

Are the Scandinavian Gods of Indo-European Heritage?

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Abstract. The origin of Germanic deities poses the question familiar from the study of phonemes, grammatical forms, and syntactic constructions: Indo-European heritage or local descent? Since from medieval Germania only Scandinavian mythology has come down to us, discussion centers around Othin, Thor, Týr, Baldr, etc. None of them has ascertainable roots in Indo-European, even when etymology points in that direction. Nor has George Dumézil succeeded in showing that the Indo-European and the Scandinavian pantheon, with their alleged tripartite division, are a good match, but from the nature of the case the question remains open.

The topic of this paper needs justification. It is far from clear what the terms *Indo-European*, *Germanic*, and even *Scandinavian* mean when applied to mythology, for the first two were coined only with reference to linguistics. The languages called Indo-European have a certain number of common features (which is the reason they form a family) distinguishing them from other families. Germanic, being a group within Indo-European, possesses the main family characteristics but exhibits a few others that do not occur elsewhere. For example, Indo-European makes wide use of inflection, and so does (or at one time did) Germanic, but, to give a random example, it also has strong and weak verbs unknown in Romance, Celtic, or Slavic. These and other similar facts are discussed in all introductions to linguistics. Unfortunately, such introductions often forget to say that terms like *Indo-European* and the rest should be limited to language studies and have no relevance to ethnicity and (this is our main point here) religion and culture.

To complicate matters, the homeland and early history (prehistory) of the Indo-European and Germanic tribes is unknown; the light

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archaeology sheds on them is none too bright. If even a small percentage of Germanic words, nowadays so generously being attributed to the substrate (or different substrates) was really taken over from the indigenous languages of ancient Europe, it follows that Germanic speakers were not among its first inhabitants. This conclusion won't surprise anyone. Consider the population of Britain: first the Picts, then the Celts, then the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes; still later the Normans and the French played an important role. Obviously, the Picts are the first only to us. The Scandinavian peninsula was "the womb of nations"; yet the Finno-Ugric people lived there before the ancestors of the modern Swedes and Norwegians.

In practice, Indo-European religious studies deal with Indo-Iranian, Greek, Roman, and Germanic traditions. The beliefs of the Celts are also occasionally thrown in for good measure. Those of the early Slavic and Baltic peoples can be mainly reconstructed from modern folklore. Germanic religion, though a legitimate part of that pool, is a vague concept, because only Scandinavian myths are extant, and even they have reached us in late recordings (the two *Eddas*, *Gesta Danorum*, insertions in the romantic sagas, and a few garbled Swedish tales). From West Germanic we have an array of place and divine names but no narratives, with the exception of the obscure *Second Merseburg Charm*. The religious vocabulary of the Goths (see Üçok 1938) does not allow us to get a glimpse of even their pre-Christian customs, let alone their myths, and Scardigli's attempt (1964:73-82) to reconstruct Gothic shamanism carries little conviction. Both common Indo-European and common Germanic religion are murky concepts.

A serious problem concerns the method of reconstruction. The existence of the Indo-European protolanguage was not postulated but deduced from irrefutable facts. Setting up a common source of Sanskrit, Greek, and other languages was a necessity, for the features recurring in all of them could not be due to chance. By contrast, reference to panhuman characteristics and migratory plots will account for the similarity of the oldest myths no worse than the hypothesis of common origin. Likewise, nothing induces us to incorporate Germanic religion into Indo-European except the consideration that, since Germanic is an Indo-European language, belief in the Germanic gods has a good chance of having Indo-European antecedents.

The cornerstone of comparative religion was laid in the nineteenth century. Schleicher and his followers visualized *Indogermanisch* as

Stammbaum, and it seemed to follow that culture had developed along similar lines. Sanskrit was identified with Proto-Indo-European, and eddic mythology with the proto-mythology of Germanic speakers. However, the parallelism is deceptive, among other things, because in mythology global comparison suggests itself more easily than in linguistics. Sounds (phonemes), endings, and syntactic constructions can be compared according to more or less mechanical rules, whereas mythic plots, to the extent that they are centered around anthropomorphic deities, are almost universal.

