

When Gods Become Bureaucrats

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■ Abstract

Even gods are not always above bureaucracy. Societies very different from each other have entertained the idea that the heavens might be arranged much like an earthly bureaucracy, or that mythological beings might exercise their power in a way that makes them resembles bureaucrats. The best-known case is the Chinese “celestial bureaucracy,” but the idea is also found in (to take nearly random examples) Ancient Near Eastern cosmology, the Hebrew Bible, Late Antiquity, and modern popular culture. The primary sources discussed in this essay pertain to an area of history where bureaucracy was historically underdeveloped, namely medieval Scandinavia. Beginning with the Glavendrup runestone from the 900s, I examine a way of thinking about divine power that seems blissfully bureaucracy-free. Moving forwards in time to Adam of Bremen’s description of the temple at Uppsala (1040s–1070s), I find traces of a tentative, half-formed bureaucracy in the fading embers of Scandinavian paganism. In the 1220s, well into the Christian era, I find Snorri Sturluson concocting a version of Old Norse myth which proposes a novel resolution between the non-bureaucratic origins of his mythological corpus and the burgeoning bureaucratization of High Medieval Norway. Although my focus is on medieval Scandinavia, transhistorical comparisons are frequently drawn with mythological bureaucrats from other times and places. In closing, I synthesise this comparative material with historical and anthropological theories of the relationship between bureaucracy and the divine.

■ Keywords

Adam of Bremen, bureaucracy, Glavendrup stone, Gothic Bible, *Lokasenna*, runes, Scandinavia, Snorri Sturluson

From a materialistic point of view, the conversion meant that a cheap and unbureaucratic religion was replaced by an expensive and bureaucratic one.

~ Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*¹

What can be more “divine” than the traumatic encounter with the bureaucracy at its craziest—when, say, a bureaucrat tells us that, legally, we don’t exist? It is in such encounters that we catch a glimpse of another order beyond mere earthly everyday reality.

~ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*²

■ Introduction

Let us imagine a holidaymaker in Ravenna, who in an unlikely fit of confusion has forgotten their *Lonely Planet* guide and instead brought an article by Christopher Kelly, “Emperors as Gods, Angels as Bureaucrats.”³ Using the article as an itinerary, they would be treated to a series of mosaics, all dated from around the middle of the sixth century, and united by the theme of the heavenly powers being depicted in distinctly earthly terms. In the church of San Apollinare Nuovo, Christ sits on a throne, clad in imperial purple. His angels sit on either side of Him, dressed in the bordered togas and diadems of Late Roman administrators. Three miles to the south, at the church of San Apollinare in Classe, the Archangel Michael wears the multicoloured cloak of a judge. Just a few hundred yards west, at the Archbishop’s Chapel, Christ appears again, now clad not in imperial purple, but in the ceremonial armour and belt (*cingulum*) of a praetorian prefect.

Let us further imagine that after a stimulating day examining church art in Ravenna, our tourist were in need of less intellectually taxing entertainment. They come back to their hotel, switch on the television, and are pleased to see Tim Burton’s 1988 film *Beetlejuice* on the schedule. The picture tells the tale of a couple who are killed in a car accident. The afterlife they face is rather different than the cosmology of Chalcedonian (and sometimes Arian) Christianity, depicted on Ravenna’s churches. But, again, otherworldly power is explored through very mortal political structures. In Burton’s narrative the afterlife is run by a class of administrators, charged with deciding who is sent to haunt earth and who passes on. The recently deceased take a numbered ticket and wait to be called for an audience with a typically unhelpful bureaucrat. The ranks of these administrators are filled by the souls of those who departed the world through suicide: a former Miss Argentina who slashed her wrists, an office worker who threw himself under a passing vehicle.

¹ Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway, c. 900–1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010) 155.

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Short Circuits; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) 120.

³ Christopher Kelly, “Emperors as Gods, Angels as Bureaucrats: The Representation of Imperial Power in Late Antiquity,” *Antigüedad: Religiones y sociedades* 1 (1998) 301–26.

The common thread in these otherwise disparate media experiences is the articulation of otherworldly power through images of bureaucracy. Examples of how and why this happens is the business of this article. One might propose that some cosmologies become bureaucratized because they are rooted in bureaucratized societies, while societies that don't yet possess bureaucracy will self-evidently continue to have non-bureaucratic gods. This is the contention of Toni Flores, who offers a culturally transposable theory of the interaction between bureaucracy and mythology:

Art set in a folklore [i.e. non-bureaucratic] society must necessarily take on certain characteristics and that art set in "professional" [i.e. bureaucratic] society must necessarily take on a very different set of characteristics . . . art in stratified, complex, professional societies such as ours quintessentially is, is produced by artists who are best considered as a sub-class of bureaucrats and is functioning most saliently for the purposes and values, the ideology, of the bureaucracy and its masters.⁴

But even these straightforward assessments are unsafe. For example, it is largely true to say that the Christian imagination of the heavens has become less bureaucratic since sixth-century Ravenna. Although Luther retained an understanding of angels not fundamentally dissimilar to that of Gregory the Great, Reformed churches since the sixteenth century have increasingly dispensed with calling on saints and angels to act as bureaucratic "middle men."⁵ Moreover, the last five hundred years of Christian iconography have tended towards two opposing poles. One is abstraction, e.g. God the Father as a ray of light, a disembodied voice, etc. The other is that of tight historical context, e.g. God the Son in Near Eastern robes and sandals, perhaps speaking Aramaic. For some reason modern Christians shy away from the image of Christ as a bureaucratic, suit-wearing "line manager" or "office supervisor," even though that is how authority looks for most people in urbanized societies.

In what follows, I will consider a case study which illustrates the etiological problems of bureaucratic cosmology: Old Norse mythology, and how far it became bureaucratized as medieval Scandinavian society became increasingly bureaucratically-minded. Wherever possible, I incorporate comparative cases from Christian and Near Eastern cosmology, in which similar social processes operated.

⁴ Toni Flores, "Art, Folklore, Bureaucracy and Ideology," *Dialectical Anthropology* 10 (1986) 249–64, at 254.

⁵ Christopher J. Samuel, "'Heavenly Theologians': The Place of Angels in the Theology of Martin Luther" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2014).

■ Defining Bureaucracy: Marx and Weber in the Heavens

If all definitions of bureaucracy have their shortcomings, one has achieved a greater prominence than the others. Max Weber defined bureaucracy as a system in which:

- 1) given offices carry authority
- 2) the offices exist independently of their holders
- 3) the offices are increasingly specialized to treat different issues.⁶

Relevant to our purposes, Weber's definition was fruitfully applied in a 1994 book by Lowell K. Handy on the mythologies of the Ancient Near East. In his reading, gods divided particular duties amongst themselves in a Weberian manner: Ba'al looked after the city of Ugarit, Môt presided over the underworld, and Yam ruled the sea, while all three were answerable to the over-deity, 'El.⁷ The angels ran a sort of postal service, which obeyed the orders of any god of sufficient power who entrusted a message to them.⁸ Moreover, the gods had hierarchic offices—at least one of which could potentially be vacated and filled anew. According to Handy, the figure of *haśśatan* (הַשָּׂטָן) in the Hebrew Bible was not always one specific deity, but a role that different deities anonymously adopted when the Canaanite gods met in their celestial council.⁹ Indeed, Job 1:6 (KJV) is suggested as a dim remembering of such divine councils:¹⁰ “Now there was a day when the sons of God [בְּנֵי הָעֲלֹהִים] *beney ha'elohim*) came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.”¹¹ In the view of Handy and others, these “sons” were originally the other members of the Canaanite pantheon, sons of 'El, one of whom had contingently donned the mask of “the adversary” (*haśśatan*).¹²

As Handy's reading shows, Weber's focus on offices makes his definition of bureaucracy easily applicable to mythology. However, his definition had a second strand, which received less explication but is arguably more important: “the principle

⁶ Max Weber, “Bureaucracy,” in *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification* (ed. and trans. Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) 73–127.

