

## Fate in Germanic Cultures

# Introducing Today's Texts

- ▶ Tacitus: *Germania* (98 CE, Rome)
  - ▶ Ethnography
- ▶ *Vǫluspá* (c. 1000)
  - ▶ Mythological wisdom poem
  - ▶ Composed about the time of the Christianization of Iceland
- ▶ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning* (from the Prose *Edda*; Iceland, 1220s)
  - ▶ antiquarian work, set up as a textbook on poetic style
  - ▶ some systemization, guessing, filling in of gaps
- ▶ *Njáls saga* (s. XIII)
  - ▶ Family saga / saga of Icelanders
  - ▶ Describes events 960–1020
  - ▶ Contains 11th-c. *Darraðarljóð*, on the Battle of Clontarf (1014)
- ▶ *Piðranda þáttr* (early s. XIV)
  - ▶ episode in *Óláfs saga en mesta*

## Tacitus

“ They attach the highest importance to the taking of auspices and the casting of lots. Their usual procedure with the lot is simple. They cut off a branch from a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips. These they mark with different signs and throw them at random onto a white cloth. Then the state’s priest, if it is an official consultation, or the father of the family, in a private one, offers prayer to the gods and looking up towards heaven picks up three strips, one at a time, and, according to which sign they have previously been marked with, makes his interpretation. If the lots forbid an undertaking, there is no deliberation that day about the matter in question. If they allow it, further confirmation is required by taking the auspices. (Birley, *Tacitus*, §10)

”

## Tacitus

“

[I]t is a speciality of this people to test horses as well for omens and warnings. The horses are maintained at public expense in the above-mentioned sacred woods and groves; they are pure white and undefiled by any kind of work for humans. They are yoked to a sacred chariot and the priest or king or chief of the state walks beside them, taking note of their whinnies and neighing. No kind of omen inspires greater confidence, not only among the common people but even among the nobles and priests, who regard themselves as but the servants of the gods, the horses as the gods' messengers. There is yet another kind of auspice-taking, used to forecast the outcome of serious wars. They somehow take prisoner a man from the state with which they are at war and set him to fight a champion from their own side, each armed with his national weapons. The victory of one or the other is taken as determining the result in advance. (Birley, *Tacitus*, §10)

”

## Völuspá

“

20 From there come maidens, knowing much,  
three from the lake that stands under the tree:  
Destiny they called one, Becoming the second  
— they carved on wood-tablets — Shall-be the third;  
laws they laid down, lives they chose  
for the children of mankind, the fates of men.

44 Garm howls loud before Looming-cave,  
the bond will break, and the ravenous one run;  
much lore she knows, I see further ahead,  
of the powers' fate, implacable, of the victory-gods.  
(Orchard, *The Elder Edda*)

”

## Völuspá

“

45 Brothers will struggle and slaughter each other,  
and sisters' sons spoil kinship's bonds.

It's hard on earth: great whoredom;  
axe-age, blade-age, shields are split;  
wind-age, wolf-age, before the world crumbles:  
no one shall spare another.

57 The sun turns black, land sinks into sea;  
the bright stars scatter from the sky.

Flame flickers up against the world-tree;  
fire flies high against heaven itself. (Orchard, *The Elder Edda*)

”

## The Poetic *Edda* on the Norns (Excerpts)

- ▶ *HH* 1–2: “Borghildr bore Helgi [...]. The norns came, they who shaped the prince’s fate”
- ▶ *Rm* 2: “A miserable norn created us of old, so that I should move in the water”
- ▶ *Fm* 12–13: “I say the norns are of very diverse descent [...]”
- ▶ *Sg* 7: “Ugly norns shaped a long yearning for us”

## Gylfaginning

“

There stands [in heaven] one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Urðr [Fate], Verðandi [Becoming], Skuld [Shall-Be]. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin, though others are of the race of elves, and a third group are of the race of dwarfs.

(after Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, 18)

”

## *Gylfaginning*

“ Then spoke Gangleri: ‘If norns determine the fates of men, they allot terribly unfairly, when some have a good and prosperous life, and some have little success or glory, some a long life, some short.’

High said: ‘Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible.’ (Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, 18)

”

## *Njáls saga*

“ Bródir tried to learn by means of his sorcery how the battle would turn out, and the answer was this: if it was fought on a Friday, King Brján would win the victory but die; and that if it was fought before that time, then all who were against him would fall. Then Bródir said that they should not fight before Friday. (Bayerschmidt and Hollander, *Njál's Saga*, 355) ”

## *Njáls saga*

“ On Thursday a man on a dapple-gray horse came riding up to Kormlod and her people; he held a javelin in his hand and he talked for a long time with Bródir and Kormlod. (Bayerschmidt and Hollander, *Njál's Saga*, 356) ”

## *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls*

“

But as the summer drew to a close, Þórhallr became very melancholy. Hallr asked why that was.

Þórhallr answered, ‘I have a bad feeling about the autumn feast that is to be held here, because I foresee that a seer will be killed at this party.’

[...] Hallr said, ‘It’s not a problem to cancel the feast.’

Þórhallr responds, ‘It won’t help to cancel it, because it will happen as it is destined to.’

”

## *Piðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*

“ He went down to the woodpile and heard a riding across the plain from the north. He saw that it was nine women, all dressed in black and with drawn swords in their hands. He also heard a riding across the plain from the south. There were nine women there, too, all in bright clothes and on white horses. ”

## *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls*

“ ‘Those women were none other than your family’s accompanying spirits. I suspect there will be a change of religion here, and a better faith will soon come to this land. I think those *dísir* who subscribe to the current faith knew about the change of religion and that they were about to lose you and your kinsman. They won’t have liked not receiving tribute from you first, which they have as their share. The better *dísir* seem to have wanted to help him, but they were unable to accomplish anything.’ ”

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