



RAGNARÖK: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VÖLUSPA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON VIKING-ERA SCANDINAVIAN SOCIETIES

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the poem from the *Poetic Edda*, called *Völuspa*, which deals with the origin and end of the world in the view of the Scandinavian peoples of the Viking Age, affirming its eschatological concepts. In this way, a parallel will be made between the events that occurred in this work, with the communities themselves, seeking points that portray them, from their mentality to their daily life. Some points will be highlighted, such as the importance of women for religious practices, the war-oriented society, as well as the appreciation of knowledge, mostly in the figure of *Óðinn*. Different works will be used in addition to the *Poetic Edda*, as well as other authors will be mobilized, covering the fields of Archeology and History.

Keywords: Mythology, Scandinavian peoples, *Völuspa*, Ragnarök, Viking Age.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Poetic Edda* is considered by most academics who research the ancient Scandinavian religion of the period known as the Viking Age, as the basic document for a full understanding of the mythology of the peoples who inhabited that region. The historical period mentioned here should be briefly delimited. This ranges from the 8th century, with the attack on the *Lindisfarne* monastery, to the mid-11th century, with the death of the Norwegian King Harald Hardrada, in the so-called Battle of Stamford Bridge, in the territory of present-day England.



Having explained the historical context in a synthetic way, we begin to discuss the *Edda*, the object of study of this work. This is also known as *Codex Regius*, written during the 13th century, with no known authorship until the present day.[3] This text contains the founding myths, or at least the interpretation of the one who transmitted them through the written word. It counts from the beginning of time to the ultimate final battle of the Scandinavian gods, known as *Ragnarök*, a term that will be better defined throughout this article.

It is noteworthy that the *Edda* also presents several other poems, which deal with the interaction of the gods with their worshippers, that is, humans, and among themselves, such as the dialogues between *Óðinn*[4] and *Bórr*[5], in which they exchange insults, which demonstrates their personality. In addition, approaching the Norse sagas, the poems also tell the stories of great heroes of ancient times, as is the case of the hero *Helgi Hjorvathson*.

In this context, a brief comment on the origin of ancient Scandinavian religion is necessary, more specifically on its historical roots. The northern countries, before the so-called Viking Age, did not have a unification from a cultural or political point of view. In this way, various religions were practiced, even if they had aspects in common, they were not identical. The most prominent at the time would be that of German matrices, that is, from present-day Germany and Denmark. That is, these were the ones that spread over the years in Scandinavia, bringing with them their gods and mythological matrices, in a modified way and adapted to the men and women who lived there.

Thus, there is a fundamental understanding to start the discussion that will be presented in this article. This, in turn, will discuss and analyze the poem called *Völuspa*, which in free translation would be “The Prophecy of the *Völva*”, or “The Witch's Prophecy”, containing in its body the story that can be called a founding myth, or that is, the one that underpins all the mythology or religion of a certain people. It is in the poem *Völuspa* that the concepts of creation and destruction of the world as we know it appear.



With the exposition and explanation of the poem, an analysis will be made of its points, which can be observed congruent with the customs and daily life of the Scandinavian peoples of the time. Among the points that will be analyzed in the text, as a reflection of the community, are the importance of women in it, both for religious rituals and in the social aspect, the bellicose mentality of the time, and finally, the fundamentality and search for knowledge and wisdom in different areas. As an example, it is possible to mention the very figure of *Völva*, being a woman of extreme importance in the text, who exposes to the god known as the Father of All, his ultimate future, or even the *Ragnarök* event itself, and how this is perceived by the people of the time.

Turning now to the research methodology that will be used, that is, its classification in relation to its objectives, as well as the procedures that will be used, it can be said that it will be exploratory, that is, it will seek to clarify what belongs to the theme, scrutinizing it and bringing to light aspects not yet possibly explored extensively in the academic sphere.

With regard to how to carry out the same, an attempt will be made to carry out a bibliographical and documental analysis, using the translation of the *Poetic Edda*, by the philologist Jackson Crawford, as well as literary works by archaeologists and historians, such as the case of Neil Price, Else Roesdahl, Kristen Wolf.

Thus, having clarified the methodological procedures, as well as an overview of what will be addressed in the present work, we move on to the discussion of the original text itself. Subsequently, aspects of this will be analyzed in the Scandinavian society of the Viking Age, going through three main points brought by the *Edda*, as well as other complementary texts.

2. VÖLUUSPA (“THE PROPHECY OF THE VÖLVA” OR “THE PROPHECY OF THE WITCH”)

As previously mentioned, the poetic text *Völuspá* belongs to the set called *Poetic Edda*, which in turn is also known as *Codex Regius* and is the oldest document relating to the Viking Age. In this way, it is observed that it is necessary, in a preliminary way, a brief



comment on this document, since it has fundamental importance for the full understanding of the poem that will be detailed below.

This compendium of texts dating from the 13th century, with no known authorship, narrates several stories, from those related to the ancient Scandinavian religion, to the saga of heroes, often mixing fiction and reality, related to facts that occurred during the Viking Age. This collection is a primary source, including for another important document known today, the *Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic historian and writer.

The *Codex Regius*, however, it should be warned, does not have a specific date of writing, which makes its wording biased. This is due to the fact that when dealing with the ancient religion of Scandinavia, the authors may have done this with a Christian look, seeking to associate these ancient practices with a barbaric way of life, and without civility in general. Remember here that the conversion of Scandinavia, more specifically the kingdom of Norway, occurs in the second half of the 10th century, this means that texts that were possibly written during the period may have the intention of guiding the reader to the thought described above.

