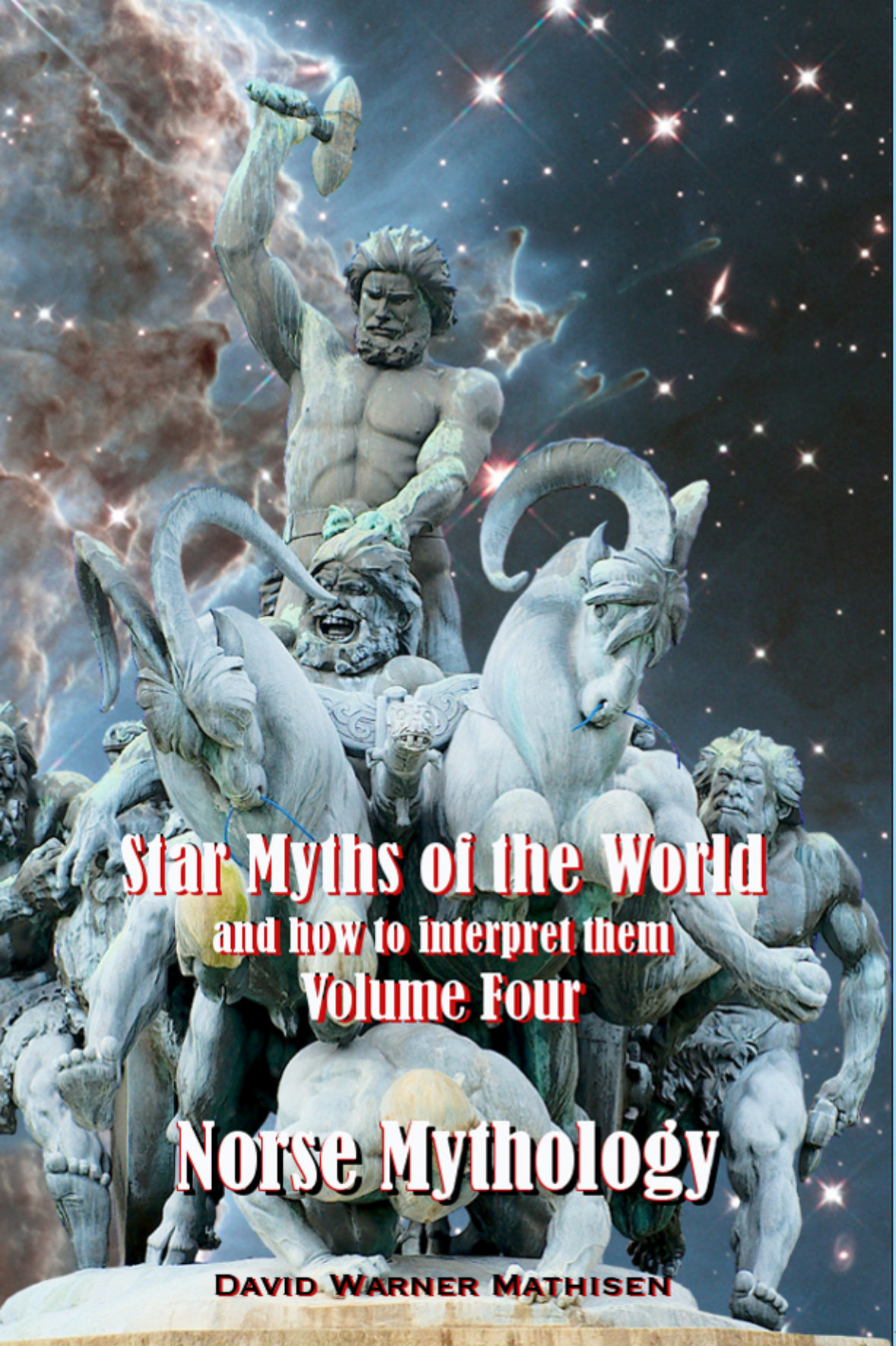

Star Myths of the World

and how to interpret them

Volume Four

Norse Mythology

David Warner Mathisen

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Published by Beowulf Books, Paso Robles, California

Mathisen, David Warner.