Nature mythology, with all its ramifications, did not need a *Stammbaum*: the sun, the moon, the stars, floods, and winds provided a seemingly solid background for reconstruction. The same holds for various symbolic schools: all people are prey to the same “complexes” and fears. In folklore, adherents of both monogenesis and polygenesis have to grapple with the astounding fact that tales are similar the world over. Some common denominator is always close at hand, as reference to the solar myth, the working of the subconscious, and initiation in attempts to explain the origin of the wonder tale has shown. Oral tradition usually pushes its students to producing all-encompassing schemes.

The main Scandinavian divinities are Othin (for simplicity’s sake, I will use the Anglicized form of their names), Thor, Baldr, Loki, Frey, Týr, Heimdal, and Njörth. The goddesses are less prominent, but Freyja, Frigg, and Sif take same part in the preserved tales. While considering the question whether the bearers of those names are descendants of Indo-European deities, etymology provides little or no help. As is well-known, only Týr can be compared directly with a non-Germanic theonym. Equating Týr with *Zeu-s* and *Ju-piter* has its problems, but in the context of this paper their identity can be accepted without further discussion.

However, this identity is confined to words. Evidently, the sole reflex of the Germanic root **tiuw-* ‘bright sky’ has been preserved in a divine name. It follows that at one time profane words with this root must also have had some currency and that Týr about whose non-Scandinavian counterparts we know nothing except that they existed (cf. Engl. *Tuesday*) was a (or the) sky god whom the early Teutons venerated. Without the evidence of etymology we would not have been able to reconstruct Týr’s past, because in skaldic poetry and in the *Eddas* he has nothing to do with the sky or light. Although the Indo-Europeans, in and outside Germania, used the same word for heavenly sheen, we cannot

bridge the distance between the word and the abstraction elevated to the status of a god. In mythology, Týr and Zeus ~ Jupiter are incompatible.

To reinforce the conclusion that a god's Indo-European name delivers less than it promises, we may look at Thor. As Týr is an animated bright sky, so Thor is animated thunder, and Þórr is allied not only to Engl. *thunder* ~ G. *Donner* but also to Lat. *tonare* and its cognates. The linguistic background of the *word* provides no clue to the Indo-European past of the Germanic *god*. The same holds for Frigg, Freyja, and Sif. The words are transparent, and their Indo-European provenance requires little proof. However, the deities are only Germanic (Scandinavian). Regardless of how one may etymologize Óðinn, we will not go beyond 'fury, frenzy' (Icel. *óðr*, G. *Wut*) or, mistakenly as I think, 'wind' (G. *wehen*; see Liberman 2011 and forthcoming, Chapter 1, sec. 4).

The names of Loki and Baldr have also been the object of involved speculation (see Liberman 1992; 2004, and forthcoming, Chapter 6, sec. 3, on Loki, and forthcoming, Chapter 7, supplement, on Baldr). I believe that *Loki* is related to G. *Loch* 'hole', so that *Loki* began his career as a demon guarding the dead (a kind of Útgārtha-Loki), opposed to the furious Othin, a wild hunter, a demon chasing and devouring corpses (hence the idea that the two were sworn brothers). The best etymology of *Baldr* connects (in my opinion) the name with Engl. *bald* 'white' (as in *bald eagle*); Baldr was a shining god. Be that as it may, Óðinn, Baldr, and *Loki* have no congeners outside Germanic. The old and recently revived idea that *Baldr* is a borrowing of *Baal* (Vennemann 2004 and 2005) strikes me as indefensible. I will abstain from examining the other names, because etymology is a side-issue here.

Comparing gods' exploits and characteristics is also tricky business, as follows even from the few remarks on nature mythology and a symbolic interpretation of myths, above. The mighty sky god will control lightning over great expanses of land and water, and thunder in the mountain terrains. A sun god will travel in a chariot driven by horses, goats, or reindeer. The most powerful male and female deities of procreation will appear as ithyphallic and endowed with a gigantic vulva. A rain god or goddess will weep. Eclipses will give rise to myths of a battle between a sky (or moon) god and his evil adversary, while earthquakes will suggest a giant tossing in pain or for any other reason.