However, even with this aspect mentioned, the *Poetic Edda* has congruent traits with the Scandinavian societies of the Viking Age, as can be seen, not only through archaeological finds, but also in written sources, as is the case of the scalded poetry, and even even the so-called *Runestones*[6]. In addition to these converging traits, even in the Middle Ages itself, it is possible to prove plausible reports and records that are consistent with religious thought, especially when it comes to other beliefs, both prior and contemporary to these, as in the case of several Germanic tribes, that occupied their place in the Roman Empire of Classical Antiquity, and even what developed in the Slavic peoples, called the *Rus*, who in turn descended from those present in Sweden and Finland.

Having clarified these points in relation to the authenticity of the document analyzed here, it is necessary, in general terms, to present some of the most important texts contained in it, so that the analysis of *Völuspá*, the core of this article, and included in



the group key verses of the document. The importance of this introduction is noted, mainly so that one can understand some characteristics, both of the stories and of their characters, mostly gods.

Starting with those that refer to religion, one should cite the so-called *Hávamál*, or in free translation, *The Words of the High God*. This god who presents himself would be *Óðinn*, considered as the leader of all residents of *Ásgarðr*[7]. In this poem, this god advises those who welcome him on Earth in different ways. Here is also described, in a vague and generic way, a possible appearance of him, or at least how he would present himself to his devotees and residents of *Midgard*. He is described as a man with a beard and long white hair, who would wear a hood or hat. Thus maintaining the image of a mysterious and wise man, mainly due to his image of an older man.

Another poetic text of great interest and importance for understanding the *Poetic Edda* is the so-called *Harbarthsljóth*. This presents a form of insult competition between the gods *Óðinn* and *Þórr*, respectively father and son. As much as it is a trivial situation, it demonstrates something not often mentioned and imagined when dealing with Viking Age Scandinavians, that is, their intelligence and wisdom. When fighting with words, both gods demonstrate great knowledge of each other, as well as presenting what was most valuable to each one, their greatest deeds, proving the need for glory and recognition on the part of the deities.

Now, in a synthetic way, since this article aims at a historical look at texts of a mythological and religious nature, it will discuss those that include the heroes. For the most part, they deal with stories involving three central themes, namely family, revenge and conquests. These would even be congruent with what is observed in the texts that deal with the gods, such as *Thrymskvitha*, where *Þórr* kills countless *jötnar*[8] due to the theft of *Mjöllnir*[9], as well as serving as an allegory for the belligerent character of the Scandinavian society of the time. That is, concluding this preliminary analysis, it is clear that as much as humans, the gods have common characteristics, and which, as will be observed later, are present in *Völuspá*.



The *Völuspa* deals with the beginning and end of the world through the vision of ancient Scandinavian religions, in verse form. Such facts are told through a *Völva*, which was summoned by *Óðinn* to present him with such knowledge, something that is even exposed in the first stanza[10] of this one. Starting with the citation of what is known as *Ginnungagap*, which was not described in the text, and would only receive a definition in the so-called *Prose Edda*. This, in turn, understands that the mentioned place would be related to the beginnings of the world, where the two pre-existing kingdoms meet, namely, *Niflheim* and *Muspellzheimr*. [11]

In the *Völuspa*, there is no specific mention of how the world was created, only that the gods, including *Óðinn*, did it together. There are, however, some of their attitudes, such as naming the stars, Sun and Moon, the stars, creating and separating time itself, for example. In addition, the place called *Iðavöllr* is still cited, which would be a kind of meeting point of the gods, however, there is no substantial description about it, only that the entities gathered there and organized activities aimed at leisure.

Still in *stanza* 8, 3 giants coming from *Jötunheim* are mentioned. These would be, as shown in *stanzas* 19 and 20, the so-called *Nornir*, these three female figures who weave the destiny of each being, whether human or a god. They are located in the so-called *Urðarbrunnr*, (Well of Destiny), and each one has the function of tracing a temporal moment, with *Urðr* responsible for the past, *Verðandi* for the present, and *Skuld* for the future. These even also predict the advent of *Ragnarök*.

During *stanzas* 9 to 16, the creation of the so-called dwarfs is presented, whose origin is linked to the blood of *Ymir*[12], the primordial giant and one of the first beings in the world. Countless names are presented, as well as several lineages of dwarves and families, thus forming a completely new race of beings. It is worth mentioning here that these would be known for their unparalleled skills in terms of forging armor and weapons, especially for the gods, the most famous of which were their weapons from the dwarves, such as *Mjöllnir* and *Gungnir*[13].

Introduced the different race, then develops the creation of human beings in *Midgard*. This occurs, with the arrival of three gods to the kingdom of men, namely *Óðinn*, *Hœnir*



and *Lóðurr*[14], where each of them, respectively, grants the first two humans, *Ask* and *Embla*, breath, soul and hair together with humans features. As in the *Poetic Edda*, the prosaic describes such events in a similar way, only adding that they would have been originated by the gods through trees.

In the stanzas that follow, it is narrated how the first great war in the world took place, and its motivation. Initially, the arrival of a goddess called *Gullveig* is described, a being whose origins, according to the poetic text, would be a *Vanir*[15]. On the surface, she means well, but has proven to be descended from a cursed family. The *Æsir*[16] decide to kill the sorceress, as they call her, using spear piercing, but end up deciding to set her on fire. They set it on fire three times, but it comes back to life in all of them, which forces the gods to gather. At this meeting, it is decided, mainly by *Óðinn*, that they would seek revenge for the presence of the entity in their kingdom, which starts the conflict between the *Æsir* and *Vanir* gods. However, such a conflict, as can be seen in the *Edda*, is resolved in a harmonious way, agreeing on a peace that would last until the end of time.

Having finished the narration of the conflict explained above, we move on to the discussion of a fundamental aspect for what we seek to analyze in this article, wisdom. Returning to the account, it can be said that the seer quotes that she knows where *Óðinn's* eye is, having the science of his sacrifice, mentioning the place known as *Mímisbrunnr*, loosely translated as *Mimir's Well*[17], where the even reside. This passage proves a trait of the personality of the god known as All Father, very important for the understanding of Scandinavian society, namely, the search for knowledge.

