

JUDGED BY THE GODS: CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION IN OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

Divine assemblies in Old Norse Religion play a considerable role in addressing mythological crises, be they eschatological or political, external or internal to the gods. This chapter explores divine þing in Old Norse mythology, emphasising the role of these assemblies in navigating and resolving crises like ragnarök. Attention is given to the apparent gender dynamics of divine þing and especially how alternation between collective participation and division along gender lines reflects societal understandings of (active) þing participation. Lastly, this examination highlights how these mythological assemblies demonstrate and shape attitudes regarding inclusion, communication and decision-making within Norse culture.

Keywords

Old Norse Mythology; Eddic Poetry; Crisis Management; Supernatural Entities; Þing Assemblies.

I. Þingboð

According to Old Norse mythology, the Old Norse gods are a harried group. As a supernatural society,¹ the *ásir* and *vanir* negotiate obstacles with both internal and external origins and maintain their group's cohesion through social activities, all while in clear sight of *ragnarök*.² Following some of these disturbances to the mythological

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¹ On the notion of 'social supernaturals,' see Simon Young and Davide Ermacora, "Introducing the Social Supernatural," in *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings: European Traditions*, ed. Simon Young and Davide Ermacora (University of Exeter Press, 2024), 1–17.

² On the two divine lineages, the *ásir* and the *vanir*, see, for example, John Lindow, "Vanir and Ásir," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures, Vol. III: Conceptual Frameworks: The Cosmos and Collective Supernatural Beings*, ed. Jens Peter Schjodt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, 2020), 1033–1050.

status quo, Eddic poetry elaborates on the procedures – even legal procedures – of divine assemblies and deities’ involvement in them.

This chapter will explore the *þing* as one of the Old Norse divinities’ most proficient strategies for crisis management and assess how crises are ultimately resolved. The attitudes of the audiences of these poems towards social inclusion, whether along gender or ancestral lines, can also be illuminated by examining how social dynamics and divisions impact the decision-making processes of divine assemblies in the texts in which they are featured: *Baldrs draumar*, *Grímnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, *Völuspá*, and *Þrymskviða*.³ These poems are found today in manuscripts from the thirteenth century or later but may have been largely composed during the Viking Age. Dating them is a difficult – and controversial – task, but recent scholars have been more optimistic about its feasibility than their forebears.⁴ On the basis of their work, we treat them as tenth-century texts, at the latest, except on the rare occasion where we refer to a stanza or section of poetry that has been dated as younger.

II. Þingsetning

The Old Norse mythological realm is notoriously beset by crises. What, then, is a crisis? The term ‘crisis’ itself could appear somewhat opaque, being easily amalgamated with potentially similar notions such as ‘disaster’ or ‘catastrophe.’⁵ As such, and in line with the reasoning of Bashar Abboodi et al. and Jonathan Bundy et al., we define it

³ Citations of Eddic poetry are rendered in accordance with Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds. *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði* (Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) and those of *Snorra Edda* are according to Anthony Faulkes, ed. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, 4 vols, 2nd ed. (Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005–2007). If not indicated differently, translations are by the authors and references to *Völuspá* are to the Konungsbók manuscript. The term *þing* appears in several mythic poems in the *Poetic Edda* that are not considered in depth here. While the *þing* of *Hávamál* 25, 61, and 114 are human rather than divine assemblies, the stanzas are nevertheless valuable as reflections of the social and administrative import of the institution. On the other hand, *Skírnismál* 38 and *Harbarðsljóð* 30 (as either *launþing* “secret-*þing*” or *lǫng þing* “long *þing*”, depending on which manuscript is consulted) both refer to romantic trysts, a well-established function of the term: Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1874), s.v. “þing.”

⁴ For new dates as well as summaries of past scholarship on these poems, see Christopher D. Sapp, *Dating the Old Norse Poetic Edda* (John Benjamins 2022). On the age of Eddic poetry more generally (and complementary dates for some of the above poems), cf. Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, “The Dating of Eddic Poetry,” in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 72–91; Daniel Sävborg, “Om Eddadiktarnas ursprung och ålder. Gamla och nya tankar,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 119 (2004): 55–104; Haukur Þorgeirsson, “The Dating of Eddic Poetry: Evidence from Alliteration,” in *Approaches to Nordic and Germanic Poetry*, ed. Kristján Árnason, Stephen Carey, Tonya Kim et al. (Málvísindastofnun og Háskólaútgáfan, 2016), 33–61; Mikael Males, “Hear No Sievers, See No Sievers: Metrics and the Eddic Commentary Tradition,” *Neophilologus* 107 (2023): 257–77.

⁵ Bashar Abboodi, Salvatore Flavio Pileggi, and Gnana Bharathy, “Social Networks in Crisis Management: A Literature Review to Address the Criticality of the Challenge,” *Encyclopedia* 3 (2023): 1157.

more specifically as a disruptive event that causes change and uncertainty.⁶ Being perceived as threatening and/or harmful, crises also represent social phenomena to a certain degree, as they are constructed by the various actors subject to and reacting to them.⁷ Thus, they constitute elements of a larger process or processes and rarely, if ever, represent isolated scenarios. As a consequence, crises can be divided into two broader, underlying currents: sudden and smouldering.⁸ In Old Norse mythology, a sudden crisis would be the threat posed by the three *þursa meýjar* in *Völuspá* 8, to which the gods react immediately in the succeeding stanza. Such spontaneous incidents are fundamental to various mythological stories, the impetus of the narratives coming from the occurrence of unanticipated circumstances that leave the higher powers scrambling to resolve the matter. The cosmological threats of the *jötunn* and the *Miðgarðsormr*, meanwhile, are both smouldering or lingering crises. Although the Old Norse gods, chief among them Þórr, try to contain these forces, their efforts will ultimately prove futile in the face of *ragnarök*, ever looming in the vague future.

Crises call for a response and should ideally be resolved if they cannot be mitigated or avoided.⁹ Researchers of social networks commonly refer to this as ‘crisis management’ – that is, “the actions taken in the immediate aftermath of a crisis.”¹⁰ One might add that crisis responses often, although not exclusively, transpire within so-called multi-agency teams.¹¹ As a polytheistic tradition, Old Nordic religion and its appurtenant belief systems featured a variety of specialised actors who could (or should?) operate in that mould, working together to reach a consensus regarding the appropriate steps for crisis response.

One of the most prominent *plurale tantums* for the Old Norse gods in Eddic poetry may reflect this. The term *regin* ([the] ruling powers) may imply a level of (divine) decision-making, given its derivation from PGmc **ragina* (‘decision’) and its cognates in other languages, such as Gothic *ragin* (‘opinion, law, decree, task, responsibility’).¹² A further, albeit more speculative connection may be with the PIE **Hrek-* (‘to speak’),

⁶ Abboodi et al., “Social Networks in Crisis Managements,” 1157; and Jonathan Bundy, Michael D. Pfarrer, Cole E. Short, and W. Timothy Coombs, “Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development,” *Journal of Management* 43 (2017): 1663.

⁷ Cf. W. Timothy Coombs, *Code Red in the Boardroom: Crisis Management as Organizational DNA* (Praeger, 2006), 2. Alexander refers to this as ‘societalization’, that is, the process of (social) problems “mov[ing] outside their own sphere and appear[ing] to endanger society at large”: Jeffrey C. Alexander, *What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of Social Problems* (Polity Press, 2019), 3.

⁸ Cf. Erika Hayes James and Lynn Perry Wooten, “Leadership as (Un)usual: How to Display Competence in Times of Crisis,” *Organizational Dynamics* 34, no. 2 (2005): 141–52.

⁹ Cf. Abboodi et al., “Social Networks in Crisis Managements,” 1157; and David McLoughlin, “A Framework for Integrated Emergency Management,” *Public Administration Review* 45, *Special Issue: Emergency Management: A Challenge for Public Administration* (1985): 166.

¹⁰ Bundy et al., “Crises and Crisis Management,” 1685, note 1.

¹¹ Cf. Willem van Santen, Catholijn M. Jonker, and Niek Wijngaards, “Crisis Decision Making through a Shared Integrative Negotiation Mental Model,” *International Journal of Emergency Management* 6 (2009): 342–55.

¹² Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*. Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series 2 (Brill, 2013), 401.

which could imply a conceptualization, at some point in the transmission of this terminology, of decisions that were made after dialogue rather than immediately.¹³

Old Norse *þing*, deriving from PGmc **þinga* ('meeting, case, thing'), has cognates in various other Germanic languages, for instance, OE *þing*, OFri and Eng *thing*, OHG *ding* as well as OS *thing* (all referring to 'thing, court, meeting' broadly speaking).¹⁴ The *þing* as a legal body was clearly a widespread institution in the Germanic sphere.¹⁵ A connection with Gothic *þeihs* ('time') motivates Guus Kroonen to ruminate whether the "original meaning may have been 'scheduled time', whence 'assembly', '(legal) case' and 'object.'"¹⁶ *Þing* are also assemblies at which "[p]olitics, religion, law, and the building of collective identities went hand in hand [...]."¹⁷ They were commonly located at interaction nodes or along communication routes, which might place them in the vicinity of (prehistoric) burial mounds or rune-stone settings or on the boundary of settled regions.¹⁸ *Þing* nevertheless served other societal functions, too. As Nanna Løkka remarks, "[...] the meetings of the *thing* represent a collective activity where collaboration and strategy are the most important qualities, rather than individual wishes or needs."¹⁹

Þing, both in its empirical and mythical garb, might thus be understood as having a trichotomous meaning: 1) the congregation itself; 2) the arranged time when the assembly transpires; and 3) the location where the assembly congregates.²⁰ It is not surprising that the significance of divine *þing* mirrors that of their real-life counterparts, given the vibrant interplay between myths and the actual, socio-cultural world.²¹ While

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 542.

¹⁵ Cf. Frode Iversen, "Concilium and Pagus – Revisiting the Early Germanic Thing System of Northern Europe," *Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Volume 5: *Debating the Thing in the North I: Selected Papers from Workshops Organized by The Assembly Project* (2013): 5.

¹⁶ Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 542.

¹⁷ See Anne Irene Rīsøy, "Conversion, Things, and Viking Kings," in *Aspects of Power in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Jakub Morawiec and Rafał Boryslawski (Katowice, 2018), 22. Cf. also Alexandra Sanmark, *Viking Law and Order: Places and Rituals of Assembly in the Medieval North* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Nanouschka Myberg, "An Island in the Middle of an Island: On Cult, Laws and Authority in Viking Age Gotland," in *From Ephesos to Dalecarlia: Reflections on Body, Space and Time in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Elisabet Regner, Cecilia von Heijne, Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, and Anna Kjellström. The Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm, Studies 11 / Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 48 (Stockholm, 2009), 101–2.

¹⁸ Cf. Myberg, "An Island in the Middle of an Island," 107; and Marie Ødegaard, "Thing Sites, Cults, Churches, Games and Markets in Viking and Medieval Southeast Norway, AD c.800–1600," *World Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2018): 158.

¹⁹ See Løkka, "Þing goda," 25.

²⁰ Cf. Iversen, "Concilium and Pagus," 5; and Løkka, "Þing goda," 18.

²¹ Tok Thompson and Gregory Schrempf, *The Truth of Myth: World Mythology in Theory and Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 24–27. Cf. Nanna Løkka, "Þing goda - The Mythological Assembly-Site," *Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Volume 5: *Debating the Thing in the North I: Selected Papers from Workshops Organized by The Assembly Project* (2013): 19 and 25; and Rīsøy, "Conversion, Things, and Viking Kings," 22.

Eddic poetry is vague regarding deific assemblies' layouts,²² numerous poems do feature *þing* in their narrations.

