

Versions of Sacred Time in Germanic Mythology

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Abstract

Germanic mythology offers one of the most ambiguous representations of the universe. Time has a special connotation as the mortality of the gods conditions their response to the challenges set by destiny before them. Much of their existence depends on the way they accomplish their quest to find the ultimate answer. In the Germanic myths time can be cosmic corresponding to the creation of the world or eschatological as the end of the universe is inevitable and certain. In between these two moments the gods need to discover the answer to the meaning of their lives and their place in the universe.

Keywords: cosmogony, eschatological time, initiation, profane duration, ritual, sacred time

Germanic mythology has one of the most intriguing and mysterious representations of the universe. It provides a vision based on the mortality of the gods and the finite nature of the world. In Germanic mythology fate is an overwhelming power as it governs and controls the existence of humans and gods alike. Both of them are subject to destiny which shapes all existence. Given the fatality of this world, the deeds of the gods only help to improve the life which is given to them. A concept which is closely associated with destiny is the one of time. It plays an essential role in the attempts of the gods to find out about their future and the means to avoid death. Time can be cosmic or eschatological since it corresponds to the beginning and the end of the universe.

In his book *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade analyses the concept of time in the light of the spiritual meaning which is ascribed to it. He divides time in two categories, depending on the way they manifest in the world. Sacred time is represented by short moments in which the divine nature of the universe becomes accessible to man.

"...by its nature sacred time is reversible, in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present" (Eliade, 1957/1987, p. 68). As in the case of sacred space, sacred time is not homogeneous, there are intervals in which it can be reached. A means by which sacred time appears in the world is through rituals. By performing appropriate gestures, man can live in the presence of the gods. Profane time is the second category used by Eliade. It differs from sacred time in the sense that it is compact, covering all manifestations of being. In order to escape profane duration man must discover his religious nature. Sacred time is the salvation from the destructive effects of profane living. A way in which sacredness can be found is by returning to the *illo tempore*, the time of the beginnings in which harmony and beauty characterized the world. Time regenerates as it both symbolically dies and is reborn in a new and fresh form. The repetition of the universal cycles through rituals allows man to annihilate the profane duration and to reenact a sacred existence. Profane time can be defeated by living life on a religious model.

In Germanic mythology there are several versions of sacred time. They correspond to the essential moments in the evolution and fall of the Germanic gods. They also stand for rituals of initiation in the mysteries of the world. The Germanic gods are not all knowing and they are permanently in search of wisdom. A first version of sacred time is cosmic time or the time of the cosmogony. According to the Germanic myths, the universe was created by accomplishing the primordial murder. The three gods, Odin, Vili and Ve, kill the giant Ymir and from his body they form the cosmos. Giants are chthonic deities, they belong to a world which was not yet given a definite shape. It is a world which stands at the threshold between uncertainty and certainty and in which the primordial elements are not yet separated. In his book about anthropological structures Gilbert Durand analyses the symbol of the giant (1977). According to Durand, giants are amplified images which stand for the fascination about inaccessible forms of life. They frighten and captivate at the same time, being the representation of the divine cult of a high form of existence. Giants symbolize the aspirations to reach the heavens and have a panoramic view of the world. In Germanic mythology Ymir stands for the power which the three cosmic gods want to have for themselves. By killing him they take over his position and transform Ymir into the substance of the new universe.

The primordial murder is necessary for chaos to become cosmos. The three founding gods destroy an archaic pattern of the world and reshape it in the new divine order. Killing Ymir is an act of creation, bringing light in the newly born world. The flesh becomes the land, the blood turns into oceans, rivers and lakes, the bones change into stones, the brain into clouds and the skull into the sky. Durand considers that cosmic mutilation

should be linked to the lunar symbolism. Initiating ceremonies are “liturgies of the temporal sacred drama and of Time controlled by the rhythm of repetition, are isotopic with the dramatic cyclical myth of the Son” (Durand, 1969/1999, p. 295). He also believes that such a ceremony implying the idea of partial or complete sacrifice is a double negation of death. “It is the ‘death of death,’ the fertilising power of death, death’s potential for life” (Durand, 1969/1999, p. 298). Death is symbolically killed in order for life to prevail. In the same way time is vanquished, as cosmic rebirth means that the temporal rhythms are replaced by universal eternity.

