

# Askr and Embla: The Creation of Man from Trees\*

## Introduction: Anthropogonic Myths and Ecocriticism

When the historian Lynn White Jr. asked about ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’ in an article published in *Science* in 1967, he came to the result that the mainstream Christian worldview, what he calls the ‘orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature’, is the ground from which this crisis has grown.<sup>1</sup> He saw this attitude based on biblical creation narratives, such as Genesis 1. 26 and Genesis 2. 19. Genesis 1. 26 describes the creation of man<sup>2</sup> in the likeness of God, his dominion over all animals and ‘all the earth’:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.<sup>3</sup>

In Genesis 2. 19 — which comes from a different creation narrative — God shows Adam all the newly created animals so that Adam can name them:

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1 White, Jr., ‘The Historical Roots’, p. 1207.

2 ‘Man’ refers here to the use in Genesis 1. 26 (‘Let us make man in our image’), where it is a translation of Hebrew ‘adam’. It means ‘humankind’ in the biblical context and does not only refer to males as Genesis 1. 27 shows: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them’ (King James translation). I will use this term throughout the chapter although current discussions on language and gender may lead to a different word usage in the future.

3 King James translation, used in all following quotations of the Bible.

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And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

The creation of man in the likeness of God, their dominion over ‘all the earth’ as intended by God and expressed again in the motif of Adam naming ‘every living creature’ establish a hierarchy in the world from the very beginning: man dominates over nature, and nature exists to serve man. According to White, this hierarchy is problematic because ‘[w]hat people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.’<sup>4</sup>

Creation narratives express the worldview of an individual or a society. In many traditions, the creation of the world and the creation of man — cosmogonies and anthropogonies — are connected with each other. Narratives of the creation of man are often part of cosmogonies or follow closely after them. The reason for this is that cosmogonic narratives generally have their *telos* in the creation of human beings who are the narrators of the creation narratives. In other words, they are etiologies of the living conditions of the narrator. However, creation narratives do not only explain how the world became the way it is. They also connect the past with the future and often come with maxims for human behaviour and action.<sup>5</sup> Creation narratives thus seem to be crucial to shaping the relationship between humans and their environment.

This chapter will analyse an anthropogony transmitted within the eddic poem *Völuspá*.<sup>6</sup> In this poem, the ‘vǫlva’ — a seeress — relates the creation of the world and its end. In this context, stanzas 17 and 18 tell the story of the creation of man from wood or trees: three Nordic gods, ‘æsir’, find Ask and Embla — apparently two pieces of wood of different trees — and bring them to life. Scholars have compared this passage with a number of anthropogonic motifs from various Indo-European traditions. Often, it has been understood as evidence for a pre-Christian anthropogony based on a motif known from other cultures according to which human beings sprout or grow forth from non-human nature.<sup>7</sup> This narrative of growing forth from nature could be interpreted as a non-hierarchical relationship between humans and their environment.

The cultural historian Nina Witoszek thus interprets this and other ‘bilder’ (images) of ‘Nordens tidlige middelalderlitteratur’ (early medieval Nordic literature) such as the creation of the world from the body of the giant Ymir, Baldr’s death, as well as our example of Ask and Embla, as examples of ‘gammel norrøn holisme’ (ancient Norse holism) that is distinctive from Christian models with their ‘transcendens/immanens-polariteten’ (polarity of transcendence and immanence):

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4 White, Jr., ‘The Historical Roots’, p. 1205.

5 Ahn, ‘Schöpfer/Schöpfung I’, p. 256.

6 Old Norse myths have recently been considered from an ecocritical perspective by Nordvig, ‘Of Fire and Water. The Old Norse Mythical Worldview in an Eco-Mythological Perspective’ (2013), and Abram, *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature* (2019). Both studies have different perspectives and aims to the present chapter and will not be discussed in detail here.

7 See e.g. Hultgård, ‘The Ask and Embla Myth’, pp. 61–26.

De søker ikke til villmarken som et sted for 'åndsgymnastikk', og finner heller ikke metaforer der for det guddommelige eller det menneskelige. De betrakter snarere naturen som grunnstoffet, *materia*, midlet til å gi ytre form til kulturen, sekundærstoffet (*epiphenomenon*).<sup>8</sup>

(They do not seek out the wilderness as a place for 'spiritual gymnastics', nor do they find metaphors there for the divine or the human. Rather, they regard nature as the element, *materia*, the means of giving external form to the culture, the secondary substance (*epiphenomenon*)).

Witoszek takes up this idea again in her monograph *The Origins of the Regime of Goodness*, where she traces the roots of perceived Norwegian exceptionalism that made Norway the epitome of 'equality, freedom, welfare, and justice.'<sup>9</sup> She states:

[Norway's] wealth goes beyond the oil, gas, and hydro-power that give it one of the highest GDPs in the world; it includes a rich tradition of peaceful, reform-oriented, development, emancipatory politics, a generous welfare system, and an identity based on partnership with nature.<sup>10</sup>

Witoszek sees this unique partnership with nature as something that is based on a tradition starting with eddic poetry and leading up to Arne Næss's ecophilosophy. The national myth created by the Norwegian elites during the nineteenth century chose the 'free peasant' instead of the Viking as a 'historical protagonist'. She detects the roots of this ideology, 'a plebeian environmental pragmatism', in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, reading this poem as a 'medieval secular textbook of survival' that 'promoted an "ecological" system of knowledge which was transmitted from generation to generation.'<sup>11</sup>

From a medievalist's perspective, these are problematic assumptions. The question of whether or not some verses within the gnomic part of *Hávamál* or even the idea for the whole poem may be via *Hugsvinnsmál* based on the widely known *Disticha Catonis* is only one issue.<sup>12</sup> More crucial, however, are the circumstances of production, reception, and dissemination. And this is the key issue: poetry such as *Hávamál* in the form in which we have it is the product of a learned elite who had clerical training. They generally wrote for chieftains and rulers or other members of the elite. This is not least suggested by the sparse transmission of the poem, whose text goes back to one manuscript, the so-called Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* from the thirteenth century. The idea that *Hávamál*, or parts of it, was commonly known amongst Norwegian peasants during the Middle Ages is pure speculation. The same

8 Witoszek, *Norske naturmytologier*, p. 69. The italics are in Witoszek's original text; translations are my own.

9 Witoszek, *Origins of the 'Regime of Goodness'*, p. 7.

10 Witoszek, *Origins of the 'Regime of Goodness'*, p. 7.

11 Witoszek, *Origins of the 'Regime of Goodness'*, p. 21.

12 For the influence of *Disticha Catonis*, see von See, 'Disticha Catonis und Hávamál' and again von See, 'Disticha Catonis, Hugsvinnsmál und Hávamál'. Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, pp. 18–19 and McKinnell, 'The Making of "Hávamál"' argue against such an influence.

is true for other parts of the mythological poems of the Codex Regius, such as the passage from *Völuspá* introduced above.