Alexandra Sanmark bemoans that previous scholarship has cast the *þing* “as an exclusively male arena,”²³ even though primary sources offer a more nuanced portrait of the composition of attendees. Eddic poetry constitutes no exception here, although mythology does not provide a homogenous picture of this issue. At the root of this problem are instances such as those in *Hávamál*, in which on numerous occasions *menn* (‘men, people;’ sg. *maðr*) are described at the *þing*, and the ambiguity of the term ‘maðr’: either exclusively ‘men’ or more broadly ‘people’ could be understood.²⁴ The almost identical descriptions of divine assemblies in *Drymskviða* 1 and *Baldrs draumar* 1 give the impression that female deities, the *ásynjur*, are partaking as well, although to what degree remains subject to interpretation. Other texts observe this intriguing dichotomy too, Loki proclaiming in *Lokasenna* 11, for example: “Heilir æsir! / Heilar ásynjur / ok öll ginnheillög goð! [...]”²⁵ Here, Loki differentiates between *æsir* and *ásynjur* as well as other, undisclosed gods. The question of whether *þing* participation is tied to certain lineages as well as genders is occasionally prompted by the mythological corpus.²⁶ However, as Sanmark suggests, the key for early audiences of these myths may have been ‘active *þing* participation’ – that is, “voting, reaching verdicts, making claims, or being a witness.”²⁷

Grímnismál depicts the gods riding daily to a divine congregation site, yet the poem is unusual for mentioning this idea. Typically, in the myths that survive at least, the gods are summoned to a *þing* when a crisis emerges, even if not every deity is necessarily present. The Eddic myths provide diverging information concerning the location of the assembly site, such that one specific locale does not take precedence over others. While some poems, such as *Drymskviða* and *Baldrs draumar*, do not specify a location, the promptness with which the assembly is convened suggests early

²² Cf. Løkka, “*Þing goða*,” 18.

²³ See Alexandra Sanmark, “Women at the Thing,” in *Kvinner i Vikingtid*, ed. Nancy Coleman and Nanna Løkka (Oslo, 2014), 89. Cf. further Alexandra Sanmark, “Administrative Organisation and State Formation: A Case Study of Assembly Sites in Södermanland, Sweden,” *Medieval Archaeology* 53 (2009): 205; and Orri Vésteinsson, “A Divided Society: Peasants and the Aristocracy in Medieval Iceland,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 122–23; as well as Peter Foote and David Mackenzie Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Great Civilization Series (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 372–86.

²⁴ Cf. *Hávamál* stt. 61, 111 and 113–4. Since this article deals with Eddic poetry, the example chosen here is consistent with this focus. However, one could easily consider passages from almost any of the *Íslendingasögur* or *samtíðarsögur* to highlight this problem.

²⁵ Cf. *Sigrdrífumál* 5 and *Lokasenna* 31.

²⁶ The issue of lineage becomes further complicated when one considers that “several Eddic poems seem to use the word *álfar* to refer specifically to the *Vanir* race of gods [...]”: see Terry Gunnell, “How Elvish Were the *Álfar*?” in *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn with Graham Johnson and John Walter (Brepols, 2007), 121. Cf. also Jens Peter Schjødt, “Relationen mellem aser og vaner og dens ideologiske implikationer,” in *Nordisk bedendom: Ett Symposium*, ed. Gro Steinsland et al. (Odense universitets forlag, 1991), 306–7.

²⁷ See Sanmark, “Women at the Thing,” 92.

audiences may have assumed a spot close to or within Ásgarðr. *Hávamál* 111, meanwhile, informs us about a congregation site near Urðarbrunnr, at one of Yggdrasill's roots. Yet, other places are mentioned in the *Eddukevði* which could have been seen as places of judgement: according to *Grimnismál* 15 and *Hávamál* 109, the gods Forseti and Óðinn judge and provide counsel, respectively, in their residences. However, these stanzas do not use *dama* ('to judge') for the activities taking place. Óðinn provides *ráð* ('counsel, advice'), whereas Forseti *svafir allir sakir* ('assuages all charges'), which suggests a diminished gravitas for the procedures there compared to those of the divine *þing* in the texts examined below. As Nanna Løkka remarks, "[...] the meetings of the *thing* represent a collective activity where collaboration and strategy are the most important qualities, rather than individual wishes or needs."²⁸

To weave together the threads of the above discussion and illustrate the approach taken below, we will now briefly explore a crisis from *Alvíssmál*, underlining the elements that are pivotal to the present study. *Alvíssmál* recounts the dealings of the *dvergr* ('dwarf') Alvíss with the god Þórr. Alvíss has negotiated a deal with the gods, referred to collectively as *fírar*, for the hand of Þrúðr, Þórr's daughter, in marriage, and contemporary audiences of the poem may have envisioned these negotiations occurring at some form of assembly, given their communal nature. The first four stanzas set the stage for the poem, which takes the form of an inquisitive, knowledge-related dialogue between Alvíss and Þórr. The term *fírar*, generally meaning 'men' or 'people,' could etymologically be connected to PGmc **ferhwa-* ('life, essence'),²⁹ which contrasts with Þórr's description of Alvíss, which insinuates a relation to death,³⁰ and thereby implies the inappropriateness of the match. The palpable tension here provokes the question of how the poem's audiences would have understood this: in their view, were the gods, in Þórr's absence, under external pressure from the *dvergr* or did Alvíss constitute an internal community member for them? Þórr's assertion that *ertattu til brúðar borinn* ('you are not born for this bride') implies that the *dvergr* had a lower standing, emphasising that the crisis may also be driven by social factors.³¹

²⁸ See Løkka, "Þing goða," 25.

²⁹ Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 137.

³⁰ In stanza 2, Þórr asks whether Alvíss had spent the night with corpses and why he is so pale around the nose. Although Þórr addresses Alvíss as *fíra* ('man'), too, this could have been intended ironically or to establish Alvíss as a humanoid, as Þórr is supposedly unaware of his counterpart's identity at this point in the poem. From a performance standpoint, recognition might be further impeded by the apparent night-time setting of the encounter. On the association of *dvergar* with death, see, for example Felix Lummer, "'ek hræðumz ekki þik' – The *dvergar* in translated *riddarasögur*," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 2 (2021): 336 and 342.

³¹ Cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society; Volume One: The Myths* (Odense University Press, 1994), 112–13. The authors are thankful to one of our reviewers for bringing to our attention that the agreement could also be a lovers' pledge between Alvíss and Þrúðr rather than an accord Alvíss struck with the gods. While the use of *fírar* is certainly ambiguous in *Alvíssmál* 2 and 3, its role in stanza 3 seems to support a broader semantic understanding. As has been noted in fn. 32 above, the reference to *fírar* in stanza 2 seems to denote a 'living being,' judging from Þórr's uncertainty over Alvíss' nature. Stanza 3, meanwhile, appears to shift in register, aligning the *fírar* more with the 'gods,' based

The dialogue between Alvíss and Þórr in stanzas 3-4 seems to hint at an earlier accord between the gods and the *dverg*, particularly Alvíss' request that Þórr honour the gods' *festu heiti* ('firm vow'). Despite the ostensible firmness of their vow, the agreement between the gods and Alvíss is meaningless as far as Þórr is concerned. Not only was he not in attendance, but he claims that he, as Þrúðr's father, has the last say regarding who she weds (st. 4):

Ek mun bregða, þvíat ek brúðar á flest um ráð sem faðir. Varka ek heima, þá er þér heitit var, at sá einn er gjöfir með goðum.	I will break it, because over the bride I as father have the utmost will. I was not home, when you were granted the promise, and I alone of the gods give her.
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The legality of the pledge appears undisputed and is even recognised by Þórr, who declares that he will break it. However, that may be legal too. In his view, his paternal guardianship takes precedence over any decision the gods made with Alvíss, potentially contradicting common legal understanding. And further, the *dverg*'s name might indicate that Alvíss, whose name translates to 'all-wise,' was supposed to have tricked the gods into promising Þrúðr to him during Þórr's 'unfortunate' absence. Ultimately, the crisis is resolved by Þórr himself, who delays Alvíss with questions until sunrise in stanza 35, when the would-be groom turns into stone.

III. Málsókn

As the gods have now taken to their judgement-seats and the *þing* is about to commence, it is time for us to turn to the key examples of divine assemblies in the *Eddukvæði*. Apart from offering precious information about the procedures of such assemblies and the responsibilities assigned to the various godly agents, they also intimate the emblematic significance of the mythological *þing* as an administrative institution. Particular focus will therefore be placed on the individuals who partake in the *þing* itself as well as the actors involved in subsequent crisis resolution.

A. Baldrs draumar and Þrymskviða

Baldrs draumar is a rather short text of only 14 stanzas.³² The poem is set in the wake of Baldr experiencing upsetting nightmares of his death and starts with the Old Norse

on several factors: Þórr's initial uncertainty over Alvíss' ilk and their association with death, the *dverg*'s subsequent social demotion, and the logical consideration that it would be unusual for Alvíss to consider the vow he made as 'firm' if it were not approved by those responsible for his hoped-for bride (Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 111–12). This would especially be the case if the vow were only confirmed between him and Þrúðr and made without the assent of Þórr, who comments on the fact that it is he who ultimately decides on Þrúðr's spouse.

³² Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, and Katja Schulz, ed., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda, Band 3: Götterlieder (Völundarkviða, Alvismál, Baldrs draumar, Rígsþula, Hyndluljóð, Grottasöngur)* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2000), 395–96.

gods assembling a *þing* to discuss those dreams and ultimately find a solution. While *Baldrs draumar*, unlike *Þrymskviða* discussed below, remains silent regarding the discussion during the *þing*, it does reveal the results: a disguised Óðinn rides down to Niflhel to raise a dead *völva* (‘seeress’) through magic and to interrogate her concerning the meaning behind Baldr’s dreams. Begrudgingly, and awakened by Óðinn’s spells, the *völva* divulges to Óðinn his son’s impending doom at the hand of his brother Höðr. She then informs Óðinn about the son Váli he will beget on Rindr, who will kill his late brother’s murderer. The poem ends with the *völva* seeing through Óðinn’s disguise.

The gods’ congregation at the *þing* is described in *Baldrs draumar*’s opening stanza as follows:

Senn váru æsir	At once were the <i>æsir</i>
allir á þingi	all at the <i>þing</i>
ok ásynjur	and the <i>ásynjur</i>
allar á máli,	all debating,
ok um þat réðu	and deliberated this
ríkir tívar,	the powerful gods,
hví væri Baldr	what were Baldr’s
ballir draumar.	dreadful dreams.

Already in the first line, we are informed that the gods meet *senn* (‘at once, at the same time’) after the crisis (Baldr’s nightmares) has become apparent. This suggests two things about the conception of this *þing* for the poet(s): first, that the communication within the social group of the gods is so effective that it can be assembled in a timely manner; and second, that its location is either within Ásgarðr or in its close vicinity, minimising travel and potentially any delay in their response.

It is worth mentioning here, too, that the term ‘æsir’ would *per definitionem* exclude the *vanir*, unless it is understood as a *pars pro toto* implying any male god regardless of lineage. The poem itself highlights the topic of gender by mentioning the *ásynjur* separately, depicting them talking among themselves. Yet again, the use of ‘ásynjur’ could exclude goddesses that were not always counted amongst them, such as Freyja or Skaði.³³ This ostensible gender differentiation between the *æsir* and *ásynjur*, as innocent as it may appear, could nevertheless cast a long shadow over the implications of active *þing* participation. Even though *ríkir tívar* (‘powerful gods’) may incorporate all Old Norse divinities, only the male gods are marked out as actively partaking in the *þing*. The female deities are seemingly sidelined, the wording of *Baldrs draumar* 1

³³ Could the label *æsir* incorporate the *ásynjur* as well? Potentially it could have referred to, say, Gefjun as well as to Óðinn, although definite examples of this occurring are almost non-existent in the surviving poetic corpus. *Lokasenna* 19 does refer back to Íðunn as an *áss*, and it could be implied in *Þrymskviða* 13, *Grímnismál* 45, and Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Haustlång*, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, ed. Kari Ellen Gade with Edith Marold, 431–63 (Brepols, 2017), st. 9, although these instances are much more vague. Looking toward the prose, Snorri does seem to count Gefjun as an *áss* in *Gylfaginning* 1 – although even there she is of the *att* (‘family’) of the *æsir* rather than categorically reckoned among them, and at other points in *Snorra Edda* the gender implications of *æsir* and *ásynjur* are pronounced. In sum, what evidence does survive is ambiguous.

perhaps implying that they only argued over the meaning of Baldr's dreams amongst themselves. Divine decision-making in *Baldrs draumar* could therefore be a twofold affair, in which all the gods can take part in the discussions, albeit in two separate parties, with the definitive decision resting ultimately with the male deities.