Before the cosmic murder there was only chaos and darkness. After it light pervades the universe. The primordial murder equals to a cosmogony during which creation replaces the emptiness preceding it. Yet, cosmogony implies killing and, though it stands for regeneration, it also brings death in the newly created world. Inevitable ending will characterize the destiny of the Germanic gods as the retribution for their deed awaits them.

The sacred time of the cosmogony is the time of purity when the evil of the previous ages was cleaned and changed in a new beautiful form. Killing Ymir equals to the performing of a ritual of transcendence as the gods leave behind their limited existence and assume the role of the rulers of the universe. It is a double transformation, that of the universe from chaos to cosmos, and that of the gods from simple inhabitants of the world to the masters of their creation. Their future evolution depends on the way they deal with the power they acquire. According to Eliade,

it is for this same reason that cosmogonic time serves as the model for all sacred times; for if sacred time is that in which the gods manifested themselves and created, obviously the most complete divine manifestation and the most gigantic creation is the creation of the world. (Eliade, 1957/1987, p. 81)

Sacred time becomes a time of creation containing in it the promise of a luminous future. It is also an instance during which profane duration is abolished.

Fatality characterizes Germanic mythology and it brings a gloomy atmosphere which corresponds to a feeling of doom. An episode in which sacred time acquires a new value is the one when Odin decides to hang from Yggdrasil, the sacred tree of the gods. Sacred time is suspended as for nine days and nine nights the god will no longer be part of the world. The purpose of this ritual is to obtain wisdom and to learn about the future of the gods. The burden of the primordial murder affects all of them, not only the three who performed the deed. The cosmic curse must be expiated by all.

As their leader Odin sacrifices himself and endures the ritual. Due to his deed profane duration is also abolished because time itself disappears in the immobility of the interval.

The ritual implies another concept which is the one of initiation. By accomplishing the deed, the god is given insight in the mysteries beyond. Initiation is obtained only after the participant proves that he deserves to receive it. He is admitted to the sacred space and while being there he must follow its rules, otherwise he will be denied any sacred vision. No mistakes are allowed in the sacred space governed by sacred time. When Odin accepts to endure the ordeal, he becomes part of a ritual which presupposes abandoning all familiar aspects of existence and plunging into the unknown.

It is a rite of passage which the god undergoes whose ultimate goal is a renewal of his inner self. In his book *Rites of Passage* Arnold Van Gennep explains the meaning of these stages of initiation (1960). They involve crossing the threshold which puts to test one's spiritual values. The rites include three levels, namely separation, transition and re-incorporation. The separation stage is the moment when one withdraws from the current status and prepares to move towards the next stage. The transition level is found between stages during which one leaves the former status, but has not yet reached the next moment of transformation. At this level one is on the threshold of experiences when balancing between stages is dangerous. The third stage is the one of reincorporation, a stage during which the passage is consummated by the ritual subject. After completing the last stage one can return to the community.

In the Germanic myth Odin remains nine nights and nine days hanging from the cosmic tree, living in his own sacred time. It is a personal version of sacredness since he isolates himself from the others and accomplishes the ritual. Sacred space and time include other elements as well. Yggdrasil is the cosmic tree growing in the middle of Walhalla, the hall of Odin and the place from where the defence of the universe will start on the last days. Sacred time depends on its existence as the moment when the cosmic tree falls, harmony and order disappear. The sacred dimension is maintained due to the presence of symbols characterizing it. The cosmic tree has an exemplary value as it stands for a primordial time when the cosmos was not threatened by the forces of evil. It is a reminder of the *illo tempore* in which divine works were possible. In the book dedicated to the sacred and the profane, Eliade considers that the cosmic tree implies the concept of initiation in the sacredness of the universe (Eliade, 1957/1987).

