’ as referring to Þórr in the oath discussed below.⁵⁹ *Landáss* could also be interpreted as referring to a local land spirit, and then a (the same?) land spirit seems to be referred to in a following verse as *landálfr* ‘land-elf.’⁶⁰ The use of *áss* here could be to avoid *goð*, which would match the *skothending* rhyme of the preceding verse and produce an extra alliteration in the line, while *álfr* in the second stanza carries the rhyme of the verse. The referent of *landáss* is open to interpretation and *áss* could be a metrically-driven choice. Nevertheless, the example is interesting to note when there is no corresponding compound attested with *goð* in verse or prose and the word’s use for a local land spirit would appear to align with the use of *garðáss* in the runic inscription above.

Perspective on *áss* is gained through contrast with *goð*, which is identified in use for non-Christian gods in 75 examples. Of these, 55 are in *ljóðabáttr*, where it never carries alliteration in the 22 uses in long lines, or 0%,⁶¹ and carries alliteration in 22 of 28 *Vollzeilen*, or almost 80%; it carries alliteration in 14 of 20 examples in *fornyrðislag* or related verse, or 70%. In these meters *goð* is found in alliteration in less than 50% of examples, in contrast to *áss* used in alliteration well over 90% of the time. Of the 22 uses in *dróttkvætt* and related meters, *goð* is used in both alliteration and rhyme in one example, in alliteration only in four and in no uses of metrical rhyme only:⁶² it carries alliteration and/or rhyme in only about 22.5% of examples in contrast to *áss* in more than 90%.

If lexical choice of *áss* was commonly metrically motivated rather than intended to make a semantic distinction, cases where *áss* does not carry alliteration or rhyme come under scrutiny as examples where word choice may be semantically driven. In the one *dróttkvætt* example where *áss* does not fill a metrical requirement, *goð* may have been avoided because it would produce an extra *skothending* rhyme with the preceding line.⁶³

57 See also Roper, “Synonymy and Rank.”

58 Egill *Lv* 21V.8 (E.g., 28.8).

59 See Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, 154–156; see also Tapp, “*Hinn almáttki áss*,” 97–99.

60 Egill *Lv* 22V.2 (E.g., 29.2); Gunnell, “How Elvish,” 118; cf. Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, 154–57.

61 The operation of *goð* in *ljóðabáttr* long lines will not be elaborated on here.

62 In three cases, *goð* seems to produce a *skothending* rhyme that complements the *aðalbending* rhyme of a verse: ÚlfrU *Húsdr*, st. 8III.2; HSt *Rst*, st. 9I.4; Hfr *Lv*, st. 9V.8 (*Hallfr*, st. 12.8); cf. also KrákÁsl *Lv*, st. 4VIII.4 (*Ragn*, st. 6.4).

63 Þjóð *Haustl*, st. 12III.2. In these meters, an additional three examples in kenning compounds warrant

Another metrical factor in Old Norse poetics is syllabic quantity: *áss* has a heavy stem syllable that can fill a metrically strong position; *goð* has a light stem syllable and can only fill a metrically strong position in combination with a second light syllable (in a process called resolution). Of the five cases where *áss* does not carry alliteration in *fornyrðislag*, exchanging it for *goð* would affect the metrical well-formedness of the verse.⁶⁴ The single *Vollzeile* in *ljóðabáttr* where *áss* does not alliterate, *Surtr ok æsir saman*⁶⁵ ‘Surtr and the *æsir* together,’ refers to the encounter at the battle of *ragna rök*. If Freyr is accepted as the adversary of Surtr in this final battle, *áss* seems to be a simple equivalent to *goð* inclusive of the Njörðung.⁶⁶ Outside of this case, all ed-

dic uses of *áss* as opposed to *goð* are clearly linked to the metricality of the verse. Generally speaking, the plural *æsir* seems to operate as a collective noun for ‘gods’ inclusive of the Njörðung. It might be possible to interpret particular uses as excluding them, but Njörðr and Freyr are in the *þulur* (i.e. versified lists) of *ása heiti* ‘poetic equivalents for *áss*’ and Freyja is in that of *ásynjur*.⁶⁷ Freyr is described as *ása jarðarr*⁶⁸ ‘prince of the *æsir*’ and he is named in multiple stanzas of *Qrvar-Odds saga* where the word *æsir* seems to include him.⁶⁹ References to the *æsir* battling Surtr in *Vafþrúðnismál* also seem to include Freyr.⁷⁰ *Áss* is an alliterating element of the formulaic word-pairs *æsir-ásynjur* and *æsir-álfar* that seem to function as collective designations for the divine community, inclusive of the Njörðung.⁷¹ In eddic verse,

- mention: all are kenning compounds for ‘warrior’ with *áss* as the second element, where *áss* carries rhyme in two cases. In these kenning compounds, the third appears to have been composed by drawing verbally on the second example: *Hrafnásar* ‘of the Raven-God’ and *belg-INFL* ‘holy’ are used for alliteration in the same metrical positions (Þjóð *Haustr*, st. 4III.4; Refr *Giz*, st. 2III.4), but the rhyme in the verse later verse is changed, so that the metrical function of *áss* was lost (on the use of model verses in skaldic composition, see Nyqvist, “Word Constellations”).
- 64 *Vpluspá*, st. 24.5–6, 43.1–2; *Þrymskviða*, st. 15.1–2, 17.1–2; Herv *Lv*, st. 12VIII.2 (*Heiðr*, st. 31.2).
- 65 *Fáfnismál*, st. 14.6. Hypothetically, e.g. **enn goð ok Surtr saman* could have been used here, and I would speculate that the phrasing *æsir saman* was modelled on the common *ljóðabáttr* formula *ása synir* ‘sons of *æsir*’ combined with repeated use of *saman* in this position in the poem.
- 66 *Vpluspá*, st. 53.5–6. Leszek Słupecki, however, proposes that Freyr was considered one of the ‘Æsir’ owing to being raised among them, and that this is why he but not the ‘Vanr’ Njörðr participates in the battle of *ragna rök* (Słupecki, “The Vanir”).

67 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 114.

68 *Lokasenna*, st. 35.6.

69 Gyða *Lv*, st. 2VIII.5 (*Qrv*, st. 61.5); *QrvOdd Lv*, st. 27VIII.7, 31VIII.5 (*Qrv*, st. 62.7, 68.5).

70 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 17.6, 18.3.

71 Uses of the *æsir-álfar* collocation have been interpreted as using *álfar* as an equivalent term for *vanir* (e.g. Hall, *Elves*, 27, 36–37, 45, 47; Gunnell, “How Elvish,” 121–24 and works there cited). This interpretation depends on the assumption that the divine community is composed of ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir,’ following interpretations of *Snorra Edda* and especially *Ynglinga saga*. This assumption, not taken for granted here, allows the *æsir-álfar* pair to be interpreted as equivalent to the bipartite division of gods into ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir’ where the word *vanir* is not used. This interpretation of the *æsir-álfar* collocation does not take into consideration how language works and evolves in oral poetry, or that *álfir* is almost never found outside of this collocation in eddic verse, with the exception of its uses in *Alvíssmál*, where *álfir* appears alongside *vanr*.