For the most part, the crisis at hand seems to be an internal one: Höðr, the principal in the crime whose hand casts the mistletoe that kills his brother Baldr, is also an *áss*.³⁴ However, when the scope is broadened, it becomes clear that the implications of Baldr's death are, in fact, catastrophic. His murder is an essential precursor to *ragnarök*.³⁵ How, then, are the gods able to tackle the consequences of this situation?

On what resolution the gods settle is not readily apparent from the opening stanza. However, it is narrated in the subsequent three, when Óðinn rides to Niflhel to interrogate the *völva*. What is noteworthy about that outcome is that, even though the gods have congregated to debate as a group, they resolve to send away a specialist, Óðinn, to settle the matter. As a result, the solution relies on that specialist's expertise. Here, this would include knowledge of how to travel (safely) into the otherworld, where to locate a specific deceased *völva* who has the required information, the magical proficiency to reanimate her and how to extort the said information. This leaves the question of whether the crisis is successfully resolved, or, in this case, even can be. While the gods have met the crisis, it is important to remember that their problem is two-sided. Thanks to the *völva*, the resolution to the internal part, that is the fratricide, is apparent. Óðinn will father Váli, who will kill Höðr, thereby settling the murder. However, while the killing of Baldr will be avenged, the tragedy of intrafamilial bloodshed will remain. Both killers and the initial victim are sons of Óðinn, and hence, in the words of John Lindow, "[the] killing of a family member by another created an insoluble problem, a situation in which a dispute could by the implicit rules never be solved."³⁶ The gods' solution concerning the eschatological calamity remains deficient too, although through no fault of their own. Baldr is fated to die because *ragnarök* is ineluctable.

³⁴ This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the killing takes place during a *þing*, although this information is only disclosed in *Gylfaginning* and not evident from *Baldrs draumar*. However, debate continues over whether, and if so to what extent, *Baldrs draumar* served as a source for the passage in *Gylfaginning* 49 (von See et al., *Kommentar* 3, 394–95).

³⁵ Since dreams in medieval Icelandic society were understood as becoming true, it is clear from the outset that Baldr is fated to die. See, for example, John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications 262 (Suomalainen Tiedekatemia / Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997), 39–43, and Steven A. Mitchell, "When a God Dreams: *því væri Baldri ballir draumar*," in *Good Thoughts on Folklore and Mythology: Festschrift in Honour of Terry Gunnell*, vol. 2, edited by Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, Felix Lummer, Katrín Lís L. Mikaelisdóttir, and Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir, 2 vols, Old Norse Studies 1.2 (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2025), 263–74.

³⁶ See John Lindow, "The Tears of the Gods: A Note on the Death of Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology," *JEGP* 101, no. 2 (2002): 160.

Turning to *Þrymskviða*,³⁷ the poem is noteworthy within the *Eddukvæði* due to its burlesque nature and play with gender roles. It renders epicene one of the more stereotypically masculine divine characters, Þórr, who dons a wedding dress to retrieve his stolen hammer from the *jötnunn*³⁸ Þrymr ('noise'). The central crisis here is that Þrymr will only return that hammer for Freyja's hand in marriage, and the gods congregate at the *þing* to decide how to respond. The only difference to the presentation of the assembly in *Baldrs draumar* 1 is the last long line, with *Þrymskviða* 14 reading:

Senn váru ásir	At once were the <i>ásir</i>
allir á þingi	all at the <i>þing</i>
ok ásynjur	and the <i>ásynjur</i>
allar á máli,	all debating
ok um þat réðu	and deliberated this
ríkir tívar,	the powerful gods,
hvé þeir Hlórriða	how they would retrieve
hamar um sætti.	Hlórriði's hammer.

Instead of Óðinn directly mounting his steed to ride off to Niflhel, *Þrymskviða* next presents its audience with a scene in which a selection of gods actively debate the matter at the *þing* (stt. 15–20). Heimdallr, Þórr and Loki are all attributed direct speech prior to Þórr being disguised as the 'bride.' The recipients of the poem therefore become witnesses to the crisis resolution itself. While the earlier-mentioned social considerations regarding inclusion in or exclusion from the active *þing* participation of certain gods also apply to *Þrymskviða* 14, it is of note that Loki serves as an active participant here, unlike the *ásynjur*. This indicates Loki's alignment with the gods in spite of his suspect ancestry (he is descended from the *jötnar* on his father's side).³⁹ The crisis in *Þrymskviða* is certainly an external one. The malevolent threat posed by the *jötnar* is tangible since the disarmed Þórr has no means of countering this physical scourge. However, while that threat may be grave, it is seemingly not as catastrophic and long-term as *ragnarök*, because it is Loki who alludes to the *jötnar* ruling Ásgarðr (st. 18) and not Heimdallr, who *vissi* [...] *vel fram* ("knew [...] well forward") (st. 15).

Again, the swiftness of the gods' congregating – it takes place *senn* ('at once') just as in *Baldrs draumar* – suggests that the poet(s) envisioned an adjacent *þing* location and

³⁷ Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Eve Picard, Ilona Priebe, and Katja Schulz, ed., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda, Band 2: Götterlieder (Skírnismál, Hárbarðsljóð, Hymiskviða, Lokasenna, Þrymskviða)* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 1997), 526.

³⁸ The *jötnar*, a concept often mistranslated as 'giants' in English, are a society of mythological beings that represent the main adversaries of the Old Norse divinities. As an eschatological power, they ultimately overcome the gods at *ragnarök*. For further information, see, for instance Tom Grant, "A Problem of Giant Proportions: Distinguishing *Risar* and *Jötnar* in Old Icelandic Saga Material," *Gripla* 30 (2019): 77–106; and Felix Lummer, "Solitary Colossi and Not-So-Small Men: A Study of the Effect of Translation on the Old Norse Supernatural Concept of the *jötnar* in the Translated *riddarasögur*," *ARV* 77 (2021): 57–85; as well as Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, *Jötnar bundnir: Norrænar goðsagnir í nýju ljósi* (Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag / ReykjavíkúAkademían, 2024).

³⁹ Cf. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 101n, 173–74.

expedient communication within divine society. However, this assembly only happens *after* Þórr has already unsuccessfully tried to send Freyja herself off to marry Þrymr.⁴⁰ The *þing*'s resolution to the crisis in *Þrymskviða* unravels across a total of six stanzas. Five verses feature dialogue, with two stanzas of direct speech being attributed to Heimdallr and Loki and one to Þórr. In stanzas 15 and 16, Heimdallr suggests that Þórr should be disguised as a bride. This proposition is one of the many instances in which the burlesque features of *Þrymskviða* come to the fore, particularly if one applies human laws to the gods.⁴¹ In the Icelandic law-code *Grágás* ('Grey Goose'), cross-dressing is punishable with minor outlawry, that is the expulsion from the country for three years.⁴² Þórr's protests (st. 17) centre on fears that the other gods would call him *argr* ('craven, being in the receiving position in homosexual intercourse')⁴³ if he were to follow through with Heimdallr's suggestion, a thought the masculine god ostensibly cannot tolerate. Loki's interjection about the dangers of the *jǫfnar* (st. 18) employs harsh language, making palpable the gods' disagreement at the *þing*. That Loki dares such verbal criticism might partly, it has been suggested, be because Þórr's authority is diminished without his hammer.⁴⁴ Without it, Þórr's wrath proves ineffective.

Thus, Þórr is ultimately disguised as the bride-to-be. Loki then disguises himself as Þórr's handmaiden, just as he has promised he would. Cross-dressing, or even the change of gender, does not pose any difficulties for Loki, who is famously the mother of Sleipnir.⁴⁵ Loki's enthusiasm for accompanying Þórr in women's clothing (or even as a woman), therefore, could have seemed a scant comfort to Þórr for early audiences.⁴⁶ If those audiences did perceive the gods as adhering to laws that corresponded with their own – and it is not implausible that *Grágás* might have guided or at least reflected perceptions of mythological behaviour – then we might see here a

⁴⁰ A useful contextualisation of Freyja's consent is provided by Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, trans. Betsy van der Hoek, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe* 6 (Brepols, 2005), 29–30.

⁴¹ Granted, should the laws of humankind not be applied to the divinities, the depiction of the Old Norse gods seemingly breaking them serves as a source of humour.

⁴² Paragraph §254 of the *festarmál* ('betrothal') section of *Grágás* as preserved in GKS 1157 fol (dated to c. 1250) outlines the punishment for cross-dressing: "Ef kona klæðiz karl klæðom eða sce^r ser scavr eða fe^r með vápn fyrir breytmi sacir: þat varðar fiordrags Garð. [...] Sliet er mælt vm karla af þeir klæðaz kuen^a klæðnaðe." Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed., *Grágás: Konungsbók* (Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974 [1852]), 203–4. The passage in English translation reads thus: "If in order to be different a woman dresses in men's clothes or cuts her hair short or carries weapons, the penalty for that is lesser outlawry. [...] The same is prescribed for men if they dress in women's clothing." Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, ed. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás – The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from other Manuscripts, II*. University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 5 (The University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 219. Cf. also von See et al., *Kommentar* 2, 526.

⁴³ Caroline R. Batten, "Argr aðal: Queer Carnival and Divine Deviance in *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 19 (2023): 12–13 and esp. 29–32 for *Þrymskviða*.

⁴⁴ Declan Taggart, *How Thor Lost His Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God* (Routledge, 2018), 68 and 85–86.

⁴⁵ The origins of Sleipnir are recounted in *Gylfaginning* 42.

⁴⁶ On the possibility that a biological transformation is being portrayed, see John McKinnell, "Myth as Therapy: The Usefulness of *Þrymskviða*," *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 5–6.

notion that laws could be either bent or overlooked in dire circumstances without suffering consequences, should that be prescribed by authorities at a *þing*.

Either way, as in *Baldrs draumar*, a pair of specialists is sent to deal with the crisis. The first is Þórr, who is not only needed to wield the reclaimed hammer, but also, with that weapon and his strength, to ensure both a safe return from Jötunheimar and an absolute resolution to the crisis by killing Þrymr and his entourage. The other specialist is Loki, who has the necessary negotiation and socio-cultural skills to navigate the wedding at Þrymr's hall and to trick him into handing over Mjöllnir. Both gods in tandem are necessary for the successful resolution of the crisis.

Þrymskviða presents a unique perspective on the divine *þing* by revealing some of the processes taking place there. The sense is that gods with special knowledge are listened to and that their advice is reflected upon. Heimdallr's view might have been seen as especially valuable because he knows the future, an ability that could have been perceived as significant in this mythological sphere. By the same token, Loki's two-fold ancestry and *savoir-faire* in the social community of the *jötnar* have a positive effect on the gods' attempts at resolution. However, his involvement, though not opposed, seems impudent and may reflect the diminished authority of the masculine sphere of society without Þórr's hammer.

In both this poem and *Baldrs draumar*, then, crises are handled by individuals – Óðinn as well as Þórr and Loki – whose expertise is considered by their community to be the most promising for resolving the emergency. While Óðinn is nevertheless incapable of negotiating a positive outcome due to circumstances outside of his control, Þórr and Loki do manage to diffuse their crisis by regaining control over Mjöllnir.