⁷ Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 79–92, 99–116.

⁸ Handy, *Host*, 152–67. See also Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have A Future?* (trans. Nancy Ann Roth; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) 104, 107. One can profitably contrast this situation with the Old Norse situation, where rather than one centralized communications service (e.g. Hermes in the Greek pantheon) each God appears to have their own page (e.g. Skímir for Freyr, Hermóðr for Óðinn, Gná for Frigg).

⁹ Handy, *Host*, 121–22.

¹⁰ H. Wheeler Robinson, “The Council of Yahweh,” *JTS* 45 (1944) 151–57; Lowell K. Handy, “Dissenting Deities or Obedient Angels: Divine Hierarchies in Ugarit and the Bible,” *BR* 35 (1990) 18–35; Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *BBR* 81 (2008) 1–30.

¹¹ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations of the Bible are from the KJV.

¹² Ellen White, *Yahweh's Council: Its Structure and Membership* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 65–79; Christopher A. Rollston, “The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence,” *Stone Campbell Journal* 6 (2003) 95–115, at 102–6.

of *sine ira ac studio*.¹³ This is the observation that in an ideal bureaucracy offices are discharged with as little feeling of personal involvement on the officer's part as possible. As I have suggested elsewhere, Weber's point can be clarified by analogy with Karl Marx's theory of the alienation of labor.¹⁴ The breakthrough provided by Marx is that once a worker is alienated from their labor, they begin to perform it as though their essential human qualities—their *Gattungswesen* (species-being) in Marxist cant—were absent.¹⁵ While the worker-bureaucrat becomes automaton-like, those non-bureaucrats who are governed by bureaucracy start to see the world through the bureaucratic gaze: documents and rules take on a life of their own. In Marx's words, we see “the conversion of things into persons and persons into things.”¹⁶

■ Denmark, 900s: Alli the Pale in his Pre-bureaucratic Eden

In a cove on the Danish island of Fyn, a group of rocks has been arranged in two sixty-metre-long lines to form the outline of a ship. At the prow there is a lump of granite, nearly two meters tall, on which one will find the longest runic inscription in Denmark. It is known either by the name “the Glavendrup stone” or its signum, DR 209. The complex was constructed in the late tenth century—perhaps four hundred years after the mosaics from Ravenna. Like most epigraphy in the runic script, the Glavendrup stone tolerates different readings,¹⁷ but for our purposes we can offer the following transcription and translation:

raknhiltr ' sati ' stain þansi ' auft ala ' saulua kuþa uia l(i)þs haiþuiarþan þiakn
[§] ala ' sunir ' karþu kubl ' þausi ' aft ' faþur sin ' auk ' hons ' kuna ' auft uar
' sin ' in ' suti ' raist ' runar ' þasi ' aft ' trutin ' sin þur ' uiki ' þasi ' runar [§]
at ' rita ' sa ' uarþi ' is ' stain þansi ailti ' iþa aft ' aṅaṅ ' traki¹⁸

Ragnhiltr put up this stone in memory of Alli the Pale, *goði* [priest] of the sanctuary, honoured *þegn* [military leader] of the troop. Alli's sons made this memorial in memory of their father, and his wife did so in memory of her man. And Sóti carved these runes in memory of his lord. May Þórr bless these runes. He who damages (?) this stone or moves it to stand in memory of another, be accursed (?)

One thing that every reading agrees upon is that Alli is called both a *goði* and a *þegn*. We do not know precisely what these titles entailed during Alli's lifetime.

¹³ Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 97–98.

¹⁴ Richard Cole, “Bureaucracy and Alienation: Some Case Studies from *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*,” *Saga-Book* 43 (2019) 5–36, at 9–12.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (trans. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton; London: Penguin, (1975) 324.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* (trans. Ben Fowkes; 3 vols.; London: Penguin, 1976) 1:209.

¹⁷ Regrettably, a word limit prevents me from discussing this further.

¹⁸ Adapted from Erik Moltke, *Runes and their Origin: Denmark and Elsewhere* (trans. Peter Foote; Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, 1985) 226. All translations from Latin and Old Norse are my own.

There is variance both in time and space. *Begn* in particular is a word much contested by historians and philologists.¹⁹ By the High Middle Ages in Norway a *begn* was a feudal rank in service to a king.²⁰ A similar notion of vassalage in the case of Alli and his contemporaries has been proposed by Svend Aakjær and Birgit Sawyer, amongst others.²¹ However, on the basis of linguistic comparison with Old English *ðegn* and the relative amorphousness of Danish royal power in Alli's time, his 'thanehood' is now supposed to be the opposite: an independent magnate, possibly the leader of a warband as per Alli's *lið* (troop).²²

While Alli's role as a *begn* signified his worldly power, his status as a *goði* was a source of religious authority.²³ Comparison with early medieval Iceland suggests that a *goði* was a local 'big man' figure whose responsibilities included presiding over religious worship in some manner.²⁴ Doubtless, the Icelandic system had its peculiarities compared to the Danish, but the lack of an allusion to Alli having any sort of liege makes it likely that Alli won and exercised power in a manner not dissimilar to the contemporaneous Icelandic *goði* Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson, here from a thirteenth-century narrative:

And when Hrafnkell had claimed land at Aðalbóll he practiced much sacrificing. Hrafnkell had a great temple built. Hrafnkell loved no god more than Freyr, and he [Hrafnkell] gave half of all his greatest possessions to him [Freyr]. Hrafnkell settled the whole valley and gave people land, he wished to be their overlord and took the office of *goði* over them. In doing so his name was lengthened and he was called "Freyr's *goði*," and he was a great trouble-maker, although very accomplished. He conquered the people of Jökuldalur and people got no quarter from him. Hrafnkell often challenged people to

¹⁹ Judith Jesch, "Runes and Words: Runic Lexicography in Context," *Futhark* 4 (2013) 77–100, at 88–95. See also eadem, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2001) 218–19.

²⁰ Martin Syrett, "Drengs and Thegns Again," *Saga-Book* 25 (2000) 243–71, at 246–49.

²¹ Svend Aakjær, "Old Danish Thegns and Drengs," *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 2 (1927/1928) 1–30; Klavs Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark: The Formation of a State* (London: Duckworth, 1980) 31; Birgit Sawyer, "The Evidence of Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions," in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway* (ed. Alexander R. Rumble; London: Leicester University Press, 1994) 23–26.

²² Syrett, "Drengs and Thegns," esp. 253, 268; Eric Christensen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 335–36; Judith Jesch, "Scaldic and Runic Vocabulary and the Viking Age: A Research Project," in *The Twelfth Viking Congress: Developments around the Baltic and the North Sea in the Viking Age* (ed. Björn Ambrosiani and Helen Clarke; Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet, 1994) 294–301, at 299; John Koussgård Sørensen, "Om personnavne på -vi/-væ og den førkristne præstestand med nogle overvejelser over en omstridt passage i Glavendrup-stenens indskrift," *Danske studier* (1989) 5–33, at 25–26.

²³ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2015) 129–30.

²⁴ Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001) 118–32; Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth* (trans. Haraldur Bessason; Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974) 53–63; Ólafur Lárusson, "Goði og goðorð," *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* 5:363–66; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956) 1:401.

duels and never paid anyone compensation [i.e. for the people he subsequently killed], because nobody got compensation out of him whatever he did.