ásynja is found eight times in its pairing⁷² and only twice outside of it (one of which opens a *þula*).⁷³ The alliterative pair *æsir-álfar* is a formulaic means to refer to everyone in the divine society, whether filling a half-line (*æsir ok álfar*) or in parallel half-lines across which they alliterate. This collocation is found three times with *vanir*, all of which are uses of the *vísir vanir* ‘wise *vanir*’ formula in *ljóðaháttr* to extend parallelism of *æsir-álfar* to the following *Vollzeile*, making use appear formally rather than semantically driven. Although *álfar* translates as ‘elves,’ the collocation is also considered to be found in Old English,⁷⁴ where the word *ōs*, cognate of ON *áss*, seems to have otherwise dropped out of use.⁷⁵ The word *álfr* does not otherwise appear to be used for agents of the divine community,⁷⁶ which suggests deep

historical roots for the collocation, leaving it unclear what *áss* or *álfr* referred to when the collocation formed.⁷⁷ The word *vanir* appears to refer to a distinct category when used in series with the *æsir-álfar* collocation, but the same collocation also seems to be used as inclusive of the *Njörðung* when *vanir* are unmentioned. The stanza in *Vafþrúðnismál* about *Njörðr*’s origin contrasts *vanir* with ‘gods’ referred to through a variety of terms rather than with *æsir* specifically.⁷⁸ The stanza in *Völuspá* about the cosmogonic conflict uses *æsir* in the opposition with *vanir*, but *göð* would not yield a metrically well-formed line in the position of *æsir*.⁷⁹ Based on how the word is used in the poetry, there is no reason to consider this single use in *Völuspá* to refer to a specific subgroup of gods rather than as a poetic equivalent for *göð*. In sum, use of *áss* in the poetry does not seem to have been semantically distinct from other words for ‘gods’ as excluding the *Njörðung* while other collective terms for ‘gods’ included them.

72 Within a long line: *Lokasenna*, st. 11.1–3, 31.4–5; *Sigrdrífumál*, st. 4.1–3; *Völuspá U*, st. 48.1–2; *Gyðja Lv*, st. 2VIII.5–6, 6VIII.1–2 (*Qrv*, st. 61.5–6, 70.1–2); in parallel long lines: *Baldur draumar*, st. 1.1–4; *Þrymskviða*, st. 14.1–4; outside this pairing in *Hyndluljóð*, st. 10.7–8 and *Þul Ásynja*, st. 1III.1.

73 *Hyndluljóð*, st. 10. 8; cf. in skaldic meters: *Stjódd Geirdr*, st. 11V.4 (*StjörnODr*, st. 16.4); *VGl Lv*, st. 6V.5 (*Glúm*, st. 6.5); *ÞSjár Frag*, st. 4III.2.

74 Hall, *Elves*, 35.

75 See *BT*, s.v. ‘*ōs*,’ noting that the rune name *ōs* appears to have undergone interpretation through its homonym *ōs* ‘mouth,’ whether in the wake of Christian discourse or, perhaps more likely, because *ōs* as a word for ‘gods’ had dropped out of use and become obscure, preserved mainly as a component in personal names.

76 In *Snorra Edda*, un-compounded *álfr* is used in *Skáldskaparmál*’s prose once with reference to the divine community in an *æsir-álfar* collocation, which may be interference from the poetic idiom (see below), and once in a statement that men can be called after *álfar*

following mention of calling them after *æsir* and *jötvar* (Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 5, 40; cf. Jónsson and Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum*, 7, s.v. ‘*álfr*’). In *Gylfaginning*, un-compounded *álfr* appears once as a name for a *dverg* and once in connection with its use in the *æsir-álfar* collocation in a quoted verse (Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 17, 18). Use in the prose introduction of *Lokasenna* (Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 96) can be viewed as interference from poetic diction.

77 See also Frog, “*Alvíssmál*,” 30–31.

78 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 39.

79 *Völuspá*, st. 24.6.

ÁSS IN PROSE

Use of *áss* in poetic discourse cannot be assumed to accurately reflect its semantics in other contexts of language use. This is because the lexicon of an oral-poetic register is shaped historically in relation to organizing principles of the poetic form, for example leading it to develop a lexicon for saying ‘the same thing’ while conforming to different patterns of alliteration.⁸⁰ The probable runic inscription *garðáss* for a local supernatural agent may be an indicator of ways *áss* could differ in use from *goð/guð* outside of poetry much as *goð/guð* but not *áss* was used in expressions for ‘idol.’⁸¹

The Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP) lists 102 examples under the entry for ‘*áss* 1’ in the meaning of ‘god.’ For the purposes of this study, these examples are considered proportionately representative of the word’s use in different types of texts in the corpus. The *ONP*’s examples are not exhaustive: for instance, examples are only listed from the first two parts of *Snorra Edda* (with very few exceptions), and even these are selected when the word appears multiple times on a page. Although it is possible to search individual texts for examples of the word, there is no reasonable way to determine what texts may include additional examples and how many might be found there. It is assumed that the examples of the *ONP* have been selected

proportionate to the distribution of the term in the corpus, and that additional examples of *áss* would not significantly impact the findings here, unless to support and perhaps refine them.

Of the *ONP*’s 102 examples (a few of which exhibit text-dependent relations), three are from the Prologue of *Snorra Edda*, 76 from *Gylfaginning*, one from a variant line of *Skáldskaparmál*, and two from an *Edda*-based fragment: 82 of 102 examples are from *Edda* or its transformations. Only one manuscript variant and the otherwise unique use as an epithet for Óðinn (*ása Óðinn* ‘Óðinn of the *æsir*’) are from *Ynglinga saga*. None are from the *Poetic Edda*’s prose nor its derivatives in *Völsunga saga*,⁸² nor do they include the dialogue comparing people to gods in *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*;⁸³ these uses will not be reviewed here. This leaves 18 of the *ONP*’s examples outside of *Snorra*

82 The textual relation is transparent between sentences in which *áss* is used in the story of Otr’s Ransom in *Völsunga saga* (Jónsson and Vihjálmsón, *Fornaldarsögur*, I: 31–32) and prose passages of *Reginmál* in the *Poetic Edda* (Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, 173–174), while the remaining two examples of *áss* in *Völsunga saga*’s prose are in a question posed by Sigurðr where use of *áss* clearly reflects its use in the eddic verse being paraphrased (Jónsson and Vihjálmsón, *Fornaldarsögur*, I: 39; cf. *Fáfnismál*, st. 13.4, 14.6). *Völsunga saga* otherwise uses *goð/guð* (Jónsson and Vihjálmsón, *Fornaldarsögur*, I: 5, 43, 50, 53, 62, 81).

83 *Sögubrot* uses *æsir* eight times and once the poetic word *regin* but never *goð* for ‘gods’ (Guðnason, *Danakonunga sögur*, 54–55). *Regin* is otherwise only found in prose in *Snorra Edda* and in an idiom *Rán ok regin* ‘Rán and the gods’ (*ONP*, s.v. ‘*regin*’), suggesting influence from poetry, a conscious elevation of register or direct influence from *Snorra Edda*.

80 See Roper, “Synonymy and Rank”; see also Foley, *Homer’s Traditional Art*, 74–83; Frog, “Registers,” 86–88.

81 *ONP*, s.vv. ‘*skurð-goð* 1–2,’ ‘*stein-guð*,’ ‘*tré-goð*,’ ‘*tré-guð*.’

Edda and *Ynglinga saga*, or less than 20%. The *ONP* offers an additional 21 examples of *áss* under separate entries, like *ása ætt* ‘kin of *æsir*’ and compounds. Examples under these entries of the dictionary seem to be more comprehensively surveyed because there are few examples in the corpus. Five of these are from outside of *Edda*, or roughly 25%. For perspective, the 20–25% of examples of *áss* outside of *Snorra Edda* can be compared to *ONP*’s examples of *goð/guð* categorized as referring to non-Christian gods:⁸⁴ 48 of 121 examples, or about 40%, are cited from *Snorra Edda*⁸⁵ and the variety of cited sources outside of *Snorra Edda* is much greater than for examples of *áss*. The prominence of *Snorra Edda* among examples of non-Christian *goð/guð* is not surprising as the only prose work with an extended and detailed discussion and review of non-Christian mythology. The difference in proportion from examples of *áss* remains pronounced. Outside of *Snorra Edda*, *goð* appears as the predominant word used for non-Christian gods.⁸⁶