Initiation can be of two types: on the horizontal and on the vertical line. When it assumes a horizontal form, initiation does not really take place as it does not presuppose any exis-

tential change. It is simply a passage during which the performer of the ritual contemplates the world around without learning anything from it. It is an immobile state of being in which no significant changes occur. When the initiation happens on the vertical line, the concept of ascension is implied. The one living it has access to the secrets of the universe, he can see beyond the veil of common events and is deeply changed by the vision he has. After such an initiation is accomplished the one benefiting from it receives a moral lesson which will help him in the future challenges and encounters. He chooses to live in the realm of the sacred time where profane duration is abolished. Initiation on the vertical line is also a reward for an act of moral courage as it is not easy to confront yourself with your limits and weaknesses.

Durand considers that any ascension is an act of reaching immortality as it represents a way of defeating time and death (1977). Ascension is a journey inside one's own self, the attempt to achieve a state of pure verticality during which one can escape in a heavenly space. The wish to accomplish the ascension implies not only a nostalgia for older times in which the universe opened to the protagonist of the initiation, but also the faith that such an achievement is possible. Such a process is the means by which one learns about his capacity to fulfil his ideals and dreams. It is an exploration of one's inner self.

When choosing to perform the rites of passage, Odin makes the sacrifice of giving one of his eyes to the Norns who are living at the roots of the cosmic tree. They are three goddesses of destiny governing the lives of the gods and shaping the fate of the universe. They are blind, thus symbolically standing for the unpredictability of destiny. Germanic myths talk about the guilt of the gods which brings their final fall. Profane duration replaces sacred time causing lack of harmony and cosmic disequilibrium. The Norns receive the eye as payment for allowing the god to enter the sacred realm of Yggdrasil. This self-blindness is an act of humility by which Odin abandons his position as father of the gods and adopts the status of a commoner subjected to punishments. Durand notices that "the unconscious is always represented in a dark and blind way" (1977, p. 114). He analyses the very episode of Odin's blindness and considers that it is an instance of solar and beneficial images. "Odin loses one eye as if he wanted to unveil a mysterious, unclear and frightening past" (1977, p. 115). Blindness identifies with the unconscious double of the soul. Once physical vision is lost, a more profound insight takes its place and man starts living in a different world. Time itself changes as man is no longer distracted by common events and he can concentrate on his own inner vision. He discovers the true vision that corresponds to a more genuine understanding of the world. In the case of Odin time is suspended and even annihilated because he lives in his

own universe, which no longer depends on the duration of common existence. Thus, a spiritual dimension is reached, which allows for a deeper communion with the universe. The reward for Odin's sacrifice is the wisdom that he receives from the Norns.

Another instance of sacred time in Germanic mythology is linked to the search for the Rhine gold and the ring of the Nibelungs. Sacred time confronts with profane duration and the threat of death. The gods ask two giants, Fafnir and Fasolt, to build a hall in Asgard where they can dwell. The pact which the two parties decide upon stipulates that the giants have to finish their work in a certain number of days and request what they want as a reward. The payment they ask for is the goddess Iduna, the keeper of the golden apples that provide the gods with eternal youth. In their absence they grow old and die. It is a dangerous bargain as the giants succeed in building the hall, later called Walhalla, and claim their prize. Once they leave with Iduna, the gods start getting old and they feel the threat of death. Sacred time vanishes since its basic aspects disappear. In order to save themselves from death, the gods suggest a compromise. They will give the giants the Rhine gold with the ring of the Nibelungs and they will receive Iduna back. The giants agree as the treasure was famous. The gods however do not intend to fulfil their part of the bargain, as they want to keep Iduna and the gold for themselves. It is another instance of a sinful behaviour in the realm of the sacred, which will bring the final fall.

