Æsirism: The Impossibility of Ideological Neutrality in *Snorra Edda*

The story of how the Victorians and later the Nazis imposed their own ideology onto Old Norse mythology is relatively well known. Even the sternest soul must admit that there is something amusing about characters such as Laurence Waddell (b. 1854–d. 1938), a medic in the British Indian Army during the heyday of the British Empire, whose *British Edda* claims that the *Poetic Edda* 'is disclosed to be all unsuspectedly the great national epic of the ancient Britons of the pre-Christian period, which was sung down the ages by our ancestors in these islands'.¹ One requires a rather darker sense of humour to be amused by Jan de Vries (b. 1890–d. 1964), a philologist whose works are still commonly cited in Old Norse studies, but who was to be found amongst the very few Dutchmen fleeing east to Germany when the Allies landed in the Netherlands in 1944. De Vries had become a member of the SS Ahnenerbe, his undeniable expertise in Nordic matters fused with an unhealthy fixation on 'Germanic' identity.² We laugh at, or pity, characters such as Waddell and de Vries because their ideologically motivated engagement with Old Norse myth seems comically lacking in self-awareness. 'How could they not know that it was only their ideologies which had made them interpret Old Norse in such distorted ways?' we might sigh through our smirking.

But in our laughter, and if we use verbs such as 'abuse' to describe what right-wingers have often done to Old Norse, we tacitly position Old Norse myth as somehow ideologically neutral. The purpose of this study is to fortify the viewpoint that, in the discrete body of Old Norse myth presented

¹ Waddell, *British Edda*, p. viii.

² Hofstee, 'The Essence of Concrete Individuality', pp. 548–50; Junginger, 'Introduction', pp. 74–81; Lincoln, 'Rewriting the German War God', pp. 192–93.

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by Snorri Sturluson (d. 1242),³ there is a coherent ideology governing the actions of the gods. That ideology will be shown to have affinities with later ideologies, such as the unlikely pairing of anarchism and colonialism, though it must be stressed that it is really a *sui generis* phenomenon, one which we might call 'Æsirism'. The value of comparisons with these modern '-isms' will be in illuminating the key policy concerns of the gods, and illustrating the timelessness of certain ideas. There will be no suggestion that Old Norse myth contained ideological elements of which modern ideologies are direct descendants, as per Christen Jonassen's claims.⁴

Is Æsirism Republican, Monarchist — or Anarchist?

Beginning with the political organization of the Æsir, it ought to be noted that in the *Edda* Snorri mostly shies away from referring to Óðinn as a king, or as a holder of any other feudal rank. There are some qualifications to be made here. The mysterious sword-juggler who greets Gylfi at Ásgarðr does briefly describe Óðinn (or the trinity of Hár, Jafnhárm and Þriði, which he hides behind) as a king:

Gylfi sá mann í hallar durunum ok lék at handsöxum ok hafði sjau senn á lopti. Sá spurði hann fyrr at nafni. Hann nefndisk Gangleri ok kominn af refilstigum ok beiddisk at sækja til náttstaðar ok spurði hvern höllina ætti. Hann svarar at þat var konungr þeira. 'En fylgja má ek þér at sjá hann. Skaltu þá sjálfir spyrja hann nafns'.⁵

(Gylfi saw a man at the door of the hall, and he was playing with short-swords and had seven in the air at once. He asked him at once

³ It must be underlined that I will not treat Old Norse mythology as a total system, and will instead limit my pronouncements to *Snorra Edda* as one work of literature. Those who are not convinced by Snorri's authorship of the *Edda* are invited to substitute mentally the name 'Snorri' for 'anonymous author'. I trust it will be found that none of my arguments will be meaningfully affected. On Snorri's authorship, see: Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the 'Edda'*, pp. 26–29; Clunies Ross, *A History*, pp. 161–63.

⁴ Jonassen, 'Some Historical and Theoretical Bases of Racism'.

⁵ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, pp. 7–8; Codex Regius 1^r; Codex Trajectinus 2^r. To reassure readers who might be concerned that I am using a critical edition to cherry-pick from different recensions of the *Snorra Edda*, I also cite the manuscript tradition, which is consistently reflected in Faulkes's edition. For my belief in the validity of a critical edition of the text, see: Cole, 'Philology', esp. pp. 518–25. The Uppsala tradition, recently edited by Heimir Pálsson, is fascinating but I agree with Faulkes that it ought to remain an outlier — especially given how severely confused the text is compared to the smoothness of the Regius and Trajectinus tradition. The speculation that the *Uppsala Edda* represents a collection of draft materials from Snorri's figurative 'desk', while Regius/Trajectinus represents Snorri's polished version, is enticing: Faulkes, 'Introduction', xxx–xxxii. Cf. Heimir Pálsson, 'Introduction', xlii–xliii, cxvi–cxix.

for his name. He [Gylfi] called himself Gangleri, arrived from secret paths, and asked that he might seek a place to stay for the night, and inquired who owned the hall. He [the juggler] replies that it was their king. 'I should take you to see him. Then you can ask him his name for yourself'.⁶