Star Myths of the World, Volume Four / David Warner Mathisen. – 1st ed.

1. Mythology. 2. Astronomy. 3. Spirituality.

ISBN 978-0-9960590-9-1

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Introduction

I have always had a special personal connection to the Norse myths. I was raised on the beautiful illustrated book *Norse Gods & Giants*, by Ingri & Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, which my father would read to me before I could read it myself, and which I would read and re-read once I could. And my grandfather on my father's side was born in Norway and came to North America when he was sixteen, and later married my grandmother, who herself was the daughter of two immigrants from Norway. And so from a very early age I knew that these myths, so beautifully retold and strikingly illustrated by the D'Aulaire's, represented the beliefs of my distant ancestors on my father's side.

What I did not realize at that early stage of life was that, if we go far enough back, we could find versions of the same broad family of ancient myths in lands further south as well, including in parts of Europe where I had other lines of ancestry on my mother's side, including England and France and Austria.

In *Scandinavian Mythology*, by H. R. Ellis Davidson, published in 1969, the author explains that while "we tend to think of Scandinavian mythology as the beliefs of the Vikings, those tough adventurers who were the scourge of Christian lands in the ninth and tenth centuries," the sacred traditions of the far North can be traced back much further, at least to the Scandinavian Bronze Age that lasted from 1600 BC to 450 BC, where "for the first time we discern recognisable figures of gods and goddesses, and catch glimpses of myth and ritual, although no written sources survive to tell us what language the worshipper spoke."[1]

The myths and sacred traditions of the northern European peoples survived longest in the farthest northern lands, especially those we now call Scandinavia and the modern countries of

Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Sweden, but the mythic tradition which we could broadly term "Nordic" or "Germanic" or simply "northern" was once much more widespread across Europe, across what the Romans called Germania, Britannia, and Gallia as well. Davidson explains that "the Anglo-Saxons were converted early to Christianity, as were the continental Germans. But in Scandinavia paganism lived on for several centuries, and received a new impetus in the vigorous period of adventure and conquest known as the Viking Age."[2]

We get further early glimpses of the culture and beliefs of the northern Europeans in the accounts of Greek and Roman authors, especially that of Tacitus, writing in the 1st century AD. Tacitus devoted an entire work to a description of the Germanic tribes as the Romans encountered them. It is entitled *De origine et situ Germanorum*, which means something like "On the origin and place [or location, or situation] of the Germanics," and which is also referred to as the *Germania* of Tacitus. Scholars believe it was written in the year AD 98.

Tacitus does not give us much detail about the names and adventures of the gods and goddesses and other figures active agents and powers who populate the invisible realm in the northern or Germanic cosmology -- for most of those details, we must rely on later works, especially two texts from Iceland, discussed momentarily -- but he gives plenty of evidence to conclude that the peoples of northern Europe, like virtually all other cultures the world over, had a deep awareness of the existence of the invisible realm, and its vital importance and interaction with many aspects of our lives in the day-to-day.

Below is a selection of descriptions from the *Germania* of Tacitus, having to do with the Germanic understanding of the sacred or

of cultures which have been cut off from the ancient streams (a situation which now prevails in many parts of the globe, thanks to western imperialism and the legacy of colonialism). The world's myths do contain waters in abundance to remedy our dire thirst. However, unless we listen to them in the language that they are actually speaking -- which is an esoteric language, a metaphorical language, and a celestial language: the language of the stars -- it is very easy for their message to be misinterpreted, and even grievously distorted and inverted.

It is my belief that the ancient myths are for all men and women -- and that they stand ready to help us, if we are willing to approach them in the right way. I believe that the Norse myths are profound and beautiful and sufficient to impart all the wisdom we need in this incarnate life -- as are all of the other sacred traditions found among the different cultures that make up the family of humanity.