ÁSS IN YNGLINGA SAGA

The primary text for the construction of ‘Vanir’ as a distinct ethnos is *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 4, which presents a euhemerized account

of their war with the ‘Æsir,’⁸⁷ whose origins are traced to migrations from Asia. Around AD 1000, Dudo of Saint Quentin identified Scandinavians as originating from Troy, presenting the words *danai* ‘Greeks’ and *dani* ‘Danes’ as designating the same ethnos.⁸⁸ Euhemerism is found in Scandinavian histories already in the twelfth century,⁸⁹ which, in Iceland, became connected with tracing Scandinavian origins to Troy, making the gods Trojans or descendants of Trojans.⁹⁰ *Upphaf allra frásagna* identifies the *Ásía menn* ‘Asia-men’ (note that accents distinguishing vowels vary in *Asial/Asía/Ásía/Ásía*) with places called *Goðlǫnd* ‘Godlands’ and *Goðþjóð* ‘God-Kingdom’ though without the term *æsir*.⁹¹ Simek highlights that, in *Ynglinga saga*, the word *vanir* is linked to places in medieval geography, situating *Vanabeimr* ‘realm of *vanir*’ in relation to it.⁹² *Ynglinga saga* seems to be the first to introduce *Ásaland* ‘Land of *æsir*’ and *Ásabeimr* ‘Realm of *æsir*’ as places in Asia, with *Ásgarðr* as a fortress there.⁹³ *Ynglinga saga* appears to actively establish a con-

84 *ONP*, s.vv. ‘goð 2’ (neut.), ‘guð 1’ (masc.), ‘guð 2’ (neut.).

85 68 of the total 110 examples under neuter *goð* with 34 (50%) not cited from *SE*; 41 of the total 50 examples under neuter *guð* with 36 (65%) not cited from *SE*; 12 of the total 300 examples under masculine *guð* with all (100%) not cited from *SE*.

86 This observation is not new, and seems instead to have been taken for granted (cf. e.g., Unger, *Postola sögur*, xi).

87 Euhemerism is an approach to mythology characterized by interpreting gods as human beings who have been mistaken for divinities, whether through error or intentional deception; the term derives from the name Euhemerus, an author from the third century BC (Heren, *The Anatomy of Myth*).

88 Dudo, *De moribus*, I.3.

89 See also Faulkes, “Descent.”

90 Ekrem et al., *Historia Norwegie*, 9 (on which, see also Ekrem, “Essay,” 195).

91 Guðnason, *Danakonunga sögur*, 39.

92 Simek, “The Vanir” (2010).

93 Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I: 11.

nection between toponymy and the ‘Æsir’ as an ethnos.

A digital edition of *Ynglinga saga* was searched for forms of *áss*;⁹⁴ this was considered sufficient for an overview of use of the term, revealing 14 examples of *áss* (not including the place names *Ásaland*, *Ásabeimr*, *Ásgarðr*) and four of *goð/guð* (not including place name *Goðheimr/-ar*), or a ratio of almost 7:2. Similar searches through the prose of the remaining 15 sagas of *Heimskringla* on the same website revealed only two additional examples of *áss*⁹⁵ alongside 22 uses of *goð/guð* for, or inclusive of, non-Christian gods, or a ratio of 1:10.⁹⁶ Although *Ynglinga saga* supports the bipartite model of current scholarship, neither the ‘Æsir’ nor ‘Vanir’ are presented as gods in the saga. The prominence of *áss* in this text is directly linked to the euhemerization project in which the saga participates, while *goð* rather than *áss* is generally used for referring to named and unnamed non-Christian gods through the remaining sagas of *Heimskringla*. The euhemerization

project obscures whether *æssir* and *vanir* were understood as two categories of *goð* or *æssir* was identified as equivalent to *goð* and *vanir* as something different.

ÁSS IN SNORRA EDDA

Anthony Faulkes’ editions of the Prologue and *Gylfaginning* and of *Skáldskaparmál* offer an idea of the frequency with which *áss* is used relative to *goð/guð*.⁹⁷ Compounds are not included in this survey, which means kennings in the prose were included only when the determinant was in the genitive case.⁹⁸ *Snorra Edda* was composed before *Heimskringla*, and it is widely accepted that the four parts of *Edda* were composed in reverse order, even if parts composed earlier may have received emendations and additions in an ongoing process or when the parts were compiled into a whole.⁹⁹ Because *áss* is not used in *Háttatal*, it has not been included in this review. The theory that *Skáldskaparmál* was composed before *Gylfaginning* has seemed consistent with my research on uses of words for different types of agent in *Edda* and will be tentatively accepted here, reviewing the texts in that order.

Skáldskaparmál includes the so-called *Bragaræður*, a framing narrative in which *einn maðr* ‘a man’ Ægir visits Ásgarðr and is

94 This was done using basic ‘find’ functions in a digital edition of the saga at Heimskringla.no, *Ynglinga saga*.

95 These are reference to ritual *minni* ‘memorial drinks’ in *Óláfs saga helga* and reference to statuary in *Saga Sigurðar jórsalafara*, *Eysteins ok Ólafs*, both discussed below.

96 By saga: *Haralds saga háfagra*: 1; *Hákonar saga góða*: 1; *Óláfs saga Triggvasonar*: 4; *Óláfs saga helga*: 16. Examples where *goð/guð* was used as a common noun but with unambiguous reference to the Christian God or Christ have thus been excluded, although King Haraldr háfagri’s oath to the god who created the world (Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I: 97) is included as contextually non-Christian, even if intended to be anachronistically interpreted as referring to the Christian God.

97 This was done using the ‘find’ function on pdfs.

98 This was a practical decision most relevant to compounds with *goð*; the epithet *ása* in *ása Þórr* was included as a genitive construction rather than as a compound.

99 Following Wessén, “Introduction”; for an alternative view, see Pálsson, “Reflections.”

told fantastic stories about the *æsir* (beginning from chapters numbered as 55–58 of *Gylfaginning*). *Bragaræður* dissolves into, and occasionally reemerges from, anonymous pedagogical dialogue in the transition from emphasis on narrative to illustrating kennings and *heiti* for different referents. *Bragaræður* emphasizes deception and illusion and may be read through euhemerism, but flows into a full-blown euhemerist discourse of ‘Æsir are a people from Asia, not gods.’¹⁰⁰ In this chapter, the authorial voice asserts that Christian men should not believe in heathen gods, *svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar*¹⁰¹ ‘as here is found in the beginning of the book,’ presumably with reference to the Prologue. This statement, if not the whole chapter, may have been added to *Skáldskaparmál* as the parts of *Edda* were being compiled. In either case, *Edda* is the first work in which the word *áss*, *æsir* is presented as an ethnonym connected with *Asia* or otherwise used in euhemerist interpretations of vernacular religion. It is also the first work in which *Ásgarðr* appears as a place name in such discussions.

In *Skáldskaparmál* are found (not including compounds) 60 examples of *áss* versus 25 of *goð/guð*, or somewhat below a ratio of 2:1; there are also 5 uses of *ásynja*, a word unattested in prose outside of *Edda*. *Bragaræður* uses *áss* and *ásynja* but never *goð/guð* in the opening framing narrative and through the story of Þjazi and the marriage of Skaði.¹⁰² The change

in lexical preference from *æsir* to *goð/guð* occurs at the beginning of the story of the Mead of Poetry with the introduction of the conflict with the *vanir*: *Þat váru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósætt við þat fólk er Vanir heita*¹⁰³ ‘It was the beginning of this that the gods (*guð*) had a disagreement with the people called *vanir*.’ The word *goð/guð* is used twice in the opening description of conflict resolution and then *áss* is used again once the narrative has progressed past the scene with the *vanir*.¹⁰⁴ The word *goð/guð* is then used four times in the authorial comments about belief and the euhemerist summary, where *æsir* is treated as an ethnonym for human beings.¹⁰⁵ The remaining uses are only in two narratives: once among the six examples of *áss* in the Hrungrnir episode¹⁰⁶ and twice along with two uses of *áss* and one of *ásynjur* in the episode of Ægir’s feast.¹⁰⁷ The remaining 13 uses of *goð* are all in kennings. Rather than *áss* designating a subgroup, it is used as a general word for non-Christian gods inclusive of the Njörðung. The opening list of twelve *æsir* includes Njörðr and Freyr and the list of eight *ásynjur* includes Freyja; Skaði chooses a husband from among the *æsir*, and this husband is Njörðr. The prominent choice of *áss* over *goð* in this text, which contrasts sharply with the broader prose corpus, appears strategic, whatever its motivation. The shift from use of *æsir* to *goð* when the truce with the

100 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, chapter 1.