The repertory of etiological tales is limited, and gods' adventures and amorous deeds, as well as variations on the *comedia sacra*, need not go back to remote antiquity; they tend to spring up independently in disparate

communities. All this makes the task of reconstructing Indo-European mythology a rather unprofitable endeavor. Certain plots are probably very old. Among them may be a tale of two cosmic rivals fighting for a woman's favors. In the mythology of many races a war precedes the establishment of world order. A juxtaposition of separate motifs and developed plots is unable to answer the question: Common origin or parallel development? Even comparing entire structures (a much more promising enterprise) does not take us far enough, for, unlike the wonder tale (fairy tale), myths are short, even if spun out into lays of the *Þrymskviða* type, and applying some elements of the Proppian formula to them has failed.

The only hope to trace the Germanic (Scandinavian) gods to Indo-European consists (or so it seems) in comparing functions rather than motifs and plots. From this point of view George Dumézil's idea has potential, and, if it did not produce expected results, this happened because of the intractable material rather than on account of some deep-grained methodological fallacy. It took Dumézil's achievement a long time to cross the French borders, but, once it happened, the number of his followers grew steadily, and today his views dominate Indo-European religious studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than listing even his most important works, I will refer to the introductory essays by Udo Strutynsky and C. Scott Littleton to Dumézil 1973 and a book (Belier 1991) containing a full bibliography and a survey of his ideas: the first two are an enthusiastic apology; the third, a devastating critique. When did Dumézil's Indo-Europeans live? I think Renfrew (1987: Chapter 10) had every right to ask this question.

Dumézil's reconstruction rests on a tripartite division of the Indo-European (predominantly Indo-Iranian and Roman) pantheon, whose structure is said to be determined by three functions: two gods represent sovereignty, one slot is occupied by the god of war (military might), and one by the gods of productivity. Dumézil contended that Germanic fully conforms to this scheme: Othin (magic) and Týr (law) allegedly represent the first function, Thor the second, and the Vanir (Frey and Njörth) the third. The match is supposed to prove the Indo-European origin of Germanic religion. This trifunctional approach is usually referred to as structuralist. Since being a structuralist is neither good nor bad in and of itself, we will disregard the implications of this label and look at the facts that bear out or are at variance with the main conclusion.

Of the two Scandinavian divine clans one (the Vanir) is understood to be responsible for productivity, or fertility. Although true in the main,

this statement simplifies matters. The Vanir certainly perform or performed the role ascribed to them, but they share it with the Aesir. Thor, a great *Ás*, in his capacity as thunder god, used to control the sky (rain) and, consequently, plants. However, his involvement with fertility finds a much more tangible expression. Two goats drive his chariot (indeed, no longer in the sky, but compare Swedish *aska* ‘thunder’), and goats, along with cats and pigs, represent fertility in the oral tradition of many nations. Then there is Mjöllnir. It need not be called a phallic symbol, for symbolism, as we understand it today, is alien to myth. The hammer is in some cases a substitute for Thor’s male organ, and that is why ithyphallic effigies of Thor enjoyed some popularity.

The main episode, as is well-known, occurs in *Brymskviða*. It must have been an open secret that Mjöllnir consecrated marriage, for, otherwise, the lay’s denouement would have puzzled rather than entertained the audience. The other episode entailing the hammer is less clear. At Baldr’s sea funeral, Thor consecrates the ship with Mjöllnir. Since Baldr does not return (at least not until Ragnarök), perhaps it guaranteed Baldr’s role as the master of vegetable life from beneath. In any case, it must have had some bearing on continued existence (not of Baldr, but on his sway over the running of the world).

Nor is Thor indifferent to love making. Great gods, whether Greek, Roman, or Germanic, are often depicted as ruthless womanizers, while some goddesses are notoriously promiscuous. Their behavior is more than a tribute to people’s perennial demand for scurrilous tales. Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Freyja, Frigg (the latter promises “friendship” to him who will rescue Baldr from Hel’s clutches), and, as we will see, Othin and Loki, were initially responsible for some form of fertility, so that chasing the objects of their sexual urge is in character. Thor knew how to win giantesses’ favors (some offered them without being accosted), and it is probably not fortuitous that he regularly fought not only giants but also their wives and daughters. In some lays and sagas, he is mocked for vanquishing female adversaries. Such raillery shows that the ancient dealings of the gods of fertility were forgotten. The same holds for such pretty tales as describe the despair of a nymph (Daphne) pursued by Apollo. In ancient myths, a god’s chase (cf. Zeus and Europe, and so forth) is always successful.