En þá er Hrafnkell hafði land numit á Aðalbóli, þá eflði hann blót mikil. Hrafnkell lét gera hof mikit. Hrafnkell elskaði eigi annat goð meir en Frey, ok honum gaf hann alla ina beztu gripi sína hálfu við sik. Hrafnkell byggði allan dalinn ok gaf monnum land, en vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim. Við þetta var lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Freysgoði, ok var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, en mennt vel. Hann þrængði undir sik Jökuldalsmenn, ok fengu af honum engan jafnað. Hrafnkell stóð mjök í einvígjum ok bætti engan mann fê, því at engi fekk af honum neinar bætr, hvat sem hann gerði.²⁵

Alli does not appear to have derived power from his offices, but rather to have attracted offices as a result of his power. We cannot know for certain whether becoming a war-leader (a *þegn* commanding a *lið*) gave him the opportunity to become a religious leader (a *goði* presiding over a *vé*) or vice versa, although one suspects that he was a *þegn* first, as a commander is a role which tolerates incompetence rather less than a religious office: a mistake made while performing a religious rite may be embarrassing, but a mistake on the battlefield easily costs one's life. The same dynamic operates in the case of Hrafnkell. Such people became local magnates because they were charismatic, wealthy, or just good at killing people. They then assumed the religious role of *goði* to boot.

This is not to say that Alli was not pious (or, at least, interested in being remembered as pious). The dedication *Þórr vígi þessar rúnar* (May Þórr bless these runes) is not often used in runic inscriptions, far less than Christians used intercessory formulae in their inscriptions.²⁶ The rarity of the formula indicates that its use was deliberate. It is therefore reasonable to deduce that carvers such as Sóti and commissioners such as Ragnhildr sincerely believed in what they were writing or ordering to be written. But Alli's piety is not in doubt. Rather, I am concerned with the way that he related his power to the gods. There is no Marxian alienation on the part of Alli according to the Glavendrup stone,²⁷ no reason to

²⁵ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, Austfirðinga sögur* (ed. Jón Jóhannesson; Íslensk Fornrit 11; Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950) 98–99.

²⁶ By my count, the formula or variants thereof are attested in five inscriptions out of a possible corpus of roughly 6,710 Viking Age and High Medieval inscriptions (the latter included to facilitate comparison between the pagan and Christian periods): Vg 150, Sö 140, DR 110, DR 220, DR 419. In contrast, the Virgin Mary is invoked at least 149 times. On Germanic pagan invocations more generally, see Franz E. Dietrich, "Drei altheidnische Segensformeln," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 13 (1867) 193–217.

²⁷ Sóti the rune-carver, on the other hand, appears to have been selling his labor in a manner instantly intelligible to Marxist critique. He also appears to have been the hand behind DR 202 (in honour of his brother) and DR 230 (again commissioned by Ragnhildr). When he calls Alli his *trúttin dróttinn* (lord), his precise relationship is left ambiguous. Was he a member of the *lið*? Was this just an affectation to pretend a degree of intimacy with the deceased when primarily he was a craftsman doing a job? On runestones and class relations, see H. A. Koefoed, "The Heroic Age in Scandinavia in Light of the Danish Inscriptions in the Younger Runes," *Scandinavian Studies* 35 (1963) 110–22, at 112–13.

believe that wages, loyalty to a higher lord, or vocation called to him to be a *goði* and a *þegn*. Indeed, the ostentatious setting of the monument leads one to suspect that personal status and enjoyment were his motivation. There is also no sign of Weberian hierarchy or specialization of expertise. Alli apparently owed no fealty to any social superior, and there is no indication that spiritual competence rather than social capital won him his recognition as a *goði*.

Just as Hrafnkell supposedly believed that he had a special relationship with the god Freyr, Alli's family believed that Þórr would intervene to protect his deceased servant's memorial. Again in stark opposition to the Marxist-Weberian bureaucratic ideal of automatic obedience to larger institutions, power here is vested in a discrete arrangement between two individuals, one human and one divine, in which both are *personally* invested. This is obviously an anti-bureaucratic situation. Did Alli believe that his gods exercised their powers in the same non-bureaucratic manner as their priests? We can point back to the Ancient Near Eastern situation where the opposite principle is at work, i.e. bureaucrat-priests depict bureaucrat-gods.²⁸ Handy and others have suggested that in Canaanite mythology the bureaucratic world-view of Syro-Palestinian scribes shaped their view of the heavens.²⁹

Reconstructing how Alli imagined the heavens is harder than doing the same for an Ancient Near Eastern bureaucrat, because we have no tenth-century Scandinavian equivalent of the Flood Tablet or the Barton Cylinder, i.e., documents which can be reliably dated to a time when their writers believed there was a degree of literal truth in the myths they recorded. However, Eddic poems such as *Völuspá* or *Grímnismál* contain mythic tropes which were probably current in Alli's days (although the manuscript which now contains most of these poems, *Codex Regius*, was written in the 1270s, and counter-Christian innovation and Christian influence permeate the Eddic corpus).³⁰ In general, the gods as they appear in Eddic poetry do not appear to be particularly bureaucratic. Again, a contrast with Ancient Near Eastern tradition brings this into relief. There is a parallel to Job 1:6–7 in *Lokasenna*. In the Hebrew story, God sits with His council, when the Adversary (*haśśatan*) makes an apparently unexpected appearance. God seems almost taken aback when He asks, "Whence comest thou?". In the Norse story, the gods sit at a feast, and in comes Loki, spoiling for a fight:

²⁸ Irene J. Winter, "Legitimation of Authority Through Image and Legend: Seals Belonging to Officials in the Administrative Bureaucracy of the Ur III State," in *The Organization of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East* (ed. McGuire Gibson and Robert D. Biggs; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1991) 69–116, at 74–77.

²⁹ Handy, *Host of Heaven*, 174–75; Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 185–91.

³⁰ Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964) 8–17; Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London: Continuum, 2011) 16–20; John McKinnell, "Völuspá and the Feast of Easter," in *Essays on Eddic Poetry* (ed. Donata Kick and John D. Shafer; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014) 3–33.

In I shall go, to the hall of Ægir
to have a look at the feast
hatred and pain I will bring to the sons of the gods,³¹
and mix their mead with poison.

Inn scal ganga Ægis hallir í
á þat sumbl at síá,
ioll oc áfo færi ec ása sonom,
oc blend ec þeim svá meini mioð.³²

Loki is not a normally harmless god who is only occupying an office: he is a constant threat to the other gods, personally invested in their downfall. The Norse pantheon meet in a celestial council at several points in *Völuspá* (stanzas 6, 7, 9, 23, 25, 48), but they seem to be discussing problems that directly affect them without any sense of Marxian alienation or Weberian office-holding, e.g.:

Then the gods all went to the thrones of fate,
the divine gods, and this they discussed,
whether the Æsir should pay tribute
or should all the gods have [rights to] tribute.

Þá gengo regin öll á roçstóla,
ginnheilög goð, oc um þat gættuz,
hvárt scyldo æsir afráð gialda
eða scyldo goðin öll gildi eiga.³³

That the decisions reached in these councils may sometimes be poor, as Christopher Abram has observed, does not alone make them bureaucratic.³⁴ There are fixtures in the Eddic corpus which might have evolved into something like “offices,” although they are not quite so in their presently attested form. In particular, there are certain seats, and sitting in these seats either gives the gods special abilities or facilitates their discharge of official functions. In the example given above, there is the word *roçstóll* (throne [lit. seat] of fate). The gods only sit in these when they deliberate important matters at council.³⁵ There is also a seat

³¹ Note the parallel between Hebrew *beney ha'elohim* (Vulgate *fili Dei*) in Job 1:6 and Old Norse *ása sonum*. In the Old English sermon on Job, Ælfric removes the term, presumably so as to eliminate any vestiges of henotheism. De Boors connects the Old Norse term with other Eddic vocabulary that he suggests as an attempt to create a more self-consciously religious register in Late Stage paganism (Helmut de Boor, *Kleine Schriften* [2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964] 1:215–16). Fidjestøl notes that “men” might also mean “gods” in some of de Boor’s examples (Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A Historical Survey and Methodological Investigation* [Copenhagen: Reitzels, 1999] 162).

³² *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst Verwandten Denkmälern* (ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn; Heidelberg: Winter, 1983) 97 [stz. 3].

³³ *Edda*, 6 [stz. 23].

³⁴ Abram, *Myths*, 160, 162.