The question remains whether the poem *Völuspá* preserves a pagan myth of the creation of man and whether it was understood by the medieval reader as such, and perceived as being different to the Christian model of creation. First and foremost, this chapter will ask how the medieval reader may have understood the passage on Askr and Embla. As Iceland adopted Christianity in the year 999, and all learning — writing, reading, and everything that followed — was based on Christian education, the interpretative background of the medieval reader was necessarily Christian. Elard Hugo Meyer proposed such a reading of *Völuspá* already in 1891. He did not, however, provide any explanation for the motif of Askr and Embla.<sup>13</sup>

This focus on a high medieval reading takes its cue from the transmission of the poem and the stanzas therein. As noted above, the main manuscript, Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4°), dates from the thirteenth century. The manuscript was produced for thirteenth-century readers. It must have addressed their interests and needs and should therefore be read against the background of a thirteenth-century worldview. We also need to keep in mind the fact that the source text is a singular poem, a literary text, by an anonymous author from the thirteenth century, even if it may be based on earlier traditions. This thirteenth-century author was a member of the learned, educated elite of their time. Therefore, all we can say is that the worldview expressed in the text is what a certain author from the thirteenth century believed to be plausible about the religion of his or her pagan ancestors. We may assume that it is not untouched by the theological teaching of the thirteenth century because the author was educated within this framework. Even if the author did not alter the transmitted stanza at all from an earlier version, the fact that they chose to select and include it must mean that they considered it significant. This chapter will therefore attempt to highlight discourses that the author was familiar with, and that helped them to understand, interpret, and reconceptualize this tradition.

The chapter argues against Lynn White Jr.'s claims that Christianity generally shows arrogance toward nature. The Christian tradition is diverse. Even Lynn White Jr. himself pointed out that the Franciscan tradition introduced 'a democracy of all God's creatures.'<sup>14</sup> This chapter will show that St Francis was not alone. Furthermore, the chapter will argue that the assumption of a dichotomy between pagan and Christian worldviews is problematic because our sources — and the sources of our sources — are an amalgam of both traditions. This amalgam grew over centuries from the earliest times of cultural contact between Christians and pagans. During the High Middle Ages, when our sources were written down, this amalgamated tradition was again interpreted and re-narrated under the influence of European theology.

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13 Meyer, *Völuspá*, pp. 82–83 referring only to the existence of an Indo-European myth of the origin of man from trees and the similarity of the names to Adam and Eve. See also Meyer, *Die eddische Kosmogonie*, pp. 109–13 on the stanzas, and p. 110 on Askr and Embla.

14 White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots', p. 1206.

## The Transmission and Dating of *Völuspá*

The dating of the composition of the poem *Völuspá* is much discussed. Often, it is dated very early, and the discussion then centres around how heathen or how Christian the poem is seen to be. Proposed datings range from the fourth to the twelfth centuries.<sup>15</sup> All these datings, of course, concern a version of the poem that we do not have extant today. Many of the datings even date an assumed oral version of the poem. In any case, these versions are not identical to the poem we have transmitted on parchment.<sup>16</sup>

This article will generally analyse the transmitted text(s) and, as outlined above, will consider them primarily a product of the thirteenth century when the Codex Regius was produced (around 1270–1280). The redactor/author of the Codex Regius and the redactor/author of its postulated model, from the first half of the thirteenth century,<sup>17</sup> must have put together, organized, and rewritten the material that they found so that it made sense during their time of writing.

The transmitted poem *Völuspá* is not a monolithic work written from scratch by one author in the thirteenth century. The poetic material seems to have been retold and rewritten several times. Even within the stanzas under discussion here, there are indications that suggest they have been taken out of one context and put into another. The poem has come down to us in two versions: one in the Codex Regius (R, GKS 2365 4<sup>to</sup>, c. 1270–1280), the other one in Hauksbók (H, AM 544 4<sup>to</sup>, c. 1305–1315). Looking at the two stanzas in question, the differences between the two manuscripts do not directly affect the interpretation proposed here.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation will generally rely on the edition by Neckel/Kuhn, who edited the text based on the Codex Regius manuscript.<sup>19</sup>

## The Context and Content of *Völuspá* 17–18

*Völuspá* is a prophetic poem that may stand in the tradition of Sibylline oracles. This thesis was introduced first by Anton Christian Bang (1879/1880), and was quickly

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- 15 For the extremely early dating to the fourth century see Wood, ‘The Age of the “*Völuspá*”’, pp. 94–107, and Nerman, ‘Hur gammal är *Völuspá*?’, pp. 1–4. De Boor, ‘Die religiöse Sprache der *Völuspá* und verwandter Denkmäler’, pp. 68–142, assumes a connection to the poems in the realm of the earls of Lade and a dating to the end of the tenth century. Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, p. 181, suggests an Icelandic origin and a dating to c. 1050; a similar dating to 1000–1050 is suggested by Schulte, ‘The Classical and Christian Impact on *Völuspá*’, pp. 181–219; Nordal, *Völuspá*, dates the poem before 1065 because of a quotation from a Skaldic poem. For a late dating to the twelfth century and a dependency on learned literature see Meyer, *Völuspa*, and Meyer, *Die eddische Kosmogonie*.
- 16 For a recent research review on this topic in general, see Thorvaldsen, ‘The Dating of Eddic Poetry’, pp. 72–91.
- 17 Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius*, p. 273.
- 18 On the differences between the R and H versions see Quinn, ‘*Völuspá* and the Composition of Eddic Verse’, pp. 325–36.
- 19 *Edda*, ed. by Kuhn and Neckel, pp. 1–16.

supported by Sophus Bugge (1881). After a long gap, Ursula Dronke (1992), Kees Samplonius (2001), and Gro Steinsland (2006) picked up this thread again. Steinsland argues that such a ‘myth of the future’ with the hope for a bright new age would be hard to explain in a pagan Norse culture, whereas the parallels of *Völuspá* to biblical apocalyptic ideas and Sibylline traditions were apparent.<sup>20</sup>

