

Völuspa

The *Völuspa* is one of the poetic songs of the *Elder Edda*, which were first compiled and written down in the 13th century in Iceland. It is believed that many of the anonymous songs of the *Elder Edda* were composed and recited several hundred years before that, some perhaps as early as the fifth or sixth century CE. Since it was written in the Old Norse language and script, I have consulted several modern English and German translations to arrive at my version. *Völuspa* means “Visions of the Völva.” Völvas were clairvoyant prophetic seeresses in the pre-Christian Nordic culture. In this poem an unnamed völva is relating her visions in response to questions posed to her by Odin/Wodan, the knowledge-seeking god of shamans, warriors and poets.

Ever since I wrote about and quoted from the *Völuspa* in my book of *The Well of Remembrance* (Shambhala, 1994), I have admired this poem with its awesome visions of the origins of the world, the creative activities and conflicts of gods and humans, and the stunning prophecies of planetary destruction and renewal that seem to be coming true in our time. (*In the following, the section headings, in italics, are added by me to facilitate the following of the story. They are not part of the poem.*)

Invocation

Hear me in silence,
Ye kin of the Holy Ones,
Both the higher and lower, the
Children of Heimdall.ⁱ

You, Wodanⁱⁱ, want me
To tell of the world
As well as I know,
From the earliest times.

Origin of the Earth and Sun

I know of the giants,
Primeval and great,
Who raised me and fed me
In times long ago.

I know of nine worlds,
And nine great roots,
Of that wonderful tree
So deep in the Earth.

There was only Ymirⁱⁱⁱ,
 The primordial giant.
 There was no land, nor sea,
 Nor ocean waves.

No earth was there,
 No heavens above,
 No growing grass,
 Only a gaping abyss.

The three sons of Bor^{iv},
 Both giants and gods,
 Uplifted the land, they
 Made mighty Midgard.^v

The sun from the South
 Shone bright on stoneground.
 The sweet greening grass
 Grew up from the earth.

In the South was the sun,
 Great sister of moon,
 Extending her arms
 Along the edge of the sky.^{vi}

Neither sun nor planets
 Were set in their places.
 The moon did not know
 Yet what powers she had.

To gather in council
 The Holy Ones came.
 The councilors met
 To converse and to speak.

They gave names to the night,
 To morning and noontime;
 To twilight and evening,
 The measures of time.

Aesir gods, giants, dwarves and humans

The Aesir^{vii} came down
 From the shining fields.
 Altars and temples

Were built in the mountains.
They built the forges,
They hammered the ores,
Made metal tongs
And other fine tools.

Board games they played,
Content in their garden.
Nothing was lacking –
They found plenty of gold.

Three mighty females,
Daughters of giants,
Awesome and terrible
Came from their giant home.^{viii}

To gather in council
The Holy Ones came.
The councilors met,
To speak and to ask:

Should dwarves make beings
From the rivers and rocks,
From the blood and the bones
Of Ymir the Earth?

Many forms they created,
Resembling humans –
The dwarves of the earth,
As they were commanded.

Then came three gods
From the clan of the Aesir^{ix},
They were mighty and merciful –
They came down to the shore.

On the beach they found lying,
Found an ash and an elm^x,
But listless and lifeless,
With no spark of life.

They had no souls,
No senses either,
No warmth of life,
And no living color.

Odin gave souls to them,
 Hönir their senses,
 Lodur brought warmth of life
 And bright, blooming colors.

The World Tree and the Three Norns

An ash-tree I know, called
 Yggdrasil, Odins Horse.^{xi}
 Sparkling moisture
 Lies on its leaves.

This is the dew that drops
 Down in the valley.
 Evergreen stands the World Tree.
 Urd's well at its roots.^{xii}

From there come three maidens,
 Three women of wisdom,
 From the deep waters
 At the root of the Tree.

One is called Urd,
 Verdandi another,
 And Skjuld is the third.^{xiii}

They carve into wood,
 Deciding the lives
 Of the children of men,
 Choosing the runes.