101 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 5.

102 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1–3.

103 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 3.

104 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 3–4.

105 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 5–6.

106 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 20.

107 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 40–41.

vanir is mentioned thus appears marked. This shift underscores that *æsir* seems to be equivalent to *goð*, which is contrasted with *vanir*, rather than both words referring to categories of *goð*.

In *Gylfaginning* were found 88 examples of *áss* and 58 examples of *goð/guð*, or a ratio of roughly 3:2. *Gylfaginning* also exhibits 5 examples of *ásynja*. The euhemerization project is foregrounded in the narrative frame, where, already in the opening paragraphs, are found the expressions *ása ætt* ‘kin of *æsir*’ and *ása folk* ‘people of *æsir*,’¹⁰⁸ and *Ásgarðr* is identified as what *kollum vér Troja* ‘we call Troy.’¹⁰⁹ *Njörðr* and *Freyr* are numbered among the *æsir* and *Freyja* among the *ásynjur*.¹¹⁰ The framework treating *áss* as an ethnonym leads a tension to be acknowledged between this identification and *Njörðr*’s background as an outsider who enters the community as a hostage:

Hinn þriði Áss er sá er kallaðr er Njörðr. [...] Eigi er Njörðr Ása ættar. Hann var upp foeddr í Vanaheimum, en Vanir gísluðu hann goðunum [...]. Hann varð at sætt með goðunum ok Vönum.¹¹¹

The third *áss* is he who is called *Njörðr*. [...] *Njörðr* is not of the kin of the *æsir* (*ása ætt*). He was raised in *Vanaheimar*, and the *vanir* gave him as a hostage to the gods (*goð*) [...]. He became a reconciliation between the gods (*goð*) and *vanir*.

108 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 7.

109 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 13.

110 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 23, 24, 29, 30, and cf. 63.

111 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 23.

Two points are of interest here. First, it is not clear that the statement *Eigi er Njörðr Ása ættar* ‘*Njörðr* is not of the kin of the *æsir*’ reflects general consensus. This sentence is not in the Codex Regius manuscript of *Snorra Edda*,¹¹² where its loss seems more likely due to omission than error. Such an omission is unsurprising if *ása ætt* was interpreted as equivalent to *goða ætt* and thus as asserting that *Njörðr* is not a *goð* rather than that he belonged to one tribe of *goð* (‘*Vanir*’) as opposed to another (‘*Æsir*’).¹¹³ The interpretation of *ása ætt* as equivalent to *goða ætt* is supported by use of *goðkunnigr* ‘descended from *goð*’ to paraphrase *áskunnr* ‘descended from *æsir*’ when introducing a poetic quotation containing the latter.¹¹⁴ Second, as in *Skáldskaparmál*, the introduction of the dispute with the *vanir* occurs with a lexical shift that opposes *vanir* and *goð* rather than *vanir* and *æsir*. This shift makes it clear that *áss* and *goð* are interpreted as referring to the same category while *vanr* refers to something else.

The Prologue revealed 3 examples of *áss* and 9 examples of *goð/guð*, with a ratio of 1:3. Here, the euhemerization project is paramount as in *Ynglinga saga*. Eight of the nine examples of *goð/guð* in the Prologue refer to an ultimate god aligned with Christian theology within a Classical and Christian mod-

112 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 74.

113 Cf. e.g., *allar ættir Ingvi-Freys* (Þjóð Haustl, st. 10III.5–6) ‘all the kin of *Yngvi-Freyr*’ to refer to the community of the gods, which suggests perception of a kinship relation rather than a contrast of the *Njörðung* with gods considered ‘*Æsir*.’

114 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 18.

el of the history of the world and society. *Áss* only enters as an ethnonym in the final chapter, when addressing the migration from Troy and the spread of the ‘Æsir’ through the Germanic world.¹¹⁵ The final use of *gōð* is introduced in that context in the preceding chapter, where such great feats are attributed to them *svá at þeir þóttu líkari gōðum en mǫnnum*¹¹⁶ ‘so that they were thought to be more like gods than men.’

Across these three parts of *Snorra Edda*, use of *áss* appears most pronouncedly strategic in *Skáldskaparmál* and then to relax somewhat in *Gylfaginning*. The terms *áss* and *gōð* only seem to be clearly distinct in euhemerist discourse where *áss* becomes used as an ethnonym for human beings who deceive people into thinking that they are gods. Otherwise, *áss* seems to be equivalent to *gōð* and even used to refer to individual Njörðung directly.

ÁSS IN PROSE OUTSIDE OF SNORRA EDDA AND YNGLINGA SAGA

Of the *ONP*'s 123 examples of *áss* under its own and related entries, 23 are from texts other than *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga*. As addressed below, one of the 23 is problematic, reducing the number of reliable examples to 22. Since original texts are available through links in the *ONP* entry, additional citation is only given with relevant quotations and for examples not listed in the *ONP* entry.

115 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 6.

116 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 5.

A Problematic Reading

(1 Example)

A gloss of *Auriga*, the constellation the Charioteer, is read “[a]far barð[a]ge” or *ásar barðagi*, but the original text is unclear. Interpreting the *-ar* as a genitive singular enables a translation ‘*áss*’ onslaught’ and the identification of the Charioteer with Þórr and his chariot,¹¹⁷ yet the interpretation seems to be driven by the comparison rather than by philology.¹¹⁸ Genitive singular *ásar* is found in a few examples in skaldic verse;¹¹⁹ it is never found in prose with *áss* in the sense of ‘god,’ where the inflection *-ar* was otherwise a plural form of *áss* in the sense of ‘beam, esp. transverse beam in a roof or wall.’¹²⁰ In verse, genitive singular *-ar* can be seen as register-dependent variation in morphology related to meter; in other words, the ending *-ar* was an alternative used in poetry to produce a metrically relevant extra syllable.¹²¹ The inflection is anomalous for *áss* in the sense of ‘god’ in any other context,¹²² which makes it

117 Beckman and Kålund, *Alfræði Íslenzk*, 73.

118 See also Ethridge, “Understanding,” 67–69.

119 Refr *Giz* 2III.4; KormQ *Lv* 47V.8; Þjóð *Haustr* 4III.4; Þmáhl *Máv* 3V.6; cf. Anon *Liðs* 5I.6; *Eskál Vell* 27I.4.

120 *ONP*, s.v. ‘áss 2’; the nominative plural form *-ar* is also later found for *ás* ‘god’ in *rímur* poetry (*Orðbog*, 11–12, s.v. ‘1 ás’).

121 Cf. metrically motivated variation between genitive *Ygg-s/-jar* in skaldic verse; see also e.g. Coleman, “Poetic Diction,” 32–45; Foley, *Homer’s Traditional Art*, 76–83.