This ‘myth of the future’ is connected to the past, to the creation. Part of this creation of the world in *Völuspá* is an anthropogony. These past events are told as being remembered by the seeress who speaks the prophecy. She remembers because she is of giant descent. Giants are the oldest beings in the world. Therefore she even remembers the creation of the world from the body of the giant Ymir. She remembers that the Æsir created the dwarves. Between a catalogue of those dwarves and a description of the ash Yggdrasil, we find this anthropogony, according to which the Æsir create Ask and Embla, the first human beings, by animating two logs that they apparently found at the seashore. This may be a specific Icelandic motif as driftwood had a certain importance in Iceland after deforestation:<sup>21</sup>

Unz þrír [RH þriár] qvómo ór því liði,  
 qflgir oc ástgir, æsir, at húsi;  
 fundo á landi, lítt megandi,  
 Asc oc Embla, ørløglausa.  
 Qnd þau né áttó, óð þau né hofðo,  
 lá né læti né lito góða;  
 qnd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hœnir,  
 lá gaf Lóðurr oc lito góða.<sup>22</sup>

(Until three gods, strong and loving,  
 came from out of that company;  
 they found on land capable of little,  
 Ash and Embla, lacking in fate.  
 Breath they had not, spirit they had not,  
 blood nor bearing nor fresh complexions;  
 breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hænir,  
 blood gave Lodur, and fresh complexions.)<sup>23</sup>

In Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning*, we find the same poetic material used as a source. Here the motif is embedded in a didactic dialogue:

20 Cf. Bang, ‘Völuspaa og de Sibyllinske Orakler’, pp. 1–23. This article was translated into German and expanded by Poestion in Bang, *Völuspá und die sibyllinischen Orakel*; Bugge, ‘Nogle bemærkninger om sibyllinerne og Völuspá’, pp. 163–72; Dronke, ‘Völuspá and the Sibylline Traditions’, pp. 3–23; Samplonius, ‘Sybilla borealis’, pp. 185–229; Samplonius, ‘Anthropogenesis in Völuspá’, pp. 5–7; Steinsland, ‘Myten om fremtiden og den nordiske sibyllen’, pp. 93–128.

21 See, e.g., Abram, *The Evergreen Ash*, p. 94.

22 *Edda*, ed. by Neckel and Kuhn, pp. 4–5. This edition will be used for all further citations unless otherwise noted. On the form ‘þriár’ see below, n. 26.

23 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 6. This translation will be used for all further citations unless otherwise noted.

Þá mæli Gangleri: ‘Mikit þótti mér þeir hafa þá snúit til leiðar er jörð ok himinn var gert ok sól ok himintungl váru sett ok skipt dægum — ok hvaðan kómu menninir þeir er heim byggja?’

Þá svarar Hár: ‘Þá er þeir Bors synir gengu með sævar ströndu, fundu þeir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok sköpuðu af menn. Gaf hinn fyrsti önd ok líf, annarr vit ok hræring, þriði ásjónu, málit ok heyrn ok sjón; gáfu þeim klæði ok nöfn. Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er byggðin var gefin undir Miðgarði.’<sup>24</sup>

(Then spoke Gangleri: ‘A great deal it seems to me they had achieved when earth and heaven were made and sun and stars were put in position and days were separated — and where did the people come from who inhabit the world?’ Then High replied: ‘As Bor’s sons walked along the sea shore, they came across two logs and created people out of them. The first gave breath and life, the second consciousness and movement, the third a face, speech and hearing and sight; they gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ask, the woman Embla, and from them were produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place under Midgard was given.’)<sup>25</sup>

There are several differences between the two passages. Among them:

- 1) Who are the three acting persons? In *Völuspá*, they are Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr. In *Gylfaginning*, they are the sons of Borr, but — according to *Gylfaginning* chapter 6 — their names are Óðinn, Vili and Vé.
- 2) How did they find the logs? In *Völuspá*, it seems as if the gods had just returned home from a sea voyage (‘qvómo ... at húsi; fundo á landi’) because ‘á landi’ (on land, ashore) seems to imply that they were at sea before. In *Gylfaginning*, it sounds as if they were strolling along the seashore (‘gengu með sævar ströndu’).
- 3) How did the gods create the humans? In *Völuspá*, it seems that they found wooden statues that already bore names and animated them. In *Gylfaginning*, the gods seem to have found logs, shaped and animated them, and finally named them.

These differences tell us a number of things. The original context of the stanzas seems to have been unknown already in the thirteenth century because the author of the poem in Codex Regius on the one hand, and Snorri on the other hand, tell the story differently. Both authors seem to have dealt with a poetic fragment. This poetic fragment was first interpreted and contextualized by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* (around 1220). It was also interpreted and contextualized by the compiler of the model for Codex Regius, possibly around roughly the same time (the first half of the thirteenth century). Then it was rewritten and interpreted for *Völuspá* in Codex Regius (around 1270). As mentioned above, the poem is also transmitted in the slightly later Hauksbók manuscript (at fols 20<sup>r</sup>–21<sup>r</sup>) from the beginning of the fourteenth century. This version is not based on the same manuscript tradition as Codex Regius

24 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and ‘Gylfaginning’*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 13.

25 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. by Faulkes, p. 13.

but is thought to be derived from a different oral version of the poem because the differences appear ‘at all levels of composition.’<sup>26</sup>

The general assumption in scholarship is that the catalogue of dwarves (vv. 9–16) is a late insertion. The key argument here is that ‘Unz þrír qvómo ór því liði’ cannot be explained from the passage on the dwarves because the three ‘æsir’ do obviously not belong to the dwarves.<sup>27</sup> If the catalogue were removed, our stanzas would follow stanza 8. This stanza could also help to explain the transmitted feminine form ‘þriár’ in stanza 17 that the scribes of both *Völuspá* manuscripts, Codex Reginus as well as Hauksbók, preserved instead of the masculine form ‘þrír’ that would fit with the three male ‘æsir’. If indeed the catalogue of dwarves were a late insertion, the reference of feminine ‘þriár’ may be found in stanza 8: ‘unz þriár qvómo þursa meyiar’ (until three ogre-girls came). Another possibility is a reference to the three norns in stanza 20 (‘Þaðan koma meyjar, margs vitandi, | þriár’ (From there come girls, knowing a great deal, | three)).<sup>28</sup> In any case, both assimilations still pose a problem because in stanza 18, three male gods are the actors. It seems that either the actors in 17 and 18 were originally different (and the feminine form is a remnant of that) or that the feminine form is indeed erroneous — but was not corrected in either manuscript.<sup>29</sup>

## Askr and Embla: Trees and Anthropogenic Ideas

### *A Question of Biology: What Kind of Trees Are Askr and Embla?*

Askr and Embla are usually interpreted as two logs from two different kinds of trees. While Askr is easily understood as ‘ash’, the meaning of Embla is less clear. If Askr is indeed ash, a tree, then scholars often assumed that Embla should also be a tree. Many scholars have suggested the elm comparing ON ‘almr’, which is not without problems.<sup>30</sup>

Hans Sperber compared Embla to Greek ἄμπελος (vine). For geographic reasons, he suggested bindweed more generally, or more specifically, ivy. The image behind the passage about Askr and Embla would thus be that of a post or a tree with bindweed

26 Quinn, ‘*Völuspá* and the Composition of Eddic Verse’, p. 325.

27 von See and others, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, pp. 178–79.