Gullveig the Golden and the Origin of War

And this too I know –
 How war came to the world,
 When Gullveig the Golden^{xiv}
 Was speared by the sky gods.

Three times they burned her
 In the Warfather's hall,
 The thrice-born goddess
 And still she lives on.

Heathen^{xv} the called her
 Wherever she wandered.
 Seeress, sorceress,
 In soothsaying trance.

She made seidr^{xvi} magic
 Wherever she could, and
 To contrary women
 Was always welcome.

When the Holy Ones
 Gathered in council seats
 The sky gods debated
 Among themselves thus:

Should the Aesir gods
 First pay tribute, or
 Should all gods equally
 Offerings receive?^{xvii}

Odin hurled his spear
 At the enemy hosts –
 And so for the first time
 War came to the world.^{xviii}

The walls of Asgard
 Came crumbling and crashing
 The Vanir gods raging
 Trampled the ground.

Then the Holy Ones
 Gathered in council seats
 The sky gods debated
 Among themselves thus:

Who filled the air
 With the stench of betrayal?
 Who promised Freyja
 As a wife to the giants?^{xix}

Great Thor the Thunderer
 Fought fiercely the foe
 He seldom stays still
 When he hears of such deeds.

Now vows were broken
 And binding agreements.
 The gods' solemn oaths
 Were forgotten again.

Mimir's Well, Odin's Eye

I know where Heimdall's
 Horn is hidden:
 Under the highest and
 Holiest of trees^{xx}.

In high-foaming spray
 Water falling I see
 In the well, Odin's eye.
 Would you know still more?

Alone I sat, outside,
 When the Old One came
 That terrible Aesir god
 And looked in my eye.

For what do you ask?
 What seek you from me?
 Odin, I know where
 You've hidden your eye:
 In Mimir's marvelous well.

Mimir drinks mead^{xxi}
 Every day in the morning
 From the well, Odin's pledge.
 Would you know still more?

Necklace and bracelets
 This Father God gave me
 For my far-seeing visions
 And words of wisdom.

Far and wide do I see
 Throughout all of the worlds.

Balder's murder, Loki's punishment

Now Balder I see
 The god who is bleeding,
 His doom was determined –
 As great Odin's son.

Growing slender and tall
 Among the green trees
 Is the mistle-toe shrub^{xxii}
 So tender and fair.

This fragile sprig
 So seeming harmless
 Was horrible weapon
 When hurled by Hödur.

Fair Frigga does weep
 In her watery home.
 Valhalla's misfortune.
 Would you know still more?

A prisoner I see
 By the boiling springs:
 The treacherous Loki's ^{xxiii}
 Miserable form.

There too sits Sigyn
 His unfortunate wife
 With woeful demeanor.
 Would you know still more?

Ragnarök

From the East flows a stream
 Through poisonous lands^{xxiv}
 Called River of Terror,
 Cutting sharply with cold.

Wading waist-deep
 Through watery torrents,
 Are traitors and murderers,
 Adulterers too.

There I see Nidhög^{xxv}
Suck blood from the corpses
That man-eating monster.
Would you know still more?

A dwelling I see
Far away from the sun
Near the Land of the Dead
It's gates to the North.

Here poisonous drops
Drip from the roof^{xxvi}
And coils of serpents
Encircle the walls.

In the East an old hag
Sits in the iron wood.
There she bears Fenrir's^{xxvii}
Terrible brood.

One among these
In the form of a troll
Will one of these days
Swallow the sun.

She feeds on the flesh
Of fallen warriors
Spattering with blood
The seat of the gods.

The sun is turned black
In the summers thereafter.
Violent weather comes again.
Would you know still more?

Loud howls the wolf
At the mouth of his cave.
He tears off his fetters
And now he runs free.

Much do I know
Far distant I see
The conquering gods'
Terrible fate.