However, we ought not to ascribe too much truth to the jester's words. The purpose of this scene is to foreshadow the series of disorienting deceptions and half-truths, which will eventually beguile Gylfi into worshipping the Æsir. Even the hall into which Gylfi enters is an illusion. It seems more likely that the jester is describing Óðinn as a *konungr* in an effort to explain the Æsir in terms that Gylfi, himself a king, will understand. Snorri himself deploys this kind of allegory when he suggests an affinity between King Priam of Troy and Óðinn of Ásgarðr. Firstly in the prologue:⁷

Nær miðri veröldunni var gort þat hús ok herbergi er ágætast hefir verit, er kallat var Troja. Þat kóllum vér Tyrkland. Þessi staðr var myklu meiri gorr en aðrir ok með meira hagleik á marga lund með kostnaði ok fongum er þar váru til. Þar váru tólf konungdómar ok einn yfirkonungr ok lágu mörq þjóðlond til hvers konungdóms. Þar váru í borginni tólf höfuðtungur. Þessir höfðingjar hafa verit um fram aðra menn þá er verit hafa í veröldu um alla manndómliga hluti.⁸

(Near the centre of the world a house and settlement was made which is the most wonderful there has ever been, which was called Troy. We call it Turkey. This place was built much larger than others and with more craftsmanship in many ways with whatever material and treasures that were at hand. There were twelve kingdoms there and one high king, and many nations were subject to each kingdom. There were in that city twelve central chieftains. These chieftains were further ahead than any other people who have ever been in the world when it comes to all brave deeds.)

And secondly in *Skáldskaparmál*, when Snorri offers a typological parallel between Óðinn being devoured by the Fenrisúlfr and Priam being killed by Pirrus, son of Achilles. (Incidentally, the parallel cannot be considered entirely convincing, because by Snorri's own account Fenrir is spared because he is in a place of sanctuary — Fenrir is not the one doing the violating of a

⁶ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁷ On the unity of the Prologue with the rest of Snorri's writing, see: Clunies Ross, 'Royal Ideology', pp. 25–29.

⁸ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 4; Codex Trajectinus 1^r.

sanctuary, as Pirrus is in the *Aeneid*. Oddly, Virgil even implies that Priam is at fault for having his own blood spilled at the altar):⁹

Priamus konungr í Troju var höfðingi mikill yfir öllum her Tyrkja ok hans synir váru tignastir af öllum her hans ... En Pirrus, honum jöfnuðu þeir til Fenrisúlfs, hann drap Óðin, en Pirrus mátti vargr heita at þeira trú þvíat eigi þyrmði hann gríðastöðunum er hann drap konunginn í hofinu fyrir stalla Þórs.¹⁰

(King Priam in Troy was a great chieftain over the entire army of the Turks and his sons were the noblest of all his army ... And they [the Æsir] compared Pirrus to the wolf Fenrir, who killed Óðinn, and Pirrus could be called a wolf in their thought because he did not honour places of sanctuary when he killed the king in the temple in front of Þórr's altar.)

These glancing allusions to Óðinn as a king are essentially periphrastic. When the jester describes Óðinn as his king or when Snorri implies that Óðinn might be a dim remembering of King Priam, the message is not so much that Óðinn *was* a king, but rather that he *was somewhat like* a king. Both the jester and Snorri are addressing audiences for whom kingship was the mode of governance in most of the world (Snorri addressing thirteenth-century Old Norse-speakers, the sword-juggler addressing the legendary King Gylfi). Similarly problematic is the moment when one of Óðinn's aliases, Hár, is once described as a *konungr*, but only in the narrative frame when the Æsir are being extremely deceptive about themselves.¹¹ Finally, in one solitary point in *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri refers to Óðinn as 'draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn'¹² (the Lord of the Undead or the Lord of the Hanged).¹³ In *Snorra Edda*, there is no equivalent to *draugadróttinn*, while *hangadróttinn* has become *hangagoð* (God of the Hanged), as though Snorri is retreating from even the slightest suggestion that Óðinn could hold a rank equivalent to those of a feudal court.¹⁴ Thus, it still remains true that in the *Edda* the term *konungr* (king) or even *dróttinn* (lord) is never used of Óðinn when 1) Snorri is speaking in

9 'Instat vi patria Pyrrhus ... vidi ipse furem caede Neoptolemum geminosque in limine Atridas, vidi Hecubam centumque nurus Priamumque per aras sanguine foedantem quos ipse sacrauerat ignis.' (Pyrrhus, urged on with the force of his father ... I myself saw Neoptolemus [i.e. Pyrrhus] and both the sons of Atreus in the doorway, furious in slaughter, I saw Hecuba and her hundred daughters, and Priam between the altars, desecrating with blood the fires he had sanctified himself). Virgil, *Aeneid*, pp. 348–50.

10 Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 5–6; Codex Regius 20^r; Codex Trajectinus 20^v lacks *mikill* but is otherwise identical.

11 Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 8; Codex Regius 1^r; Codex Trajectinus 2^v.

12 When quoting from the *Edda*, I use single quotation marks for when Snorri's own narrative voice is speaking, and double quotation marks for Óðinn/Hár or Gylfi/Gangleri.