In the event alluded to above, the god sacrifices an eye, not being specified whether right or left, so that he can drink the waters of the Well of *Mimir*, which would guarantee the same comprehensive knowledge on various topics that were of interest to him. Another fact that must be mentioned is the mention of *Völur* that *Mimir* could drink from that sacred place at all times, which, consequently, is an affirmation that he would be a man of great knowledge, being admitted by several scholars as a of the wisest of the Nine Realms, including a fact that is quoted in the *Prose Edda*.



Later in stanza 30, the seer presents well-known and important creatures for the events that will follow, mostly *Ragnarök*. The *Valkyrjur*, translated as Valkyries, are, in short, a group of women represented as warriors, who in the service of *Óðinn*, collect the dead in battle for the formation of his army when the end of time comes. These would be located in the great hall called *Valhöll*, translated as *Valhalla*, in the kingdom of *Ásgard*, where they would battle every day as a form of training for the aforementioned event.

From stanza 31, the *Edda* begins the tales that precede *Ragnarök*, starting with the most important of them, the mention of *Baldr's* death. He begins by saying that he is a victim of a terrible event, and then he presents the mistletoe, the object responsible for his death. This harmless plant would be used by *Höðr*, the blind brother of the murdered god, kept in error by *Loki*[18], to take his life. This fact, according to the sayings of the *Prose Edda*, triggers the so-called *Fimbulvetr*, a winter that lasts three years, and when it comes to an end, the final destiny of the gods begins.

During these passages, the pain felt by *Óðinn's* wife, *Frigg*, is presented, as well as the capture of the god responsible for the aforementioned death, *Loki*. This one, in turn, is imprisoned, being his destiny, according to the *Prose Edda*, to be freed and lead the final battle against the entities of *Ásgarðr*. In addition, in stanza 34, it is mentioned that beside the traitorous god, there was his wife, *Sigyn*, who, however much she accompanied him, did not feel accomplished in this feat. Nothing else is known about this figure, its main passage in ancient texts being the one just presented.

Later, the poem describes various places and beings that do not necessarily correlate with events to come in the future. Having said that, we proceed to briefly present such mentions. The first of these would be *Sliðr*, a river full of swords, that is, an armed river. Then he mentions briefly, without further depth, a gold-plated hall, situated on the top of *Ókolnir*, which belongs to the being called *Brimir*. Finally, the seer in her report says she observes another room, where the sun cannot be seen, and covered by serpents, next to a beach of bodies. She also says that from this place, a poison spill would originate, and *Niðhöggr* [19], would feed on those sent to the place, being only



marginalized beings in society, such as those who do not fulfill their vows, adulterers and criminals several.

In the following stanzas, an important figure for *Ragnarök* is mentioned, the wolf that can be identified as *Hati*, the one who will eat the Moon, guided by the god *Mani* in the mentioned event, since it is the only canine mentioned in the original documents that is related to this star. Then she tells *Völur*, that many men sacrifice themselves to the wolf, and consequently the sky of *Ásgarðr* turns red, the Sun grows dark, and joy disappears from that realm. She further cites a *jötun* called *Eggþér*, who played the harp in conjunction with his red rooster, *Fjalarr*. The first is described, in the *Prose Edda*, as a protector of the *jötnar*, who inhabited the place known as *Járnviðr*, known as the Iron Forest, where the creature first mentioned in this paragraph resides. Finally, another rooster is mentioned, its name being *Gullinkambi*, who had awakened the *einherjar*[20] for their final war.

From *stanza* 43, the events immediately preceding *Ragnarök*, as well as *Ragnarök* itself, begin to reveal themselves, starting with what will happen in general, saying that brothers will face each other, promises will be broken, the world will become a place without trust and peace, where no one will trust his neighbor. She cites the howls of *Fenrir* [21] at the gates of *Hel* [22]. Then, the final battle of the gods begins, to the sound of the *Gjallarhorn* call, played by the god and guardian of *Ásgarðr*, *Heimdall*. At the same time, it is mentioned that *Óðinn* goes to meet *Mimir*, that is, he goes to the roots of *Yggdrasill*, which in turn trembles with the beginning of the end.

The description of the *jötnar* preparing for war begins, firstly with the description of *Hrymir*, who wields a shield and comes from the eastern region. Then *Jörmungandr*, the serpent residing in *Midgard*, is mentioned, its size being equivalent to the circumference of the Earth, since it involves the same, which when moving with great rage will cause immense waves. It should also be mentioned here that the great reptile mentioned is one of the sons of the god *Loki*. Another cited creature would be the eagle that is located, according to the *Eddas*, at the end of the world, called *Hræsvelgr*, whose translation would be “the one that eats bodies”, and it would be screaming at the beginning of the battle.



It is important here to note the last mention of the army that would face the gods, the ship *Naglfar*, commanded by *Loki*, and according to the *Prose Edda*, which presents more details about the event, it would be being manned by the *muspellz*, that is, those who inhabit the kingdom of flames, whose leader would be *Surtr*, who even goes to battle, destroying what is in front of him, even mountains. It should be said here that the great wolf *Fenrir* accompanies the vessel during the invasion.

Finally, the gods assemble, both *Æsir* and *Vanir*, in preparation for the combat to come. Then, some battles that took place are described very clearly, mainly those involving the main gods of this religion. The first of these would be when *Óðinn* faces *Fenrir* and suffers for it, causing his wife *Frigg* to mourn for the second time. However, soon after, his son *Víðarr* avenged him, killing the giant with a sword stuck in his jaw.