³⁵ De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, 1:346.

called Hliðskjálf, in which Óðinn sits.³⁶ This grants the power to see anywhere in the world. The similarity between a “chair” and an “office” is that (1) they may grant special powers, and (2) they may theoretically be vacated and refilled by another sitter, granting those powers to the newcomer without prejudice or alteration.

The later prose incipit to the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* demonstrates this principle, when Freyr (illicitly?) occupies Hliðskjálf: “Freyr, son of Njǫrðr, had sat down in Hliðskjálf and saw around all the worlds” (*Freyr, sonr Njarðar, hafði sezt í Hliðskjálf oc sá um heima alla*).³⁷ Anne Holtsmark pointed out that the Christian mythographer Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241) converted the *rökstólar* into *dómstólar* (“seats of the court” or “seats of judgement”).³⁸ This makes the gods sound more bureaucratic, and thereby more intelligible to the language of power in thirteenth-century Norway. In contrast, Catharina Raudvere has suggested that chieftains in Alli’s time saw the chairs of the gods as more like the thrones they occupied themselves on the mortal plane: symbols of *their* authority in particular, not necessarily authority in general.³⁹ For the people who attended whatever long-lost ritual consecrated Alli’s stone ship on Fyn, it seems that the gods were effectively individuals with personal power, unalienated and uncomplicated. In this regard, their gods resembled their rulers.

■ Sweden, ca. 1040–1070s: The First and Last Pagan Bureaucrats?

Christianity brought a strong sense of belonging, of social order, and of structured dogma. Scandinavian paganism, it would seem, offered none of these assets when Christian missionaries began to arrive in the Nordic region in the ninth century. The general story of the conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia is that of rulers realizing that Christianity provided a superior set of tools for encouraging loyalty and dispensing power.⁴⁰ But there were a few examples of Scandinavians who, instead of adopting the new religion, attempted to reform paganism from an unreflected folk tradition into something more codified—closer to an Abrahamic faith in its use of texts and offices. The classic example of this reactionary paganism is that of Hákon Jarl, a northern magnate who extended his rule over Norway between 975 and 995. He made efforts to transform paganism into something like a “state

³⁶ *Edda* 56, 69; *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (ed. Klaus von See et al.; 7 vols.; Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011) 7:255–57.

³⁷ *Edda*, 69. The same mytheme is found in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* from ca. 1220: “There was one day when Freyr had occupied Hliðskjálf and saw over all the worlds . . .” (*Þat var einn dag er Freyr hafði gengit í Hliðskjálf ok sá of heima alla . . .*). Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (ed. Anthony Faulkes; London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005) 31.

³⁸ Anne Holtsmark, “Rökstólar,” *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* 14:624.

³⁹ Catharina Raudvere, “Fictive Rituals in *Völuspá*: Mythological Narration between Agency and Structure in the Representation of Reality,” in *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions* (ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt; Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012) 97–118, at 104.

⁴⁰ Gro Steinsland, *Den hellige kongen: Om religion og herskermakt fra vikingtid til middelalder* (Oslo: Pax, 2000) 82–97, 169–70.

religion” for Norway, sponsoring poets to create mythologically-inflected verse glorifying his men in battle, and himself claiming to be descended from Óðinn.⁴¹

Our next case study dates from this period where pagan rulers, although governing through a doomed religion, were using Christianity as a model to make last-ditch reforms. By the year 1000, Iceland, Norway, and Denmark had accepted Christianity, but in Sweden paganism would hold on throughout the eleventh century, and isolated pockets of pagan belief and not-quite-Christian-enough practice would hold on as late as the 1100s.⁴² *Gesta Hammaburgensis* was composed in Latin by the German churchman, Adam of Bremen, probably during the early 1070s. It contains a description of a pagan temple at Uppsala in Eastern Sweden. Adam claims that his informant was a Swedish Christian, who had seen the temple for himself:

That people have a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna or Birka. In this temple, which is decorated with gold all over, the people venerate the statues of three gods thusly, that the most powerful of them, Thor [Þórr] has a throne in the middle of the hall; Wodan [Óðinn] and Fricco [Freyr] have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, rules over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the wind and rain, good weather and crops. The other, Wodan—that is, the Furious—makes war and gives men strength against their enemies. The third is Fricco, who grants peace as well as pleasure to mortals. They also craft his statue with a huge erection . . . For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If there is a threat of plague and famine, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wodan; if marriages are celebrated, to Fricco.

Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab Sictone civitate [vel Birka]. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Woden et Fricco. Quorum significationes eiusmodi sunt: Thor, inquit, presidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges gubernat. Alter Wodan, id est furor, bella gerit hominique ministrat virtutem contra inimicos. Tercius est Fricco, pacem voluptatemque largiens mortalibus. Cuius etiam simulacrum fingunt cum ingenti priapo . . . Omnibus itaque diis

⁴¹ Abram, *Myths*, 127–57. See also de Boor, *Schriften*, esp. 1:282–83. Fidjestøl dismantles most of de Boor’s arguments but agrees: “. . . there may be some truth in this picture” (*Dating*, 165). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this dialogue.

⁴² Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr’s Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Library, 2002) 112–17; Britt-Mari Näsström, “Från Fröja till Maria: Det förkristna arvet speglat i en folklig föreställningsvärld,” in *Kristnandet i Sverige: Gamla källor och nya perspektiv* (ed. Bertil Nilsson; Uppsala: Lunne böcker, 1996) 335–49, at 346–47.

uis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant. Si pestis et fames imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur, si bellem, Wodani, si nuptiae celebrandae sunt, Fricconi.⁴³

The veracity of this account has been much debated, and we cannot rehearse the wrangling here.⁴⁴ *Interpretatio christiana* on Adam's part is certain. When he says that the temple "is decorated entirely with gold" (*totum ex auro paratum est*), or indeed the scholion writer says that "a gold chain goes all around it, hanging over the roof and glimmering at those who approach" (*catena aurea templum circumdat pendens supra domus fastigia lateque rutilans advenientibus*),⁴⁵ there is obvious influence from 1 Kings 6:21: "So Solomon overlaid the house within with pure gold; and he made a partition by the chains of gold before the oracle; and he overlaid it with gold" (*Domum quoque ante oraculum operuit auro purissimo, et affixit laminas clavis aureis*).⁴⁶

For our purposes, it is noteworthy that the way the priests (*sacerdotes*) are described is not what one would expect from Eddic verse and runic inscriptions. Allí the Pale from the Glavendrup stone does not seem much like the priests from Uppsala. He presided over a small sanctuary (*vé*) and appears to have been a local authority, collecting offices in proportion to his prestige, rather than through his technical ability. The priests of Uppsala, on the other hand, serve an institution bigger than themselves. They are expected not to serve their own ends, but to serve the people (*qui sacrificia populi offerant*). They provide services using expertise which ordinary people are not expected to possess. Their knowledge is not only specialized in relation to the rest of society, but also specialized amongst their own ranks: some specialize in the worship of Þórr, some in Óðinn, and some in Freyr. This is unlike the cosmology of Allí or Hrafnkell Freysgoði, where the human-divine relationship is framed in terms of mutual favoritism between one individual human and one individual god. The Uppsala priests occupy something more like an office. Perhaps they do feel particular spiritual attachments to particular gods, but if so, it is irrelevant. The important thing is that in times of plague, priests who know the correct way to worship Þórr do so for the good of their community, etc.

⁴³ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (ed. Bernhard Schmeidler; 3rd ed.; *Scriptores rerum Germanicum in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicae separatim editi*; Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917) 257–59.

⁴⁴ Regrettably, space does not allow examples.

⁴⁵ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 258.

⁴⁶ This scholion is attributed to Adam by Werner Trillmich, *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (Ausgewählte Quellen zur Deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters 11; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961) 155. Medieval geographers commonly deferred to sources they thought to be prestigious. If a second, apparently respectable informant later communicated an account of Uppsala to Adam, and that second source contained a borrowing from 1 Kings, then Adam may well have accepted it despite the naked biblical allusion. Just as, to the medieval Christian mind, Christianity had replaced Judaism and paganism alike, the idea that pagans should in some way appear like Jews was not outlandish.