Baldr is another *Ás*. His mythology is either lost or, more likely, was from the beginning limited to his murder by the principal god of the underworld. Saxo enlarged on the rivalry between Balder and Hother

in wooing Nanna; some episodes in his watered down romance inspire little confidence. The “dark god” (in Icelandic or Norwegian-Icelandic tradition, Höth is blind) hated his bright counterpart ontologically. The story tellers of later epochs had no knowledge of the primitive myth and explained the enmity between the two in human terms, by their desire to obtain the most coveted woman in the world. Regardless of all that, a sky god could not avoid protecting plants. Thor (thunder god, cloudy sky) and Baldr (clear sky) took joint care of storms and droughts, that is, the weather phenomena on which the fate of any community of cattle breeders and agriculturists depended, assuming that in the remote past they coexisted as members of the pantheon. The less evident such functions became, the more people burdened the two gods with other tasks.

Although on sufferance, Loki is also a member of the Aesir clan. Dumézil devoted a monograph to him (1949 [1959]). In discussing Loki (see the references, above), I strove to show that Dumézil’s parallel Syrdon (a character in Ossetian epic poetry) – Loki is less convincing than it seems. If I am right, Loki has nothing to show for his alleged Indo-European past. Nor could Dumzil come to grips with Loki’s role and ended up calling him impulsive intelligence. This is a meaningless formula. Who would worship a god protecting such a quality? On the other hand, if Loki emerged as a subterranean death demon, a primitive version of Útgārtha-Loki, he had direct ties with vegetation. The gods of death, apart from destroying or guarding their victims, rule over the bowels of the earth; they are privy to the secrets of treasures and plants, and possess a huge store of mantic wisdom. That is why seeresses, like the speaker of *Völuspá*, are dead and those who return from the sleep of death (for example, Sigrdrífa) or are on the threshold of death (for example, Grímnir, Fáfnir, and Glám) possess a great store of information about what did or will happen.

Ages separate the myths told in the *Eddas* and in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* from those in which Thor and Baldr acted as the masters of the elements. A few considerations summarized above were meant to show that fertility is not such a clearcut prerogative of the Vanir as a rigid division of the Scandinavian gods into two families suggests. I will not touch on the war between the Vanir and the Aesir. As already noted, the establishment of order follows war with great regularity in the myths of the world, so that this motif can be called a near universal. Such motifs lend themselves to reconstruction with difficulty. Also, the circumstances preceding the war are known too little. We hear about the progress of the campaign, and

Snorri told a detailed story about the truce and its consequences. The question at the center of this paper may do without examining that war. We should rather turn our attention to individual gods.

According to Dumézil, Othin and Týr are the Germanic pair of gods representing the so-called first function (sovereignty: power and magic). This conclusion ignores numerous moments. Othin is certainly a magician, though the romantic sagas (*lygisögur*) and the introduction to *Heimskringla* emphasize his sorcery more strongly than do the *Eddas*. In the eddic myths, Othin appears in various roles. He is the supreme war god, the ruler of Valhalla, the recipient of sacrifices, the collector of the runes (he “took up” the runes after hanging on a tree), a patron of poetry (and therefore of magic, for all charms were chanted: cf. the word *incantation*; runes were also used for magical purposes), and, of course, the Allfather (even Thor and Baldr turned out to be his sons). Since military luck is capricious, people stressed his deceitful and fickle character.

Depending on which of his features is singled out as the leading one, Othin emerges in scholars’ interpretation as the god of ecstasy (religious or poetic), of magic, of war, or of death. For reconstructing his possible Indo-European past, we should pinpoint his earliest role. Above, I made my hypothesis clear: Othin was once a wild chaser (or hunter), a demon devouring corpses. Always astride a swift horse (Sleipnir or his predecessor), he may have been thought of as a theriomorphic deity: half-man, half-horse. That demon could not possibly have power over magic, poetry, and runes.