Finally, the fight between *Þórr* and *Jörmungandr* is narrated, which is fundamental, since due to the ferocity of both combatants, *Midgard* is destroyed, causing the death of all men. The god manages to end up victorious, killing his opponent, but being poisoned by him in the process, and dying after the nine-step walk. Thus, the known kingdoms are decimated, with the Earth submerged, the sky darkened and the stars falling, culminating in *Surtr's* final blow, which destroys everything known until then.

As a result, the end of *Ragnarök* is reached[23], however, the poem presents some survivors of the catastrophe, of the fate of the gods. *Baldr* comes back to life, and reigns together with his brother *Höðr*, who took his life, in a place called *Iðavöllr*, field where the gods started the world. Another place finally mentioned is the so-called *Gimlé*, plated with gold, where humanity will reside and prosper.

Having thus finished the presentation and explanation of the poem, we move on to its interconnection and analysis with the Viking Age and its people, and which aspects can be observed from the text in the society of the time.

3. VÖLVA, WAR AND WISDOM

This topic aims to understand aspects presented in the poem previously described briefly, using three topics as a reference. *Völur*, or *Völva* to exemplify the role of



women, and their importance to Scandinavian communities. The war, contained in the *Ragnarök* event, and its fundamentality for the maintenance of power, and even from the religious point of view, where one perceives an appreciation of war activity. Finally, the principle of wisdom, the central theme of *Völuspá*, since *Óðinn* only seeks the narrating seer, so that she can obtain knowledge of the beginning and end of time.

Starting with the role of women in the Scandinavian context of the Viking Age, it can be said that, in addition to the social purposes pertinent to a predominantly male society, women played a relevant role. Among them, as Else Roesdahl states in her work *The Vikings*, when the absence of her husband, or the head of the house, women became the holders of all the power in that environment. However, as much as this power seems a small design, others were not, as is the case of the possibility of divorce and even the ability to belong to the line of succession of the political system, that is, in addition to being able to assume a position of leader of State, his heirs could claim him by maternal descent.

In addition, women still had importance in the religious life of communities. As mentioned, even though there was a male predominance, when it came to offerings related to domestic life, the vast majority of participants were women, which for a society primarily based on agricultural production, has a clear essentiality for its maintenance. However, their participation in the religious sphere was not restricted to such acts with a commemorative and restricted bias.

There is archaeological evidence, mostly related to artifacts found in women's caves and tombs that show important aspects of women's lives in those societies. As a Viking Age tradition, as Neil Price says, people were buried with their belongings, and these, in general, revealed the social position of the individual. That is, some women were found with artifacts that would go back to wands, or staffs, as is the example cited by the author, from the tomb of Ballateare, in Balladoole, on the Isle of Man. These, as attested by the National Museum of Denmark, could represent the seer function, an important function of the religious system of the time.



Women could have a prominent social position, which can be proven archaeologically, in addition to written sources, as is the case of the poem under analysis here. In this, the figure of fundamentality for the structuring of the world in ancient Scandinavian religion is presented. Examples of these beings, in addition to *Völva*, the central character of the narrative, there are the so-called *Nornir*, three women who weave and control, with certain limits, time, whether past, present or future, being responsible for prophecies referring to *Óðinn* himself.

Finally, it should be presented, to emphasize the relevance of women in northern European communities, what is called *seðir*. This would be, according to Simek, in his work *Dictionary Of Northern Mythology*, a type of black magic that only women could use and control, seeing that this, in general, would go against the expected attitudes of a man. However, it had been used by *Óðinn*, in a situation where he was forced to dress in female clothing, as this was the only way he would be able to expose an essence of the same gender, for its effectiveness.

Neil Price, talks about the subject, in his work, *Vikings: The Definitive History of the Peoples of the North*, mainly on the conclusions of the archaeological point of view in relation to the figure of the *Vö*

lva, and its definition of gender.

Provavelmente existe a possibilidade de rastrear esses tipos de pessoas na arqueologia, como nos mais de cinquenta túmulos contendo cajados de metal muito semelhantes às descrições que as sagas fazem do principal atributo de uma feiticeira, consagrado até mesmo em nome do tipo mais comum de mulher que usava magia – a *Völva*, ou “portadora do cajado”. Determinou-se que as pessoas enterradas nessas sepulturas são mulheres, por causa das problemáticas associações artefatuais mencionadas anteriormente, e sem dúvida os corpos usam roupas femininas “convencionais” da Era Viking. (PRICE, 2021, p. 240)

That is, it is concluded, at least with regard to women, even if a society dominated by men prevailed, the Scandinavians greatly appreciated the feminine. This, therefore, led the citizens of the time to glimpse in their gods and creatures, as well as in religious



practices in a broad way, women as figures, if not central, fundamental to the functioning of the world as a whole.

We now turn to the analysis of the warrior aspect in Scandinavian societies. As can be seen in the poem above, the final fate of the Norse gods is a great battle that will result in the death of the vast majority of them, as well as all of humanity. It can be said, therefore, that there is a mentality focused on an exacerbated warmongering, which is praised in the texts that narrate their exploits. Archaeological findings and even other written sources, both from the Scandinavians themselves and from their opponents over the years, show how war was overvalued in that environment. Such societies had, as one of their main activities, the so-called incursions, that is, invasions of other cities and often other peoples, as is mostly observed in what happened in the British Isles.

In this way, it can be seen, as mentioned by the historian Kristen Wolf, that the practice of raids and wars was something natural at the time, and even seen as an extension of its primary internal activities, being related to trade, and even as a way to venture into diverse lands and teach young people from those communities certain skills. It should also be added that his fame was achieved in Western European society, as a result of such practices, where the starting point, - not that this was the first looting carried out, but it was certainly the most notorious for the time, - the invasion of *Lindisfarne Monastery*.