If Adam's pagan priests are verging on bureaucratic territory, it is striking that according to his depiction the gods themselves are also moving in that direction. Adam of Bremen is the earliest source which explicitly states that Scandinavian gods have domains of expertise—in Handy's language, "spheres of authority."⁴⁷ Sundqvist argues that this idea is also witnessed by Snorri Sturluson's mythographic *Ynglinga saga*.⁴⁸ However, as *Ynglinga saga* dates from the 1200s, Snorri could have come up with the same idea either by comparison with Greco-Roman myth or by reflecting the bureaucratic conditions of his own age.

It is conceivable that the notion that specific deities could help with specific areas of human concern is something which Scandinavians first discovered during the reactionary turn in the last days of paganism (we shall return to this problem later). In Eddic poetry there is little indication that humans should turn to the gods for anything at all; the stories told are instead mostly about the problems that occur amongst the pantheon. In stanza 25 of *Völuspá*, humanity would surely appreciate some divine intervention as it succumbs to the bloodlust and sexual mania of Ragnarök. Yet there is no suggestion that humans should seek assistance from the celestial powers, nor that the gods have failed humanity (or vice versa). Indeed, in runic inscriptions, the gods are called upon surprisingly rarely, DR 209 being one of just 20 inscriptions in a corpus of 3,726 Viking Age inscriptions which explicitly invoke or even mention any pagan god. It is from the reactionary phase, then, that one first encounters a view of Old Norse myth that has the potential to be comparable to Lowell Handy's view of the Ancient Near Eastern pantheon as a bureaucracy. However, it must quickly be cautioned that Adam's account lacks the sophistication of the Canaanite material. Perhaps some thirty deities, each with their own specialization, can be found in Ancient Near Eastern sources. The division between war, weather, and fertility found in the Uppsala temple looks primitive by comparison.

Before moving on to our final Old Norse example, I wish to stress that what we have in Adam's depiction is *an image of a mythological system*, not necessarily a mythological system itself, in which pre-Christian Scandinavians actually believed. For my own part, I think that the account has the ring of truth: Adam presents a variety of paganism that has adopted some of the institutionalization that made Christianity so successful. In the last days of paganism, it would make sense if a few hold-outs attempted to copy the ideological weapons which their own religious culture had lacked. On the other hand, it is possible that Adam was imposing his experience of being an eleventh-century Christian priest. Weber notes that the Latin church was one of the most ornate bureaucracies in history.⁴⁹ Just as our Ravennese and Ancient Near Eastern bureaucrats imagined their own gods as

⁴⁷ Handy, *Host*, 114–16.

⁴⁸ Sundqvist, *Freyr's offspring*, 124.

⁴⁹ Weber, "Bureaucracy," 85–86; Sverre Bagge, *Cross & Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 82–90.

fellow bureaucrats, we cannot discount the possibility that Adam imagined other people's gods as bureaucrats. However, even if Adam was a complete fantasist, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that "Pagan" myth as imagined by Christians is still myth, insofar as it constitutes an assemblage of narratives and thought-patterns, genuinely believed or not.⁵⁰ Indeed, pagan myth in Christian hands is a serviceable description of the example below.

■ 1220s, Norway/Iceland: The Counter-Bureaucratic Dreams of Snorri Sturluson

The priests of Uppsala may be the last historically plausible image of sincere Germanic pagans (their only possible competition is the last heathen king, Blót-Sveinn of Sweden, r. ca. 1080s, but this is from a thirteenth-century Icelandic account, of suspiciously antiquarian bent).⁵¹ If the ruling elite at Uppsala thought that adopting a semblance of bureaucracy would save them, they were misguided. But while the pre-Christian Scandinavian religion was moribund by ca. 1100, its myths lived on. It is ironic that the fullest and liveliest image of Old Norse myth comes from a time when people had long since ceased to believe in the reality of the gods, and in fact had been Christians for two centuries.

Snorri Sturluson was an Icelandic statesman and author, born in 1179 at Hvammur, and assassinated at his farmstead at Reykholt in 1241. In the 1220s, he wrote a mythological compendium which we now call the *Prose Edda* (not to be confused with Eddic verse, which far predates Snorri). He probably authored this work while at the court of the Norwegian king, Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263). The mythological world of Snorri's *Edda* is not a rigorous attempt to reconstruct pagan mythology with as much scientific accuracy as possible. We might think of Snorri's account of Old Norse myth as a Tolkien-esque act of "subcreation." His *Edda* is a work of literature, an eclectic fusion of stories which may be pagan in origin, in addition to thinly veiled episodes borrowed from Christian learning, folklore, and Snorri's own imagination.

The gods in the *Prose Edda* are not as bureaucratized as some of the previous non-Norse examples, but they are more self-consciously organized than the Glavendrup stone and the *Gesta Hammaburgensis* would suggest. Snorri maintains the notion that the gods ruled themselves via a council, in which Óðinn has a *primus inter pares* position. In this, there is no contradiction with the political constitution of the gods as hinted at in Eddic poetry. However, the question of the organization of the gods does seem to have animated Snorri. In fact, as I have discussed elsewhere, he provides at least four descriptions of the gods' form of government, each slightly different.⁵² Interestingly, he takes advantage of stanza 15 in the Eddic poem

⁵⁰ Abram, *Myths*, 229–31.

⁵¹ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. G. Turville-Petre; London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1976) 70–71.

⁵² Richard Cole, "Æsirism: The Impossibility of Ideological Neutrality in Snorra Edda," in

Grimnismál to stress the point that the pantheon contains one god who specializes in resolving difficult legal cases.

Forseti is the name of the son of Baldr and Nanna, daughter of Nep. He owns the hall in heaven which is called Glitnir, and all who come to him with legal problems go away resolved. This is the best place of judgement amongst gods and men. As it says here:

Glitnir is the name of a hall,
it is propped up with gold
and also thatched with silver,
and there Forseti
spends most of the day
and resolves all cases.

Forseti heitir sonr Baldrs ok Nõnnu Nepsdóttur. Hann á þann sal á himni er Glitnir heitir, en allir er til hans koma með sakarvandráði, þá fara allir sáttir á braut. Sá er dómstaðr beztr með guðum ok mǫnnum. Svá segir hér:

Glitnir heitir salr,
hann er gulli studdr
ok silfri þakðr it sama,
en þar Forseti
byggvir flestan dag
ok svæfir allar sakar.⁵³

Forseti may well have been considered to be a god with some sort of legal function during the pagan period.⁵⁴ Indeed, on its own the concept of a god who supposedly once created laws or upon whom people call when they are in a difficult legal situation is not novel, e.g. Ma'at in Egyptian myth, Athena or Eunomia in Greek. However, the concept of a god who arbitrates between other gods appears to be a hallmark of a particularly bureaucratized mythological world. Handy points out that in Canaanite myth the function of cosmic ombudsman was filled either by 'El or 'Ašerah.⁵⁵ Disputes between the gods could be referred to these deities. This dynamic is reflected in Psalm 82:1: "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods." (The same sentiment occurs again a few lines later at Psalm 82:6, with an explicit mention that God rules over the *beney ha'elohim* as in Job 1:6.)

In this regard Snorri's mythology is more bureaucratically advanced from a Marxist-Weberian perspective than the Canaanite material. In Ugaritic myth 'El

Myths and Ideologies: Critical Studies in Political Uses of Old Norse Myths (ed. Nicolas Meylan and Lukas Rösl; Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

⁵³ Snorri, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 26 [ch. 32]. The cited verse, slightly at variance, is *Edda*, 60.

⁵⁴ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London: Penguin, 1964) 171–72. De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, 2:281–84.