Sacred time transforms into a time of cheating as it is based on the wish to destroy and not to create. It is a worse instance of profane duration, a sort of time that cannot be redeemed because it consists of falsity and lies. Profane duration can be changed into sacred time by using appropriate rituals. Cheating, destructive time can never transcend the limits of a lie. By trying to play with destiny the gods attract the existential curse that will lead to their death in Ragnarök. Sacred time becomes the time of punishment and due retribution for their deeds. Time itself turns against them as they can no longer control it. It is like an entity more powerful than they ever imagined. Cheating on time is one of the greatest mistakes as rules must always be respected in the sacred dimension.

In order to retrieve Iduna and become young again the gods send Loki to obtain the treasure of the Nibelungs. He catches one of its keepers while he was enjoying a swim in the river. The three beings guarding the hoard are shape-shifters, the captured one having transformed into an otter. His name is Andvari. Loki fishes him out and threatens to kill him if he does not give him the treasure. Angry because they lost it, Andvari throws a terrible curse on the gold, saying that whoever possesses it will die of a violent death. The most precious object in the treasure is the ring which has the capacity to recreate the trove if it is used. The giant builders receive the gold and release Iduna. Yet, the curse

begins to function because Fafnir kills Fasolt and by transforming into a dragon he takes the treasure and the ring to a cave where he guards them. The hoard is called the Rhine gold since in the beginning it belonged to the daughters of the Rhine. It will return to them at the end of the world when all is destroyed in the apocalyptic fire.

Loki is a very complex god, as he is the god of fire, but also the god of mysteries and of imagination. Loki decides to steal the treasure as the owners do not want to surrender it. Negotiating with time is the means the god chooses to use in order to accomplish his mission. Time becomes part of the decisions of the gods as it depends on how they use it that they can obtain what they want. The mistake which the gods make is that they cannot distinguish between sacred time and profane duration. Their existence is no longer under their control as time turns into an enemy ready to destroy them. Eliade considers that "Sacred, mythical time also originates and supports existential, historical time, for it is the latter's paradigmatic model" (Eliade, 1987, p. 89). Sacred time becomes a devouring time, symbolically annihilating the cosmic creation. The gods grow old and lose their powers, facing the end. It is as if they have fallen in their own trap and are unable to escape from it. Time closes down on them creating parallel dimensions and posing impossible challenges. The temporal duration has no mercy as it punishes anyone who dares to defy it. Sacred time acquires negative connotations and no redemption is possible. It is like a fall in the abyss of a primordial guilt. Time destroys and no longer creates.

A version of sacred time that can be linked to the previous one is found in the episode of Balder's death. He is one of the sons of Odin, the god of light and of beauty. He dies as a consequence of Loki's thirst for revenge. The god of fire feels betrayed because he is not given a proper place among the gods. He is envious of Balder and in order to avenge himself he tricks the blind god Hönir into killing Balder. Sacred time loses again its regenerating value and transforms into a threat for the gods. After Balder is killed, time precipitates, darkness falls and the end gets near. The death of Balder is an anticipation of the last day when the gods and the whole universe will perish. The punishment for Loki is to be tied up to a slate with chains and to suffer there until Ragnarök. Time is no longer sanctified, it loses its regenerating powers, an instance that actually stands for the end of time altogether. No return to the primordial beautiful time is possible since sacred time no longer exists.

Balder's death is a violent one and it brings pain and suffering to the other gods. It can be seen as a reversed version of the entrance of the sacred in the world. In his book *The Violence and the Sacred* René Girard analyses the concept of the sacred in relation to culture and ritual gestures (1996). He believes that mankind is intimately connected

to rituals and it is impossible to say which ritual is more important than the others. It is necessary for man to understand which type of ritual he wants to perform and for which particular purpose he needs to act. Using a wrong magic has as result more destruction and subsequently the impossibility of redemption. Girard considers that evil must be properly exorcised in order for the ritual to succeed. All rituals and magical practices have their origin in the ritual murder. The first act of violence brings moral disequilibrium in the world and the necessity of sacrifices. Girard concludes by saying that cultural order is a result of the manner in which man knows how to deal with evil and how to turn it into potential good.