Only folklore has preserved Wode, the most primitive ancestor of Othin. Tacitus did not mention his Germanic name and resorted to the *interpretatio romana*. He stated that the main Germanic god was Mercurius. Unless we had the equation *dies Mercurii* = *Wednesday/Onsdag* (Wodan’s day), we would have had no way of guessing whom he meant. We still lack the answer to the question of why he identified Othin with Mercury rather than with Jupiter or Mars. The features and attributes common to Othin and Mercury are superficial, and magic is not prominent among them. Besides, Tacitus relied on German informants, and Othin probably became famous for sorcery on Scandinavian soil under Saami influence. He did not develop into a full-fledged shaman but acquired some shamanistic traits, including involvement with *seiðr*. Opinions are divided on whether Othin was “always” known in Scandinavia or migrated there from the Lower Rhein. Wherever the truth lies and whatever the connection between Óðinn and his mysterious

double Óðr may have been, the centaur-like demon of the early Teutons could not perform Dumézil's first function.

Othin had a son named Víthar (Viðarr). At Ragnarök, he avenged his father and tore Fenrir apart. Nothing is known about him except that he always kept silent, had a shoe made of many pieces of leather (it is this shoe that allowed him to step on Fenrir's lower jaw), gave up his seat to Loki at the banquet of the gods (*Lokasenna*), possibly had a horse, possibly lived in a wooded area (but reference to the wood seems to have been suggested by a folk etymological interpretation of his name: *Viðarr* instead of *Viðarr*), and got the better of the Wolf. The reconstruction of a Germanic-Italic god *Viðarr* (sic) shatters at the insurmountable phonetic barrier (*i* versus *í*; see Liberman, forthcoming, Chapter 2). It follows that Othin did not have an "Indo-European" offspring.

Matters stand even worse with Týr than with Othin. To begin with, it is not said anywhere that Týr ever performed the duties of a lawgiver or a judge. True, the loss of the right hand deprived him of the possibility to conclude bargains, but why should people have celebrated their divine negotiator's incompetence? We are ignorant of the reasons that made just Týr sacrifice himself in order to secure Fenrir. Perhaps this episode hearkens back to a lost myth in which he and the wolf were cast as more natural opponents. In our texts, Fenrir is pitted against Othin because it seems that the greatest god had to fight the strongest monster. At one time, Týr may have been the greatest god.

Some myths suggest that the early Scandinavians and their neighbors placed their fiercest enemies and the protectors of the human race (who had to be where their opponents were) in swamps. The wolf destined to swallow the whole world at Ragnarök is called Fenrir. The root of the name is *fen*, though wolves do not frequent fens and marshes. *Frigg* is related to *frij-*, as in Gothic *frijon* 'to love' (or more properly 'to have the feeling one should have for a kinsman'), but she lives in Fensalir 'Fen Hall', and it is to Fensalir that Loki went to wheedle out of her the secret of the mistletoe. Grendel and his mother resided in a *mere*. Beowulf's second battle takes place on the bottom of the sea; yet the word *mere* is ambiguous, for it would designate 'swamp' as well as 'sea'. Nature mythologists identified Grendel with spring flooding. Grendel is not a flood; he is an anthropomorphic cannibal, larger than life and almost invincible. However, he certainly embodied the danger coming out of the ocean or perhaps out of a pestiferous bog with its treacherous surface and fevers. Judging by Týr's name, long before the age of the skalds and the *Eddas*,

he stood for a bright sky. The sun may be thought of as the killer of the swamp. But this is too speculative. The same holds for the old suggestion that Týr was once a theriomorphic deity: half-man, half-wolf. Discussion of such hypotheses would take us too far afield.

Throughout this paper I keep emphasizing the point that, while comparing the Scandinavian and the Indo-Iranian/Roman gods, we should look at the earliest stages of their development. The eddic pantheon is archaic in some respects and “modern” in others. Even if it could be shown that in the *Eddas* Týr sometimes appears as a lawgiver (and, as we have seen, he does not), he would have acquired this role too late for tracing his primordial function to the Indo-European past. The perennial dilemma – common origin or parallel development, briefly alluded to above – complicates every area of reconstruction, from phonetics to religion.

The deities of all nations started as multitudes of spirits (mainly hostile), sending people diseases but also reigning over the firmament, water, winds, and the underworld. In the course of time, they became therio- and anthropomorphic and more and more human in their behavior. It is possible (theoretically even probable) that the beliefs of the Germanic speakers resembled those of the other Indo-Europeans from the outset and continued along the same lines, with inevitable regional variants, into the epoch(s) of written monuments. If such was the main scenario, the two sets of beliefs would diverge but still be compatible, at least in part, but compatible typologically rather than genetically.