28 Gering and Sijmons, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, p. 20.

29 This problem was edited away by Neckel/Kuhn, who confined the transmitted form to the apparatus, where we also learn that ‘þrír’ is an old emendation by Rasmus Rask. It might be added here that Samplonius ‘Anthropogenesis in *Völuspá*’, pp. 6–7 argued for the influence of Isidore of Seville on stanza 18. He quotes *Etymologiae* v. 30. 8, a passage in which the pagan naming of the weekdays after the seven ‘stars’ is explained. These stars are said to have had influence on the pagans, insofar as they received ‘spiritus’ from Sol, ‘corpus’ from Luna, ‘sanguis’ from Mars, ‘temperantia’ from Jupiter, and ‘humor’ from Saturn. This background could clarify the otherwise difficult vocabulary in this verse as well as the feminine ‘þriár’ discussed above. If, indeed, the stars (*stjornur* f.) were the subject, the grammatical form could be explained. Samplonius’s hypothesis deserves a longer discussion but this would lead us away from this chapter’s focus on the trees.

30 von See and others, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, pp. 183–84.



entwined around it.<sup>31</sup> I will come to the details of this interpretation later. From this first exploration, it becomes clear that the different understandings of Embla are connected to different poetic images and anthropogonic ideas.

### ***A Question of Myth: Which Anthropogonic Idea?***

The thesis of Askr and Embla as logs of two different trees is usually connected to the idea that humans have grown forth from non-human nature. The other thesis, that Askr is a tree and Embla a bindweed, is connected to the idea that humans are the result of the sexual procreation of two plants.

#### *Man Growing Forth from Nature*

a) from trees: from ash and elm

The general anthropogonic idea would be that man is generated or sprouted by chance from nature, growing forth from the earth or, in this case, from trees. Such anthropogonies are known from other cultures. Anders Hultgård assumes that

myths on the origin of mankind from trees and wood seem to be particularly connected with ancient Europe and Indo-European speaking peoples of Asia Minor and Iran. By contrast the cultures of the Near East show almost exclusively the type of anthropogonic stories that derive man's origin from clay, earth or blood by means of a divine creation act.<sup>32</sup>

Hultgård argues for this interpretation of the myth of Askr and Embla. He suggests considering stanza 4 as the prehistory to our stanzas. This stanza describes how the 'stony ground brought forth green plants'.<sup>33</sup> From there, he concludes:

The light and the warmth of the sun did not only produce the first plants but also the first human couple who grew up like two trees *á landi*, on the bare ground newly arisen from the sea. Divine intervention then turned them, as in the Iranian myth, into the full forms of man and woman. The anthropogonic myth to which *Völuspá* alludes may thus reflect mythic ideas on the origin of mankind from trees that were part of a common Indo-European heritage.<sup>34</sup>

I have to admit that I am generally sceptical of comparative approaches that postulate a 'genetic' connection between the Indo-Iranian tradition and Germanic myths, meaning, in fact, Icelandic literature of the High Middle Ages. Literature is usually based on literature as writing is learned by imitating existing models. I would therefore imagine that medieval authors were inspired by the literature they read.

31 Sperber, 'Embla', pp. 219–22.

32 Hultgård, 'The Myth of Askr and Embla', p. 61. On such anthropogonies see also Burkert, 'Denkformen der Kosmologie', p. 16.

33 Hultgård, 'The Myth of Askr and Embla', p. 61.

34 Hultgård, 'The Myth of Askr and Embla', p. 62.

Of course, proponents of the comparative Indo-European approach usually look to mitigate the gap between Iran and Iceland. Traces of such anthropogonies are suggested as standing behind two passages in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Statius's *Thebais*.<sup>35</sup> Both passages refer to the Arcadians (the Virgil passage indirectly, though). The Arcadians supposedly grew from trees; in the case of Statius, the ash ('*fraxinus*') is specifically mentioned. A similar reference can be found in Juvenal, who describes man during the age of Saturn being composed of pieces of oak and clay. Although a tree is mentioned here, man is not growing forth from it but seems to be built by a demiurge using wood and clay, which does not make it a compelling example. Generally, it has to be said that the age of Saturn is the first age of mankind. The Arcadians are considered an ancient tribe. All quoted passages refer to the oldest generations of mankind, which are characterized as steadfast and strong so that being grown out of wood may as well be understood metaphorically and need not necessarily be read as the memory of a creation myth. The ash bears further significance in the context of war because the shafts of spears were made from this wood. In this sense, Hesiod referred to the men in the Iron Age as 'of ash.' This age is characterized as violent and belligerent.<sup>36</sup>

b) from ash and rock

As the meaning of *Embla* is unclear, one should also discuss another variant that Marianne Luginbühl gives in her study on anthropogonic myths: man growing forth

