

Völuspá

– a Source to Norse Pagan Mythology or a Christian Revelation in Disguise of a Classical Sibylline Oracle?

Anton Christian Bang's hypothesis of *Völuspá* as a Norse Sibylline oracle

Working with *the myth of future* in Norse mythology, a theme most fully unfolded in the eddaic poem *Völuspá*, an old hypothesis has become reactivated and strengthened on new conditions.



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In an article published in 1879, the Norwegian bishop Anton Christian Bang argued that *Völuspá* was most probably created as a Norse parallel to the classical Sibylline oracles, a literary genre productive over a long span of time, from pagan Antiquity into early Christianity. Bang argued that both

the structure and the main mythic themes of *Völuspá* to a rather amazing degree do indeed correspond to the Sibylline oracles.

Völuspá

Uncovering the whole cosmic history, *Völuspá* has the character of an apocalypse. The vision of the world's destiny from primeval times to the end of cosmos and even further into a brand new future, a revelation laid in the mouth of a female prophet called *völva*, makes this poem outstanding among the eddaic poems.

The poem devotes its deepest attention to the visions of the *eshcaton*, the end of the world. In one of the two textual sources of *Völuspá*, *Hauksbók*, the future myth even contains a vision of a heavenly Man, a ruler of the New Age. More than 30 stanzas of the poem are occupied with the disasters of Ragnarökr, painting horrifying scenes of cosmic collapse, heaven and earth broken down; gods, giants and monsters mutually ruining each other. The final scene is a beautiful vision of a new age and a new earth to come with brand new conditions for life.

Völuspá has been looked upon as the most important source of the pagan Norse world view and mythology, dated to the late Viking Age. The poem has been given a special authority, from Snorri Sturluson on, who structured his learned presentation of Norse myths in his work *Edda* about 1220, down to modern scholars in the field. It is not surprising that any hypothesis that could change the common view of the source (origin or dating) would provoke heavy debate. The hypothesis of Bang did not

gain much support, either in his own lifetime or later. Just a few scholars, among them the Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge, a comparative oriented scholar, lent Bang his full support.¹ The thesis was, however, strongly opposed by representatives of the Germanic school who maintained the view that Norse mythology belonged to an age-old Germanic culture. Bang's thesis was soon ignored by scholarly world.

The antique Sibyls

The antique Sibyls were known as god-inspired pagan prophetesses with the ability to look into past and future. They became channels of revelation in an antique, pagan oracle genre that was accorded great authority by the Christian church as well. In the antique world, the oracles were brought into circulation through text collections and they took the form of apocalyptic visions with a strong eschatological emphasis. The Sibyls present the end of the world, *eschaton*, in frightening and horrifying mythical images. The oracles often had the form of the so-called *vaticinia ex eventu*, fictive prophecies of the future that often were so well constructed, that representatives of the early church took them for genuine ones. For example, the Church Father Augustine made use of the pagan Eritrean Sibyl's prophesy about the wondrous child who was going to be born for the salvation of the peoples, in his *De civitate Dei*.² In several of the Sibylline oracles the cosmic catastrophe is followed by a new age in which the world is recreated or reshaped. The climax of the visions may be the arrival of a future ruler who will come in a wondrous fashion, either born as an extraordinary child, or most often, as a fully-grown, divine man, a king, described within the pattern of traditional royal mythology and ideology.³ The Church Fathers saw an apologetic meaning in the old pagan oracles: through the frightening Sibyls, paganism had realised its own downfall. The Sibyls, though pagan, were inspired to reveal the breakthrough of a new cosmic order which was interpreted by the Church as the coming of Christianity. Obviously, there are important parallels between the Sibylline oracles and *Völuspá*. However, it must be admitted that there was a serious problem with the thesis of Bang: no potential intermediaries could be identified between the antique Sibylline oracles from the first centuries AD and *Völuspá* transmitted in text-collections from the 13th century.⁴

Notwithstanding, recent research has established that some Latin Sibylline oracles were in use in Anglo-Saxon England during the Viking Age, in the liturgical traditions of the Anglo-Saxon Church. The then Norse people might have come to know elements of the Sibylline prophetic traditions through contacts with the Anglo-Saxons or through Irish or Spanish channels.⁵

1: Bugge 1881. Bugge proposed that the name *Vsp* is a translation of *Oracula Sibylla*, *oraculum* and *spá* being identical idioms.

2: *De civitate Dei*, book XVIII, 23.

3: Collins 1998.

4: Rydberg 1881.

5: Dronke 1996 and 1997: 93 ff., cf. Clunies Ross 1992 on the *Prologue*, *Snorra Edda*, cf. Samploniuis 2001.

The myth of future

Bang was occupied with several similarities between the Norse and the continental prophecies that seem rather convincing: the female figures of prophetesses of the two traditions do resemble each other; the number of cosmic worlds following each other is nine. The revelations end up with a total breakdown of the actual world and then a new Age follows, in the pagan sources a king or a wondrous child will come, in one of the Norse sources to *Völuspá*, it is a mysterious heavenly Man – who I have elsewhere interpreted as the pagan Heimdall, a Christ in sophisticated disguise. It has been the *myth of future* with the future ruler in *Völuspá* that convinced me about the strength of Bang's hypothesis. The future-myth seems to be difficult to defend as a genuine pagan Norse creation. The ideas about a common, messianic future would be meaningless in a pagan society built upon kinship, with a folk religion with no ideas about individual salvation and eternity. It seems reasonable to propose that the myth of a common, cosmic future was an innovation brought to the North by Christianity.

Bang's hypothesis seems to be strengthened

The old hypothesis of A. Chr. Bang seems to have been strengthened from the perspective of History of Religion, focusing on an analysis of mythology. In *Völuspá* the Norse culture got its Sibyl, probably inspired both from a genuine Norse tradition of pagan seeresses, in combination with specific ideas brought from the antique, Jewish-Christian traditions of the Sibyls. Then *Völuspá* seems rather to be a creation of the learned Middle Ages than a product of the late Viking Age, with a probable dating of closer to 1150 than to 1000.

To the question of how *Völuspá* should then be looked upon as a source to pagan mythology and world view, I would dare to answer that the broad picture of the pagan cosmology transferred in the poem might be reliable to some degree. But there are obvious medieval innovations, such as the anthropogonic myth with *Ask* and *Embla* resembling the biblical Adam and Eve; the *imago dei*-motif of the creation myth, alluding to the creation myth of the Bible⁶; the role of the world-tree embracing cosmic history as in the Bible, and not least the myth of the Future as argued here.⁷ Thus *Völuspá* is a modified source to pagan mythology and a masterpiece of Christian revelation in disguise as well.

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6: Steinsland 1983; 2001.

7: Cf. Steinsland 2006 for detailed analysis.

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