B. *Hymiskviða*

In *Hymiskviða*, the term *þing* appears only once, at the end of the poem in stanza 39:

Þróttflugr kom	The mightily powerful one came
á þing goða	to the <i>þing</i> of the gods,
ok hafði hver	and had the kettle,
þanns Hymir átti,	which Hymir owned;
en véar hverjan	and the gods
vel skulu drekka	will rightly drink
ölðr at Ægis	the beer at Ægir's
eitt hórmeitið.	every flax harvest. ⁴⁷

This *þing* may be considered an oddity, when compared with the other mythic parliaments. The setup for *Hymiskviða* – for which this stanza acts as a conclusion – is that, after a successful hunt, the gods throw lots to decide where to hold a feast and are directed to the home of the brewer Ægir (st. 1). Already the gods are problem-

⁴⁷ The meaning of this last line is unsure, particularly in light of manuscript variation. For a summary of previous arguments, see von See et al., *Kommentar* 2, 360–61. Regardless, it seems from context that a recurring feast has been instituted here.

solving through communal action – a ritual in this case.⁴⁸ In stanzas 2–6, however, Ægir refuses to help, apparently out of irritation and using the excuse that he has no cauldron big enough; the solution offered by Týr is to steal one from his father, Hymir. According to this context, the *þing* of *Hymiskviða* 39 is the *sumbl* ('feast') for which the *æsir* initially gather in stanza 2.

This assembly may not seem to respond to a crisis, therefore. There has been conflict, with Ægir and then Hymir, but this *sumbl* neither initiates nor reacts to those disputes (unlike the communal efforts at troubleshooting in *Hymiskviða*'s introductory stanzas) and, while it may be a source of dramatic tension, contemporary audiences are more likely to have been exercised about the peril experienced by Týr and Þórr at Hymir's home and demonstrations of the latter's strength, which are the real organising device for the poem.⁴⁹ That first quarrel with Ægir, moreover, might seem more frivolous to a modern reader than the prompts for the other Eddic assemblies surveyed here. However, early audiences may have thought this *þing* equally consequential, if it was envisioned as a fixture in divine life as stanza 39 states,⁵⁰ and its institution may have been a necessary mythological step towards *ragnarök*.⁵¹ In *Lokasenna* 8, it is powerful and exclusive, and it may have been a prototype for worshippers' own ceremonial meals.⁵²

Even if *Hymiskviða* 39's gathering was a pillar of Old Norse mythology for some, it remains unusual among the mythic *þing* examined here in that it does not focus on crisis containment or even judicial or legislative matters. Rather, *þing* seems to be a synonym for *sumbl*, especially when the stanza itself largely concerns feasting. Because it is poetry, of course, whether *Hymiskviða*'s audiences understood it as a literal *þing* must be an open question. It may be metaphorical, like Hel's with her dead leader in *Ynglingatal* 24 (cf. stt. 7 and 22–23) or as battle is in kennings like *Vellekla* 22's *eggþing* ('blade-þing'),⁵³ or the term *þing* might be flexible enough that not every meeting labelled as such had to have administrative and legal wrangling at its core.

⁴⁸ And indeed, this is identified as another *þing* in *Lokka*, "*Þing goda*," 23.

⁴⁹ von See et al., *Kommentar* 2, 268–69.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Grímnismál* 45.

⁵¹ Cf. John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, with an appendix by Maria Elena Ruggerini (Il Calamo, 1994), 46–54.

⁵² See further the discussion of *Grímnismál* 42 in Andreas Nordberg, "Handlar *Grimmesmál* 42 om en sakra Måltid?" *Scripta Islandica* 56 (2006): 55–64; Declan Taggart, "Human Morality and Old Norse Religion," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* (Forthcoming); Paul C., Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 72–84 argues that a *sumbl* was a central ritual feast for worshippers of Old Norse deities, although his argument leans heavily on comparative evidence. Moreover, the term does not appear solely in religious contexts and can even be a synonym for alcohol, which emphasizes that its principal denotation is that of feasting rather than ritual (e.g. *Alvíssmál* 34; *Hávamál* 110).

⁵³ Although very few battle kennings omit a determinant (Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis: Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog oprindeligt forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson*, 2nd ed. [Møller, 1931], s.v. "*þing*"). Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035; Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1*, ed. Edith Marold and others, vol. ed. Diana Whaley, trans. from German by John Foulks (Brepols, 2012); Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Ynglingatal*, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical*

This latter possibility evokes Orri Vésteinsson's recent complaint that modern scholarship's view, in which ritual, symbolic and performative features of *þing* are subordinated to legislative and judicial functions, is based on outdated nineteenth-century nationalist historiography and that the traditional model of the assembly can only have been one of the types of meetings that buttressed Viking Age Scandinavian social organization.⁵⁴ Despite the meaningful contributions made in history and archaeology over the last ten years, spearheaded by Alexandra Sanmark's *Viking Law and Order*, much of our understanding of the purpose and procedure of any *þing* is founded in saga literature, which likely owes more to a thirteenth- than to a ninth- or tenth-century reality.⁵⁵

Despite the overweening portrayal of assemblies as occasions for law and administration in those texts, and of their presentation in other Eddic poems as arenas for communal problem-solving, the *þing* of *Hymiskviða* is a social event. That, however, must have seemed purposeful to early Icelanders, given the land's low population density and how rarely neighbours may have seen each other.⁵⁶ Assemblies, legal or otherwise, must have represented crucial opportunities for coalition-building and thereby crisis prevention, which is a key stage in modern crisis management.⁵⁷ A *þing* like that of *Hymiskviða* 39 would offer neighbours the space and time to formally or informally share information, make and cement alliances, consolidate communal structures and, in general, prepare together for both sudden and smouldering crises. This particular *þing* could have been seen as a failure – it results in *Lokasenna* in social fragmentation and discord – although this poem only seems to celebrate the meeting and probably was not constructed with that outcome in mind, given that the text appears to indicate that it will become an annual tradition. That apparent cyclicity may indicate that *Hymiskviða*'s audiences envisioned the assembly as formalized, but it still shares the *ad hoc* quality of its counterparts examined above, thrown together in the aftermath of a hunt according to the beginning of the poem.

The *þing* was undertaken by an elite. In that respect, a sharp distinction is drawn between its participants and *Ægir*, whose labour enables it to take place. The gods are circumscribed as a group through the many names attached to them: (*val*)-*tívar* (stt. 1 and 4), *æsir* (st. 2), *goð* (stt. 3 and 39), *ginnregin* (st. 4), *vér* (st. 39). *Ægir* is not included within those groups – sometimes he is positioned in opposition when those labels

Times to c. 1035; Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1, ed. and vol. ed. Diana Whaley (Brepols, 2012).

⁵⁴ Orri Vésteinsson, Review of "Sanmark, Alexandra. 2017. *Viking Law and Order: Places and Rituals of Assembly in the Medieval North*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press," *Saga-Book* 43 (2019): 145. Løkka, "*Þing goða*," 18, 27 likewise emphasizes the range of signifiers possessed by *þing* just in mythic poetry.

⁵⁵ Sanmark, *Viking Law*. On the oral inheritance of the *Íslendingasögur*, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse of Method* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 17–50; Joseph Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense University Press, 1986).

⁵⁶ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason (University of Manitoba Press, 2007), 31–34.

⁵⁷ Bundy et al. "Crises and Crisis Management," 1664–70.

appear (stt. 2, 3) – and dynastically he is also set apart. A key character in *Hymiskviða* is Þórr, the son of Yggr (i.e. Óðinn) and husband of Sif (stt. 2–3); Ægir, in contrast, is a *mōgr* *Miskorblindi* (“son of Miskorblindi”). While *Miskorblindi* has never been fully explained, ‘mash-blender’ is the most likely translation,⁵⁸ which may characterize Ægir’s lineage as less respectable than those of his antagonists (*Hymiskviða* never attributes Ægir a hall either, although he does own one in *Lokasenna*).⁵⁹ He is also set apart from the gods geographically and perhaps ethnically through the typical labels *berghúi* (‘cliff-dweller,’ st. 2) and *jötunn* (st. 3), although travel to his home is not indicated and, certainly, the implication is that, in the mind of the poet(s), Ægir’s settlement stands much closer than Hymir’s (stt. 5 and 7). While some of this terminology may have been chosen to fit the poem’s metrics, the effect is to exclude Ægir from the in-group of the gods. The geography, his role and the commanding register in which the gods address him (st. 2) paint him as a subordinate rather than a rival. The relationship evokes the sort of tribute that early itinerant Scandinavian aristocrats could expect from their social inferiors.⁶⁰ As such, this *þing* likely attests to social division. Its participants are not the same individuals who organize and maintain it, and who have much less agency in society in general beyond what they can seize through dissembling.

Indeed, the approach to communal problem-solving in *Hymiskviða* 2–4, with its parallels to the assemblies discussed elsewhere here, would seem to be subverted by Ægir’s involvement. He creates the problem that the rest of the poem is dedicated to solving, although whether, as a subordinate, he is a member of the gods’ community is up for debate. Here, the poem echoes the apparent perversion of the assembly in some stanzas of *Völuspá* (see below) and may indicate that contemporary societies (or at least those with authority within them) approved of exclusivity in such organizations. Whether contemporary audiences would have imagined women also being excluded from the decision-making at the outset of the poem or the feast at its

⁵⁸ von See et al., *Kommentar* 2, 281–82.

⁵⁹ The social status of brewers in the Viking Age is unclear. In the thirteenth and fourteenth-century, specialists in this field were among the wealthiest in society (Jesús Fernando Guerrero Rodríguez, “Old Norse Drinking Culture” [PhD thesis, University of York, 2007], 191), and it was an expensive enterprise and so at least backed by a social elite in earlier periods as well (Lisa Turberfield, “Intoxicating Women: Old Norse Drinking Culture and the Role of Women” [PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2016], 36–43). However, for those earlier centuries little concrete evidence survives on the status of those involved in the labour, and the association of halls with brewing houses is ambiguous and likely varies (Turberfield, “Intoxicating women,” 40–46).

⁶⁰ Ægir, in his role of retainer to the (potentially peripatetic) Old Norse gods, is not only unable to fulfil his responsibilities of hospitality towards them, but also refuses to provide any assistance to redress the problem. While this disobedience worsens the crisis, it arguably also adds some comic undertones to the situation. Cf. Beñat Elortza Larrea, *Polity Consolidation and Military Transformation in Scandinavia: A European Perspective, c.1035–1320* (Brill, 2023), 78, 161, 248 and 252; and Albrecht Classen, “Traveling to/in the North During the Middle Ages: The World of Northern Europe in Medieval and Early Modern Travel Narratives,” in *Travel, Time, and Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time: Explorations of World Perceptions and Processes of Identity Formation*, ed. Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture* 22 (de Gruyter, 2018), 298.

end is not clear. Only men are active in the frame narrative – Hymir, Týr, Þórr and Ægir – and the hunt itself could have been perceived as a masculine activity among social elites, although this is difficult to support archaeologically or through other mythological sources.⁶¹

C. *Grímnismál*

The apparent institutionalization of the *þing* at the end of *Hymiskviða* finds a parallel *Grímnismál* 29–30:

Kǫrmt ok Ǫrmt ok Kerlaugar tvær, þær skal Þórr vaða dag hvern er hann dæma ferr at aski Yggdrasils, þvíat ásbú brenn öll loga heilög vötn hlóa.	Kǫrmt and Ǫrmt and the two Kerlaugar: Þórr shall wade them each day, when he goes to <i>dæma</i> at Yggdrasil's ash, because the <i>ás</i> -bridge burns all with flames, the holy waters boil.
Glaðr ok Gyllir, Glær ok Skeiðbrimir, Silfrintoppr ok Sinir, Gísl ok Falhófnir, Gulltoppr ok Léttfeti, þeim ríða æsir jóm dag hvern er þeir dæma fara at aski Yggdrasils.	Glaðr and Gyllir, Glær and Skeiðbrimir, Silfrintoppr and Sinir, Gísl and Falhófnir, Gulltoppr and Léttfeti, the <i>æsir</i> ride them each day when they go to <i>dæma</i> at Yggdrasil's ash.

Grímnismál and *Hymiskviða* seem not to refer to the same socio-political entity: the former's meeting takes place on a daily basis and the latter's *þing* seemingly annually, and while we cannot know where contemporary audiences would have placed Ægir's home – if it had any consistent place at all – there is no evidence that it was at Yggdrasil (*Skáldskaparmál* G55 situates it on Hlésey).

