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CTW: Cosmology and Controversy

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### Norse Cosmology vs. Western Cosmology of the Greek

In the midst of modern-day science and research, the twenty-first century still feels the effects of the historical Greek and Norse cosmographies. However, the cosmologies and their respective influences to contemporary culture vary drastically. While both their cosmographies incorporate mythological deities, the progressive cosmological model of the Greeks formed the structure for modern cosmology whereas the Norse universe still lives on to this day through fan-fiction and pop-culture. The geographies and landscapes of the Norse and Greek appear to be key factors in the development of their cosmologies.

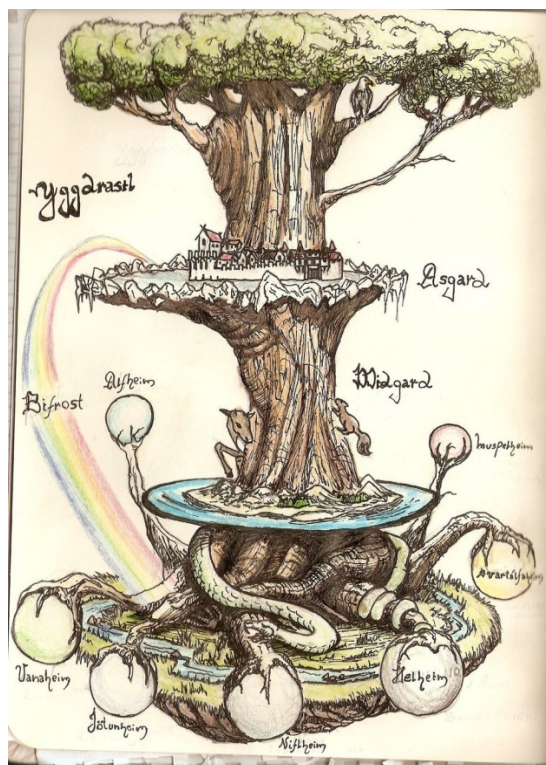
The Norse's cold and isolated region along the Scandinavian Peninsula created a form of cultural escapism that inspired the culture's complex and imaginative myths. The *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, for example, are two collections of Norse poems that describe mythological events occurring in diverse and imaginative realms. In contrast, the Greeks lived in a lush and rich environment which contrasted with their early primitive cosmological model. Their location provided them with greater cultural influence as well as a more rapid progression of science and mathematics. Whereas the Norse kept their mythological model of the universe until their introduction to Christianity, the Greek's cosmological model evolved more scientifically, with philosophers such as Ptolemy and Aristotle constantly proposing more and more advanced models of the universe.

In the Norse creation story as according to the Prolouge section of the *Poedic Edda*, the universe began in the yawning gap (Ginnungagap) between two primordial worlds. The first was Muspelheim, the land of fire in the south and the other was Niflheim, the land of arctic mist and ice in the far north. When the warmth of Muspelheim met with the chilling mist of Niflheim, they created a frost like mass that melted and created the frost giant, Ymir. The same frost that gave birth to Ymir also birthed a primordial cow called Audumla. Ymir fed from her teats and his sweat created the race of frost giants. The genealogy of the gods began with Buri and concludes with Odin (the All-father) and his son, Thor (god of thunder). Odin and his brothers, Vili and Ve, slew Ymir and created Midgard, the land of humankind, out of his body. His flesh became the land and his skull became the sky which was held up by four dwarves, representing the four cardinal directions. Odin and his brothers then discovered an ash tree and an elm tree on the seashore which they used to create Ask and Embla, man and woman.

The Greek creation story began with nothingness except for “Chaos” surrounded by a great stream of water. Out of the nothingness appeared Love, which created Light and Day. Light and Day in turn created Gaea (earth), who then gave rise Uranus (the sky). By Uranus, Gaea gave birth to a race of monster, giants, and titans. The well-known Zeus (often thought to be the Greek equivalent of Odin) was the offspring of the titan Cronus and his sister Rhea. Zeus then took control of the world after an epic battle between the titans and five of the children of Cronus (e.g. Hades, Poseidon, Hera). Zeus claimed himself to be the god of the sky and lightning and gave his brothers and sisters their own role in the world. Prometheus, a titan who fought on the side of the gods, fashioned man from clay. Prometheus’s brother Epimetheus was then bestowed with giving humankind their respective qualities among the animal kingdom. However, Epimetheus had already given the good traits of cunning and strength to the other animals and

had nothing to give man. Prometheus, however, had compassion on man and gave them the gift of fire to keep warm and cook their food.