122 Read as a plural through its homonym (*ONP*, s.v. ‘áss 1’), *ásar* would be nominative: ‘roof beams [gods?], onslaught.’

seem more likely that the gloss of *Auriga* says something else.¹²³

Clear Dependence on *Snorra Edda* and/or *Ynglinga saga*

(5 Examples)

Five of *ONP*'s examples appear directly linked to *Snorra Edda* and/or *Ynglinga saga*. Two of *ONP*'s examples are uses of the epithet *ása* 'of the *æsir*' with Þórr's name. One is in a variant manuscript of *Rognvalds þátrr ok Rauðs*, where it appears in an addition opening a section of text where Þórr is prominent; the other is in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, where Þórr is only named as the father of a slain giant. These are dated in the *ONP* to the late fourteenth and late fifteenth century, respectively. *ONP* also lists two examples of this epithet's use with Þórr's name in *Snorra Edda*, where it is actually found seven times in *Gylfaginning* and once in *Skáldskaparmál*, as well as listing the single use of *ása* as an epithet of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga*.¹²⁴ The expression *ása Þórr*

seems to have a traditional basis, but *ása* is only found once as an epithet in eddic (or skaldic) verse, where it allows Þórr's name to be used with vocalic alliteration and thus appears metrically driven.¹²⁵ In *Snorra Edda*, usage differs by both foregrounding the epithet and presenting it as relevant in prose. The lack of evidence that the epithet was generally common in verse makes it probable that use in these two relatively late sagas is directly or indirectly influenced by *Snorra Edda*. Another two of *ONP*'s examples draw on the euhemerist discourse of *Ynglinga saga*. *Sǫrla þátrr* clearly draws on *Ynglinga saga* and includes one use of *æsir* as an ethnonym for the people who migrated from *Ásialand*. *ONP* cites an example of *ása konungr* 'king of the *æsir*' under a separate entry.¹²⁶ The example is from a chapter of *Flateyjarbók* that combines information from *Ynglinga saga* and *Snorra Edda* in tracing the genealogy of Haraldr *hárfagri* from Óðinn, referred to as *ása konungr*, a phrase that is also repeated

ása does not appear prominently in poetic sources. However, in contrast to the two sagas above, where the epithet seems arbitrary, poetic phraseology in *Gautreks saga* appears as a device for making the god's speech seem elevated, so the epithet may have been introduced through a direct connection with poetic diction.

123 Proposing an alternative reading for "[?]far" is beyond the scope of the current article, particularly when the interpretation of the first letter(s?) in the gloss are not clear.

124 Shortly before publication, I identified an additional example of *ása Þórr* in *Gautreks saga* (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, III: 35). Using basic 'find' functions in a digital edition of the saga (Heimskringla.no, *Gautreks saga*), Þórr's name is found ten times, nine in third person narration without epithets, and once in direct speech with the epithet. Here, Þórr refers to himself as *ása Þórr* alongside the predominantly poetic phrase *bundviss jötunn* 'hound-wise giant.' *Gautreks saga* reflects an interest in poetry, so influence from *Snorra Edda* is quite possible, particularly when the epithet

125 *Hárbarðsljóð*, st. 52.1. The epithet is also found in *rímur*, used in alliteration, but it primarily occurs in *Þrymlur* rather than generally with use of Þórr's name (Jónsson, *Rímnasafn*, e.g. 279, 283, 284, 313). Although use in *rímur* might be influenced by *Snorra Edda*, it seems improbable that these sagas drew their use in prose from *rímur* poetry rather than from *Snorra Edda*'s prose, particularly when the uses have no connection with poetics or elevated speech.

126 *ONP*, s.v. 'ása konungr.'

in the following chapter. The fifth of *ONP*'s examples is the only listing under the entry for *ása heiti* 'poetic equivalents for *æsir*';¹²⁷ the example comes from *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, attributed to Snorri Sturluson's nephew, Óláfr Þórðarson. The closeness of Óláfr and Snorri makes it reasonable to infer that using *æsir* as an example category of *heiti* is under the influence of *Edda*, where the phrase is found three times in Faulkes's edition.¹²⁸ These five examples account for more than 20% of *ONP*'s 22 reliable examples of *áss* from outside *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*. In other words, more than one in five of these examples are directly or indirectly dependent on those works or their stimulation of uses of *áss* in prose.

Translation Literature (6 Examples)

Six of *ONP*'s examples come from translation literature. These fall into two groups. Three examples are in the phrase *sólar áss* 'áss of the sun,' which receives a separate entry in *ONP*.¹²⁹ Only found in translation literature, this expression appears to have been generated to refer to the Classical god Apollo. The earliest example is found in *Dialógar (Viðröður) Gregors páfa*, on which the example from *Benedikts saga* seems directly dependent. The third example is from *Thómass saga postula*. On the other hand, there are 10 examples taken from eight sagas listed under

sólar goð/guð 'god of the sun,' sometimes explicitly identified as Apollo.¹³⁰ *Sólar goð* seems to be introduced once alongside *sólar áss* in a copy of *Thómass saga*,¹³¹ and *sólar áss* disappears entirely from the second version of the saga, where the text seems to have been freely rephrased rather than copied systematically with no less than seven uses of *sólar goð/guð* in the relevant passage (from which *ONP* cites only one of each spelling).¹³² *ONP* lists an additional four examples of *sólar goð/guð* under a separate entry for *sólar guðs hof* 'temple of the sun-god.'¹³³ In contrast to *áss*, use of *goð/guð* is also found in similar translations like *sævar goð* 'god of the sea' and *drauma goð* 'god of dreams.'¹³⁴ Why *áss* rather than *goð* was used for Apollo in the translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* is unclear, and returned to at the conclusion of this survey. *Sólar áss* looks like an anomaly when *sólar goð/guð* is so much more common and widespread as well as following a more common paradigm for references to types of god outside of verse.

The three remaining examples from translation literature all come from *Clemens saga*, ch. 7–8. *Áss* is actually found four times in the saga (where *sólar goð* is twice used for Apollo¹³⁵). The anti-pagan discourse concentrates on the names Þórr and Óðinn. The first use of *áss* in the text is a sentence on how

127 *ONP*, s.v. 'ása heiti.'

128 Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 40, 113, 114.

129 *ONP*, s.v. 'sólar-áss.'

130 *ONP*, s.vv. 'sólar-goð,' 'sólar-guð.'

131 Unger, *Postola sögur*, 725 note 5.

132 Unger, *Postola sögur*, 733–734; see also *ONP*, s.vv. 'sólar-goð,' 'sólar-guð.'

133 *ONP*, s.v. 'sólar-guðs-hof.'

134 *ONP*, s.vv. 'draumar-goð,' 'sævar-goð.'

135 Carron, *Clemens saga*, 4.

wicked and deceitful were *Þórr eða Óðinn eða aþrir æsir* ‘Þórr and Óðinn and other gods (æsir).’¹³⁶ The writer exhibits interest in use of alliteration with names for gods, so word choice here may also be driven by alliteration. Two examples appear along with four uses of *goð* around a list in which a number of gods are named in a series of alliterative phrases. The first use of *áss* refers to Þórr in the phrase *inn sterksti áss áræþisfullr* ‘the strongest áss, full of courage,’ where choice of *áss* produces alliteration in the phrase while avoiding a third use of *goð* within the same sentence.¹³⁷ The second use follows the list of gods and is also preceded by *goð* in the same sentence. Whether the second use is motivated by alliteration is less clear, but the context of foregrounding poetic principles of text organization can be seen as linked to a shift into the poetic register where *áss* is common as a poetic and alliterative term. This use of *áss* seems to be as a simple synonym for *goð* with no indication that it excludes the Njorðung, who are all named in the alliterative list. The final use of *áss* in this saga is followed immediately by use of *goð* in the statement that Clemens *slæsk á it mesta ámæli við Þór eða Óþin ok alla fællir hann þá æsi ok öll goþ ór* ‘has entered into the greatest abuse of Þórr and Óðinn and he mocks all those [things] of the áss and [mocks] all our gods (*goð*).’¹³⁸ The expression *alla ... þá æsi*, making ‘all those’ the

object of the verb with dative singular *áss*, is exceptional. The dative rather than genitive indicates an intrinsic relation to the *áss* (as with e.g. body parts) and likely refers to ‘powers’ or something similar.¹³⁹ The referent of *áss* is impossible to resolve from the text, since *áss* is not found used as a name like *Týr*, but it is likely chosen to avoid using *goð* consecutively for the two distinct referents amid further play with alliteration. Use of *áss* is less frequent than *goð* in the saga, but the number of uses is striking in comparison with how rare the word is elsewhere, which supports the view that use of *áss* is connected to the writer’s poetic style.