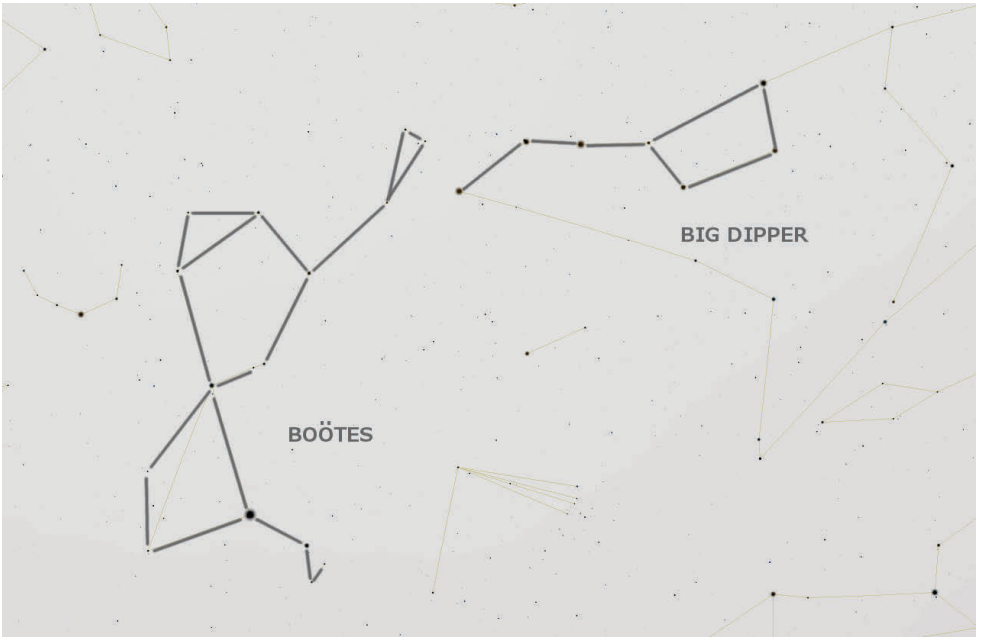
It is my hope that this volume will help you to approach them in an intimate way, and to consult them for your own situation -- and it is my hope that your relationship with them, and with the other ancient myths of the world, will be a blessing to you in your life.

What is written herein is offered in the hope that the myths will help each of us to connect with and to elevate our own spiritual nature, and to whatever degree possible that we can help lift others up as well -- and not put them down, denying or degrading their spiritual nature, treating them as if they are primarily physical.

I am certain that the ancient myths are capable of such uplifting spiritual elevation, and that this is their true purpose, despite the ways that they have been twisted, weaponized, and used to teach an inverted message.

I have come to the conclusion that the ancient myths show us that the gods and goddesses work their will *through* men and women, and that indeed they are present with us at all times. I love the world's ancient myths -- including the Norse myths -- and I hope that you do also, and that you will come to love them even more. And if we love the myths and the gods they reveal to us, then we should love one another -- because the gods have their home in us, and in every man and woman we meet each day: in everyone we will ever meet.

Paso Robles, California
January, 2018



The rather bulbous head of the constellation Boötes gives rise to the fact that this constellation is sometimes associated with the moon -- because he is somewhat "moon-headed." In *Star Myths of the World, Volume One*, we examined a myth from the Indigenous Warramungu tribe of north-central Australia involving the origin of fire, in which the Moon walks the earth in the form of a man, and encounters a bandicoot woman. According to my interpretation of that Star Myth, the moon-man is Boötes (and the bandicoot woman is Virgo).[64] Hence, the connection between Boötes and the Moon, which supports this interpretation of the figure of the Handle Turner (who is also the father of the Moon) in the *Vafthrúdnismál*.