⁵⁵ Handy, *Host*, 77, 88 nn. 90, 91.

and 'Ašerah are the most powerful divine couple.⁵⁶ They are therefore highly imperfect ombudsmen; at least there *is* an accepted process for resolving disputes, but arbitration is achieved simply by appealing to the highest authority. This is a “might makes right” situation, where impartiality depends on the moral virtues of the gods in question. Forseti, on the other hand, is an ombudsman *proper*. In Snorri’s account, he is *not* a ruler, but rather an external arbitrator, not personally involved in any case and therefore situated to provide the “best place of judgement amongst gods and men” (*dómstaðr beztr með guðum ok mönnum*). This is a mirror of how the Icelandic legal system was supposed to work in Snorri’s time, where disputes between two parties would (ideally) be resolved by the arbitration of a third party without vested interests in the case. That third party would hold the title of *goði*—the same title held by Alli the Pale and also an office held by Snorri himself.⁵⁷

Snorri also further develops the concept of “spheres of authority” in relation to what we saw at the temple of Uppsala. In the *Prose Edda*, the traveller Gangleri says admiringly to Óðinn: “that you should know the details of the gods and know to whom each [sort of] prayer should be prayed” (*er þér skuluð kunna skyn goðanna ok vita hvert biðja skal hvernar bænarinna*).⁵⁸ We then hear of the god Týr that “it is good for vigorous people to call on him” ([*á*] *hann er gott at heita hreystimönnum*).⁵⁹ This is particularly suggestive of how much Snorri was reshaping rather than recording pagan myth, given that most of the Týr-mythos is post-pagan mythopoesis.⁶⁰ Of the god Ullr it is said “it is good to call on him in a duel” ([*á*] *hann er gott at heita í einvígi*).⁶¹ Forseti, as above, is to be invoked during a legal deadlock. But, as seen, the epigraphic record shows that exceptionally few pagan Scandinavians called on their gods for *anything*. Snorri must therefore have had some reason for wanting his version of Old Norse myth to have the sense of political order and predictability we saw in the cosmologies of the Ravennese mosaics, of Job, and of *Beetlejuice*.

Snorri returns to the problem of how society can be made to work smoothly with his enumeration of the goddesses. He discusses 14 goddesses. For 5 of them he provides little more information than a name. In 4 cases the goddesses represent sexual-romantic virtues, e.g. Hnoss is the goddess of beauty, Gefjun and Fulla are listed as goddesses of chastity (although Snorri earlier tells a story implying that Gefjun may have provided sexual favors in return for land holdings

⁵⁶ William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 209–10; Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah with Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgia, 2007) 69–74, 84.

⁵⁷ Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) 39–43.

⁵⁸ Snorri, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 25.

⁵⁹ Snorri, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 25.

⁶⁰ Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson, “Týr: The One-Handed War God” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2002) esp. 166–87.

⁶¹ Snorri, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 26.

in southern Sweden). The rest are hard to classify according to their allegorical role. A completist may be more satisfied by viewing them as handmaidens who are essentially adornments of Frigg, as the narrative frame of the *Prose Edda* recommends. Nonetheless, it is important for our purposes that four of the goddesses represent legal virtues:⁶²

The eighth, Lofn: She is so generous and good to call upon that she receives permission from the All-Father [i.e. Óðinn] or Frigg for the union of people, of women and men, even if they had previously been prohibited or opposed. This is why “permission” [*lof*] comes from her name, and that which is very much praised [*lofat*] by people. The ninth: Vár: she listens to people’s oaths and the private agreements which pass between women and men. This is why such agreements are called *várar*. She also takes revenge on those who break them. The tenth, Vǫr: She is both wise and curious, so that nothing can be hidden from her. It is a saying that a woman becomes “aware” [*vǫr*] of something when she becomes intelligent. The eleventh, Syn: She keeps the gates to the hall and shuts them before those who are not supposed to enter, and she is also set to defend in the assemblies [*þingum*] on cases which she wishes to disprove. This is why it is a saying that a refusal [*syn*] is in place when she (?) turns something down

Átta Lofn: hon er svá mild ok góð til áheita at hon fær leyfi af Alföðr eða Frigg til manna samgangs, kvenna ok karla, þótt áðr sé bannat eða þvertakit. Fyrir því er af hennar nafni lof kallat, ok svá þat er lofat er mjök af mǫnnum. Niunda Vár: hon hlýðir á eiða manna ok einkamál er veita sín á milli konur ok karlar. Því heita þau mál várar. Hon hefnir ok þeim er brigða. Tíunda Vǫr: hon er ok vitr ok spurul, svá at engi hlut má hana leyna. Þat er orðtak at kona verði vǫr þess er hon verðr vís. Ellipta Syn: hon gætir dura í höllinni ok lýkr fyrir þeim er eigi skulu inn ganga, ok hon er sett til varnar á þingum fyrir þau mál er hon vill ósanna. Því er þat orðtak at syn sé fyrir sett þá er hann neitar.⁶³

Just as we saw with Forseti, Snorri did not invent these goddesses. In the case of Lofn, he cites a *þula* (a genre of Old Norse list poetry), where she is listed as a female deity. Moreover, there is some skaldic verse traditionally dated to the pagan

⁶² Structurally, the passage reminds one of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, where he lists goddesses whose names are also socially desirable virtues: “Secondly, he married shining Themis [Order], who gave birth to Horae [Ἥρας, Seasons], / Eunomia [Legality] and Diké [Justice] and flourishing Irene [Εἰρήνην, Peace], / who ensure the works of mortals” (δεύτερον ἠγάγετο λιπαρὴν Θέμιν, ἣ τέκεν Ἥρας, / Εὐνομίην τε Δίκην τε καὶ Εἰρήνην τεθαλυῖαν, / αἵ τ’ ἔργ’ ὠρεούουσι καταθητοῖσι βροτοῖσι). Hesiod, *Theog.* 900–902 (Hesiod, *Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia* [ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most; LCL 57; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007] 76). The resemblance must have something to do with the universal traits of mythographical treatises, not direct influence, as the *Theogony* was virtually unknown in the Latin West in Snorri’s time.

⁶³ Snorri, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 29–30.

era which uses the name “Lofn” in kennings for women.⁶⁴ The same is true of Vár,⁶⁵ Vǫr,⁶⁶ and Syn.⁶⁷ But the explanations of whence their names derive seems like Snorri’s work. There is nothing in the Eddic, skaldic, or runic corpus to corroborate the attachments Snorri gives to each deity. Nor are Snorri’s folk etymologies the only possible interpretations which might have been made. For example, Snorri derives Lofn from the noun *lof* and the verb *lofa*. He chooses to highlight the sense of *lof* meaning “permission,” but it also means “praise.” Conversely, for *lofa* he chooses the sense of “to praise” but passes over the sense of “to promise.”⁶⁸ If he had wanted to put a more overtly monarchist spin on his myth-making, for example, Snorri might have come up with, say, “Lofn is so noble that she is often praised by the All-Father, hence *lof*, just as men praise their king to whom they promise [*lofa*] loyalty.” But this is not what Snorri says. The latest named individual in Snorri’s family tree whom we might plausibly assume to have been pagan is his great-great-great grandfather, one Jǫrundr Þorgilsson, who was probably born in the last quarter of the tenth century.⁶⁹ Therefore, it seems safe to assume that Snorri did not know anything more about these deities than we do. And if he was relying on etymological deduction—which could have had any number of varying outcomes—then there is every reason to suspect that what he did and did not come up with was ideologically conditioned, whether consciously or subconsciously.

Relevant to our purposes is that Snorri’s folk etymologies are all virtues which Weber would have recognised as necessary for the smooth operation of a bureaucracy: seeking appropriate permission before acting in the case of Lofn (“the principles of ‘hierarchy of offices’ and ‘proper’ channels . . . means that there is a strictly organized system of government *Behörde* with levels of authority, where the higher ones supervise the lower ones”),⁷⁰ knowledge and diligence in the case of Vǫr. As Weber notes, “command of case knowledge”⁷¹ and *Responsenpraxis*

⁶⁴ Ormr Steinþórsson, “Poem about a Woman 3” (ed. Russell Poole), in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics* (ed. Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold; 2 vols.; Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3; Turnhout: Brepols, 2017) 1:327. See also the *pula* known as *Ása heiti*: Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* (ed. Anthony Faulkes; 2 vols.; London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998) 1:114.