Brothers do battle
 And murder each other.
 The sons of siblings
 Break bonds of clan.
 Much woe's in the world
 And treachery too.

It's axe-time, sword-time,
 Time of shattered shields.
 Wind-time, wolf-time,
 Until the world breaks down.

No one anymore
 Considers the others.
 The gleaming Gjallarhorn
 Announces the end.

Loud blows Heimdall
 He lifts high the horn.
 And Odin murmurs
 With Mimir's head.^{xxviii}

Yggdrasil trembles
 The towering ash groans^{xxix}
 The giant is loosened
 The underworld quakes^{xxx}
 The flaming giant^{xxxi}
 Devours the trees.

What ails the Aesir?
 What troubles the elves?
 The giants are roaring,
 The gods meet in council.

The gnomes are groaning
 By their gates of rock
 The wise spirits of stone.
 Would you know still more?

Loud howls the wolf
 At the mouth of his cave.
 He tears off his fetters
 And now he runs free.

This much do I know
Far distant I see
The conquering gods'
Terrible fate.

From East comes a giant
His shield he holds high.
The Midgard serpent coils
As raging rivers wind

And whip up the waters.
The eagle screams on high.
With cut-up corpses
Comes the deathship.

The giants are coming
In horrible hordes.
And the monstrous Wolf
Even Loki as well.

From the South comes *Surt*^{xxxii}
Who scorches the plants
His flaming sword
Burns hot as the sun.

The mountains are cracking
The trollwomen reeling^{xxxiii}
To Hel go the humans
The heavens rupture.

As Odin goes forth now
To fight the great wolf
He thrusts his sword
Through its gaping jaws.

Now comes another
Thor, Son of Earth
This mighty warrior
Battles the Serpent.

Protector of Midgard
He fights with fierce rage.
Terrified people
Are fleeing their homes.

The sun turns black
 Land sinks into the sea
 And the radiant stars
 Fall from the sky.

Hot flames engulf
 The all-nourishing tree
 The searing heat rises
 High in the heavens.^{xxxiv}

Loud howls the wolf
 At the mouth of his cave
 He tears off his fetters
 And now he runs free.

Much do I know
 Far distant I see
 The conquering gods'
 Terrible fate.

Resurrection

Now again I see Earth
 Rising up from below
 Up out of the waters
 With all greening plants.

Falling waters are foaming.
 High over the mountains
 The eagle flies
 Hunting for fish.

The Aesir gods meet again
 In the shining fields.
 They speak once again
 Of that terrible snake.

They remember the great
 And awesome end-time,
 And ancient rune secrets
 Of the High Father-God.

Lying in grass, they find them
 Again, the golden tablets^{xxxv}
 As they had them before
 In the ancient times.

The fields will grow high^{xxxvi}
 Without being sown
 All harm will be healed
 As *Balder* returns.

Hödur^{xxxvii} and Balder
 Will dwell once again
 In the halls of the high gods.
 Would you know still more?

Now a hall I see
 More bright than the Sun
 With a red-golden roof
Gimlé^{xxxviii} is its name.

There dwell the noble
 And kind ones, forever.
 Their lives free of guilt
 And with gracious ease.

Down from above
 The mighty Lord^{xxxix} comes
 To the council of gods
 And rules over all.

The sun has a daughter
 This maiden will ride
 On the paths of her mother^{xl}
 After the fall of the gods.

Who are these maidens^{xli}
 Of wisdom and sense
 That we see hovering
 Over the wide ocean waves?

The throngs of maidens
 Daughters of giants
 Descend on the villages.^{xlii}
 Protecting the humans.

The End

ⁱ *Heimdall* is the name of the celestial gate-keeper of the Aesir gods, akin to the Roman *Janus*; but here he is also regarded as the progenitor of the human race. His form is white and luminous, and he has a horn, the *Gjallarhorn*, that can be heard around the world.