Regarding the point mentioned above, and which should be analyzed in more depth, it would be what relates war to fame. This, according to Neil Price, was also related to their social status, that is, whether the individual would be well liked in their midst, whether they would be seen as a legend or even a hero. Fame is associated with the rise of the nobles of the time, as a result of this war-oriented mentality. The importance seen in war can be seen in the so-called *Runestones*, in which many deeds narrated are focused on wars, citing, as an example, the *Karlevi stele*, a runic inscription of Sweden, which was built in honor of a Danish nobleman who died in a battle.

War and fame are associated elements in Viking culture.



As violentas incursões vikings não serviam apenas para recompensa material, uma questão de saques e pilhagens. Em uma cultura que privilegia a fama, as façanhas corajosas e realizações demonstráveis, ofereciam também oportunidades para obter tudo isso. Como afirmou um estudioso acadêmico: O ato de adquirir prata era tão importante quanto a prata em si. (PRICE, 2021, pp. 323-324)

It is also worth highlighting that within what is called fame, there is a character that goes beyond the mere battle, or incursion, as explained above. As is known, the Scandinavian peoples had expansionist intentions, even conquering cities and creating settlements, from Britannia, to the so-called *Vinland*, in North America. Going further, these communities founded cities of great importance, such as *Kiev* in Eastern Europe. That is, fame came not only through battle for economic purposes, but also aimed at discovering new places and conquering them.

However, this belligerent mentality also has a religious bias, with the source that justifies this statement being the texts of the *Eddas* and skald poems, as is the case of the *Völuspá*, even if implicitly. Accordingly, *Óðinn's* warriors were selected from the slain in battle, by the *Valkyrjur* calls, and brought to the great hall *Valhöll*. That is, for a Scandinavian, who dedicated his life to battles, death would be just a ticket to become a closer and more loyal servant of his greatest god, and to be by his side in *Ragnarök*.

Another interesting factor, and equally linked to religion, is the figure of the *berserkr*, in its plural form *berserkir*. These were, in summary, considered as warriors, who in battle would be as fierce as bears, and would even use animal skins, aiming to obtain their strength. Some scholars, including Neil Price, also point out that their nomenclature is related to rituals performed prior to a confrontation. A notable fact of these men would be their connection with the god *Óðinn*, since the most explicit citation of their existence, according to the so-called *Ynglinga* saga, narrates their behavior, fighting without armor, and not being hit by any kind of weapon, his fury being equal to that of wolves.

In this context, it can be said then that war and warlike thinking, as well as a martialized society with expansion ideologies, are reflections, both of a policy that sought the rise and glory of its people, as well as of its beliefs, having between them a relationship of



reciprocity. Thus, it is understood that there is an intrinsic and inseparable bond between these institutions in Scandinavian society.

Finally, a point of paramount importance is presented, which is related in certain aspects to what was presented above, mainly with regard to trade and the expansionist ideologies of the time. This would be the importance of knowledge for such communities, something that even underlies *Völuspá*, since *Óðinn*, when communicating with the resurrected *Völva*, only seeks to understand the beginning of the world and what will happen at the end, so that he can prepare and understand better signs and events.

This search and use of knowledge is evident in the Scandinavian society of the Viking Age, in many aspects, highlighting here, however, the military aspect, and its practice, as well as with regard to social organization. Starting with this last point, it can be noticed, mainly regarding the reading capacity and knowledge of the runic alphabet of the time. It is worth remembering that it was only known, according to the writer Else Roesdahl, at least during the beginning of this period, by the aristocracy, by the high social class, that is, those who, in a way, organized and controlled fundamental sectors of the community.

However, it should be explained here that this monopoly of knowledge was only observed in large urban centers, as in citadels, whether coastal or inland, the need to organize the place fell on the population in general, they knew read and write more comprehensively. However, even so, it is still possible to understand the importance of knowledge in relation to power structures. It is also worth mentioning that many runes, whether written in words or individually as a mere representation of something, have been found throughout history in various objects, including in more urbanized environments, however, due to the simplicity of their use, the aforementioned monopoly is understood.

Such an assumption is even found, succinctly, in the text by historian Else Roesdahl, as transcribed below.



Muitos dentre a alta classe foram capazes de ler runas julgando pelo número de inscrições em pedra que intentaram a ser vistas e lidas, mas runas também surgiram em todos os tipos de objetos de madeira ou osso, quando podiam ser talhados ou esculpidos – em navios, maçanetas, túmulos, broches, teares e pentes. Geralmente elas apresentavam o nome do dono ou somente anotações. Algumas inscrições talvez contivessem fórmulas relacionadas a magia, mas isto comumente é presumido, simplesmente pois as runas não puderam ser compreendidas.” (ROESDAHL, 2016, p. 52)[24]

A point of great interest, especially when presenting runes related to magical inscriptions, and magical practices in general, would be the passage from the poem *Hávamal*. This, as already mentioned, can be described as teachings and advice from the god *Óðinn*, and among them, he mentions, from *stanza* 138, how he became aware of the runes and how important it was for his knowledge related to magic practices. In addition, something very important in his description is the sacrifice made by him, in which there is a self-sacrifice, in his own name, to obtain such learning. That is, from the religious point of view, even death is irrelevant for obtaining knowledge.

In terms of practicality, in the broad sense, manufacturing must be extensively presented. This had fundamentality for this society, since such people were mostly traders, even maintaining such activities with several other civilizations, from the Saxons to even the residents of Constantinople. In this way, there would be a need for a broad knowledge about the manufacture of objects, from the construction of ships to the use of ceramics.

The products made were diverse, from those derived from hunting and agriculture, as is the example of clothing, to those produced from metals, as is the example of jewelry and weapons. The latter, points out Kristen Wolf, were manufactured with high standard and intricate adornments. It is even worth mentioning the highlight of swords, mostly produced by the Scandinavians, being considered at the time as one of the best available.

We now move on to one of the most important elements of the Viking Age when it comes to knowledge and technology, namely the ships. These were carried out in an exquisite way, with no levels of comparison with the production of other social groups.



