

An Overview of the Germanic Mythology's Epic Order

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The investigations I have presented for my readers, in their details and overall, provide evidence that the Germanic myths formed an epic, whose core, already organized into an epic, originated in proto Indo-European times. For this reason, it is useless to ask when the individual Germanic myths were first brought into epic connection with one another. When the proto-Germanic language began to diverge from its western Indo-European stem as a branch flourishing in its own right, the epic state of the extant myths was already an age-old fact, which extended to the very roots of proto Indo-European life.

I have already shown that the Germanic myths are of much different ages, and a separate treatise is devoted to those that demonstrably originate from the proto Indo-European era.. Others belong, as we have seen, to later ages: some to the so-called European Indo-European era, some to the European Bronze Age, and still others to the Iron Age, and it may be taken for granted that all of these inherited sagas, so different in age, were influenced by the times that they passed through right up to the end of heathendom. But whatever their origin and whatever their transformations may have been since they arose and became universally accepted, they have been joined as new links to an already existing epic chain of myths, created by degrees.

But when did this begin? From a psychological standpoint, I imagine one could answer: the need for organization and order in the mythic ideas, and thus the need for an epic connection between them, arises and asserts itself to the same degree as a race's or a people's mythology develops from animism and polydemonism into a polytheism with concrete and characteristic divine personalities. These must proceed in relationship to one another and develop an activity in accordance with the character they gradually receive. With that, an epic connection becomes necessary. It appears with the power of a natural mental process. It is a product of the union of the association of ideas and causality. The material which animism and polydemonism create and which arises through the impression that the phenomena of nature make on mankind cannot remain in a scattered and chaotic condition forever. To the degree of the development of mental life, the power of order enters and works in this chaos to unite these elements into a coherent picture in time and space.

As such, this natural process cannot be limited solely to the Indo-European race. Humanity in its entirety has been and is its area of activity, so long as the people progress out of the animistic and polydemonic period. The Semites as well as the Indo-Europeans have their great mythic epic, whose scattered links Oriental research is now on the verge of uniting. Already in the period before the pyramids, the Egyptians, like the Semites and the Indo-Europeans, had their mythic epic in a largely finished form as Maspero shows. It does not require a developed civilization for the epic-building instinct to appear: the need for order and coherence in the world of ideas asserts itself in all of polytheism's earliest phases. Among the Finns and the Bulgarians, as well as among the Egyptians, the

Semites, and the Indo-Europeans, the inherited sagas have been linked together into an epic chain; so too among the Indians and the Mincopies.

Every little story that the study of folklore brings to light is a fabric of associated ideas and causality; each is a miniature epic with cause, action, and the consequence of the action, along with the characteristics of the acting personage or natural object, and sometimes with ethical or religious motives as well. Were all religions and mythologies swept out of mankind's consciousness at this moment and the field thus opened for the existing "folklore" to grow freely and acquire all the nourishing juices that are now being used by the former, undoubtedly the isolated existing pieces of this folklore would, in degree of their kinship and under the influence of the association of ideas, grow together with one another into a bigger complex and this again would join itself to an even greater one, which, transformed by religious and moral requirements, would finally assume the shape of a new mythology. Stories, legends and adventures, whether they originated from collapsed mythic structures and banished religions or whether they never had any mythic or religious significance, during the historic centuries and under pressure from officially recognized religious legends, still show their extraordinary power of growth as well as their tendency to unite with the latter to form an epic whole.

In order to strengthen this, do I need mention the wealth of Jewish folklore that appeared in order to remedy this need wherever a gap existed in the coherence of the events of the Old Testament and wherever these events required livelier color and apparent exposition, and thus gave us stories about Adam and Eve, about angelic relations with mankind's daughters, about Enoch, about Abraham and the other patriarchs, about Solomon, etc, which in fact, with the Biblical stories as chronological support, united with them through centuries into an all-attracting folklore-epic?

Need I mention the number of dethroned myths and the many non-mythic creations of the folk imagination, which in the form of legends on Christian soil attempted to unite with Biblical history or historic Church data and with them receive a fixed place in an epic chain of events continuing through centuries? Or the Indo-European mythology, which the Greek forebears traveled with to Europe's southern peninsula and which, crushed to bits there during the collision with other myth-cycles, in memory of its lost unity looked back and formed a new continuity, so that one could speak of events in a Golden Age during Chronos' rule, about those in a Silver Age following thereon after the scepter was passed to Zeus, and about those in a Copper and an Iron Age, and further, within the latter, of events in Cadmos' and Jason's time and about those, which dormant in ovo in Leda's womb developed into a connecting chain of events up to and after the Trojan war with the Iliad's battles and the Odyssey's adventures as just episodes in a vast whole, still mastered by those well-versed in mythology? Thus when Ovid decided to celebrate all of the metamorphoses that the ancient mythology contained, he could do so in a long established epic-chronological order, which begins with Chaos and progresses through the entire legendary times.