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- 35 Virgil, *Aeneid*, ed. and trans. by Rushton Fairclough, VIII. 314–18: 'haec nemora indigenae Fauni Nymphaeque tenebant | gensque virum truncis et duro robore nata, | quis neque mos neque cultus erat, nec iungere tauros | aut componere opes norant aut parcere parto, | sed rami atque asper victu venatus alebat.' (In these woodlands the native Fauns and Nymphs once dwelt, and a race of men sprung from trunks of trees and hardy oak, who had no rule or art of life, and knew not how to yoke the ox or to lay up stores, or to husband their gains; but tree branches nurtured them and the huntsman's savage fare.) Statius, *Thebaid*, ed. and trans. by Shackleton Bailey, IV. 275–81: 'Arcades huic veteres, astris lunaque priores, | agmina fida datis, nemorum quos stirpe rigenti | fama satos, cum prima pedum vestigia tellus | admirata tulit; nondum arva domusque nec urbes, | conubiisve modus; quercus laurique ferebant | cruda puerperia, ac populos umbrosa creavit | fraxinus, et feta viridis puer excidit orno.' (To him the Arcadians, an old race earlier than stars and moon, give loyal troops. They were born, as legend tells, from the stiff forest trees when the astonished earth first felt the print of feet. Not yet were there fields and houses or cities or marriage rules. Oaks and laurels bore stout offspring, the shady ash created peoples, a vigorous boy dropped from the pregnant rowan.)
- 36 Hesiod, *Erga*, ed. and trans. by Most, 143–46: Ζεὺς δὲ πατὴρ τρίτον ἄλλο γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων | χάλκειον ποιήσ', οὐκ ἀργυρέω οὐδὲν ὁμοίον, | ἐκ μελιᾶν, δεινόν τε καὶ ὄβριμον· οἶσιν Ἄρης | ἐργ' ἔμελε σπονδόντα καὶ ὄβριες (Zeus the father made another race of speech-endowed human beings, a third one, of bronze, not similar to the silver one at all, out of ash trees — terrible and strong they were, and they cared only for the painful works of Ares and for acts of violence.) It is noteworthy, though, that the scholiasts Servius and Lactantius Placidus deny the assumption of such an anthropogony (Luginbühl, *Menschenschöpfungsmythen*, pp. 207–08). Their denial, though, may not refer to the existence of such an anthropogony. It may only refer to the falsehood of these beliefs, especially in the eye of the Christian author Lactantius. Servius did, apparently, not convert to Christianity but belongs to a pagan milieu. See Steinbauer and Suerbaum, 'Servius'.

from tree and rock.<sup>37</sup> Two passages from the *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony* may be based on a saying or a proverb containing this metaphor that we do not understand completely.<sup>38</sup> The background of the saying may have been a passage from the *Iliad* about the famous spear of Achilles that his father received from the centaur Chiron who was the teacher of both heroes. In *Iliad* XVI. 140–45, we are told that none of the Greeks was able to swing this spear that was made from an oak on the summit of Pelion. The context in the *Theogony* is the narrating poet's invocation of the muse. The saying is, therefore, to be understood metaphorically: not wanting to speak about tree and rock means not wanting to write a heroic epic poem such as the *Iliad* but a didactic poem, which shares the metre with the heroic epic but not the content. These rather weak arguments for the existence of an anthropogony from tree and rock is supported by Luginbühl with a biblical reference, Jeremiah 2. 27: 'Saying to a stock, Thou art my father; and to a stone, Thou hast brought me forth: for they have turned their back unto me, and not their face: but in the time of their trouble they will say, Arise, and save us.'<sup>39</sup> However, this passage refers to idols made of wood and stone and not an anthropogony.

Both motifs, growing forth from trees and from ash and rock, are frequent in literature that directly or indirectly could have been known by and influenced medieval authors. Similarities in medieval literature to these passages can therefore be explained by reading and not alone by Indo-European heritage.

#### *Man as the Result of Sexual Procreation of Two Different Plants*

For this anthropogonic idea, two different motifs are discussed. In both cases, Askr/ the ash is interpreted as male, Embla as the bindweed/ivy/vine as female.

- a) As mentioned above, Sperber compared Embla to Greek ἄμπελος (vine). However, he suggests that the reconstructed Germanic \*ambilōn would not refer to the 'late imported grapevine' but more generally to a bindweed or, specifically, the ivy. Despite this interpretation of \*ambilōn as bindweed or ivy, he mentions a connection between grapevine and ash: Roman farmers used support posts of ash wood for their vines.<sup>40</sup> In this picture, the ash post is imagined as male, the vine entwined around it as female. No matter what the specific plants are, the image is the same.
- b) Adalbert Kuhn suggested that the method of starting a fire by rubbing two pieces of wood against each other may lie behind the mentioning of the two different kinds of wood. More specifically, the image is that of the fire being started by spinning a

37 Luginbühl, *Menschenschöpfungsmythen*, pp. 53–54.

38 Homer, *Odyssey*, ed. and trans. by Murray, XIX. 162–63: ἀλλὰ καὶ ὧς μοι εἰπέ τεδὸν γένος, ὅπποθεν ἐσσί | οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ δρυὸς ἐσσι παλαιφάτου οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης. (Yet even so tell me of your stock from which you come; for you are not sprung from an oak of ancient story, or from a stone.) Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. and trans. by Most, 35: ἀλλὰ τί μοι ταῦτα περὶ δρῦν ἢ περὶ πέτρην (But what is this to me, about an oak or a rock?).

39 Luginbühl, *Menschenschöpfungsmythen*, p. 53.

40 Sperber, 'Embla', pp. 219–22.

stick of harder wood (ash) on a tablet of the softer wood (bindweed/vine). Kuhn cites Greek and Latin sources for the method. The figurative similarity to sexual intercourse can undoubtedly be argued. This intercourse is then understood as a metaphor for the creation of man. Kuhn finds the only explicit parallel for this anthropogonic motif in *Rigveda*, a rather far-fetched argument for explaining a passage in a medieval Icelandic poem.<sup>41</sup>

### *Typology of Anthropogonies*

If we look at anthropogonies from a typological perspective, there are three types: 1) 'emersio' (emerging), 2) 'formatio and animatio' (shaping and animating), and 3) 'sacrificatio' (sacrificing).<sup>42</sup> Only the first two types are relevant for our discussion. The Askr-and-Embla passage is usually understood as belonging to the first category. As we saw, it is often read as an anthropogonic myth where humans grow forth from nature, be it spontaneously or through sexual procreation.

The type 'formatio and animatio' means that a god forms the human from some material, often earth or clay, and then animates them. This model can be found in Greek mythology (cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 320d) and the Bible (Genesis 2. 7). It is undoubtedly tempting to interpret the *Völuspá* passage as belonging to type 1 'emersio' and associate this with it being Nordic and pagan and to view it in contrast to type 2 'formatio and animatio' that would be associated with being Graeco-Roman and Christian. Interpretations following this idea would argue that in Nordic paganism, man and nature are considered as part of an organic system and that there would be no hierarchical relationship between them. The Graeco-Roman-Christian model would then stand for a hierarchical system where a creator god creates man in his image to rule over nature.