ⁱⁱ Among the many epithets for *Wodan* or *Odin* is *Walvater* – Chooser of the Fallen – pointing to his choosing of warriors killed in battle, who get to go with him to *Valhalla*. It was also said that fallen warriors could, if they wished, go to *Feyja*'s domain after dying.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ymir* is the name of the primordial giant, formed from rivers and ice, in the beginnings of the Earth, before life. From his arms and feet came male mountain and female river giants.

^{iv} *Bor* or *Bur* is the name of the giant who, with the giantess *Bestla*, fathered the first three Aesir gods – *Odin*, *Villi* and *Vé*. The race of primordial giants precedes the gods on planet Earth.

^v *Midgard*, the “garden in the middle”, is the temperate zone in the biosphere, with its plants, animals and humans.

^{vi} This verse and the next describe events from the pre-history of the planet – the course of the sun at the solstices and the origins of the moon.

^{vii} The “shining fields” are the supra-earthly domains, the higher worlds where the Aesir sky gods dwell, before the creation of humans – and also where they go after the end of the world.

^{viii} *Jötunheim*, the realm of the giants, is situated to the East and Northeast of *Midgard*. In modern terms, *Midgard* is Central Europe, and *Jötunheim* are the cold and icy realms to the East and North.

^{ix} The three Aesir gods who created the first humans are *Odin*, *Hönir* and *Lodu*, who are named further below. In other parts of the *Edda*, the three creator brother-gods are listed as *Odin*, *Vili* and *Vé*. Only *Odin* plays a further significant role in other mythic texts and poems, including the *Völuspá*.

^x *Ask* refers to the ash tree and *Embla* possibly to the elm tree. This would therefore be a mythos of creating humans from trees. This is one possible interpretation of these obscure lines.

^{xi} *Yggdrasil*, or “*Odin's Horse*”, is one of the names of the World Tree. The name points to its function as the axis for shamanic traveling to the upper and lower worlds.

^{xii} *Urd* is the name of the well at the foot of the world tree, as well as the name of one of the three norns. *Urd* also refers to the web of life and destiny, and thus is future-oriented.

^{xiii} The name *Skjuld* relates to the German words for guilt (*Schuld*) and debt (*Schulden*), and thus refers to the karma associated with our past actions. *Verdandi* is related to the German verb *werden*, becoming, and thus is related to the present.

^{xiv} The name *Gullveig* means something like “the power of gold”. Her story, referred to in these verses, tells of the origin of the war between the invading *Aesir* gods and the indigenous *Vanir* deities, of whom *Gullveig* is one. In *The Well of Remembrance*, I interpret these obscure lines as follows: the *Aesir* motivated by lust for gold, attack *Gullveig*. But she was a goddess with powerful magic and the *Vanir* struck back – “and still she lives on.”

^{xv} *Heathen* is another name for the seeress, but also for the heath and the heathen pagans.

^{xvi} *Seidr* is the name for the divination ceremonies of the *völvas*.

xvii The dispute is over which group of deities, Aesir or Vanir, should be paid first – i.e. the origin of the conflict, as always, was over gold!

xviii So this is the war started: the Aesir argue with the Vanir about gold, unsuccessfully try to kill Gullveig and then Odin throws the first spear.

xix A second cause of war is added: the treacherous *Loki*, who belongs to the Aesir gods, had promised *Freyja*, Vanir goddess of love and beauty, to one of the giants – without her permission, enraging her.

xx The seeress now leaves her stories of the past – origin of the world, origin of the wars – and describes the visionary task that Odin has asked of her, in exchange for his pledging one eye into Mimir's well (also a waterfall). The well, the waterfall and Heimdall's horn are situated at the foot of the world tree *Yggdrasil*, the *axis mundi*. Through his payment of one eye, Odin has gained access to visions of the past and the future.

xxi *Mimir*, the Giant-Spirit of the World Tree, the Keeper of the Axis, enables the visionary seeing into all worlds and all times. The seeing is made more vivid through the drinking of the visionary mead. The seeress mediates the connection and the dialog between Odin and Mimir.