Interference from Poetic Diction (2 Examples)

Use of *áss* in connection with poetic diction is not limited to *Clemens saga*. Two more of *ONP*’s examples also seem to reflect interference from poetic use of *áss*. Both are *Landnámabók* variants of the description of men arriving at þing so decked out *at menn hugðu at æsir væri þar komnir* ‘that people thought that *æsir* had come there.’¹⁴⁰ The same idea of seeming more like gods (*goð*) than men is found in the Prologue of *Snorra Edda*,¹⁴¹ a statement in *Volsunga saga* about Sigurðr that, *bygg ek at hér fari einn af goðunum*.¹⁴² ‘I

136 Carron, *Clemens saga*, 36, 37.

137 Carron, *Clemens saga*, 44, 45.

138 Carron, *Clemens saga*, 46, 47, and cf. *fællir öll goþ ór* ‘mocks all our gods’ on 44, 45.

139 Carron translates *alla ... þá æsi* as “all the divinities.”

140 The same statement and stanza are also reproduced in *Barðar saga* (Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsón, *Barðar saga*, 171–172).

141 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 5.

142 Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsón, *Fornaldarsögur*, I: 53.

think that here is coming one of the gods,’ and what seems to be the only use of *goð* not for the Christian deity in *Morkinskinna*, describing the rich dress of King Sveinn’s sister as *sem goð væri sett á stalla*¹⁴³ ‘as a god would be set on an altar.’ The identification of impressive people with gods appears to be a conventional idiom. The sentence in *Landnámabók* precedes an authenticating skaldic stanza expressing the same information, using *æsir* in alliteration. Use of *æsir* rather than *goð* in the prose can be considered the result of interference from the stanza which is the source of the information, anticipating its phraseology, rather than *áss* being chosen for either semantics or style.¹⁴⁴

Ritual Speech (5 Examples)

Five of *ONP*’s examples are connected with contexts that might be described as ritual speech. Three of these are in the wording of oaths and two are in references to *minni* ‘memorial drinks.’ The *ONP* lists the legal oath-taking formula invoking *Freyr ok Njörðr ok hinn almáttki áss* ‘Freyr and Njörðr and that almighty *áss*’ from a version of *Landnámabók*.¹⁴⁵ The variant word order *áss hinn almáttki* of this passage in another copy of *Landnámabók* is not listed,¹⁴⁶ although a text-dependent variation is cited from

Þorsteins þátr uxafóts.¹⁴⁷ Who the ‘almighty *áss*’ is remains debated, although Þórr is the popular choice.¹⁴⁸ Naming Freyr and Njörðr excludes the male gods conventionally identified as ‘Vanir,’ which leaves other non-Christian male gods among those classed as ‘Æsir.’ Although it may be compared to the mysterious use of *áss* in *Clemens saga*, a third *ONP* example is the oath from *Víga Glúms saga*, which includes the phrase *ok segi ek þat æsi* ‘and I say it to the *áss*.’ Although Þórr has been argued to be the *áss* of this oath as well,¹⁴⁹ the oath is said in a temple of Freyr, a context which suggests that Freyr is designated as *áss* rather than *goð* or *vanr*.¹⁵⁰ The two references to *minni* are from *Óláfs saga helga*, in the sentence *Var konungi svá sagt, at þar væri minni qll signuð ásum at fornum sið* ‘To the king was thus said that there would all memorial drinks (*minni*) be consecrated to the *æsir*, according to the old way,’ and *Bósa saga*, where the similar *minni* cannot be assumed to be independent of influence from *Óláfs saga*.¹⁵¹ About 20% of *ONP*’s examples outside of *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* are

143 Jónsson, *Morkinskinna*, 39.

144 See also note 82 above on uses of *áss* in paraphrases of verse in *Völsunga saga*.

145 Benediktsson, *Ládnámabók*, ch. S309 / H270.

146 Benediktsson, *Ládnámabók*, 314 note 6.

147 Text-dependence is transparent because a whole passage has been taken from *Landnámabók*.

148 Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, 36; Gunnell, “How High,” 113; Tapp, “Hinn almáttki *áss*,” 99.

149 Tapp, “Hinn almáttki *áss*,” 97–99. This interpretation is presumably led in part by assuming Freyr is not an *áss*.

150 Gunnell notes that Þórr seems to be absent from this and other sagas where Freyr dominates (“Pantheon?” 68 note 13), which points away from Þórr as the referent for *áss* here.

151 Cf. Jiriczek, “Einleitung,” il; Koskela Vasaru, “Bjarmaland,” 303–04 and works there cited.

thus in reported ritual speech or labels for a type of ritual. This category of use can be compared to poetic vocabulary, connecting *áss* with elevated speech registers in which diction might be marked by formalized divergences from conversational language. If this is correct, *áss* in the alliterative *hinn almáttki áss* would more likely reflect the register of oath-taking than *áss* as a categorical distinction of ‘one of the *æsir*-gods.’ The near-exclusive use of the epithet *almáttki* for the Christian God makes it reasonable to consider that reference is not necessarily to one of the ‘Æsir’ as understood in today’s scholarship.

Áss of a fell

(3 Examples)

Three of *ONP*’s examples refer to an *áss* of a *fell* ‘hill.’ Two of these are variants of the insult in *Njáls saga* suggesting a man’s passive role in sexual encounters with an *áss*: *þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss* ‘you are the bitch of the *áss* of Svínfell.’ One of these includes a note that *Svínfellsáss* has a manuscript variant *Snæfellsáss* ‘*áss* of Snæfell.’ The third is reference to *Barðr Snæfellsáss* in *Víglundar saga*. *ONP* does not list examples from *Barðar saga Snæfellsáss*, where, not including titles,¹⁵² I find an additional eight examples of *Snæfellsáss*, never used independently of *Barðr*’s name.¹⁵³ The

Norse god *Bragi* is sometimes considered a deification of the first poet *Bragi* owing to their shared name,¹⁵⁴ but, outside of euhemerist discourse, sources only make such a transition explicit for *Barðr*. There is, however, a comparable and equally unique description of *Óláfr digrbeinn* who becomes identified as *Geirstaðaálfr* ‘*álfr* of *Geirstaðar*’ after his death.¹⁵⁵ The supernatural agency of kings, also after their death, is more widely attested, but only *Óláfr digrbeinn* is lexically identified with a category of supernatural agent.¹⁵⁶ However, *Jordanes* observes similar traditions among the Goths, stating that their king *Thanausis* was venerated *inter numina* ‘among their divinities’ after his death,¹⁵⁷ and that, after a great victory over a Roman army, the Germanic leaders *non puros homines sed semideos id est ansis vocaverunt*¹⁵⁸ ‘were not called pure humans but demi-gods, that is *anses*.’ The introduction of the Germanic *ans-* is marked, suggesting that there is something distinctive in the term that accounts for use of *semidei* rather than *numinis* ‘supernatural agent, divinity,’ which is *Jordanes*’s preferred term for beings venerated by the Goths. The significance of *Jordanes*’ use of *ans-* has been debated,¹⁵⁹ but the pronounced introduction of the word suggests

154 See e.g. Simek, *Dictionary*, 42, s.v. ‘*Bragi*,’ and see also 143–44, s.v. ‘*Hermóðr*.’

155 Vigfússon and Unger, *Flateyjarbok*, II: 6–9.

156 See Sundqvist, *Freyr’s Offspring*.

157 *Jordanes*, *Getica*, 67 and cf. 64.

158 *Jordanes*, *Getica*, 76.

159 See e.g. Helm, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 32–34; de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II: 7–8.

152 The question of titles becomes complicated: see e.g. Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson, *Barðar saga*, lxxiii.