However, if we read our passage carefully, without the idea in the back of our mind that we have here a pagan myth according to which humans grow forth from nature, we can discover elements of 'formatio and animatio': there are three gods who take natural material, wood instead of the more common clay, and animate it. I would therefore argue that there is a typological similarity between the Askr-and-Embla passage and the biblical anthropogony in Genesis 2. 7 — 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul' — as well as the passage in *Protagoras* (320b) where the gods create humans from earth and fire, and Prometheus and Epimetheus bestow abilities on them. The only difference is that clay can be easily formed and that the shaping is often but not always described in the narratives.

41 Kuhn, *Die Herabkunft des Feuers und des Göttertranks*, pp. 36–43. To a similar end, Henning Kure, 'Emblas Ask', recently argued that Askr and Embla signify the sexual organs of man and woman, although based on Old Norse poetic language starting with the kenning 'emblas ask'. This interpretation leads us away from the imagery of trees as Askr is here a *heiti* for the sword/phallus and Embla for the female counterpart sheath/vagina.

42 This is the classification of Luginbühl, *Menschenschöpfungsmythen*, pp. 29–31.

### ***Biblical Anthropogonies and Christian Theology***

Some of the differences between the stanzas and the biblical creation narratives can be explained using elements of Christian theology.

- 1) The triad of pagan gods can be interpreted as the Trinity. The Trinity as being present at the moment of creation is not uncommon in Christian theology. Genesis 1. 2 and Psalm 33. 6 state the presence of the Holy Ghost during creation. John 1–3 states the presence of the Son.<sup>43</sup> To understand three heathen gods as the Trinity is possible for the reader in the thirteenth century against the background of biblical interpretation techniques and Natural Theology. That means, from the perspective of the thirteenth-century author, the heathen poet of the source text would have described in these verses in their terms what they could not wholly comprehend because they were not yet Christians, and the truth was not yet revealed to them. In this sense, the best they could do was to describe the Trinity as three gods.<sup>44</sup> Snorri Sturluson similarly uses the triad of Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði in *Gylfaginning*. Although triads existed in many cultures, it is hard to imagine that Snorri did not interpret a triad of gods as an imperfect understanding of the Trinity.
- 2) The creation as man and woman at the same time can be found in Genesis 1. 27: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.’ The Askr-and-Embla-passage could be understood as an amalgamation of the two biblical reports, taking the element of creation from natural matter from one narrative and the element of creating man and woman at the same time from the other narrative. From this interpretation, it is only a very small step to read Askr and Embla as Adam and Eve as Elard Hugo Meyer and Gro Steinsland have already suggested.<sup>45</sup> I will take up this reading and provide a literary context that could support it.

### **Trees in Christian Tradition**

The following section will introduce two learned models that use tree imagery and may have played a role in the medieval understanding of the creation of man. The texts that will be introduced are not to be understood as specific sources but rather,

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43 Genesis 1. 2: ‘And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.’ Psalm 33. 6: ‘By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.’ John 1–3: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.’

44 Isidore, *The Etymologies*, trans. by Barney and others, v. 30. 8 describes — in a different case — the efforts of the heathens with following words: ‘Talis quippe extitit gentilium stultitia, qui sibi finxerunt tam ridiculosa figmenta.’ (Such indeed was the stupidity of the pagans, who made up such ridiculous figments for themselves.)

45 Meyer, *Völuspá*, p. 82; Steinsland, *Ask og Embla*, p. 253.

they provide the background against which medieval readers and authors may have read and interpreted the stanzas.

### *Man as 'arbor inversa'*

The comparison of tree and man and vice versa is widespread in medieval learned literature. One important motif that propagates the idea very visually is the motif of man as 'arbor inversa' (inverted tree). The idea goes back to Plato (*Timaios*, 90a–b), who distinguishes three kinds of human soul that are housed in three regions of the body. Plato uses the image of a plant and compares the root to the head. The noblest kind of soul is housed there. This part comes directly from God. In terms of his plant metaphor: it is rooted in heaven.<sup>46</sup>

This idea had quite a rich medieval reception.<sup>47</sup> We find the expression that man is an 'arbor inversa' in a homily of a student of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian Gueric of Igny (1070/1080–1157), who refers to medical literature for this knowledge: 'Quod enim physici dicunt hominem esse arborem inversam, eo quod nervi corporis radicem et initium in vertice habeant' (The physicians even say that man is an inverted tree because the sinews of the body have their root and beginning at the tip of the head).<sup>48</sup> It can also be found in Innocentius III (1160/1161–1216), *De contemptu mundi sive De vilitate conditionis humanae*, I. 9 and in Alanus ab Insulis, *Liber in distinctionibus dictionum theologialium* to name but a few occurrences. It is not surprising that this idea reached Iceland, where we find it in a text titled *De natura*. This text is transmitted in the manuscript AM 435 12<sup>mo</sup> (c. 1500) and in the Codex Lindesianus (1473). It is assumed to be a partial translation of the Ps.-Aristotelian *Physiognomics*. The Greek text was translated into Latin by Bartholomaeus of Messana during the thirteenth century. Thence, it was translated into many vernaculars.<sup>49</sup> The comparison between man and tree belongs not to the *tractatus* itself but the introduction. The author argues for the distinction of man compared to the rest of the creation, referring to

46 Plato, *Timaios*, ed. and trans. by Bury, 90a–b τὸ δὲ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ' ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἶδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῆδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἐκάστῳ δέδωκε, τοῦτο δ' εἰς φαμεν οἰκεῖν μὲν ἡμῶν ἐπ' ἄκρῳ τῷ σώματι, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ ξυγγένειαν ἀπὸ γῆς ἡμᾶς αἶρειν ὡς ὄντας φυτὸν οὐκ ἔγγειον ἀλλ' οὐράνιον, ὀρθότατα λέγοντες· ἐκείθεν γὰρ ὄθεν ἡ πρώτη τῆς ψυχῆς γένεσις ἔφυ τὸ θεῖον τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ῥίζαν ἡμῶν ἀνακρεμαντὸν ὀρθοῖ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα. (And as regards the most lordly kind of our soul, we must conceive of it in this wise: we declare that God has given to each of us, as his daemon, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us — seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant — up from earth towards our kindred in the heaven. And herein we speak most truly; for it is by suspending our head and root from that region whence the substance of our soul first came that the Divine Power keeps upright our whole body.)

47 Chambers, "I Was but an Inverted Tree", pp. 291–99 traces a passage — quoted in the title of his article — of the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell back to the passage of Plato's *Timaios* quoted above. He hints at the early Christian and medieval tradition but focuses on the reception in the early modern period. See also Edsman, 'Arbor inversa'.