Grímnismál never actually calls this a *þing*, even though it could more closely echo our conventional notion of such events than *Hymiskviða*'s get-together does.⁶² Þórr

⁶¹ Julie Lund and Marianne Moen, "Hunting identities: Intersectional perspectives on Viking Age mortuary expressions," *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* 36 (2019): 142–55; *Gylfaginning* 23; and Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Haustlǫng*, 5.

⁶² The term *þing* is used only once in *Grímnismál*, in stanza 49 when Óðinn proclaims that he is called *Þrór þingum* at "Þrór at *þing*" amid a longer list of his names. *Þrór* may mean something like 'grower' (cf. *þróask* 'increase, grow'), and past scholars have linked it with fertility on that basis or attributed legal responsibilities to Óðinn because of this apparent relationship with *þing* (for references and discussion, see John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* [D.S. Brewer, 2005], 148). While legal operations rarely feature in the assemblies of the *Poetic Edda* (though they are more conspicuous in a few heroic poems, e.g. *Gudrúnarkviða II*

and the other *ásir* assemble to *dæma*, a word that is especially popular in legal settings with the implication of giving judgement and passing sentences, and in Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century understanding, it does seem to be a legal environment.⁶³ He labels it a place of *dómr* ('[court of] judgement') and a *dómstaðr* ('court place'), although he also locates it at Urðr's well, a site almost synonymous with fate, and tends to brand any assembly-like behaviours in general with *dómr*. The *rökstólar* ('judgement-seats') of the gods in *Völuspá*, for instance (see below), are *dómstólar* for him,⁶⁴ while Forseti is attributed his own *dómstaðr*, even though this is absent from the quotation from *Grimnismál* 15 that follows and otherwise harmonizes with Snorri's description of that god.⁶⁵ Law is central enough lexically and in literature that the intention of *Grimnismál* 29–30 could have been to depict the gods going to a *þing* to judge the transgressions of humans or others.⁶⁶

However, modern audiences should not assume that the exclusive purpose of this meeting in *Grimnismál* was related to law for the listeners that preceded Snorri. It may have been conceived as a place for discussing the affairs of the world and/or to socialize, even if not so extravagantly as in the instance in *Hymiskviða*. In *Hárbarðsljóð* 46, *dæma* does not have a legal meaning but rather of "giving an opinion", and in *Lokasenna* 2, *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* 2, and *Völuspá* 58, for instance, it has a sense like 'to converse' – though still with connotations of observing and assessment and often in formal settings.⁶⁷ That terminology may indicate a non-legal gathering, but without implying that it was perceived as less consequential than *þing* that did have that function. As may be the case with the recurring assembly in *Hymiskviða*, the gods'

3–4; *Sigrdrífumál* 13), neither of these suggestions is impossible, especially if specific gods were viewed as responsible for overseeing particular assemblies (for hints of this practice, see Declan Taggart, "Religion in the Viking Age Moral Economy: A Reading of a *lausavísa* by Egill Skallagrímsson," *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 74 [2022]: 433–458). If *Drór* does indicate that Óðinn was sometimes given a fertility aspect in such contexts, however, it would imply that an assembly in this period could have a broader cultic role. Alternatively, *Grimnismál* 49 may refer to romantic meetings, which is Hjalmar Falk's clever proposal (*Odensbeite* [Dybwad, 1924], 30–31; cf. fn. 5). Falk's idea that *Drór* was originally a name for Freyr is partly inspired by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's *Ynglingatal* 26, but the name is used there in a kenning and so could signify any deity.

⁶³ *Gylfaginning* 15. In the *Poetic Edda*, *dæma* is used for legal matters in *Gripisspá* 29 and *Guðrúnarkviða II* 3.

⁶⁴ *Gylfaginning* 42; *Skáldskaparmál* 35.

⁶⁵ *Gylfaginning* 32. According to *Grimnismál* 15, Forseti *svæfir allar sakir* ('assuages all charges'). *Snæfa* (literally, 'to lull to sleep') does not carry the same connotations of judgement as, say, *dæma*, and outside of *Gylfaginning*, no extant source connects Forseti with assemblies. However, his name may mean 'presiding one' (Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd ed. [Brill, 1962], s.v. "forseti") and this suggestion that he soothes contentiousness could indicate that he was envisioned guiding the parliaments of gods or humans, if he was not simply petitioned by worshippers for intercession in interpersonal conflict more generally (cf. Taggart, "Morality").

⁶⁶ Cf. John Lindow, "Islandingabók and Myth," *Scandinavian Studies* 69 (1997): 454–64; Pragya Vohra, "One of Us? Negotiating Multiple Legal Identities across the Viking Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (2016): 204–22; and Taggart, "Morality."

⁶⁷ For further discussion, see von See et al., *Kommentar* 1, vol. 2, 1349–50.

discussions in *Grímnismál* could have been interpreted by audiences as opportunities to mitigate smouldering crises and to plan for sudden ones. Karen Bek-Pedersen envisages them as a nexus for managing the natural order, law more as a means of conceptualising the interaction of fate with human life than a functional aspect of the assembly.⁶⁸ For her, this is signalled by the association of Urðr's well with this *þing* in *Gylfaginning* 15 and with divine authority in *Hávamál* 111. One could grouse over elements of that argument: Urðr's spring is absent from *Grímnismál* 29–30, even if it is associated with Yggdrasill in *Völuspá* 19, and reasonable quibbles have been put forward over the age of *Hávamál* 111 by John McKinnell.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the cosmological centrality of *Grímnismál*'s gathering, its daily nature, and the language that describes its procedures do allow that it could have been conceived by worshippers as a place of godly administration, even if a legal function is equally possible. Its *heilög vötn* ('holy waters') do not help much in the diagnosis of function: they could reflect the divinity of the place or actors involved or suggest that any formalized gathering (mythic or real) could be sacred,⁷⁰ as much as characterize the acts that were thought to take place there.

Whatever their mythological goals, the gods appear to operate as a group at the potential *þing* of *Grímnismál* 29–30. They are bracketed together under the identity of *ásir*, and the site is geographically related to an *ásbrú* ('ás-bridge'), though only Þórr is mentioned by name.⁷¹ Others may once have been identifiable as the owners of the horses enumerated in stanza 30, but only Gulltoppr and Glaðr can be connected to known deities today – Heimdalr and Dagr, respectively – for which we are reliant on Snorri's thirteenth-century work.⁷² While Heimdalr is a relatively major presence in the extant mythology, the same cannot be said for Dagr, so Glaðr's inclusion here may suggest that his owner was more important than is now assumed.⁷³ More likely, given the obscurity of the other horses, it simply indicates that the primary purpose of this list of horses was to compile and store knowledge, as *Grímnismál* does elsewhere for a range of other cosmological minutiae. As such, we cannot rely on this stanza to divulge the participants in the divine meeting. Modern readers can only be sure that it was for *ásir* – although even then, whether the poet(s) would have expected beings like Freyr and Skaði to have been incorporated in that category is unsure (cf. *Grímnismál* 5, 11 with *Skírnismál* 37 and *Lokasenna* 50–51, in which those deities have origins outside the

⁶⁸ Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Dunedin, 2011), 174.

⁶⁹ John McKinnell, "The Making of *Hávamál*," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 102–3.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I 1, and see Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 21–22, 71, and 86–89.

⁷¹ Þórr may be mentioned here because the stanza alludes to a lost myth about *ásbrú* (Hugo Gering and Barend Sijmons, ed., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Eddas* [Halle, 1927–1931], 200), although that is not the *modus operandi* of other stanzas in this section of the poem.

⁷² *Gylfaginning* 27 and 49; *Skáldskaparmál* 8 and 58. Cf. the wariness about this attribution in Rudolf Simek, *A Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (D.S. Brewer, 1993), s.v. "Gulltoppr;" Snorri adds Óðinn's horse Sleipnir to the list from *Grímnismál* in *Gylfaginning* 15, while Léttfeti is named in Gustaf Cederschiöld, ed., *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, in *Fornsögur Suðurlanda: Magus saga jarls, Konráðs saga, Bæringa saga, Florents saga, Bevers saga* (Berlings, 1884), 61.

⁷³ Cf. the devotion given to him in *Sigrdrífumál* 4.

æsir). No women are named, but so few individuals are in general that concrete conclusions cannot be drawn from that.

Their ownership of horses indicates that the *æsir* were a wealthy social elite, as does their association with a bridge. That *ásbrú* could also have implied for early listeners that the assembly took place within *æsir* territory – and perhaps, accordingly, that it was beyond the reach of other groups. For those audiences, the *ásbrú* and the waters associated with the location may also have implied physical restrictions to attendance, especially if the bridge is defunct.⁷⁴ If this bridge can be identified with Bifrost and, as Snorri claims, is therefore identical with a rainbow (*Gylfaginning* 13), then that would exclude humans from attending at least.⁷⁵ These topographical elements, however, may have been most important for their evocation of real-world *þing*-sites, which were often situated by rivers and fording places,⁷⁶ and where the physical and psychological movement of crossing water may have contributed to the elevation and even sacralization of such spaces by their demarcation from the rest of the landscape.⁷⁷

D. *Völuspá*

Völuspá is an allusive text, which in many places can only partly be deciphered, and the stanzas that refer to *þing*-like communal gatherings pose as many questions as they answer. A recurring reference to such gatherings comes in a refrain from stanzas 6, 9, 23 and 25:

Þá gengu regin öll á rökstóla, ginnheilög goð, ok um þat gættusk [...]	Then all the gods went to the judgement-seats, the most holy gods, and deliberated this [...]
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This congregation on *rökstólar* is not specified as a *þing* anywhere in the poem, but it does reflect features of the literary *þing* examined so far: aristocratic participation, communal deliberation and decision-making, and, as in *Baldrs draumar* and *Drymskviða*, responding to a crisis.⁷⁸ Even the formalized process of taking seats may have been

⁷⁴ Although Ferdinand Detter and Richard Heinzel, *Saemundar Edda: mit einem Anhang* (Georg Wigand, 1903), vol. 2, 182–83, argue that it is not.

⁷⁵ For past and new interpretations of Bifrost, some of which dispute Snorri's interpretation, see Mark-Kevin Deavin, "Bifrost Re-interpreted," in *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past*, ed. A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig and Lisbeth H. Torfing with Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt, and Ulla Loumand (Aarhus University, 2012), 108–9.

⁷⁶ Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 56–57 and 100–3.

⁷⁷ Cf. Stefan Brink, "Mythologizing Landscape: Place and Space of Cult and Myth," in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 23. 12. 2001*, ed. Michael Steusberg (de Gruyter, 2001), 76–112; Jens Peter Schjødt, "Landscape: Sacred and Profane," in *Making the Profane Sacred in the Viking Age: Essays in Honour of Stefan Brink*, ed. Irene García Losquino, Olof Sundqvist, and Declan Taggart (Brepols, 2020), 43–52.

⁷⁸ See also Løkka, "*Þing goða*," 23.

interpreted by tenth-century Icelanders as that of an assembly.⁷⁹ Snorri interprets those *rökstólar* as *dómstólar*, as mentioned above,⁸⁰ and probably *Völuspá*'s earlier listeners did as well. The choice of this *þing*-like event as a refrain suggests that, for them, the assembly was idealized as a social institution and means of problem-solving. Again, this is not a legal setting. The gods have gathered to *gættusk*, meaning something more like 'to deliberate' or perhaps 'to sort out'.⁸¹

The first use of this refrain, in *Völuspá* 6, responds to confusion in the previous stanza among the celestial bodies about their homes and, in the case of the male *Máni* ('Moon'), their strength:

Þá gengu regin öll
á rökstóla,
ginnheilög goð,
ok um þat gættusk;
nótt ok niðjum
nófn um gáfu
morgin hétu
ok miðjan dag,
undorn ok aptan,
árum at telja.

Then all the gods went
to the judgement-seats,
the most holy gods,
and deliberated this:
to night and her kin
they gave names;
they named morning
and midday
afternoon and evening
to count in years.