xxii Balder's mother *Frigga* had persuaded all trees and all plants not to be part of any harm to her beloved son in the combat games the Aesir liked to play. But she had overlooked the seemingly harmless and fragile mistletoe. The cunning *Loki* exploited this oversight – turning a twig of mistletoe into a spear, and putting it into the hands of Hödur, Balder's blind brother. The unconscious fratricide is the catalyst for the collapse of the world order.

xxiii In this story, the cunning Trickster *Loki* acts as an enemy of the gods, though in other stories he helps them. He is the instigator of Balder's murder, which in the end leads to the *ragnarök*. As punishment, the Aesir gods bind him to a rock (like Prometheus). The drops from a venomous snake are collected by his wife *Sigyn*, instead of falling on his face.

xxiv Is this only a mythic image, or could the vision of poisoned lands in the East also refer to the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl, near the Pripjat River, poisoned by radioactivity in the 20th century?

xxv *Nidhögg* is the name of the death dragon, that devours human corpses. Elsewhere it is the name of the giant serpent, gnawing at the roots of the World Tree until it collapses.

xxvi In *The Well of Remembrance* I related the prophecies of the *Völuspá* with cataclysmic earth changes in the late Middle Ages and/or in the 20th century. Such visions are not specific as to dates. "Poisonous drops from the roof" refer perhaps to volcanic eruptions and/or to industrial "acid rain".

xxvii *Fenrir* or *Fenriswolf* is the monster whose offspring bring about the destruction of the world. It is a symbol of the voracious greed that fuels the runaway exploitation and destruction of our biosphere.

xxviii The decapitation of *Mimir*, whose name is related to the Latin *memor*, symbolizes our species loss of memory. Odin preserved his skull for oracular purposes, "Odin murmurs with Mimir's head." Divination with a skull was/is the custom among some Asiatic shamans.

xxix The *Yggdrasil* tree is the world axis. Thus, when it trembles, the whole Earth starts shaking.

xxx The giant in the underworld is probably the Fenriswolf – when he breaks out of his fetters, we get earthquakes.

xxxii The flaming, fiery giant, elsewhere called *Surt*, burned large areas of forests: in Russia in 2010, in Northern California in 2017, increasingly in many areas of the planet.

xxxiii *Surt*, the fire giant, brings fiery heat from the south, nearer the equator, to the northern lands.

xxxiiii *Trolls* are furry, hairy female giants, who are unpredictably hostile and dangerous to humans.

xxxv Another predictive vision of the Earth's feverish over-heating in the 20th century, the so-called "greenhouse effect."

35 The golden tablets, with divine instructions, were given by the creators at the beginning; and here again now, at the beginning of a new cycle of creation.

xxxvi Here is a vision of the spontaneous regeneration and healing of the Earth, through *Balder*, the green vegetation deity.

xxxvii *Hödur* is the blind brother of *Balder*, who through *Loki*'s treachery, threw the mistletoe branch that killed *Balder*. Here they are the two brothers who will inherit the realm of the *Aesir* gods, after the current cycle.

xxxviii *Gimlé* is a golden hall that can't be touched by fire. That means it is an other-worldly place, what esoteric traditions call the astral realm, where the virtuous deceased may find themselves.

xxxix Some commentators believe the "mighty Lord" refers to Christ, whose teachings started to spread in the Nordic lands around the 10th century.

xl The last three verses, from the *Vaftrúdnismal*, another poem of the *Edda*, elaborate on the post-ragnarök world. After the sun had been devoured by a volcanic ash-cloud, it became invisible for a time – and then reappeared, as her "daughter", moving in the same orbital pathway.

xli Does this perhaps refer to the spirits of whales and dolphins, "hovering over the ocean waves"? Will humans have deeper alliances of understanding and mutual support with them in the coming in the post-apocalyptic time?

xlii The wise giant maidens remind us of the three "mighty women" who appeared in the early part of the *Völuspá*.