The Big Dipper is the closest large and recognizable asterism to the north celestial pole, and it is in a sense "connected" to the central point around which the heavens appear to turn, in that its front to stars (known as "the pointers") between them can be imagined as creating a line which leads to Polaris.

As earth rotates on its axis, the Dipper makes a relatively tight circle around the pole, such that you can even tell the hour of the

Yggdrasil

Sacred or special trees of one type or another play a central role in many myths from around the world, from the cedar tree guarded by Humbaba in the Gilgamesh cycle of ancient Mesopotamia, to the tamarisk tree which grows around the coffin of the god Osiris of ancient Egypt, to the living tree which forms one of the bed-posts of the marriage bed of Odysseus and Penelope, to the *bo tree* under which the Buddha reaches enlightenment, to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis -- and many more could be found from other cultures as well. But perhaps no tree in ancient myth is imbued with such solemn and numinous immanence as the great World Tree of Norse mythology, the sacred ash which grows through and gives life to all the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, and which (perhaps unlike any other mythical tree) has its own awe-inspiring and mystical name: Yggdrasil.

Yggdrasil is described in many places in the Elder Edda. In her discourse with Odin, the Volva introduces Yggdrasil fairly early in the *Völuspá*, just after introducing the coming of the first Æsir gods, and the creation of the first man and woman from the lifeless logs (discussed in the previous chapter). She declares:

Ask veitk standa, heitir Yggdrasil,
hár bathmr ausinn hvíta auri;
thathan koma döggvar es í dali falla,
stendr æ of grœn Urthar brunni.

Olive Bray translates this stanza thusly:

An ash I know standing, 'tis called Yggdrasil,
a high tree sprinkled with shining drops;
come dews therefrom which fall in the dales;
it stands ever green o'er the well of Weird.[65]

Note that the text itself does not say "the well of Weird" but actually says "Urd's well." There are different wells associated with the different roots of Yggdrasil, which Snorri's Edda tells us

Odin and the Mead of Poetry

The story of Odin's quest for the marvelous Mead of Poetry is recounted in both the Poetic Edda, where Odin himself recounts the tale in the first person, and the Prose Edda, where Snorri gives us more of the "backstory" behind the origin of the Mead itself, as well as a full account of the way this liquor came to Asgard.

The story of the Mead is bound up in the story of the war between the Vanir gods and the Æsir gods, of which war more in the following chapter. As we will see, this heavenly battle ended in a truce, with neither side completely vanquishing the other, and in an exchange of hostages from each side to live among those of the other camp.

The truce also included a peace-meeting between the Vanir and the Æsir, and Snorri's Edda tells us that the two sides met and:

> established peace in this way: they each went to a vat and spat their spittle therein. Then at parting the gods took that peace-token and would not let it perish, but shaped thereof a man. This man is called Kvasir, and he was so wise that none could question him concerning anything but that he knew the solution.[148]

Out of this meeting, and the wisdom-entity which arose when the gods of the Vanir and the Æsir spat their spittle into a common vat, would eventually come the Mead of Poetry, and the story which follows.

The Edda tells us that Kvasir "went up and down the earth" giving instruction to humanity in all matters -- until one day he was invited "to the abode of certain dwarves," named Fjalar and Galarr. As the story continues, we learn that Fjalar and Galarr are particularly murderous in nature, and they kill Kvasir, letting his blood run into two vats and a kettle, then blending it with honey and brewing a mead "the virtue of which he who drinks becomes a skald or scholar."[149]

Thor and his adventures

We now arrive at the strongest of all the Norse gods, and the one whose name is most widely known even to this day: Thor the Thunderer, weilder of the most powerful weapon among all the Norse gods, the mighty hammer Mjolnir -- without which Asgard would long ago have been overrun by the giants.

By virtue of his possessing the most powerful weapon and the greatest strength, as well as by virtue of his association with thunder and the sky, Thor can be seen to have strong parallels to the weilder of the thunderbolt-weapon in other mythologies, including Zeus of the pantheon of ancient Greece.