This is a successful assembly. The underlying crisis here seems to be that no measure of time yet exists, which is resolved by naming the celestial bodies and results in a stanza and a half of leisure, peace, and prosperity.⁸² While this crisis is cosmogonic, it may also be social: the celestial bodies – and times of day – are anthropomorphized and seemingly governed by the gods (as the case of *Dagr* above illustrates, they can be counted as gods themselves). Ordering existence also means ordering society.

Völuspá does not state whether the sun, moon, and stars were conceived as taking part in the assembly over their futures; given their confusion, the supposition must be that they did not but instead relied on the *regin*/*ginnheilög goð* for direction. A hierarchy of power may be implied, therefore, the foremost deities making decisions that affect the rest of society, as any group of leaders might in reality as well. That it is an aristocratic institution (as befits gods) is signalled by the *rökstólar*, which recall the high-seats of hall-owners.⁸³ The terms used to classify the gods here – *regin* and *goð* in stanza 6 and *æsir* in stanza 7 – could have been guided by alliteration, but none of them would be unusual for this divine in-group. Elsewhere, the *æsir* includes deities like *Þórr* and

⁷⁹ Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 109–12.

⁸⁰ *Gylfaginning* 42.

⁸¹ Cf. *Atlamál* 22 and 63.

⁸² On the slight variation here between *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók*, see Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda. Volume II: Mythological Poems* (Clarendon, 1997), 87–88.

⁸³ On the symbolic import of these thrones, including the *konungsstólar* of saga accounts of Danish and Swedish rulership, see Olof Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers: Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Brill, 2016), 488–99. Cf. also the wisdom associated with the seat in *Hávamál* 111.

Óðinn but perhaps not, for example, Freyja (see above).⁸⁴ In *Völuspá*, from previous context, these *regin* are the sons of Burr (st. 4), who are not identified by name there, although Óðinn is identified among them in several sources that either probably or definitely post-date the Viking Age,⁸⁵ and he is the poem's first-named god (st. 18). In all likelihood, tenth-century audiences viewed this first assembly as a socially homogeneous institution. In the mythic history presented, at least, in *Völuspá*'s early stanzas, no divine actors from other, for example, gender or economic groups have yet appeared.

The next assembly, in stanza 9, is occasioned by the arrival of *þrjár* [...] / *þursa meyyar* / [...] *ór jotunheimum* ('three [...] þurs-girls [...] out of Jötunheimar').⁸⁶ The nature of the dilemma they cause is unknown, but they seem to have spoiled the gods' idyll:⁸⁷

Þá gengu regin öll
á rökstóla,
ginnheilög goð,
ok um þat gættusk,
hverr skyldi dverga
dróttin skepja

Then all the gods went
to the judgement-seats,
the most holy gods,
and deliberated this:
who should make
the people of the *dvergar*

⁸⁴ Cf. also Edith Marold, "Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschichte," in *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers, and Kurt Schier. RGA-E 5 (de Gruyter, 1992), 707–11.

⁸⁵ *Gylfaginning* 6; *Hyndluljóð* 30; Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lausavísur*, in *Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 5*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, vol. ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Kari Ellen Gade, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout, 2022), st. 23; Þorvaldr *blönduskáld*, *Fragment*, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3*, ed. Vivian Busch, vol. ed. Kari Ellen Gade with Edith Marold (Brepols, 2017).

⁸⁶ *Völuspá* 8. *Þurs* is often translated as 'ogre.'

⁸⁷ For a summary of previous speculations about these events, see Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, and Katja Schulz with Simone Horst and Eve Picard, ed., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda. Band 1: Götterlieder (Teil I: Völuspá [R]. Hávamál. Teil II: Vafþrúðnismál, Grímnismál, Völuspá [H])* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019), vol. 1, 125–27. Snorri is no more positive towards these women than most modern commentators, although he sidesteps describing their involvement (*Gylfaginning* 14). *Völuspá* 8 portrays the gods at leisure, merry and not lacking gold *unþ* ('until') the women arrive, and that conjunction may be the best key we have to understanding the text (cf. Løkka, "Þing goða," 24; and the in some (but not all) ways complementary reasoning in Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 163–64). As Sigurður Nordal points out in the commentary to his *Völuspá* edition, the gods then move from crafting and producing wealth themselves to making beings who can fulfil that role for them (Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Völuspá*. 2nd ed. [Helgafell, 1952], 61–62). Presumably, in that case, the incursion is not violent and may even be romantic given that these are the poem's first women. If so, the financial imposition could be a *mundr* ('bride-price'). Of course, the women could simply symbolize the introduction of competition to divine society. As descendants of *þursar*, they may encapsulate the worst possible opponent for worshippers of the *æsir*, given, say, the consistent animosity towards their kind in the myths of Þórr (McKinnell, *Both One*, 69–75; John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* [D. S. Brewer, 2005], 8, 109–25; and Lotte Motz, *The King, The Champion and The Sorcerer: A Study in Germanic Myth* [Fassbaender, 1996], 35).

ór Brimis blóði
ok ór Bláins leggjum.

from Brimir's blood
and from Bláinn's bones.

The success of the assembly's intervention is difficult to gauge without knowing more about what caused it, although the text offers no detrimental consequences and both *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók* dedicate a significant portion of their length to enumerating the *dvergar* that result, suggesting that those creatures were not inherently viewed as negative creations (despite sometimes unfavourable depictions like *Alvíssmál* 1–3).⁸⁸

These stanzas offer no more clues than the last about the makeup of divine society, as it was understood by the poet(s), although presumably the *þursa meyyar* were imagined as excluded from the *þing* if they are the source of the *regin*'s problem (which may or may not be connected to their background and gender).

The next assembly is prompted by a series of stanzas that, again, remain poorly deciphered. Apparently amidst a divine war, the gods attempt and fail to kill someone called Gullveig (st. 21). A *völva* named *Heiðr*, favoured by evil women, is described (st. 22), after which stanza 23 appears to introduce a new issue:⁸⁹

Þá gengu regin öll
á rökstóla,
ginnheilög goð,
ok um þat gættusk,
hvárt skyldu æsir
afráð gjalda
eða skyldu goðin öll
gildi eiga.

Then all the gods went
to the judgement-seats,
the most holy gods,
and deliberated this:
should the *æsir*
pay the penalty
or should all the gods
own the tribute.

Multiple, possibly related crises may therefore have prompted this *þing*. A sensible hypothetical scenario would find the *æsir* and *vanir* at war over some form of tribute (assuming they are not fighting together against an unknown enemy, which is not Snorri's understanding in *Skáldskaparmál* G57),⁹⁰ and the *æsir* blundering with an important *vanr* called Gullveig (although her mythological background is not specified in *Völuspá* and the name does not appear anywhere else). Then, coming together to debate their next steps, they decide to continue the conflict. That has disastrous ramifications for their defensive structures, leading in *Konungsbók* to their next crisis and assembly (see below). As such, the decision-making apparatus of the *þing* functions, but the assembly is nevertheless a failure, given the consequences for the *æsir*'s fortifications. This chronology presumes that all these stanzas were configured

⁸⁸ Cf. Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Boydell Press, 2007), 29–34.

⁸⁹ A long history of research has been printed on the war and the identities of Gullveig and *Heiðr* – too long to be properly acknowledged here. Instead, for summaries, see von See et al., *Kommentar* 1, vol. 1, 209–12, 215–16, 235–38; Lindow “Vanir and Æsir,” 1036–43, 1045–47.

⁹⁰ For previous speculation over the nature of the tribute, see von See et al., *Kommentar* 1, vol. 1, 231–34.

in the order found in *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók* in earlier iterations of the poem and that *Heiðr*, for instance, has not been incorporated in a way that is at odds with tenth-century understandings of the war. That presumption is not easily verified or disproven, however.

As John Lindow concludes, by distinguishing between *æsir* and *goðin ǫll*, *Vǫluspá* 23 is stating that the *æsir* are a subset of gods, likely alongside the *vanir*.⁹¹ Up to this point in mythic history, then, the authorities of the assembly are probably this exclusive group. Because the *vanir* consider themselves worthy of tribute, the division here was unlikely for *Vǫluspá*'s listeners to be related to class; rather it may have been seen as geographical, given that one of the *vanir* is said to have come from another place and community in *Lokasenna* 34–35 and *Vafþrúðnismál* 38–39, even if *Vǫluspá* itself does not make this claim. No woman has been named among the in-group of the *þing* so far, and Gullveig is explicitly in opposition to it. Whether audiences would have perceived the decision-makers of the *þing* as all male at this point in the poem is unclear, however, given the limited evidence. Assuming that the timeline and context hypothesized above is correct, the attention given to Gullveig would suggest that women were prominent among the *vanir* and perhaps more so than among the *æsir* (even ignoring the standing of, for example, Freyja in other texts).

As noted above, subsequent events seem to be connected to the war, though the exact narrative is once more unclear.

Þá gengu regin ǫll
á rökstóla,
ginnheilög goð,
ok um þat gættusk,
hver⁹² hefði lopt allt
lævi blandit
eða ætt jǫtuns
Óðs mey gefna.

Then all the gods went
to the judgement-seats,
the most holy gods,
and deliberated this:
who had all the air
mixed with treachery
or to the family of the jǫtnar
given Óðr's girl.

This gathering in stanza 25 leads to Þórr's anger in the next. *Þórr einn þar vá* ('there Þórr alone struck') the enemy of the *regin*, thereby breaking oaths that had been made;⁹³ *bann sjaldan sitr / er bann slíkt um fregn* ('he seldom remains sitting when he learns of such things'). *Óðs mar* ('Óðr's girl') is usually identified as Freyja on Snorri's say so and

⁹¹ Lindow, "Vanir and Æsir," 1037.

⁹² Emended by the editors from *hverir*, based on *Hauksbók* and *Gylfaginning*. See further fn. 102.

⁹³ *Konungsbók* provides *var* ('was') here, whereas *Hauksbók* and *Snorra Edda* give *vá*, the reading preferred by our edition (and most other editors). *Var* does also make sense but *einn þar var* ('alone was there') insinuates a distinct narrative from that of *Gylfaginning* or the one we posit below. The god is not by himself in Snorri's rendition of the story and nor can he be at an assembly, as we propose. Instead, these events could be a sequel to the gathering of *Vǫluspá* 25 and imply that a decision was taken to send Þórr out alone to fix the gods' problem (similarly to e.g. *Baldrs draumar*). The violence here and the use of feuding to achieve a resolution is in keeping with other literary depictions of dispute management: see further Lindow, "Islendingabók and Myth," 457–59; and *Murder and Vengeance*.

the parallels in other stories of the *jötnar* hoping to steal her away.⁹⁴ *Gylfaginning* 42 offers a more elaborate version of these events, but with some salient differences even despite the paucity of detail in *Völuspá*'s two stanzas. Snorri tells of a *jötunn*- (later *bergrisi*-)builder who, early in history, offers to construct a fortification for the *æsir*.⁹⁵ Those gods come together once to discuss the terms and again later, on their *dómstólar*, when they realize they need to escape the pact. They blame Loki and force him, on pain of death, to solve their problem. When he does and the builder flies into a rage, Þórr is called home from abroad. He kills the *bergrisi*, thereby breaking the gods' oaths.