The similarities between the two mythologies are subtle but important. The rulers of the Greek world and Norse world are both descendants of primordial beings consisting of giants or monsters. In both stories, the gods had to defeat these primordial beasts before becoming the chief ruler of the world. However, the structure of the universe differs greatly between the Greeks and the Norse. For instance, the Greek creation story tells of the gods being created by the physical universe. This directly contrasts with the Norse creation story, where the gods and their actions would lead to the construction of the physical universe.



1 The World Tree Yggdrasil

In Norse cosmography, there were many worlds that existed in addition to Midgard, the Norse idea of planet Earth. Yggdrasil contains nine realms in total that are home to various creatures and environments. For instance, Muspelheim and Niflheim are the primordial worlds of fire and ice, respectively. Asgard is home to Odin and his numerous offspring known as Asgardians.

Vanaheim is home to the gods of fertility, wisdom and the ability to see the future. Alfheim is the home of light and elves, Jotunheim the realm of giants,

Svartálfaheim the realm of dwarves, and Niflheim the

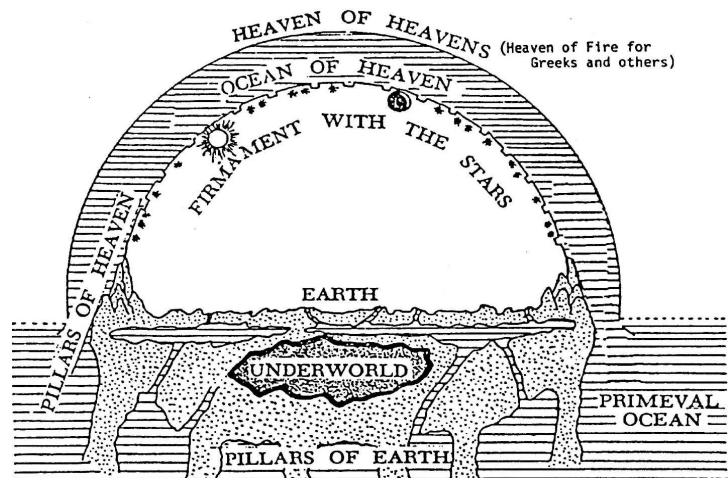
land of the dead. These worlds are connected by a metaphysical ash tree called Yggdrasil. The

Norse described the Yggdrasil as a tree of life, providing nourishment for the universe's nine

realms. Cosmologically, the Norse realms are various dimensions that few can traverse. The earth, which is known to the Norse as Midgard, lies at the center of Yggdrasil and is encircled by an impassible body of water. A large and ferocious sea serpent called Jormungandr inhabits the water. During the end of the world, this serpent would rise out of the sea and destroy Midgard with its poison. The world would then sink into the ocean to be reborn again.

Unlike Norse cosmology, the Greek structure of the universe was not entirely set in stone; various philosophers had their own ideas on how the universe was structured. A common universe model created by ancient cultures is a flat world held up by pillars. Those pillars are covered by the sky, separating the heavens from the earth. Additionally, the Greeks believed that underworlds of Hades and Tartarus lie below ground. But this mythological view of the structure of the universe was soon replaced by theories developed by philosophers and mathematicians such as Ptolemy, who introduced the

geocentric model, or Aristotle, who developed the heliocentric model. The Greek's simplistic model of the universe in comparison to the cosmography of the Norse further reinforces the theory of cultural escapism among the Norse.