153 Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson, *Barðar saga*, 120, 126, 135 (*Snjófellsáss* in variants), 139, 141, 142, 149, 172.

that it was not a term specifically for gods of the cosmological sphere and instead was understood as more similar to ON uses of *áss* to refer to supernatural agents that inhabit the empirically perceived landscape and perhaps to *álfr* used in connection with *Óláfr digrbeinn*. Use in ‘*áss* of a *fell*’ expressions stands apart from use in poetic or ritual discourse but is comparable to use of Jordanes’ *anses*, runic *garðáss*, and would be consistent with interpretation of *landáss* as equivalent to *landálfr* in Egill’s stanzas.

Decorations in the Hippodrome (1 Example)

ONP’s remaining example is in *Morkin-skinna*’s brief description of images in Constantinople’s hippodrome: *æsir ok Volsungar ok Gjukungar gørt af kopar ok málmi með svá miklum hagleik, at þat þykkir kvikt vera ‘æsir* and *Volsungs* and *Gjúkungs* made of copper and metal with such great skill that they seemed to be alive.¹⁶⁰ Paganism seems polarized in *Morkin-skinna* and attention is not otherwise given to pagan gods or rituals. It is thus surprising that rich representations of pagan gods appear as part of the dazzling splendour of Constantinople. Three aspects stand out in this case: use of *áss* rather than *goð*; positive representation within *Morkin-skinna*; and presenting the *æsir* alongside hu-

man heroes (although this may only appear anomalous owing to brevity). The description could be an *interpretatio Germanica* of representations of Greek gods and heroes, but *goð* would be expected rather than *áss*, unless the word choice is speculated to be influenced by a poetic source being paraphrased. Nevertheless, the author’s representation of pagan gods in a positive light seems inconsistent with the text, as indeed does the whole description of the wondrous displays in the hippodrome, where *sýnisk sem menn ríði í lopti* ‘it seemed as men rode in the air’ and some feats are accounted for through *forneskja* ‘ancient arts’ or ‘magic.’¹⁶¹

Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade observe that the author may have a euhemerist account in mind, whereby the ‘*Æsir*’ would be a lineage from Troy, which makes it logical to find them represented in Constantinople alongside the most widely famed Germanic heroes.¹⁶² The description of the hippodrome’s wonders parallels the feats of illusion and magic that impress visitors of the ‘*Æsir*’ in *Snorra Edda*.¹⁶³ A euhemerist interpretation would account for all three peculiarities of the text—i.e., use of *áss* rather than *goð*, positive representation in *Morkin-skinna* and the presentation of *æsir* alongside human heroes. To my knowledge, *Morkin-skinna*’s description of the hippodrome is the only Old Norse parallel to *Snorra Edda*’s euhemerist descriptions of the deceptive

160 This statement also appears in a version of *Saga Sigurðar jórsalafara, Eysteins ok Ólafs* (Linder and Haggson, *Heimskringla*, 153), between what would be the end of ch. 12 and ch. 13 of the Íslenzk Fornrit edition (cf. Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III: 253).

161 Jónsson, *Morkin-skinna*, 350.

162 Andersson and Gade, *Morkin-skinna*, 453n. 4.

163 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 7–8; Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1.

displays of the ‘Æsir.’ The probability that *Morkinskinna*’s single use of *áss* appears within this description only accidentally is close to zero, particularly as this is one of *Morkinskinna*’s only two uses of a common noun for ‘god(s).’¹⁶⁴ *Morkinskinna*’s description can thus be considered somehow connected with the euhemerist representation in *Edda*. In this case, *Morkinskinna* seems to affirm the feats described in *Edda*, presenting them as wonders performed by people in Byzantium, the part of the world from which the ‘Æsir’ came. The caveat remains that euhemerism is not explicit in *Morkinskinna* and must be assumed for the interpretation, but the evidence is nevertheless compelling.

According to Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna* was most likely composed between 1217 and 1222.¹⁶⁵ *Edda* seems to have been composed soon after Snorri returned from Norway in 1220 and likely before 1223,¹⁶⁶ so both may have been influenced by the same contemporary discussions or one may have drawn directly on the other. That *Morkinskinna* handles the euhemerist interpretation of the ‘Æsir’ as assumed knowledge rather than explaining it suggests that it relies on an independent authority. Nothing suggests a work linking *æsir* to *Asia* prior to *Edda*, whereas this link is consistent with *Edda*’s interest in poetic language and etymology, and also with *Edda*’s stance toward pagan gods. If use of *æsir* in *Morkinskinna*

reflects a euhemeristic interpretation, then the description of the hippodrome has more likely than not been inspired by *Snorra Edda* (in some form). This scenario would seem to leave only a quite narrow chronological window of sometime during 1220–1222.

OVERVIEW OF ÁSS IN PROSE

Current ideas of the ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir’ as two ethnic groups or tribes of gods are primarily built through the lens of *Ynglinga saga*, where the ethnic categories are a euhemerization. If both *Ynglinga saga* and *Snorra Edda* are accepted as being authored or organized by Snorri Sturluson (or otherwise by the same agency), *Ynglinga saga* can be viewed as the last of a series of texts within a broader (and potentially evolving) euhemerization project. The prominence of *áss* in contrast to *goð* in *Snorra Edda* can be viewed in this light. Curiously, *áss*’s prominence decreases between *Skáldskaparmál* and *Gylfaginning* in inverse proportion to the foregrounding of euhemerization, but this is also as emphasis on poetic diction decreases. The focus on poetic diction in *Skáldskaparmál* may at least have been a factor in the preferred use of *áss*, which likely conferred on narration an impression of elevated or poetic speech for contemporary audiences. *Snorra Edda* does not exhibit an interest in distinguishing *áss* as a subcategory of *goð*.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, introduction of the term *vanr* in connection with the cosmogonic conflict co-occurs

164 Cf. Jónsson, *Morkinskinna*, 39, quoted above.

165 Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 66–67.

166 Wanner, *Snorri*, 99 and works there cited.

167 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, 63.

with a shift from use of *áss* to *goð* in both *Skáldskaparmál* and *Gylfaginning*. This shift stresses that, whatever group *vanir* referred to, contrast was with ‘gods,’ not with ‘Æsir.’ The euhemeristic discourse of *Ynglinga saga* obscures the relationship of *vanir* to *goð*, but if we accept that this text evolved on the trajectory of the different parts of *Snorra Edda*, there is no reason to believe that the author ever considered the euhemerized *vanir* to have a background as *goð*.

The *ONP*’s 23 examples from outside *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga* reduce to 22 when **ásar barðagi* is excluded. Of the remaining 22, six (including *Morkinskinna*) appear directly or indirectly dependent on *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga*, five seem to be linked to poetic style or diction; five are connected with ritual speech; three are used in the expression *sólar áss* in translation literature; and three are used with reference to a type of local land spirit. Examples dependent on *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga* are in two uses of *ása* as an epithet, one using the phrase *ása heiti* in the discussion of poetry, and only two examples (including *Morkinskinna*) use it in distinguishing *æsir* as an ethnos of mortals from *goð*, with a third, epithet-like use in the phrase *ása konungr* ‘king of the *æsir*.’ The only examples which seem to make a semantic distinction between *áss* and *goð* are these euhemerized uses and the examples of *áss* of a *fell*, similar to the runic inscription *garðáss*.

When examples under the influence of *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga* are taken aside

along with the *áss* of a *fell* examples, only 13 of *ONP*’s examples remain, of which 10 appear connected to shifts in register or style, whether poetic or ritual. These do not use *áss* rather than *goð* for a categorical distinction of ‘Æsir’ from ‘Vanir,’ and seem instead to include, or, in the oath of *Víga-Glúms saga*, refer directly to *Njorðung*, which is consistent with both uses of *áss* in verse and in *Snorra Edda*. The remaining three examples are uses of *sólar áss*. The motivation for use of *áss* in the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* is uncertain. Finding an outlier among examples of a word rarely found outside of poetry is not itself surprising. The example can also be historically contextualized as from a time when vernacular written registers were just forming. Use of *áss* rather than *goð* could thus have been linked to a sense that writing generally or the language being translated in particular mandated an elevated register, although this remains only speculation. Nonetheless, there is no reason to consider use of *sólar áss* to reflect a semantic distinction from *goð*. In the context of uses of *áss* reviewed here, and accepting that use of *sólar áss* in *Benedikts saga* is dependent on the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues*, use of *sólar áss* rather than the more common *sólar goð/guð* in a version of *Thómass saga* can be considered also somehow dependent on the same translation.