While Snorri relates that the gods were to lose the sun and the moon as well as Freyja, he does not actually link this crisis to the *æsir-vanir* war (which appears elsewhere in his *Edda*, in *Skáldskaparmál* G57). Their proximity in Konungsbók's *Völuspá* and the destruction of the fortification in the stanza before the *regin*'s parliament suggests that early audiences of the poem did, nonetheless, understand the war as the inciting incident.⁹⁶ The reality is that *any* narrative of the gods potentially losing Freyja (or another female deity) could have led to *Völuspá* 25–26, given how widespread that story pattern is,⁹⁷ yet Snorri does connect those stanzas to his tale by quoting them, and there are enough common factors to assume that earlier audiences would have envisaged a comparable story behind the bare-bones account of *Völuspá*, despite the substantial divergences between the poem and *Gylfaginning*.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of these stanzas is that Þórr may be interrupting the assembly itself. The line *hann sjaldan sitr* in stanza 26 could have been intended to characterize the deity through metaphor, encapsulating his familiar attitude and behaviour. Yet, when the same stanza claims that Þórr struck *þar*, *Völuspá* situates Þórr in the physical location of the preceding stanza (i.e. at the *rökstólar*). Moreover, it separates Þórr from the others in that space with *einn* – presumably the gods sitting in their thrones. In that circumstance, it seems likely that audiences would have envisioned Þórr as an active participant in the gods' meeting, who stands from his own *rökstóll* to attack (rather than arriving from abroad, as he does in Snorri's text). The broken oaths may therefore be those of *gríðr* ('sanctuary'), which toponyms and later texts associate with *þing*-sites in general, rather than any specific bargain with a builder. Such oaths imply a degree of formalization that is in keeping with the elevation and

⁹⁴ Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, "Freyja," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures, Vol. III: Conceptual Frameworks: The Cosmos and Collective Supernatural Beings*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, 2020), 1276; cf. *Hyndluljóð* 47; and Einarr Skúlason, *Óxarflokkur*, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3, ed. Kari Ellen Gade, vol. ed. Kari Ellen Gade with Edith Marold (Brepols, 2017), st. 2.

⁹⁵ While *risi* and *jötunn* are typically synonymous in Snorri's usage, he appears to reserve *bergrisi* for more aggressive beings, perhaps explaining why the gods in *Gylfaginning* seem happy to deal with a *jötunn* but break their oaths when it transpires he is a *bergrisi* (Blake Middleton, "Ek Man Jötuna: An Analysis of the Semantic Development and Narrative Use of the *Jötnar* in the Poetic Edda and Snorra Edda" [PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2021], 84–90).

⁹⁶ In Hauksbók this assembly occurs in stanza 21. It does not seem to result from the war, which is first mentioned in stanza 26, but neither does it have another obvious cause.

⁹⁷ Cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, "Reading *Drymskviða*," in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (Routledge, 2002), 177–84.

organization of participants on *rökstólar* – and recalls saga descriptions of administrative and judicial assemblies⁹⁸ – despite the *ad hoc* nature of this and many of the other *þing* examined here.

The action of stanzas 26–27 implies that Þórr should be envisioned among the *regin* as a participant and that Freyja is now within that coalition too, even if it seems she lacks agency relative to the male gods.⁹⁹ The *jötnar* are an out-group, although they too are a collective, with a single delegate seemingly representing them in the narrative of this assembly, given that it only took one blow from Þórr to end the dispute. Tenth-century audiences presumably did not credit *jötnar* with authority at the assembly.

In the end, Freyja remains with the gods – but they do not arrive at that outcome through proper assembly procedure. Arguably, therefore, the *þing* was a failure and to a greater extent than that of the *ásir-vanir* war, despite the outcome achieved. Moreover, a treacherous internal element appears to be at fault, having promised to give away *Óðs mæ*.¹⁰⁰ We must wonder how early audiences would have perceived this: would they have believed that an issue was less likely to be fixed or avoided if the body responsible for doing so was incompetent or corrupted in some way? Perhaps, given the emphasis on the rupturing of oaths in stanza 26 (a further debasement of the institution), Þórr's intervention was the only means of achieving an acceptable resolution.¹⁰¹ Because of the corruption of the *þing*, that violence may have been the best possible bad outcome. In other cases, and as Løkka notes for this poem,¹⁰² the collective's decision is often to send a single deity (or a pair of deities, with one dominating) to solve a problem. This may be for storytelling reasons or because Old Norse myths habitually focus on individuals. Nevertheless, a single deity does resolve this conflict too, though apparently by asserting his will over that of the group rather than by enacting their decisions.

This is the second seemingly ineffective assembly in a row, and while, in the short term, society has returned to its status quo, early audiences may have seen the seeds of the end being planted. The next assembly in stanza 50 is the final one before the battle of *ragnarök* begins, and the first time the word *þing* is actually used in the poem:

Hvat er með ásum?
Hvat er með álfum?
Gnýr allr jötnheimr,

How is it with the *ásir*?
How is it with the *álfar*?
All jötnheimr roars;

⁹⁸ Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 21.

⁹⁹ The identification of Freyja through her (probable) husband may reflect this, although characterising individuals via family members is common in kennings, including in *Völuspá*.

¹⁰⁰ Konungsbók uses the masculine plural *hverir* when referring to that element, which suggests that a group was pictured as responsible. However, Hauksbók and *Gylfaginning* offer the singular *hverr*, and in Snorri's account, the guilty party is Loki (cf. the similar wording of *Lokasenna* 3, in which Loki mixes alcohol rather than the air with malevolence, although the phraseology may simply be idiomatic, given another parallel in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 38).

¹⁰¹ Cf. Judy Quinn, "Fifth-Column Mother: Týr's Parentage according to *Hymiskviða*," in *Making the Profane Sacred in the Viking Age: Essays in Honour of Stefan Brink*, ed. Irene García Losquiño, Olof Sundqvist, and Declan Taggart (Brepols, 2020) on fifth-column activities in Old Norse myth.

¹⁰² Løkka, "*Þing goda*," 25.

æsir ro á þingi;	the <i>æsir</i> rock at the <i>þing</i> , ¹⁰³
stynja dvergar	the dwarfs groan
fyr steindurum,	before the stone doors,
veggbergs vísir.	the wise ones of the boulder.
Vituð ér enn – eða hvað?	Would you know more – or what?

The gods have gathered to find a solution to the coming *ragnarök* and the chaos of the world. The following stanzas portray war, so either they did not find that solution in the narrative alluded to here, or they decided upon conflict. Given the resulting destruction of the world, it seems unlikely that all audiences would have deemed this *þing* a complete success, and while the seeming inevitability of *ragnarök* in much of this mythology lends a tragic heroism to the gods' final battle,¹⁰⁴ the logical powerlessness of the assembly in this situation is nonetheless a symptom of the gods' broader weakness.

The contrast that is drawn between the *æsir* and other groups may be as important for the poet(s) and the effect they wish to achieve as the assembly itself. While the gods are in a *þing*, with its connotations of organization and community, the population of *Jötunheimr* *gnýr* ('roars'), language that often expresses the violence of natural phenomena.¹⁰⁵ The significance of the groaning, wise *dvergar* is less clear, although it may relate to their migration in the face of the coming destruction or inability to hide from it¹⁰⁶ – or simply imply the inactivity of other beings to elevate the gods by comparison. Perhaps there is a sense of the isolation of the *æsir* here, although whether that is a positive or negative is difficult to gauge. Is it a positive that only they attend the *þing*? Early listeners may have thought so, in light of the intense noise-making of the other groups and the increasing lack of success of earlier assemblies as divine society expanded – yet this *þing* does not lead to a better outcome than the previous two in this poem and by distinguishing them as *æsir*, the text pointedly excludes the *álfar* (as well as the less positive *dvergar* and *jötnar*), given that they have just been cited in the same stanza.¹⁰⁷ Tenth-century audiences may, therefore, have picked up on the

¹⁰³ *Ro* ('row') may have been chosen here to portray the gods sitting, as they seem to in stanza 26, but also rocking backwards and forwards anxiously (cf. Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. "róa"). However, *ero* ('are;' normalized to *eru*) may have been intended: compare Hauksbók (H 40) and some manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* (SnE 19), which do offer *ero*, and a similar issue in stanza 44 of *Konungsbók's* text (cf. von See et al., *Kommentar* 1, vol. 1, 378).

¹⁰⁴ See McKinnell, *Both One*, 37 and 54.

¹⁰⁵ Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. "gnýja"; cf. Lindow, "The Tears," 161.

¹⁰⁶ Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, "Groaning Dwarfs at Granite Doors: Fieldwork in *Völuspá*," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 118 (2003): 29–45; cf. Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen, "*Svá er sagt í fornum vísindum: Tekstualisering av de mytologiske eddadikt*" (PhD thesis, University of Bergen, 2006), 95 on its dramatic impact.

¹⁰⁷ How positive the *álfar* were perceived to be may have varied from text to text and audience to audience, although they are frequently mentioned in the same breath as the *æsir* (presumably partly for the alliteration) and sometimes (but not always) appear to cross over with the *vanir*. See Terry Gunnell, "*Álfar* (Elves)," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*:

isolation of the *æsir*, especially if the *álfr* were thought to have abandoned them (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 38–39) or, at least, were not allowed to attend the assembly.¹⁰⁸

The saving grace of the gods’ assembly for early audiences may have been that they knew how the poem would end – that the world would return. When it does, a familiar institution seems to come with it:

Finnask æsir	The <i>æsir</i> assemble
á Iðavelli	on Iðavellir
ok um Moldþinur	and opine about the
máttkan dæma,	mighty earth-fir
ok minnask þar	and remember there
á megin dóma	the great judgements
ok á Fimbultýs	and Fimbultýr’s
fornar rúnar.	ancient runes.

The gathering of *Völuspá* 58 is a fitting ending to the trajectory of the poem, reflecting the rebirth of nature and civilisation. There is a new status quo, and again, an assembly-like meeting is at its heart. As *Grimnismál* 29–30 may also do, the text subverts the verb *dæma* to echo the new mood, the legal language referring to judgements of the past rather than any individual in the present. If decisions are being made, they are not to resolve crises.¹⁰⁹

Because there are no crises, there are no resolutions either. The participants, though, are a curious bunch: while this stanza only names them as *æsir*, the deities of stanzas 60–61 are not the warlike beings that inhabit this reborn world in *Vafþrúðnismál* 51, as McKinnell has pointed out before.¹¹⁰ We only hear of Baldr, whose great mythic contribution is to die (st. 31); of Hœnir, one of the gods responsible for creating humanity in *Völuspá* 18; and of Höðr, Baldr’s killer (st. 32), presumably unwitting, as other texts suggest, given their amicable reunion (st. 60) and Loki’s punishment (st. 34; cf. *Gylfaginning* 49–50). This being the first communal gathering in a world without *bol* (‘harm, misfortune’), it is probably an insight into the opinions of *Völuspá*’s creator(s) that the new authorities are these more innocent gods (who, again, early

History and Structures, Vol. III: Conceptual Frameworks: The Cosmos and Collective Supernatural Beings, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, 2020), 1571–80.

¹⁰⁸ There are no hints regarding the gender of participants. Some manuscripts do incorporate *ásynjur* in place of *álfr* in *Völuspá* 50, but the latter is the dominant reading, and other factors hint that it may have been preferred by the poet(s) too: see Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, 147.

¹⁰⁹ This stanza survives in Hauksbók (H 52) as well as in Konungsbók, although lines 5–6 only appear in the former. As in our edition, *Völuspá*’s editors typically insert the lines from Hauksbók into their text for Konungsbók, arguing that it better represents the original poem (cf. Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, 81; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 58n.). Without that emendation, in both texts critical thinking is at the heart of social organization in the new world, but Hauksbók makes history the foundation of the exercise.

¹¹⁰ McKinnell, *Both One*, 121–22.

audiences probably thought of as kin to one another).¹¹¹ They are not the *ójafnaðarmenn* ('unreasonable people') who unbalance society in sagas.¹¹²

Whether that harmony will survive is an open question, given the reappearance from the poem's earlier sections of *Níðhöggr* (st. 59) and golden gaming pieces (st. 63), although the significance of neither is clear.¹¹³ For at least a time, however, the poem implies that the world will enjoy a new Golden Age. Perhaps *dama* was intended as a means of maintaining the desirable new status quo, even if it was not seen as possible to do so indefinitely.