To avoid misunderstanding, I am pleading for the approach that is the only one historical linguists use. For example, there is no point in comparing the forms of Modern German and Modern Armenian. To prove their descent from a protoparent, we need the oldest forms available or reconstructable. Dumézil, though he began his career as a linguist, never tried to apply the methods of linguistic reconstruction to mythology. He hoped to show that even such highly advanced forms as Indian and eddic religion provided a good match. Here, I think, he erred.

Returning to the question in hand, we see that Týr was not a master judge. Baldr and his son Forseti occupied that niche, but they did it most imperfectly, for they are never shown in action. Equally important is the fact that Týr and Othin do not form a pair (see especially Page 1978-81:68). Nothing unites them except that both are Aesir and perish in the final battle. We can conclude that Dumézil’s first function finds dissimilar forms of expression in Germanic and outside it. Productivity

(the third function) has been discussed above. We should now look at Thor, the alleged carrier of the second function (war).

The distant origin of Thor has also been touched upon above. Logic suggests that the myth of Thor, the son of Earth (the kennings to this effect are stable), must be older than the myth of Thor, a son of Othin. The debate about the ancient hierarchy of the Scandinavian gods cannot be resolved with the information at our disposal. Four gods compete for the top place. First, we have Tacitus's reference to Othin-Mercury, venerated above all his peers. Second, Týr, because of his name, emerges as the Germanic counterpart of Zeus/Jupiter. Third, Frey has the suggestive name 'lord', and his abode commands a prospect that should have been Othin's. Finally, there was Thor, by far the most popular god of the saga age, and not only among commoners (despite the taunt preserved in *Hárbarðslíóð*). Whether Frey "usurped" Othin's place or Othin ousted Týr and Thor remains unclear. The gloss 'lord' for Frey has been disputed but without sufficient justification.

What then is the answer to the question about the possible Indo-European heritage of the Scandinavian pantheon? As pointed out, only Týr may have been an analog of Zeus, but in this matter we are unable to go beyond etymology. In the extant myths, he is neither a rival nor a partner of Othin. Thor seems to have sprung forth from the womb of Mother Earth but assumed the role of the thunder god. The original god of the bright sky was Baldr. Two closely related demons (sworn brothers) controlled the dead: one (Othin) devoured them, the other (Loki) kept the dead in their "enclosure" and did not let them rejoin the living. However, there does not seem to have been a unified picture of the kingdom of the dead, for alongside of those two demons we find Hel, perhaps Höth's original "dame" (like Grendel and his mother, Thiazi and his daughter, and so forth).

The picture drawn above has no specific Indo-European features: a similar array of deities can be expected to turn up in any pagan religion. The eddic cross-section of Scandinavian (only Scandinavian, not Germanic) mythology does not look more specifically Indo-European than the previous one. Othin became the supreme god of the pantheon. No longer a primitive demon, he rose to the rank of the master of Valhalla, which only those slain in battle were allowed to enter. He broadened his domain immensely (war, magic, poetry, the runes, Allfather – see above). Thor developed into a giant slayer and the main preserver of order. Only a few semi-obliterated traces of a thunder god remind us of

his past. Whatever the genesis of his cult, he never engaged in military campaigns; war was Othin's domain (cf. Kroesen 2001). Therefore, he does not qualify for a god of Dumézil's second function. Loki's ties with death are severed completely. But for Snorri's tale of Útgarða-Loki and especially Saxo's corresponding tale, his ancient role would have been beyond recovery. Frey and Njörth are Vanir. Tacitus mentioned the female goddess Nerthus. In his days, the Germanic speakers may have venerated another pair like Freyr and Freyja. They took care of fertility and the sexual urge, but Freyja and Nerthus's resemblance to Aphrodite/Venus is so general as to be useless for reconstruction.

In sum: Dumézil's three rigidly coherent functions are nowhere to be seen in the world of Germanic religion. The main term of abuse in the writings of Dumézil and his followers is evolutionism. A tripartite pantheon is supposed to have arisen all at once and be immune to change. This approach strikes me as untenable. In the history of Scandinavian religion I see nothing but evolution from the lower depths. Today we can hardly decide to what extent those depths are Indo-European.

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