⁶⁵ Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, “Lausavísur 12” (ed. Russell Poole), in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035* (ed. Diana Whaley; 2 vols.; Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 2012) 1:231. In *Ása heiti*: Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1:115.

⁶⁶ “Anonymous Þulur, Dægra heiti 1” (ed. Elena Gurevich), in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics* (ed. Gade and Marold), 2:914. In *Ása heiti*: Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1:114.

⁶⁷ Eilífr Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa 20” (ed. Edith Marold), in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics* (ed. Gade and Marold), 1:119. In *Ása heiti*: Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1:115.

⁶⁸ Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* (Kristiania: Feilberg & Landmarks, 1867) 416.

⁶⁹ *Landnámabók in Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson; 2 vols.; Íslenszk Fornrit 1; Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968) 1:163.

⁷⁰ Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 77.

⁷¹ Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 96.

(the practice of curating reports) are bureaucratic hallmarks. In the case of Syn, she who “keeps the gates to the hall and shuts them before those who are not supposed to enter,” a cynic might point to Weber’s observation that “every bureaucratic administration has an inclination to exclude the public.”⁷² But there is another side to this oppressive facet of bureaucracy—that eventually, there is a bureaucrat who is also what Weber called a monocrat: the one whose decision can no longer be appealed.⁷³ Syn embodies this principle: eventually, there are no more appeals, the door slams shut, and the case is closed. In the case of Vár, it is striking that Weber actually identifies oaths of loyalty and oaths of revenge as precursors to bureaucratic systems of order and personal protection—in Weberian analysis, this is the flawed system which gives way to bureaucracy, rather than bureaucracy itself.⁷⁴

It stands to reason that Snorri would be interested in these sorts of virtues. Between 1215 and 1218, then again between 1222 and 1231, he was the *lögsgumaðr* (the lawspeaker) of Iceland’s highest assembly, the Alþingi.⁷⁵ In Snorri’s time, Iceland was governed by a peculiar system, consisting of a judiciary without an executive. Icelandic society was intensely litigious, but there was no king, no police force, nor indeed any of the trappings of a civil service.⁷⁶ Once the courts made a ruling, it was up to the community to see the enforcement of justice, which meant in practice that sentence of outlawry, violence, and rampant “strong man-ism” came to paralyze Icelandic society.⁷⁷ In some ways, thirteenth-century Iceland was an atavistic hold-out of the sort of governance found in Norway back in the 900s: local magnates and assemblies, with little in the way of impersonal power. One suspects that this is a scenario in which Alli the Pale would have felt at home.

With this context in mind, it is striking that the goddesses listed above embody only *some* principles of a bureaucracy; Snorri prioritizes those which are essentially rooted in individual self-regulation rather than top-down governance. For example, Snorri indirectly praises the idea of peaceably accepting when a case should be dropped through Syn. With Vár, he tacitly reminds the reader of the importance of sticking to one’s own oaths. As seen, Lofn does imply acceptance of hierarchy, but not necessarily through state coercion. This accords with Snorri’s mythological

⁷² Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 116.

⁷³ Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 77.

⁷⁴ Weber, “Bureaucracy,” 95.

⁷⁵ On Snorri’s complex political views, see: Helgi Þorláksson, “Snorri Sturluson, the Politician, and his Foreign Relations: The Norwegian, Orcadian and Götdlandish Connections,” in *Snorri Sturluson and Reykholt: The Author and Magnate, His Life, Works and Environment at Reykholt in Iceland* (ed. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir and Helgi Þorláksson; Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2018) 79–107; Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 192–251; Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, 18–25, 39–43.

⁷⁶ Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1993) 59–76.

⁷⁷ William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) esp. 58–63, 174–79; Jón Jóhannesson, *A History*, 222–84; Helgi Þorláksson, “Historical Background: Iceland 870–1400,” *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (ed. Rory McTurk; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 136–54, at 148–52.

world-building more generally, in which his deities do not discard the idiosyncrasies of Icelandic political culture. At no point do they adopt a king to rule over them, for example.⁷⁸ But at the same time, Snorri's mythology is not anti-monarchist nor anti-Norwegian (the question of Snorri's exact political views is unclear, though it seems that he accepted, perhaps out of sober *Realpolitik*, that Iceland should become an earldom of Norway, ruled by a Jarl, with important Icelandic families retaining their prominence—something not unlike what, in fact, happened twenty years after Snorri's death).⁷⁹ It is worth remembering that Snorri's *Edda* was probably composed at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson, who had aspirations both of creating a more bureaucratic Norway and making Iceland a part of it.⁸⁰ It is tempting to interpret Snorri's depiction of mythical bureaucrats as a sort of negotiation: an acceptance of the advantages of bureaucracy, but an attempt to make it a collaborative, voluntary venture rather than an oppressive structure. Snorri's view of the heavens can be characterized as a sort of "ordered disorder"—a codified system cobbled together from selected snippets of Eddic verse, and a bit of Snorri's own folk etymology, which he may have intended to reflect concessions that he thought ought to be made to Iceland's unique political system when it inevitably became a part of Norway.

■ Conclusion: The Changing Valences of Bureaucracy

We began with general examples of bureaucracy in mythico-religious thought, and then we turned to a specific genealogy of how such thinking developed in Scandinavia. In concluding, we will reintegrate our Scandinavian examples into a corpus of instances from other times and places. Flores offered the formulation that bureaucratic societies would create bureaucratic mythologies, while non-bureaucratic societies would not. I submit that our Scandinavian examples suggest that a more productive tack might be not to characterize societies as bureaucratic versus non-bureaucratic, but instead to consider what the valences of bureaucracy are in a given social milieu. This would account for why Jesus is never a bureaucrat in modern Christianity, but He was one in sixth-century Ravenna. Nearly everybody today agrees that bureaucracy is obstructive, frustrating, and mundane.⁸¹ There is no reason that a believer would project such qualities onto their God. For the Ostrogothic elite of Ravenna, on the other hand, bureaucracy must have seemed like a wonderful technology of which they had only recently taken control. The

⁷⁸ Technically, Óðinn is discussed as a king in the deliberately unreliable narrative frame of the *Prose Edda*. I discuss this in more detail in Cole, "Æsirism."

⁷⁹ Theodore M. Andersson, "The Politics of Snorri Sturluson," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93 (1994) 55–78; idem, "The King of Iceland," *Spec* 74 (1999) 923–34, esp. 927–34.

⁸⁰ Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed: Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996) 148–50; David Bréguin, *Vox Regis: Royal Communication in High Medieval Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 174.

⁸¹ On the critique of bureaucracy from both left and right, see: David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London: Random House, 2015) 3–44.

idea that people would obey unarmed men on account of their position, rather than their accomplishment in acts of violence, must have been exciting and considered worthy of propagation. The message of these mosaics is both “God is bureaucrat-like,” and also “bureaucrats are God-like, and therefore you should obey them.”