The gathering is held on *Íðavöllum*, where gods met to craft and build during their first Golden Age (*Völuspá* 7); no longer a place of active work, it is now one of reflection. That it is a *völlr* ('field, plain'), recalls real-life *þing* sites, most famously Iceland's Þingvellir. Although such places were not solely used for assemblies (as the poem itself attests), the name does reflect the kind of marginal agricultural location that offered the resources and setting suitable for large gatherings.¹¹⁴

In sum, the motif of the gods gathering is put to narrative use in *Völuspá*, the poet(s) echoing society's slide towards chaos and then its renewal through the successes and failures of what is presented here as a major institution. For the poet(s), order and security are clearly related to the effective functioning of communal problem-solving measures. However, while the obvious reading is that assemblies were necessary for the proper functioning of society, another (not mutually exclusive) possibility is that the poet(s) saw assemblies as a bellwether. A *þing* can only be fully successful when its participants are reliable and have the power to enforce their decisions. Incompetence and treachery naturally undermine this, as they would with communities more generally.

These conferences are limited to an aristocratic minority, although the poem's opinion of the value of diversity among participants is ambiguous. Society does expand to incorporate the *vanir* without greater success, but neither do the *ásir* seem much better off by themselves during their last *þing* before *ragnarök* – even if they are again the sole rulers of the new Golden Age afterwards. Early audiences who knew *Völuspá*'s underlying narratives may have pictured women involved in the *þing*, especially after stanzas 25–26. However, women are not given a prominent role in the poem's versions of those myths and may have been perceived with relatively little power.

¹¹¹ Cf. McKinnell, *Both One*, 120–28.

¹¹² Joanne Shortt Butler, "Narrative structure and the individual in the *Íslendingasögur*: Motivation, provocation and characterisation" (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016).

¹¹³ Cf. Declan Taggart, "Fate and Cosmogony in *Völuspá*: Shaping History in a Moment," *Northern Studies* 44 (2013): 21–35.

¹¹⁴ Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 12–13, and 140–41. Suggestions for the meaning of *íð(a)* range from 'eternal' and 'shimmering' to 'working,' partly based on the context provided by *Völuspá* and without one interpretation clearly being better than all others (Stefan Brink and John Lindow, "Place Names in Eddic Poetry," in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn [Cambridge University Press, 2016], 175–76).

IV. Úrskurðr

This contribution has tackled the question of how the Old Norse gods meet and manage crises and the role of the divine *þing* in this process. According to the surviving myths of the *Poetic Edda*, the divine *þing* was usually a *reactive* institution, focusing on crisis response and management; only *Grimnismál* and perhaps *Hymiskviða* may depict the gods *proactively* negating or minimising potential risks through such gatherings. At any rate, the sources underline the importance of some form of communal discussion.¹¹⁵ One way in which crises are approached by the gods in these poems is the deployment of specialists, whose expertise is consistent with the respective crisis (e.g. Óðinn’s magical knowledge spellbinds a *völva*; Þórr’s might dispatches *jötnar*). The deliberations over how to address crises are conducted within multi-agent teams, as evinced by *Drymskviða* and *Völuspá*, for instance, though female involvement during these consultations remains nebulous. *Drymskviða* depicts Freyja being approached by Þórr for aid *prior* to the *þing* beginning, while *Baldrs draumar* paints a picture of the *ásynjur* congregating separately to the male gods. Yet, as will be discussed further below, early Norwegian laws did allow for women to participate at *þing*, so some female agency and involvement in decision-making processes is not implausible. We found three aspects of divine *þing* gatherings particularly worth highlighting: who participated in them, how their procedures unfolded, and what their function was within the larger mythological context.

The first consideration may appear rather obvious, given the male-centred vocabulary surrounding the *þing*. In Lökka’s words, “When a problematic situation arises, the pantheon gathers at the *thing* to discuss the matter.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, it is apparent from the mythological poems that male divinities are *always* present at any divine *þing* gathering. Furthermore, the poems use words such as *regin*, *tívar*, *firar*, or *ásir* that could refer to Old Norse deities as a whole or to specific sub-groups. The latter term, *ásir*, even when not understood as a *pars pro toto*, could include the female deities of the *ásynjur* as well (see above). Even so, their *þing* participation generally seems to be less active and more restricted than that of male gods. According to the earliest Norwegian laws, female participation would have been restricted to five groups of women, according to Sanmark: landowning widows; female witnesses; women who were in legal suits with other women; women maintaining a household; and the so-called *baugrýgjar* (‘ring-women,’ sing. *baugrýgr*), who were unmarried women without close male relations and who could thus inherit domains and/or possessions.¹¹⁷ However, as Sanmark goes on to observe, in Iceland’s own medieval period, at least, women

¹¹⁵ In this context, it might also be worthwhile to consider the idea of ‘groupthink,’ where several factors, such as the pressure of time, the acuteness of the crises, and the composition of the decision-making body, can have a negative impact on crisis responses, potentially resulting in premature action or disregarding alternative resolutions. Cf. Verena Epp, “*Simus in te unum*: Mittelalterliche Versammlungen als Phänomene von ‘groupthink?’” in *Versammlungen im Frühmittelalter*, ed. Phillippe Depreux and Steffen Patzold, RGA-E 141 (de Gruyter, 2023), 31.

¹¹⁶ Lökka, “*Þing goða*,” 25.

¹¹⁷ Sanmark, “Women at the Thing,” 94–95.

seem to have had less scope for actively partaking in *þing* gatherings than their counterparts in Norway.¹¹⁸ While this evidence post-dates the supposed composition dates of many of the above poems, it could, again, imply that art has imitated (or influenced) life here and the *ásynjur* and other female deities were conceptualized as having limited, if any, active roles at divine *þing*. This would fit with the silence over their participation in most poems and the potential sketching of a gender divide in *Baldrs draumar* and *Þrymskviða*, the male gods actively contributing to their *þing* and the goddesses merely attending it, being expelled to an auditorium.¹¹⁹

One example of a female mythological character who might have been eligible for active *þing* participation comes from *Snorra Edda* rather than the Eddic poems, which have so far been our focus. *Skáldskaparmál* G56 recounts how Skaði, clad in armour, arrives in Ásgarðr to claim compensation for the murder of her father Þjazi, whom the gods had killed for abducting Iðunn.¹²⁰ The gods offer to let Skaði marry one of them in recompense, after which she is appeased. Her treatment by the gods after her marriage suggests that a different status was ascribed to Skaði, maybe going so far as making her an honorary member of the gods. However, before her engagement to Njörðr, Skaði also seems to have a man's role in society, presumably because she lacks other living (male) relatives; she is akin to the *baugrýgjar* and not unlike Gerðr in her father's absence in *Skírnismál*.¹²¹ Ultimately, according to another part of Snorri's text, Skaði and Njörðr separate, and it is feasible that, in the minds of early audiences, Skaði retained her right to active *þing* participation after this, if she were recognised as maintaining her own household in *Þrymheimr*.¹²²

Concerning the procedures of the divine *þing*, there is less evidence for ritual than may be the case for their real-world counterparts.¹²³ Broken oaths and implied movements towards and out of seats in *Völuspá* are the clearest indications of such activities in this poetry.¹²⁴ What, if any, are the procedural differences between these types of mythological parliaments and a *þing* proper? Even if we assume that there were widespread commonalities among the Alþing and the many Viking Age Icelandic local and regional assemblies (which is hardly a given), the poems provide only scarce information regarding *þing* proceedings with which to answer this prompt. Assemblies are seldom shown in progress. Their depiction may have been unnecessary, if such procedures were well known or narratively unproductive, and their details could have been easily lost in oral transmission. When Old Norse mythology was staged, the proceedings of the assembly may have been quickly staged or passed over entirely, leading to the situation found in these texts.

¹¹⁸ Sanmark, "Women at the Thing," 96–97.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Sanmark, "Women at the Thing," 92–93. *Contra* such an understanding, see, for example, Løkka, "*Þing goda*," 21 and 25.

¹²⁰ Þórr claims to be Þjazi's slayer in *Hárbarðsljóð* 19.

¹²¹ Cf. Sanmark, "Women at the Thing," 94–95.

¹²² *Gylfaginning* 23; cf. *Grímnismál* 11; Þórðr Særeksson, *Fragments*, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3, ed. Kari Ellen Gade, vol. ed. Kari Ellen Gade with Edith Marold (Brepols, 2017), st. 3.

¹²³ On assembly rituals, see Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 82–142.

¹²⁴ Although see Løkka, "*Þing goda*" and Sanmark, *Viking Law*, 103 for an array of more doubtful indications of ritual.

Regarding the third subject, the divine *þing*'s purpose, it appears that they were an administrative institution first and foremost, with a reduced legal aspect.¹²⁵ As such, the mythological *þing* might have rather different connotations than those depicted in saga literature.¹²⁶ Indeed, if the poems do have Viking Age origins as Christopher D. Sapp and others argue,¹²⁷ they may be a better indication of the purposes of and, especially, the flexibility of what constituted a *þing* in that period of Iceland's history than later prose. As has been stated above, within the extant myths of the *Eddukvæði*, only *Grímnismál* and *Hymiskviða* paint the divine *þing* as a routine occurrence, one the gods attend in the former case to judge and deliberate on (perhaps) legal matters. How widespread this interpretation of the divine *þing* as a legal institution was remains debatable, particularly as it is arguable even in *Grímnismál*. Indeed, the divine *þing* seems to fail the very moment they are required to discuss a legal matter – the resolution of the stolen hammer in *Drymskviða* represents only a short-term fix, any conclusive solution regarding wreaking vengeance on the *jötnar* is disappointing in the light of the continued hostilities between the factions. Oaths or vows that are sworn at divine gatherings other than *þing* seem to have some degree of legality, too. The deal struck between Alvið and the *firar* in *Alvíssmál* may serve as an example of this, assuming early audiences would not have envisaged this too occurring at a *þing* and even if Þórr can seemingly break it without ramifications due to his own legal position.

Rather, the mythological *þing* is primarily depicted as a tool of crisis management and resolution: it is chiefly reactive, appearing almost exclusively in the wake of dilemmas in the mythological record and partly functioning as a means of emphasising the seriousness of narrative obstacles.¹²⁸ These crises are always dealt with after they transpired and the Old Norse deities are only rarely described working at assemblies to prevent them from occurring. Nonetheless, the *þing* may not have been as significant in the body of Old Norse mythology as previous scholars have suggested.¹²⁹ It may have been ideologically central for some worshippers of Old Norse gods, given its connection with, for example, Yggdrasil in *Hávamál* 111 and *Grímnismál* 29–30. However, that does not mean that it was relevant much beyond that, given that assemblies occur relatively seldom across the body of Eddic and Skaldic poetry. While the *þing* is utilized and sometimes probably idealized as a means of conflict resolution, it was far from the only means for returning to the status quo available to early Icelanders.

Lastly, the main boon for audiences may arguably lie in what can be referred to as “survivor agency.”¹³⁰ The *þing* gatherings investigated here are narrated in mythological

¹²⁵ Cf. Lökka, “*Þing goða*,” 25.

¹²⁶ In her detailed study of the *þing* in the *Íslendingasögur*, Hannah Burrows concludes that “the *Íslendingasögur* may give such a prominent and positive role to the *þing* at least partly in order to express a desire for a return to the values around which it was understood to have worked in times past.” See Hanna Burrows, “Some *Þing* to Talk About: Assemblies in the *Íslendingasögur*,” *Northern Studies* 47 (2015): 69.

¹²⁷ See fn. 6.

¹²⁸ Cf. Lökka, “*Þing goða*”; Thorvaldsen, “*Svá er sagt*,” 95.

¹²⁹ Cf. Lökka, “*Þing goða*.”

¹³⁰ Cf. Carl Lindahl, “We are all Survivors: Verbal, Ritual and Material Ways of Narrating Disaster and Recovery,” *Fabula* 58, no. 1–2 (2017): 1–25.

poems, yet their various crises might reflect real ones, like natural disasters or war. Therefore, the gods' accomplishments and failures in crisis management at *þing* suggest to the recipients of Old Norse mythology various compelling ideas, including the potential for individuals and societies to challenge and surmount crises, or that some calamities elude resolution, even for the gods. This possibility of psychological succour also explains why the Eddic poems rarely focus on the procedures of divine *þing*: more important are their results and any successive actions. Divine assemblies would thus provide individuals experiencing real-life crises with a formula for not only overcoming those crises but also for aiding their fellow afflicted.

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