Scandinavian ships were extremely versatile, being able to be used from trade to invasions, being adaptable to seas, rivers, deep or shallow waters. A point that, according to archaeologist Neil Price, made the primary difference in navigation for the Nordics, including the unprecedented use of sails on ships.

These sails, as the author mentions, serve to, in addition to substantially improving the speed of the means of transport, also improve the ship's maneuverability, making it simpler to handle. Sails were not only used on ships destined for trade, but also on those whose objective was raids, thus having a different apparatus in their use, see that the first ones would be larger and wider vessels, while the second ones, even justified by the objective of their use, were narrower and smaller.

However, the use of sails was not the only reason for the success of the navigations of the Scandinavian peoples, but also the way in which the ships were designed, thought and produced. The wood used in production was special for this type of transport, the models were symmetrical, those intended for war, were lighter and more agile, with smaller hulls, in the sense of being less deep. Another point was the ease in raising and lowering the sail of the latter, being useful for maneuvers that required speed. These vessels were so effective that they served as an inspiration for several other peoples, such as the Normans, who used models close to the Scandinavians. That is, even though some of the techniques used by the Scandinavians had already been invented, their search for improvement managed to transform them in a positive way and ensured that these societies achieved great success.

Finally, one should talk about the knowledge involved in war, praising the warmongering culture during the Viking Age. It will focus here on the aspect of maritime invasions, since it was the most successful point of these societies during the period. These were carried out before the eighth century, however, it was from this moment that, due to political and economic issues, the Danes (Germanic ethnic group from Scandinavia) started an increase in these incursions.

This occurs, using two primary techniques, the choice of target, as well as the method of attack. The first was conceived, since, before the invasions, the Scandinavians



carried out trade with the places they would attack in the future, as is the case of *Lindisfarne*, for example. In this way, they could see that in many of these, especially places with a strong religious presence, such as the one mentioned, there would be no fortifications or even defenses.

Therefore, they could invade without encountering resistance, or if there was, it would be negligible compared to the number of soldiers. Another point that had been observed would be the amount of riches that monasteries, for example, contained in their property. That is, for years analyzing through trade, the Danes were able to identify the weakest targets in different places, such as *Britannia* and *Francia*, and invade them.

Secondly, the strategies used would be attacks with great speed and brutality. For the most part, these incursions took place with smaller ships, compared to freighters, aimed at transporting goods, being faster and not perceived as dangerous by many peoples who would suffer the attacks. In this way, the invaders would be able to dock and set sail with speed, causing attacks that would be very difficult to stop, as there would be no time to, for example, request reinforcements.

Something that should be mentioned, and out of paramount importance for the success of these incursions, is the violence used in the attacks. In diverse accounts, from Saxon to Frank, the Northmen are always described as brutal, killing civilians, and even causing massacres of peasants, along with priests and other members of the Church. That is, the brutality with which the Danes carried out their invasions caused fear, a factor that also made resistance difficult. Including, many religious in their descriptions, put these men as evil creatures, who bring chaos and death.

In this way, it can be seen, with everything explained and presented so far, that knowledge was a fundamental part of the success of the men of the north during the Viking Age. Such knowledge was used in the most diverse ways, from understanding language and writing, to building ships and producing goods, including the militaristic view of the time, with battle and invasion tactics.



4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given what has been presented so far, it can be clearly seen how the *Völuspá*, one of the most important texts from Scandinavia during the Viking Age, influences and portrays the communities of that region. Clearly, there are several aspects that relate to the reality experienced by such societies, however, the most important ones are presented here in their written records.

The participation of women was of great relevance for the functioning of social structures, even in the case of patriarchal communities. This is because the feminine was valued and necessary, for example, for the practice of certain rituals for the protection of houses, and even with regard to the observed *seðir*. In addition, as explained, their rights were more recognized than in other places in medieval Europe, such as the right to divorce, inheritance and royal heredity.

Another point addressed, which confirms one of the hypotheses of the present work, is the warmongering of this society. As exposed, the Scandinavians had, in a way, a warmongering, martial socio-political regime. In this sense, it was common to encourage conflict and wars, which is reflected in their religious practices, as well as in the beliefs themselves. For example, the absence of fear, or at least something reduced in relation to this feeling, was rooted in the belief that the dead in battle, the good warrior, would fight alongside the greater god, *Óðinn*, and help him during *Ragnarok*.

The belief and practice of this warrior mentality led to the search for constant knowledge. This can be seen in the tactics used, in the weapons built, and clearly in the most famous symbol of the Scandinavians, that is, their ships. The commitment of these peoples to a warlike mentality brought a true obsession with wisdom, something that can be seen in the constant improvement of their vessels.

The zeal in manufactures and the pursuit of knowledge were seen in other aspects of everyday life, such as in the runes. Its reading was seen as a symbol of power and of great importance for the maintenance of communities.



Finally, the last point presented that proves the hypotheses introduced at the beginning of this article would be in the learning that had been used in the manufacture of other products, such as jewelry. These were sold, and consequently, it was an essential activity for the survival of those peoples, since the vast majority of Scandinavians were traders.

Thus, it is possible to conclude this article, sustaining the confirmation of the initially thought hypotheses, at least for the most part, and observing the wealth of details present in ancient writings, as well as in Nordic society itself during the Viking Age.

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APPENDIX - REFERENCE FOOTNOTE

3. Here it is worth a brief explanation about the maintenance of memory as well as history. For many centuries in communities in northern Europe, especially in Nordic countries, traditions, great deeds, and even customs were, for the most part, transmitted orally. However, as mentioned by Jean Jacques Le Goff, in his *Analytical*



Dictionary of the Medieval West, with the mass Christianization of Europe, many of these reports began to be written, with the aim of maintaining the History and Memory of these peoples, in a uniform way and lasting, in a source, to some extent, reliable. Of course, it must be remembered here that the written record presented the point of view of the writer.