Indeed, this development in Gothic thought during the sixth century is brought into even sharper relief when one compares it with the Gothic Bible of the fourth century. Admittedly, the statements of the Gothic Bible are decided by the Greek source text, but it is still notable that in our extant Gothic literature a constant is the decrying of the “scribes” (*βοκάργος bokarjos*), e.g. the fragmentary Luke 20:46: “Beware of the scribes, those who wish to walk in white [clothes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts]” (*Διτσειοιφ φαηρα βοκαργαμ φαιμ γιλσανδαμ τατραν ιν οειταιμ . . .*). The frequent attacks on the *bokarjos* are a reflection of the Greek γραμματεῖς. But one suspects that, like any act of translation, this was not an ideologically neutral business. Wulfila’s Gothic translation of the Bible was probably undertaken around the same time that the Goths were fleeing the Huns and were consequently attempting to settle inside the borders of the Roman Empire, sometimes as supplicants, sometimes as invaders.⁸² Wulfila himself was part of a resettlement in Moesia in 348.⁸³ Other trans-Danubian migrations occurred in the 370s. For many of the refugee Goths, the adversarial or exasperated Roman administrators whom they faced must have been the first bureaucrats they had ever seen.⁸⁴ Under such circumstances, religious rhetoric against the *bokarjos* must have had a particular appeal. Note that Wulfila’s text diverges from the Greek in Luke 20:46. In Greek, the scribes wear “long robes” (στολαῖς, the same word which gives us “stole,” as in the liturgical vestment). But in Gothic, they wear *huitaim* [leinam?]⁸⁵ (white [linens?]). I am not convinced that Wulfila lacked a word meaning “robes.” Every other older Germanic language had words denoting either long clothing or clothing of rank, e.g. Old English *gerela*, Middle High German *kittel* or *röbe*, Old Norse *kyrtill* or *tignarklæði*. But by making the pompous, bureaucratic γραμματεῖς of the New Testament wear white, Wulfila provided the possibility for his audience to make a comparison with the white-with-purple-trim togas of Roman administrators. Two centuries later, the same togas would be positive symbols for divine power on the mosaics of San Apollinare Nuovo, which were commissioned under the Gothic King Theodoric the Great (r. 475–526). For the refugee Goths, bureaucrats were

⁸² Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans 332–489* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 122–56.

⁸³ E. A. Ebbinghaus, “Some Remarks on the Life of Bishop Wulfila,” *General Linguistics* 32 (1992) 95–104, at 103.

⁸⁴ Heather describes the support of the recently arrived Goths as an “administrative nightmare” (*Goths and Romans*, 122–23).

⁸⁵ Or any word for clothing. In Mark 16:5 the angel wears γαστραι οειταιι (white clothes), and in Luke 9:29 it is said of Christ that ταγασειν ισ οειτα σκειρανδει (His clothes [were] shining white). Other extant words for clothing include ταπεινις in 1 Tim 2:9 and τασκαδυεινις in 1 Tim 6:8.

the people standing in the way of their migration to safety. For a Gothic ruler, the connotations of bureaucracy were self-evidently different.

The changing valences of bureaucracy—and how they govern the representation of bureaucrats in mythology—should not only be considered in terms of “good” and “bad.” In the epigraph to this study, Žižek also indicates the dichotomy between “mundane” and “mystical.” Specifically, he implies that the opacity or inscrutability of bureaucratic processes can sometimes recommend their comparison to the divine. This may well be true in the case of the temple at Uppsala, described by Adam of Bremen. Earlier, we saw how it appeared that the priests and worshippers at Uppsala were transitioning from the socially atomised strongman-ism of Alli the Pale’s time to something that more closely resembled a Weberian bureaucratic mindset. One thing that Adam’s pagan priests apparently do not do—which contemporary Christian clergy would—is to use their bureaucratic organizational techniques for the administration of secular responsibilities as well as religious duties.⁸⁶ At no point does Adam suggest that they are managing estates, collecting taxes, keeping records, etc. Doubtless, this is in part because they would not have been competent at some of these tasks. They would only have been literate in the runic script, which as far as we can see was not used for administrative purposes in the pagan period. But the question must then be asked, why would the pagan elite adopt bureaucratic techniques at all? What benefits did they imagine such a change would bring?

When comparing Adam’s account to the administrative culture of medieval Christianity, I am reminded somewhat of the material and ritual culture of Melanesian Cargo Cults in relation to the cultures which they emulate. As the reader will probably know, Cargo Cults are religious movements which sprung up on various Melanesian islands in the wake of occupation by foreign military forces. The planes or ships which resupplied the colonizers were viewed as wondrous by the colonized, who began to harbor millenarian hopes that the same vessels could be attracted to them instead. Scale models of aircraft and sailing ships were constructed to attract this “cargo.” In some cults, the replication of foreign material culture was meticulous, with uniforms being made in impersonation of servicemen, and huts with mock radio equipment being made to impersonate air traffic control towers.⁸⁷ The social forces which governed the creation of these cults are multifaceted,⁸⁸ but it seems to me that at least part of the reasoning behind such projects is the unease that a foreign civilization has materially and organizationally developed to the point that it now threatens one’s own—only by becoming more like that civilization can one hope to defeat it.

⁸⁶ Sverre Bagge, *Fra knyttneve til scepter: Makt i middelalderens Norge* (Rapportserien Makt- og demokratiutredningen 67; Oslo: Makt- og demokratiutredningen, 2003) 38–53.

⁸⁷ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of ‘Cargo’ Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 204, 207, 247; Lamont Lindstrom, *Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of Desire from Melanesia and Beyond* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993) 88–91.

⁸⁸ See Lindstrom, *Cargo*, 41–72, 183–210.

Obviously the Melanesians who built these airfields could only copy what they could see: they could go as far as replicating the inside of a radio control room, but no further. If Cargo-ists could see the inner workings of a modern military administrative office, would they also seek to make mockups of Excel spreadsheets, photocopiers, or other bureaucratic paraphernalia? I suspect so. They would only have achieved a portion of the bureaucratic sophistication they copied, because their efforts necessarily focus more on appearances than organizational techniques. Cargo cults often do import a degree of organizational culture, of course—their soldiers sometimes practice western-style military drills, which implies they also have a chain of command⁸⁹—but they cannot perfectly constitute bureaucracy without (1) intimate study of the systems they wish to emulate and (2) a suitable degree of pre-existing bureaucratic complexity in the rest of the society in which the cult develops. Is the same true of the Uppsala priests? Perhaps from observing the cult of saints in their Christian peers, the idea that cultic labor should become specialized arose, both for the gods and for their priests. The Uppsala pagans cannot have been unaware that Christianity was a religion which covered far more territory than their own, and they might well have made the same calculation as the later Melanesians that reorganizing themselves to be more like their competitor would be the only way to survive. If so, the valence that bureaucracy must have carried in the minds of the pagan elite would not just be positive, but also mysterious: a source of strength which could only be partially recreated for themselves.

Similarly, Snorri's mythical bureaucrats (such as they are) reflect an accommodation of the undeniable appeal of bureaucracy on the part of a person who had been raised in a relatively non-bureaucratic society. Snorri's hope for a bureaucracy which works by the willing adoption of personal virtues rather than the imposition of alienated administrators chimes with the modern experience. We want to be free of the absurdity and coercion of bureaucracy, but at the same time, as David Graeber notes:

Bureaucracy holds out at least the possibility of dealing with other human beings in ways that do not demand . . . complex and exhausting forms of interpretive labour . . . where just as you can simply place your money on the counter and not have to worry about what the cashier thinks of how you're dressed, you can also pull out your validated photo ID card without having to explain to the librarian why you are so keen to read about homoerotic themes in eighteenth century British verse. Surely this is part of the appeal.⁹⁰

For Snorri, the deliberate establishment of bureaucracy was a recent development. No Norwegian king had ever sought to expand bureaucratic culture, nor bring it to Iceland, to the extent that Hákon had. The nuanced valences which bureaucracy had in his eyes must have seemed like a matter worth discussing through mythography. He would not have been completely deluded to imagine that a political-theoretical

⁸⁹ Lindstrom, *Cargo*, 89.

⁹⁰ Graeber, *Utopia*, 152.

discussion could have been ignited and, who knows, perhaps tangible political change might occur as a result. In our own days, bureaucracy is more of an immanent reality than a recent development. Its permanence has become reflected in our own myth-making: contemporary Christian iconography offers the faithful an escape, by asserting that non-bureaucratic power still exists, albeit in the heavens rather than on earth. Visions such as *Beetlejuice* are a less comforting response to the same conditions: the fear that even in death, we might not escape the alienated absurdity of the bureaucratic age.