If we now move to the Germanic arena and to the centuries which saw one

Germanic tribe after another converted to Christianity and the great Germanic mythic structure at last completely brought down in ruins, what do we find? The epic-synthesizing instinct again in full activity, since from the rubble, new epics joined together and were built up into one great whole. The ancient heathen heroic epic about Mannus and his descendants was sentenced to oblivion and dissolution; but the scattered pieces had life and with newly historic and quasi-historic support were tied in anew with legends about the Gothic King Hermanrich, about Odoacer, King Theoderich, and King Attila. Sigurd Fafnirsbane's epic sprouted out of the soil of decaying myths, and an epic-synthetic need hastened to further nourish it with what could still be found close at hand of the remains of decomposing sagas, and which, more or less organically, became incorporated with the Dieterich epic. One ought to have realized a long time ago that the epic-building urge did not come with the baptism of the Teutons, but has its basis in human psychology and was active through the millennia. A contrary opinion is puerile.

That this insight has taken so long to manifest itself finds its explanation in the state in which the mythological research formerly found itself, and in which it appeared hopelessly imprisoned for several years within the so called ethnographic school before Andrew Lang took the lead and pointed the way out.

The meteorological school of mythology for a long time, and even now, has been as good as the absolute authority over the entire area of research discussed here. In regard to methodology, the most severe mistake that it makes is that it lacks an eye for the distinction between mythology and myth, for the difference between the science of the creation of myths and the science of their present contents, epic connection, and historical development. Mythology, which is a human psychological and ethnographic branch of research, has been regarded as the actual myth by this school. In closest connection with this methodological mistake stands the untenable assumption upon which this school rests, that the myths as they exist today, without further analysis, are suitable material for its endeavor to explain their genesis out of natural phenomena: from the storm, the lightning, dawn and dusk, etc. And this mistake has been compounded by the influence of linguists, who imagine that when a mythic person's name is interpreted and found to mean "rumbling" "shining" etc, that all myths concerning him can therefore be explained by the meaning of his name. Arising in this way, the meteorological-etymological school has intentionally made itself blind since, whatever their origin [and among them, that natural phenomena had an effect on the power of imagination is more probable than likely] --the myths in their current state were created in a course of evolution that progressed through an indeterminable number of millennia, during which entirely different factors than celestial and weather phenomena worked, creating new myths and remodeling old nature-myths. One can say with certainty that ever since the time when they were in the phenomenon-stage, the acting superhuman forces began to be formed into more or less concrete personalities by the imagination each with a fairly definite character and a fairly prescribed area of activity, united with elements of another origin and character altogether, thus weakening or remolding the purely natural elements in the mythology. And this remolding process must have been further reinforced-- the pure nature-myths further transformed-- when, after the time superhuman forces became distinct acting personalities, the need for order within these

mythic concepts immediately set to work and placed the stories under causal and chronological laws in order to satisfy the epic-synthetic demands of the imagination.

For this reason, it is a given that the meteorological school of mythology would absolutely ignore any research into the epic connection of the myths. Mere presentation of such connections would undermine the course they have pursued thus far. Almost exclusively, their efforts concern mythology. But in order to accomplish this school's goal, one has to regard the myths as they have come to us as material, which only with utmost critical prudence can be used for this purpose, and only as a small part of the material available to gather and investigate. It is from the new folklore-movement and its human psychological investigations that one can hope for a mythology that is in a position to accomplish this goal.

After this account of my position, I pass to the subject of this treatise, adding only the observation that all mythologies in which narratives about the progenitors of man are included, of necessity must already place many if not all of its myths in a chronological order, since of necessity such a chronology exists in legends concerning progenitors following after one another, who are always put in the closest connection with the gods. The holy powers of the heavens and the underworld protect creation and mankind, their protégés, and, in relations with mankind's patriarchs, guide the course of events. Thus, the stories about the gods and the stories about the progenitors, as far as research can penetrate, have been interlaced within or fused with one another. To put the mythology in one box and the heroic sagas in another, as the meteorological school of mythology has, is a psychological absurdity and can only produce incorrect results.

William Reaves' translation of 'Viktor Rydberg's Investigations into Germanic Mythology: Volume II Part 2: Germanic Mythology' can be purchased at any major book retailer, or through [Barnes and Noble](#).