Indeed, as we will see, abundant evidence points to the conclusion that Zeus and Thor are associated with the same constellation in the night sky: the constellation Hercules, which almost invariably plays the role of the most physically powerful deity or hero in any myth-cycle around the world, and which almost invariably wields the most powerful weapon -- often a thunderbolt-weapon.

Even across the ocean, among the myths of the Maya, we can find evidence that the deity described in the Popol Vuh known as Hunrukán or Juruqan, and who is also known as "Heart of Sky" and who wields the thunderbolt-weapon in that sacred tradition, is also associated with the same constellation Hercules (indeed, the prominent extended rear leg of the constellation's outline may well be the origin of the name "Hunrukán," which means literally "one-leg").[268]

Zeus and Thor, of course, are both deities of thunder and lightning -- and we can see that across the Pacific in Central America, the corresponding god Hunrukán is a god of storm as well, and the likely origin of the word *hurricane*, the name which designates the most powerful, whirling storms on our planet. In *Star Myths of the World, Volume One* and *Volume Two* (respectively), I present evidence to conclude that Hunrukán and

The realm of the stars helps us to perceive the truths of the Invisible Realm. Understanding their language, this myth-episode implies, gives one options which we might not perceive if we are unable to read the message of the sky. Perhaps the most interesting of the incidents described in the visit of Thor to the realm of Útgard is Thor's inability, in his anger and frustration, to perceive the mountain-range that Útgarda-Loki interposes between himself and the Thunderer -- and the fact that both are symbolized in the heavens by the same constellation, implying perhaps that an ability to perceive this "code" gives Útgarda-Loki an advantage against the more headstrong god.

Thor is a god whose strengths and weaknesses are very much familiar to us as human beings. He was clearly a much loved and much revered deity among the Viking culture, judging from the importance of his hammer, which was worn as an amulet and carved onto runic stones. Many Viking names, for both men and women, derive from the name of the god Thor, as do many place names which can still be found in the northern lands to this day.

Like the god Jupiter or Zeus, who shares his association with the constellation Hercules, Thor is a jovial god with tremendous appetite, who loves a good feast (one time, Loki tempts Thor into a trap by describing the wondrous and abundant food at the hall of the jotun Geirrod).

Thor possesses many characteristics which are familiar to our own human condition. Indeed, he is called the son of Jörd, which is the Earth-goddess and the Earth herself (he is the son of Odin by Jörd). This connection seems appropriate, as Thor's passions seem familiar to our own condition, we who are also children of earth (but also possessed of the divine spark which comes down from the realm of spirit).

Of Thor's visit to the realm of Útgarda-Loki, Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson says that in this adventure, "Thor is pitted against the realities of life: fire, thought, the relentless sea, old age, and

Hanging over the Norse myths, and growing more pressing as the day approaches, is the knowledge that the Age of the Æsir gods will come to an end in a final catastrophe.

This day of reckoning is called Ragnarok, a Norse word which means the fate or doom of the gods, or rulers of the age. The word *ragna-* signifies the rulers or reigning ones, and is in fact linguistically related to our word "reign." The word *rök* signifies fate or judgment, and is related to our word "reckon," which means to measure and thus to judge or analyze or determine.

The name Ragnarok is also translated as the "Twilight of the Gods," from a very similar Norse word rökkr or røkkr, which means "twilight" and which appears once in the Poetic Edda, during *Lokasenna* -- where it is used by Tyr to describe the binding of Fenris, who must bide his time in bonds "till the twilight come of the Powers," as translated by Olive Bray.[368]

In a note appended to that verse, Bray writes underneath his translation of the original Norse line, which reads *bítha ragna rökkrs* ("biding the rulers' twilight"):

> Twilight of the Powers *or* Ragna rökr: *This is the only use of rökr in the poems, which has give rise to the phrase "twilight of the gods." The more usual form was* rök *or* fate.[369]

From this phrase, "twilight of the gods," Wagner titled the fourth and final of the artistic works in his Ring cycle *Götterdämmerung*, which is a translation into German of the same phrase.