He also considers that the sacred can be reached and included in the common world if there are certain gates through which it can penetrate. According to Girard, the sacred is not part of human existence. It can be assimilated into it if man proves that he deserves to be part of the sacred. Eliade mentions that man can live in the sacred time if he has faith (Eliade, 1957/1987). Girard thinks that the sacred can be reached if appropriate sacrifices are made. Such gestures have the value of a ritual by which man gets in communion with the gods. They are meant to improve human existence and to bring spiritual fulfilment. In the Germanic myth the situation is reversed. Instead of bringing the sacred dimension closer to the gods and thus reassuring them that redemption is possible, the killing of Balder annihilates all hope. The sacred is replaced by the profane because what happens is not a sacrifice proper. It is a murder bringing the end. Thus, one can say that the death of Balder is the opposite of the killing of Ymir, which helped with the creation of the new cosmos. Germanic mythology is made of parallel structures and episodes that are meant to better unveil its essence.

Loki is the instrument by which destructive time enters the world. He fulfils the role of a trickster by cheating on Hönir and making him kill his brother. Once a positive cosmic function, the trickster becomes an evil character whose mission is to bring to light the weaknesses and limitations of human nature. It is also an observer as he remains in the shadows and speculates on the mistakes of his opponents. Loki is a trickster because he changes identities and masks, cheating on the others in order to reach his own purposes. According to Victor Kernbach, the trickster is "a civilizing hero, usually a deity or an archetypal ancestor who has a negative double" (1989, p. 599). A trickster is capable to undergo metamorphoses by which he changes identities and cheats more easily on others. In his turn, Claude Lévi-Strauss believes that

Not only can we account for the ambiguous character of the trickster, but we can also understand another property of mythical figures the world over, namely, that the same

god is endowed with contradictory attributes—for instance, he may be good and bad at the same time." (Lévi-Strauss, 1958/1963, p. 227)

Höfnir kills Balder with an arrow made from mistletoe. Durand considers that any weapon made of mistletoe or of any substance related to wood belongs to the nocturnal characteristics of the image (1969/1999). They imply destruction and death. The mistletoe is a parasite of the oak tree and it symbolizes the negative counterpart of the divine connotations of the oak. This pair has one element (the oak) standing for immortality, while the other one (the mistletoe) represents the destiny trying to take advantage of the first. They both coexist as there can never be good without evil. Such complementary pairs keep the world in balance, but the right measure must be found. In Germanic mythology good and evil are found in all the gods in equal shares, but eventually evil will triumph. Given the mortal nature of the gods, there is no hope for salvation.

One of the ways in which the gods try to gain more time is by gathering an army of warriors in Walhalla. They are meant to fight and protect the gods during Ragnarök. The *einherjar*, as they are called, are heroes who died on the battlefield and are brought to Walhalla by the Walkiries. Being aware that time is against them, Odin attempts to postpone the end by choosing these warriors. They spend their time in Walhalla, preparing for the last day. The warriors are messengers of a time which is external as they exist outside any temporal dimension. They belong to a semi-sacred time because they used to live a common life, while after death they enjoy the presence of the gods. The sacred can be reached also through messengers, not only in a direct personal manner. Sacredness is conditioned by the behaviour man has towards it. Eliade considers that sacred time can be recreated if man understands that it is a primordial time, a mythical time, "an original time, in the sense that it came into existence all at once, that it was not preceded by another time, because no time could exist before the appearance of the reality narrated in the myth" (1957/1987, p. 72). In Germanic mythology the gods are unable to have an appropriate relation with time and thus its sacredness vanishes.