48 Gueric of Igny, *Sermo* 2, col. 107B. My own translation.

49 The Icelandic translation was dated by Eiríkur Magnússon to around 1400, see *Alfræði Íslenzk III*, p. 91 n. 1. The arguments for this dating are not given. Even if this dating were correct, the Latin source text could have been available earlier.

the incarnation of Christ, their cognitive faculty, and their insight into their sins. To remind human beings of these abilities, God created them walking upright with the head directed towards the sky:

Likami manzins berr aa ser liking eins hvers tres, ok kallazt hann at grizku mali antropos, þat þyðum ver svo sem rangsnuit tre. Þviat hofud med hari er skipad i þeiri þyðing svo sem rætur tresins, enn armleggir ok fotleggir sie kvistir af trenu.

(The body of man bears similarity with a tree and it is called ‘antropos’ in Greek, which we translate with ‘inverted tree’, because the head with the hair has the place of the roots of the tree but the arms and legs are the twigs of the tree.)<sup>50</sup>

The text supports the comparison of man and tree with an etymological connection between *antropos* and *tré* (ON ‘tree’), which may sound weak to us but was a typical argumentation in the Middle Ages in the tradition of Isidore of Seville. Indeed, Isidore uses a similar explanation in *Etymologiae*, XI. 1. 5 (referring to Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I. 84–86):

Graeci autem hominem ἄνθρωπον appellaverunt, eo quod sursum spectet, sublevatus ab humo ad contemplationem artificis sui. Quod Ovidius poeta designat, cum dicit:

Pronaque cum spectent animalia caetera terram,  
Os homini sublime dedit, coelumque videre  
Jussit, et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus.

Qui ideo erectus coelum aspicit, ut Deum quaerat, non ut terram intendat, veluti pecora, quae natura prona et ventri obedientia finxit.

(The Greeks called the human being ἄνθρωπος because he has been raised upright from the soil and looks upward in contemplation of his Creator (perhaps cf. ὤψ, ‘eye, face, countenance’). The poet Ovid describes this when he says (*Met.* 1.84):

While the rest of the stooping animals look at the ground, he gave the human an uplifted countenance, and ordered him to see the sky, and to raise his upturned face to the stars.

And the human stands erect and looks toward heaven so as to seek God, rather than look at the earth, as do the beasts that nature has made bent over and attentive to their bellies. Human beings have two aspects: the interior and the exterior. The interior human is the soul [and] the exterior is the body.)<sup>51</sup>

Here, again we find the Greek word for ‘man’ that also appears in the Old Norse text. Speculations about the etymology of ἄνθρωπος are old: e.g. Plato (*Cratylus*, 399c) explains that man is a being that contemplates what it sees (ἀναθρῶν ἃ ὄπωπε). Isidore finds a different but related explanation, probably thinking of ἄνα (up), τρέπειν

<sup>50</sup> AM 435 12<sup>mo</sup>: *Alfræði Íslenzk III*, ed. by Kálund, pp. 92–93; own translation.

<sup>51</sup> Text: Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Migne, XI. 1. 5; translation: Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans. by Barney and others, XI. 1. 5.

(to turn), and ὤψ (face; genitive ὠπός). In the Old Norse text likewise, we find an imaginative etymology where Greek *antropos* is connected to Old Norse ‘tré’ (tree) which leads to the image of man as ‘arbor inversa.’<sup>52</sup>

### **Origo crucis**

Theological speculation on the Holy Cross is another model that could have been known and used either to interpret or even to create texts on trees and different kinds of wood, such as stanzas 17–18 of *Völuspá*. These ideas are narrated in the *Legend of the Cross* (*Origo crucis*), a matter that was quite widespread during the Middle Ages. It is often transmitted together with the *Vita Adae et Evae* (*The Lives of Adam and Eve*).

The *Legend of the Cross* has its origin in the twelfth century. Amongst its Latin versions, Meyer distinguishes a shorter, older ‘historia’ and several younger versions, among them the longer ‘legend’. The content of the short ‘historia’ can also be found in the works of Honorius Augustodunensis and Petrus Comestor. Jacobus de Voragine included it in his compilation of *Legenda aurea*. However, even after Jacobus’s influential work, new versions were written. *Origo crucis* was translated into several vernaculars, among them Old Norse.<sup>53</sup> The oldest preserved text is preserved in the aforementioned manuscript Hauksbók.<sup>54</sup>

The *Legend of the Cross* is chronologically connected to the *Vita Adae et Evae* and begins in the last days of Adam’s life. On his deathbed, Adam sends his son Seth to Paradise to fetch a twig or a seed from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to relieve his pain. Seth acquires entry to Paradise with the help of an angel. There he receives either a twig or a seed from the tree of knowledge. As he returns, Adam is able to die. The twig or the seed is planted on Adam’s grave. From the twig/seed grows a beautiful tree. The tree grows and lives until the construction of Solomon’s temple. It is cut down and used for the temple, serving different functions. One day, the queen of Saba comes by, after a later version the Sibyl, and makes a prophecy. She says that one day someone will be crucified, whose death will lead to the downfall of the Jewish kingdom. The trunk is then either submerged in water or buried and stays hidden until the time of the crucifixion when it emerges again so that the cross can be made of it. The cross will again be raised over Adam’s grave.<sup>55</sup>

Hauksbók follows the so-called ‘legend’ until § 12. Then there are quite significant differences. From the three seeds sprung three sprouts. God gave two of them to Moses to do his miracles. The tree that Solomon had cut down, he had erected in the temple, where the Sibyl saw it and wrote a letter to Solomon. Solomon then had

52 This discussion of *De natura* in this chapter is based on Walther, ‘Erzählen vom Anfang’, pp. 189–92.

53 Meyer, *Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus*.

54 Hauksbók, Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 544 4<sup>to</sup>, fols 17<sup>r</sup>–18<sup>v</sup>; edited in Hauksbók, pp. 182–85; newer edition of all versions: *The History of the Cross-Tree*, ed. by Overgaard.