The events of Ragnarok are referenced to varying degrees throughout the Poetic Edda, as well as being related in an extended description by Hárr to Gylfi in the Prose Edda. We will begin with the extensive and moving description in the Prose Edda, and add details from the Poetic Edda as we explore the celestial foundations -- and possible esoteric implications -- of Ragnarok.

As translated by Arthur Brodeur Gilchrist (who renders *ragnarökr* in the first line as "the Weird of the Gods"), we read beginning in section 51 of *Gylfaginning*:

> Then said Ganlgeri: "What tidings are to be told concerning the Weird of the Gods? Never before have I heard aught said of this." Hárr answered: "Great tidings are to be told of it, and much. The first is this, that tere shall come that winter which is called the Awful Winter: in that time snow shall drive from all quarters; frosts shall be great then, and winds sharp; there shall be no virtue in the sun. Those winters shall proceed three in succession, and no summer between; but first shall come three other winters, such that all over the world there shall be mighty battles. In that time brothers shall slay each other for greed's sake, and none shall spare father or son in manslaughter and in incest; so it says in *Völuspá*:
>
> Brothers shall strive and slaughter each other;
> Own sisters' children shall sin together;
> Ill days among men, many a whoredom;
> An axe-age, a sword-age shields shall be cloven;
> A wind-age, a wolf-age, ere the world totters.
>
> Then shall happen what seems great tidings: the Wolf shall swallow the sun; and this shall seem to men a great harm. Then the other wolf shall seize the moon, and he also shall work great ruin; the stars shall vanish from the heavens. Then shall come to pass these tidings also: all the earth shall tremble so, and the crags, that trees shall be torn up from the earth, and the crags fall to ruin; and all fetters and bonds shall be broken and rent. Then shall Fenris-Wolf get loose; then the sea shall gush forth upon the land, because the Midgard Serpent stirs in giant wrath and advances up on to the land. Ten that too shall happen, that Naglfar shall be loosed, the ship which is so named. (It is made of dead men's nails; wherefore a warning is desirable, that if a man should die with unshorn nails, that man adds much material to the

Concluding Thoughts

The Norse myths have a beauty and an atmosphere all their own. Yet, as we have seen, they are not separate from any of the other ancient sacred traditions imparted to the various cultures around the globe, but instead can be shown to rest upon the same celestial foundation and to share close parallels with patterns found in the sacred stories of the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament texts, the myths of ancient Greece, and of ancient India, and ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Japan and many others – including the cultures of the Americas and those living in the scattered islands across the vast Pacific.

The evidence supporting the above conclusion is indeed overwhelming in sheer volume: we have filled nearly five hundred pages with discussion of the connections between various episodes and the constellations of the night sky, and yet we have only scratched the surface, and had to skip over many other characters and stories which could easily yield hundreds or even thousands of additional pages of profitable analysis and evidentiary support.

In addition to the constellational references in the texts -- the description of the characters, and the events which unfold in the various episodes and adventures of the myths themselves – we can also call on the evidence from surviving ancient artwork which can be seen to evoke the outlines of constellations referenced in the stories, and these parallels cut across cultures, such that artwork depicting Zeus battling Typhon (for example) or Jacob seeing his vision of a ladder reaching to heaven can shed light on aspects of the Norse myths which are built upon the same region of the night sky (such as Thor battling the Midgard Serpent, or Odin escaping with the Mead of Poetry).

We also find irrefutable linguistic parallels, such as the name of the ogress Hyrrokkin in the Norse myths and the name of the god Hunrukán or Juruqan in the Popol Vuh of the Maya -- parallels which reveal the folly inherent in the ongoing refusal of most of

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ISBN 978-0-9960590-9-1
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