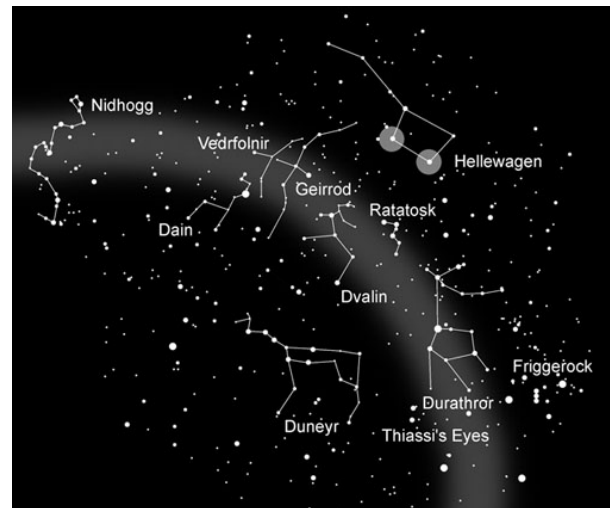


Although Greek and Norse

## 2 Ancient Cosmological Structure of the Universe

manifestations of the universe differed drastically, their views on the observable universe are moderately similar. Both cultures believed astronomical beings and phenomena had mythological ties. Even though the Greeks and the Norse both incorporated animals in their constellations, the Greeks emphasized the roles of Gods and Goddesses into the creation of their

constellations much more than the Norse did. The Norse's sparing use of deities can be derived from the properties of the Yggdrasil world tree. According to the *Gylfaginning*, the first section from the Nordic mythological poem *Prose Edda*, the night sky consisted of Yggdrasil's canopy, and the stars are the fruit that hang from the tree. The Norse based their constellations off of the properties of the Yggdrasil and the activities that occurred on it. For example, Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr and Durathor, are four Nordic constellations named after the deer that frolicked on the branches of the Yggdrasil in the Nordic poem, *Grimnismal* (Grimnir's Sayings).



3 Norse Constellations in the Night Sky

In comparison, the Greeks rationalized each of their constellations with an act of a Greek god or goddess. Take for example the story behind the Greek constellation of Orion. A common constellation myth speaks of Orion as a famed hunter who foolishly stated during a hunting trip that he could kill every creature on earth. Mother Earth misinterpreted his assertion as a threat to all the animals of the world, and sent a scorpion to sting and kill Orion. Both the Greek's as well as the Nordic's understandings of the constellations stem from their origin stories. Unlike the Greeks, however, the Norse heavily integrated their cosmological model of the universe into their astronomy. Whereas the Nordic constellations incorporated the mythological animals and characteristics from the Yggdrasil world tree, Greek constellations only embodied the actions of Greek Gods and Goddesses.

Further mythological similarities exist between the Greek and Norse through the mythological interpretations of the Sun and of the Moon. In Norse culture, the sun and the moon were personified as a brother and sister called Sól and Máni. Sól is described sitting on a chariot being pulled across the sky by two horses named Árvakr and Alsviðr. In the *Grímnismál* poem within the *Poetic Edda*, Odin speaks of the sun and the moon fleeing through the sky, with Sól and Máni being pursued by the wolves, Sköll and Hati Hróðvitnisson. Although there are many Greek Gods and Goddesses of the sun and of the moon, Sól and Máni share remarkable resemblance with their Greek equivalents, Helios and Selene. As stated by Homer in the *Iliad*, Helios made a daily trip across the sky on a fiery chariot drawn by four steeds named Pyrois, Aeos, Aethon, and Phlegon. Selene, sister and goddess of the moon, would later make the same trip at sundown, lighting up the darkness of the night sky.

As seen in their creation stories as well as their myths of the sun and moon, the Greek and Norse cultures do incorporate mythology into their cosmologies. However, their respective cosmographies are very different. As a result of their isolated geography, the Norse people experienced a form of cultural escapism evident in their understanding of constellations as well as their complex and imaginative model of the universe. In comparison, the Greeks lived in a less-isolated Mediterranean location that provided them with greater cultural influence. Just as readers turn to Norse-influenced fan-fiction as a form of personal escapism, the Norse writers of the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* manuscripts were influenced by cultural escapism in their creation of the Norse Universe.

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