4. *Óðinn*, is the ruling god of all other gods, being most associated with the leadership of the so-called *Æsir*, and is also considered the one who created the world. According to author Rudolf Simek, this god has numerous names, and generally, through analysis of them, is strongly associated with two aspects of society, poetry, and war. However, on several occasions, the god in question is presented as a great sage, linked to the pursuit of knowledge, and also seen as one of the greatest sorcerers of the kingdoms. Married to the goddess *Frigg*, who on several occasions is accepted as being the same person as *Freya*, he was always accompanied by his two ravens, *Huginn* and *Muninn*, who watched over the kingdoms at his command. Many adventures are described about him, but he is not considered the great hero of Scandinavian religion. His destiny can be observed in the poem *Völuspá*, which will be analyzed in this article.

5. *Þórr* is the best known of the gods, and seen by his devotees as the most famous and fearless hero of the nine kingdoms. His name has the meaning of thunder, being associated countless times with this phenomenon of nature. According to Simek, this god is the son of *Óðinn*, with the *jötun*, who is often described as a primordial giant and personification of the Earth itself, *Jörð*. *Þórr* has a wife, *Síf*, and three sons, *Magni*, *Moði* and *Þrúðr*. He is considered the defender of *Midgard*, i.e. Earth, as well as all realms. He is seen as a warrior, being the biggest of them, a tall and robust man, with red hair and beard, and fierce look. Many adventures take place in his name, including being the hero who won the most battles and defeated the most enemies. Something that should also be mentioned is his hammer, *Mjöllnir*, one of the most feared weapons of the era.

6. *Runestones* are, in general terms, monuments that were built to honor the dead, who generally belonged to high social classes, during the so-called Viking Age. In these, there were two elements, the visual and the written. The first featured a kind of mural, which according to archaeologist Neil Price, had a strong relationship with the religion of the time, with figures similar to *Óðinn* and *Þórr*, for example. The second element of these stone monuments would be the runic writings that would tell the story of what was buried in the place. It should also be remembered that the presence of these two elements was not unanimous, there could be, for example, only the writings.

7. *Ásgarðr* is the name of the fortress of the gods, or their kingdoms, more specifically those called *Æsir*. An important thing to note, as mentioned by Rudolf Simek, is that originally this region of the gods was not another realm, but a place belonging to *Midgard*. However, according to the author, in the writings of Snorri Sturluson, the region becomes independent of the Earth and a new kingdom is created, more specifically in the heavens. It is worth mentioning here that there are some important places belonging to it, such as *Valhöll*, *Hliðskjálf*, from where *Óðinn* observes the



whole, *Íðavöllr*, *Glaðsheimr* and *Vingólf*, a temple and a hall for the *Æsir* women respectively.

8. *Jötnar* or *Jötun*, the second being the singular form of the first, is the name given to those who are known today as giants. However, the explanation observed from the original sources would be that this name would be related to the residents of *Jötunheim*, one of the nine kingdoms of the Scandinavian religion. Therefore, it is not possible to call all the inhabitants of that place as giants, it is worth noting that some were recognized with an appearance close to that of the gods.

9. *Mjöllnir* is the name given to the hammer of the god *Þórr*, and the object that also symbolizes his strength. This was a gift from the dwarf brothers *Sindri* and *Brokkr*. They forged this weapon, however there was an error in it, caused by a distraction created by *Loki*, when he turned into a bee and stung the dwarf *Sindri*. This mishap led to a decrease in the handle of the hammer, which was shorter than expected. This one has two main skills, namely, the creation of thunder and lightning when launched, and the return to *Þórr*'s hand, at any time, being in any location. The god, due to the weight of the hammer, needs his gauntlets, called *Járngreipr*, to use it. It is also worth mentioning that his sons *Magni* and *Moði* inherit the weapon after *Ragnarök*.

10. *Stanza* can be defined, in a synthetic way, as a stanza of the Scald poems as a whole, as well as the so-called *Eddas*. This one, however, is not the same in its form, since, for example, a prosaic tone in its structure and presentation is observed, as well as the lack of rhymes or rhythm in its verses.

11. It is necessary here to explain in a synthetic way each of the kingdoms mentioned above. Preliminarily it should be noted here that the descriptions of these are presented in the so-called *Prose Edda*, a document subsequent to the *Codex Regius*. Starting with *Muspellzheimr*, this was conceived before the other realms, even Earth, called *Midgard*, and in Sturluson's words, it would be covered in flames and fire in general. In this there would be no inhabitants, but only a being called *Surtr*, a primordial entity in the Scandinavian religion, and who has an important entrance in *Ragnarök*. Finally, *Niflheim* is observed, another place whose creation is prior, as well as the kingdom previously analyzed. However, here, greater details are presented by Sturluson, who says it is the cold place, and more importantly, where several rivers originate, including the one called *Gjöll*, near the gates of *Hel*.

12. *Ymir* is the first giant to be created. According to *Simek*, this was generated at the meeting of the primordial kingdoms, *Ginnungagap*, by the melting of the rivers that were in it. He fed on the milk of the so-called *Auðumla* cow, until he became a being of massive proportions. The creature was the one who spawned the first generations of *jötnar*, the so-called ice giants. In a way, he was also responsible for the beginning of the gods, coming to have kinship with *Óðinn*, who had even been his executioner, killing him together with his brothers. However, the death of the giant meant that the gods mentioned above could, at the beginning of the world, shape the kingdoms, mostly Earth, *Midgard*, from his body.



13. Gungnir, is the spear used as a weapon by *Óðinn*. This, like most of the weapons of ancient Scandinavian religion, was built by descendants of Ivaldi, a renowned and famous dwarf blacksmith, due to a bet with *Loki*. The spear is of paramount importance within the deeds of the god, since it would serve to kill warriors in battles, and collect them for the army of the deity, to carry out his greatest sacrifice, aiming at learning runes.