In overview, prose sources outside of *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* support the view that *áss* was a word used in poetic or otherwise elevated speech for *goð*, generally

consistent with use in *Snorra Edda*. They also offer evidence that *áss* was used for a type of potentially benevolent supernatural agent residing in the experienced landscape. Neither these sources nor *Snorra Edda* support a view of *áss* as referring to the subcategory of gods identified as ‘Æsir’ in current scholarship. Perhaps the most striking evidence for how the term *áss* was used and understood is its lack of presence in the prose corpus. *Snorra Edda* or *Ynglinga saga* do not seem to have significantly stimulated use of *áss* in euhemerization discourse: only three such uses (including *Morkinskinna*) remain in the minority even of examples influenced by these works. Nor, however, is *áss* developed as somehow anti-Christian either in *Edda* or elsewhere, which is surprising if the word *áss* commonly referred to an exclusive set of non-Christian gods, and particularly if it referred to ‘gods like Óðinn and Þórr’ who were prominent in discourse on paganism. The lack of evidence that *áss* was taken up outside of *Edda* speaks against the idea that it was a word for specifically non-Christian gods or some group thereof, otherwise we should expect some trace of it used in that way in discourse on paganism; such use never manifests outside of euhemerism, and even there seems to receive little interest. This lack of engagement with the word *áss* supports the view that its use in the sense of ‘god of cosmological proportions’ was not generally perceived as semantically different from *goð* but rather that the words were semantically equivalent and *áss* was simply

used in poetic or other elevated forms of discourse. There are also indications that, outside of those types of discourse, the primary meaning of *áss* may not have referred to gods of such proportions at all, but rather to some type of local supernatural agent.

PERSPECTIVES

The review of evidence above constitutes another volley in the Vanir Debate. Simek has taken a hammer to current scholarship’s ideas about ‘Vanir’ as a term for a category of gods, built centrally on the mythographic and euhemerist projects of *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*. His “Obituary” for this category sparked a heated discussion that may ultimately redefine how we conceive Norse gods as belonging to different groups. Here, attention has been turned to the other half of scholarship’s bipartite system of divinities, bringing ‘Æsir’ under scrutiny. Etymology suggests that the word *áss* has a long history and presumably changed in meaning over time, so that **ansur* may have been used differently at the time of the Vimose bronze buckle inscription or when the *æsir-álfar* collocation became established than when *áss* is used in medieval Norse sources. The medieval sources suggest that *áss* had become primarily an equivalent for *goð* comparable to, if more common than, *týr*, used in poetry and ritual discourse. Such usage could be inclusive of the Njörðung with no clear evidence that *áss* was used for a subgroup of *goð* that excluded the ‘Vanir.’ Moreover, *Snorra Edda* is observed to contrast *vanir* with *goð*, suggest-

ing that the word *vanir* was not conceived as referring to ‘gods’ at all.¹⁶⁸ Use of *áss* to refer to supernatural agents in the local landscape may reflect the more commonplace use of the word outside of poetic or ritual speech in the time of the written sources, although this use may not have been prominent, judging from the relatively few examples. Put simply: the sources do not support current scholarship’s construction of a bipartite division of the Norse divine community into ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir.’

Simek asserts that “it is high time to bury” the ‘Vanir,’¹⁶⁹ and it seems that we should go a step farther and lay the ‘Æsir’ to rest as well. Nevertheless, these proposals with the arguments and evidence behind them are contributions to discussion on topics to be engaged and responded to by others, evolving more subtle and nuanced perspectives than any one scholar would develop alone. Breaking down the ‘Vanir’ as a category has stimulated critical consideration of the Njǫrðung as a distinct group within the mythology. Breaking down the ‘Æsir’ may similarly bring into focus the group of gods

at the core of this identity also in terms of a kin group linked especially to Óðinn and Þórr. This, in its turn, raises questions about gods like Týr and Heimdallr, who seem to be outside of both kin groups although they have been attributed an ‘Æsir’ (i.e. ‘non-Vanir’) identity by default. Breaking down these categories may seem dramatic, but many perspectives on the mythology may be little affected. Structural differentiation between ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir’¹⁷⁰ or differences in ritual activity surrounding them¹⁷¹ can simply be reinterpreted in terms of the respective kin groups in the divine community.¹⁷² On the other hand, removing the lens of scholarship’s ‘Æsir’/‘Vanir’ division makes it possible to observe, for example, that gods do not seem to mix freely in stories; their interaction seems mainly to parallel their networks of social relations, which makes it interesting that Freyja, married to Óðr, has encounters with Óðinn, Loki and Þórr in stories, but not Freyr and Njǫrðr.

Scholarship’s fundamental categories of ‘Æsir’ and ‘Vanir’ have structured both thinking about the mythology and also research. Challenging such basic concepts will not be accepted lightly, especially where rejecting those concepts might threaten scholars’ views and interpretations in which they have become invested.¹⁷³ Anything with such

168 Whatever the word *vanir*’s etymology, it was most likely interpreted in the preserved sources as referring to a recognizable mythic ethnos, in which case the only probable referent would be the *jǫtnar* ‘giants’ (cf. Kuusela, “Halls”). In this case, the qualities like sexuality that scholars commonly attribute to the *vanir* would reflect associations already recognized for the *jǫtnar* (see e.g. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*). However, discussing the implications of this reassessment for the Njǫrðung would depart from the question of the referent of *æsir*.

169 Simek, “The Vanir” (2010), 18.

170 Schjødt, “New Perspectives”; see also Motz, *The King*; Tolley, “In Defence.”

171 Gunnell, “Blótgyðjur”; Tolley, “In Defence.”

172 Cf. Gunnell, “Pantheon?”

173 Cf. Campbell and Kay, “Solution Aversion.”

deep roots in our thinking is not easily set aside. Yet contributions to the Vanir Debate have been precisely that—contributions to a discussion that is ongoing, the engagement with which is constitutive of participation in the field, to which I was initiated through my first encounter with Simek and his beard.

Our research builds on identifying patterns in the evidence, exploring those patterns and interpreting them. Nevertheless, our interpretations emerge within broader frameworks for understanding the materials and in relation to current interests and concerns, which are all significant factors for what comes into focus and what sorts of interpretations seem relevant. The Vanir Debate has brought basic features of those frameworks into question, producing reassessments that also make it relevant to reflect on our own reactions to those arguments and the stances we take to them. The Debate raises questions about the history of scholarship's bipartite vision of the Norse gods, for example in relation to nineteenth-century National-Romanticism or the tempestuous period of the World Wars. Such questions may equally be turned to the researchers making the interpretation: the foundation for reassessing the 'Vanir' was laid by a matron of the discipline at the time when the 'Great Goddess' theory was being prominently debated for Germanic mythology.¹⁷⁴ Curiously enough, the Vanir Debate proper, arguing about the validity

of a whole category of gods of fertility, has only been engaged by senior men, and, thus far, only those men with beards have had the confidence to reject it. The patterns are indeed present in the data, and we can certainly weave interpretations around them, much as the identification of patterns and their interpretation gradually evolved the dynamic image of 'Vanir' familiar to scholarship today. It is thus sometimes good to keep in mind, as Sigmund Freud is said to have once said, that "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," or, in the overwhelming majority of cases, an *áss* is just a *goð*.

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174 See e.g. Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess*; Motz, "The Great Goddess."

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