The last version of sacred time is eschatological time, corresponding to the end of the world. Sacredness is abolished as the forces of evil will attack Walhalla and destroy the universe. Giants and monsters plunge the cosmos into the nothingness of the beginnings, thus closing the circle that has started with the primordial murder. The main element characterizing this event is fire. It is not the cosmic fire of creation, bringing light and hope, it rather is the apocalyptic fire which reduces all the universe to ashes. As a primordial element fire is the flame that is purifying and innate in the dialectics of fire and light, thus, the real sublimating virtue of fire is formed (Durand, 1969/1999, p. 168).

In the book *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* Eliade states that

access to sacrality is manifested, among other things, by a prodigious increase in heat. ... The respective initiations,..., pursue the same end—to make the novice die to the human condition and to resuscitate him to a new, a transhuman existence. (1958/1975, pp. 86-87).

Such connotations apply to the positive characteristics of fire which imply purification and regeneration. This kind of fire brings joy and confidence in a more luminous future. Due to its presence man can hope that his existence will be sanctified and he will be able to partake in the divine creation again. In Germanic mythology fire loses its regenerating value. It is a devouring fire, destroying all the places inhabited by life. Eschatological fire corresponds to eschatological time. During Ragnarök time is compressed as if it lost its very essence. It becomes immobile, events happen simultaneously since the temporal line itself is abolished. Time itself disappears as there are no temporal references to connect to. Sacred time and profane duration mingle in the same undifferentiated temporal dimension. The end of time represents the end of all known aspects of the world. The gods die and their creation is destroyed. The immobility of the void will rule again. The circle of guilt and retribution is complete.

Eliade considers that “when it is desacralized, cyclic time becomes terrifying; it is seen as a circle forever turning on itself, repeating itself to infinity” (1957/1987, p. 107). It is a dissolution of all temporal and spatial links with the surroundings which once formed the known world. On the last day the gods are killed by the monsters which they tried to subject. These creatures become messengers of destructive time as death acts also by intermediaries and not only directly. Ragnarök is a period of utter dissolution since no redemption is possible.

In the book *The Well and the Tree* (1982) Paul C. Bauschatz discusses the concept of time, relating it to the existential experiences found in Germanic mythology. He underlines the quality of time as perceived at the beginning of the world and at its end. He considers that time is binary, being divided into past and non-past in which the latter can be equated to the present. There is no future in Germanic mythology mainly because time is limited and it does not regenerate itself. Temporal duration is important if it bears upon essential events which may change the destiny of gods and humans alike. “Duration reckons with horizontal relations that lack significant moment. Significance is built through association with the power of the past and ultimately leads to a spatial and temporal unification of action” (Bauschatz, 1982, p. 139). The past deeds of the gods condition their present destiny and the manner in which they respond to such challenges is rendered in what happens to them during Ragnarök.

Though Germanic mythology is definitely marked by the concepts of guilt, violence and murder, sacredness can still be found in some of its aspects. Cosmic time is cyclical and even if there is no future dimension events seem to occur in a present which constantly mingles with the past. Such identification explains the fact that the fire of Ragnarök can be interpreted as a purifying fire as well. Out of the ashes of the old world may rise the new one. The former sacred time changes into an improved version which, although is not certain to happen, may at least be hoped for. "Cosmic myths, at least to the extent that they deal with matters of time, always attempt to reconcile what seems to be a universal, temporal paradox" (Bauschatz, 1982, p. 143).

Sacred time in Germanic mythology emerges out of fragmentary places in which it is preserved as a reminder of past achievements. It can be brought back to life through rituals and magical gestures. Time and space dissolve during Ragnarök, yet they can still be invoked as part of memories that tell of heroic past events. A full cosmic cycle is achieved due to the expiation of sins. Much of the destiny of the gods is shaped according to the way they understand the challenges set before them. Initiation can be reached only if one is able to acknowledge his limits and see beyond the veil of illusions. Thus, Germanic mythology transforms into an exemplary story about the creation, fall and regeneration of the universe.

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