14. It is necessary to make a brief comment here on the three gods mentioned above. This is because there is a disagreement, even a small one, about the company that *Óðinn* brought with him to the creation of human beings. As the object of analysis in this article is the *Poetic Edda*, it will be admitted that the gods would be *Hœnir* and *Lóðurr*, but when one migrates to the *Prose Edda*, the situation changes. In this, the author describes the entities as being the sons of Bor, who would be, according to him, in addition to *Óðinn*, *Vili* and *Ve*. That is, there is an incongruity regarding who would have created human beings, even if the main god remains unchanged. It is believed, however, for the purposes of this work, that what is quoted in the *Völuspá* is closer to the original belief.

15. *Vanir*, would be the second family of gods within the Scandinavian religion, with importance, even if lesser. Some names that can be mentioned here would be *Njörðr*, *Freyr* and *Freyja*. These had an intimate relationship with fertility, in all its senses, from the conception of sons and daughters, to mostly good harvests, sunny days, rain, among others. In this way, they were deities very connected with the agrarian population and, as the vast majority of Scandinavians practiced this type of work activity, these gods were, in a way, very worshipped. Something that differentiates these from their colleagues, according to Simek, would be, in addition to their more peaceful and magical bias, as they are possessors and adherents of *seiðr*, their power structure would have strong indications of a matriarchy. This, perhaps, can be proven, since the type of supernatural practices carried out by them is mostly used by women.

16. *Æsir* is the name given to the family of gods best known in medieval Scandinavia. Among them, the best known would be *Óðinn*, *Þórr* and *Baldr*. The present family would be intimately connected with wars and battles, with one exception, as *Óðinn* had a great appreciation for poetry and knowledge in a broad way. These were usually worshiped by warriors and rulers who fomented war, since they aimed at victory in it, and would be in convergence with what was preached by the deities. That is, in a way they were venerated by a kind of elite of Scandinavian society, but not exclusively. The term *Æsir*, has its root in the word *áss*, which would mean god, so the family presented here would have the plural name of this word, gods.

17. This is regarded as a being of great knowledge and wisdom. However, there is no concrete record of his belonging to any family of religion, that is, he is sometimes represented as an *Æsir* god, sometimes as a giant, that is, a jotun. The being is represented, mainly by the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson, as being only a head, without having a complete body.



18. *Loki* is considered an *Æsir* god, and by many specialists, as the one with the greatest negativity. However, at the same time that he is understood to be the destroyer of the deities, he helps them at different times, including being co-responsible for the creation of various weapons and objects in general for the residents of *Ásgardr*. Little is known about the god, but one of his most important facts is that he is considered *Óðinn's* brother, due to a pact between the two, as described in the poem *Lokasenna*. One of the most notorious facts performed by the god, was the death of *Baldr*, by tricking his brother, *Höðr*, and making him throw a mistletoe at him, leading him to death.

19. *Niðhöggr*, in ancient Scandinavian religion, is described, according to the *Eddas*, both prosaic and poetic, in the form of a dragon of death, who drinks the blood of the dead and eats the corpses. This is a creature that lives at the roots of *Yggdrasill*, the great tree that sustains the kingdoms. The only two other substantial pieces of information known about him, according to *Simek*, are his role in terrorizing, as well as his fate after *Ragnarök*.

20. *Einherjar* are the warriors who fell in battle on Earth, were taken by the *Valkyriur* to the halls of *Valhöll*. In this, as described by *Simek*, the combatants fought daily, in addition to eating the meat of the boar *Sæhrímnir*, and drinking the mead produced in the udder of the goat *Heiðrun*. These are the facts that are known about these warriors, the most notorious being their alliance during *Ragnarök* with the gods, where they will fight side by side with the deities.

21. *Fenrir* is called the giant wolf who will kill the god *Óðinn* during *Ragnarök*. This one, like *Jörmungandr* and *Hel*, is the son of the god *Loki* with the *jötun Angrboða*, his lover. There is a fundamental passage of this creature in the original texts, with the exception of his participation in the end times mentioned earlier. This would be related to his imprisonment, where the gods, mostly *Æsir*, seek to chain the wolf, and for that they deceive him by saying that they only test his strength. However, they require the dwarves to forge a chain that cannot be broken, and thus *Gleipnir* appears. However, the giant says that in order to tie him up and guarantee his safety, he would like one of the gods to put a hand in his mouth. *Týr* offers to do so, and when *Fenrir* is bound and unable to free himself, being deprived of his freedom, he rips off the god's hand. It is predicted that the wolf will only break loose at *Ragnarök*. Finally, another interesting point to note is the analysis carried out by some scholars, that this would be the same creature called *Garm*, the canine residing in *Hel*, as both are trapped and freed at the same moment.

22. *Hel*, in Nordic religion, has two congruent interpretations. The first would be that the term would be linked only to the realm of the dead, the place itself. This would be the home for everyone who died from illness or old age, excluding only the drowned, who would go to the *Rán* river, and the warriors, duly taken to *Valhöll*. The place would not have the same purpose as the Christian underworld, that is, there is no suffering and punishment for residents here, but a place for those who are gone, their new home. However, *Hel* is often described as the personification of the realm, a listless-looking woman, half of her body being dark and dead, and the other as being a beautiful pale



woman, thus being a dual being. This would be the daughter of the god *Loki*, as well as Fenrir and *Jörmungandr*. Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are some mentions of the goddess and her residence, the most famous being related to the death of *Baldr*, an episode in which *Óðinn* seeks the entity to bring her son back to life, but her demand is not fulfilled and their offspring remain in the realm of the dead until the end of days and the rebirth of realms.

23. A summary of *Ragnarök* can be found in Peter *Sloterdijk's* book, *Post-God*. See p. 17.

24. Our translation.

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