55 Meyer, *Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus*, pp. 123–49; also Suchier, *Denkmäler provenzalischer Literatur und Sprache*, pp. 165–200.



the tree submerged in a swamp until it emerged again to become the cross. These elements are taken from Jacobus's version, according to Meyer.<sup>56</sup>

We cannot, of course, know exactly which version was known in thirteenth-century Iceland and/or Norway but generally speaking there are a number of elements that seem significant with respect to stanzas 17–18 of *Völuspá*:

- The legend starts with Adam and Eve: in *Völuspá*, we have Ask and Embla.
- There are references to the Trinity: the tree has three kinds of foliage, there are three seeds: in *Völuspá*, we have three pagan gods.
- When Seth comes to Paradise, the tree is nude, without leaves and bark ('foliis et cortice nudata') because of the sin of his parents ('per peccatum parentis'): in *Völuspá*, the trunks are 'litt megandi' and 'ørløglausa', in both cases, the trees are in a deficient state, not green and healthy.
- The tree stands over a spring: in *Völuspá*, we have Urd's well under Yggdrasil (the passage on Yggdrasil follows directly after the passage discussed in this chapter).
- Later the trunk is found in a pond ('piscina') by one or more angels: in *Völuspá*, the logs are found by the three gods on the shore.

For an *interpretatio Christiana* of the stanzas in *Völuspá* we can conclude: God — in form of the Trinity — finds two logs on the shore and animates them: they are the first humans, male and female, Adam and Eve. This would be a synthesis of the two biblical anthropogonies. The creation of man from wood prefigures the crucifixion as Adam can prefigure Christ. For instance, Paul in Romans 5, 14 calls Adam 'a type [τύπος] of the one who was to come'. He compares Adam and Christ also in Romans 5 and in I Corinthians 15.

### ***The Vine — Reconsidered***

We are left with some questions concerning the specific trees: Why did the poet choose two different kinds of wood? Why Ask, 'ash', and Embla? And what, finally, does Embla mean? In *Origo crucis*, the cross is composed from four kinds of wood: 'Ipsa autem crux Christi ex quatuor generibus lignorum fuisse perhibetur, scilicet palmae, cypressi, oliuae et cedri' (The same cross of Christ is regarded to be from four kinds of wood, that means: palm, cypress, olive, and cedar).<sup>57</sup> According to Meyer, the source of this may be Ps.-Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who explains in *Vitis mystica* the four dimensions of the cross as follows: 'de cypresso, de cedro, de oliva, de palmis. Cypressus in profundo, cedrus in longo, oliva in alto, palma in lato' (Of cypress, of cedar, of olive, of palm. The cypress [is] in the depth, the cedar in the length, the olive in the height, the palm in the breadth).<sup>58</sup> In the beginning of the same text, *Vitis mystica*, Jesus is compared to the vine: 'Jesu benigne, vitis vera, lignum vitae, quod in medio paradisi situm est fructum crucis, illum profecto, quem ipse per crucem fuerat operatus'

56 Meyer, *Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus*, pp. 151–52.

57 Meyer, *Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus*, p. 125. My own translation.

58 Ps.-Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vitis mystica*, col. 732D; own translation.

(Benign Jesus, [you are] the true vine, the tree of life, that — situated in the middle of the Paradise — is the fruit of the cross that surely was operated through the cross).<sup>59</sup> Christ as the vine goes, of course, back to John 15. 1: ‘ego sum vitis vera et Pater meus agricola est’ (I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman). The apostles are the branches (15. 5: ‘ego sum vitis vos palmites’; I am the vine, ye are the branches). Thus the log of the vine can be understood as a human being in the succession of Christ or Adam prefiguring Christ. Later in the text, *Vitis mystica* shows that ‘palma’ (the palm tree) is the cross and ‘vitis’ (the vine) the ‘crucifixus’ (Jesus on the cross): ‘Palma crucem, vitis vero significat Crucifixum’ (The palm signifies the cross, the true vine Jesus on the cross). It is noteworthy that the Greek word for ‘vitis’ is indeed ἄμπελος.<sup>60</sup> This means, in the end, I am returning in a way to Sperber’s etymological explanation of Embla from Greek ἄμπελος but in a different — and Christian — interpretation. Askr in this model would stand for the cross and Embla for Christ.

## Conclusion

At first sight, it is tempting to read the myth of Askr and Embla as a pagan myth and as a ‘green’ counter-model to the commonly known biblical anthropogony. This turned out to be problematic for several reasons.

On the one hand, extracting pre-Christian concepts from eddic poetry is a difficult task. Even if there were residual elements of pre-Christian mythical narratives preserved in eddic poetry, these were — without a doubt — chosen, interpreted, and re-narrated several times under the growing Christian influence. This influence had indeed started not only with Christianization during the late tenth century in Norway and Iceland but much earlier, with the first cultural contact with Christians. Worldviews are never static. It would be unhistorical to reconstruct a pre-Christian worldview by subtracting all Christian elements from mythological literature and assuming this would be the worldview of Norwegians and Icelanders shortly before the conversion date or at any given date at all. On the other hand, our view of Christian thought often seems too limited. The Christian tradition is rich and diverse.

Trees certainly seemed to have importance in the pre-Christian ‘Germanic’ religions. Holy trees and groves are attested from Tacitus onwards. We learn about the destruction of holy trees and groves by missionaries and during Charlemagne’s expansion. However, trees also have symbolic meaning in Christianity. Michael Bintley, who has studied tree imagery in early medieval England, argues that survivals of pre-Christian beliefs are likely in areas where parallels existed between the old and the new beliefs. Missionaries could even use the old symbols as vessels and fill them with new concepts.<sup>61</sup> This may also have been the case in Norway and Iceland.

59 Ps.-Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vitis mystica*, col. 635D; own translation.

60 Ps.-Bernard of Clairvaux, *Vitis mystica*, col. 733B; John 15. 1 in Greek: Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος (= ἄμπελος) ἡ ἀληθινή καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστιν. ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος, ὑμεῖς τὰ κλήματα.

61 Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England*.

The creation of man and woman from the trees Askr and Embla seems to be inspired by medieval speculations on the symbolic meaning of trees. On the one hand, there is the idea of man as ‘arbor inversa’, and on the other hand, speculation on the Holy Cross being composed of different woods. The first idea delivers the image of man as a tree. The second idea connects the creation to the crucifixion and finally to salvation, thus tying past and future together. This is especially fitting for *Vǫluspá* since the seeress who recites the poem starts with creation and ends with the apocalypse and the hope for a new world (stanzas 56–61). The result is a creation narrative in which man (as humankind) and non-human nature are both God’s creations and belong together from the beginning to the end. There is a salvific connection between them. I would therefore argue that the value of ‘nature’ in *Origo crucis* and *Vǫluspá* is as high or low as that of man. There is no hierarchy between humans and the environment, and also no hierarchy between Askr and Embla, or: Adam and Eve. All of this can be based on Christian thinking. In the end, neither humans nor the environment matter. It is all about the Last Judgement, the Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the possibility of salvation.

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