13 Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, p. 18.

14 Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 21; Codex Regius 6^r; Codex Trajectinus 6^v.

his own narrative voice, or 2) when Óðinn is telling stories about himself, rather than an alias.

When considered alongside other bodies of mythology, this is somewhat unusual. In Greco-Roman myth, Zeus is not infrequently the βασιλεὺς or ἀναξ (king) of the other deities, e.g. Hesiod Ζεὺς δε θεων βασιλεὺς (Zeus, king of the gods), cf. Homer Διὶ Κρονίωνι ἀνακτι (King Zeus, son of Cronos), etc.¹⁵ The situation with regard to Roman sources is more complex, but there too the epithet *Jupiter rex* appears to have had some degree of currency.¹⁶ A similar sense of celestial hierarchy is discernible in Hebrew and Canaanite myth, hence epithets like אֲדֹנִי (Lord), בָּעַל (master) and deity names like Malku (king). In the *Edda*, however, Snorri's chief deity is never straightforwardly a *konungr* or a *dróttinn* — not even when he is ruling over geographical territories in Northern Europe. Óðinn was apparently 'tignat um alla konunga' (honoured above all kings).¹⁷ He was the 'æztr eða elztr allra goða' (highest or oldest of all the gods).¹⁸ Nonetheless, the closest thing to a rank that Snorri's narrative voice uses to describe Óðinn, either in his *Edda* or in *Ynglinga saga*, is the word *höfðingi* (head, chief). Given that Snorri was writing at a time when the Christian God was referred to in Snorri's own language as *dróttinn várr* (Our Lord) or 'konungr allra konunga' (king of all kings), why not use a pinch of the contemporary language of power to illustrate his own fictional world?¹⁹

One might suppose that the reason for this curious lack is that Snorri otherwise did not consider the rank of king to be used by Old Norse speakers until the reign of the legendary King Dyggvi, as Sverre Bagge has pointed out.²⁰ In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri writes that: 'Dyggvi var fyrst konungr kallaðr sinna ættmanna, en áðr váru þeir dróttnar kallaðir, en konur þeira dróttningar, en drótt hirðsveitin' (Dyggvi was the first to be called king of his lineage, and before they were called lords, and their wives were called queens, and their lords were called 'the retainers').²¹ However, this explanation is not tenable, as Snorri also carefully avoids referring to Óðinn as a *dróttinn* in his *Edda*, when it would otherwise be a quite convenient appellation (Óðinn having supposedly ruled Sweden seven generations prior to Dyggvi). A simpler solution is that Snorri imagines that the Æsir did not have a monarchy, nor any sort of comparable institution. Indeed, this explanation is strongly suggested by the further details he provides about the government of the Æsir in Sweden:

Þar þótti Óðni fagrir lands kostir ok kaus sér þar borgstað er nú heita Sigtúnir. Skipaði hann þar höfðingjum ok í þá líking sem verit hafði í

15 Hesiod, *Theogony*, p. 74; Homer, *Iliad*, p. 294.

16 Fisher, *The 'Annals' of Quintus Ennius*, pp. 45–48.

17 Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 5; Codex Regius 1^r; Codex Trajectinus 1^v.

18 Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 8; Codex Regius 2^r; Codex Trajectinus 2^v.

19 *Old Norwegian Homily Book*, ed. by Indrebø, p. 33.

20 Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 192–94, 296.

21 Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, p. 34.

Troja, setti tólf höfuðmenn í staðinum at dæma landslög, ok svá skipaði hann réttum qllum sem fyrr höfðu verit í Troju ok Tyrkir váru vanir.²²

(It seemed to Óðinn that there were beautiful qualities to that country, and he chose for himself a city there which is now called Sigtuna.²³ He also arranged chieftains there in the likeness of what had been in Troy, putting twelve chief men in the city to judge the laws of the land, and he arranged all the laws as they had been in Troy, and as the Turks were accustomed.)

Later in the *Edda*, Óðinn, in the guise of Hár, furnishes us with his own account about how the Æsir established their system of government:

Hár mælir: “Í upphafi setti hann stjórnarmenn ok beiddi þá at dæma með sér orlög manna ok ráða um skipun borgarinnar. Þat var þar sem heitir lðavöllr í miðri borginni. Var þat hit fyrsta þeira verk at gera hof þat er sæti þeira standa í, tólf önnur en hásætit þat er Alföðr á. Þat hús er bezt gert á jörðu ok mest. Allt er þat utan ok innan svá sem gull eitt. Í þeim stað kalla menn Glæðsheim. Annan sal gerðu þeir, þat var hórgr er gyðjurnar áttu, ok var hann allfagr. Þat hús kalla menn Vingólf ... Þar næst settusk guðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sína ok mintusk hvaðan dvergar höfðu kviknat í moldunni ok niðri í jörðunni svá sem maðkar í holdi.”²⁴

(Hár says: “In the beginning he [Óðinn] established potentates and ordered them to judge amongst themselves the fates of men, and decide about the arrangement of the city [i.e. Ásgarðr]. It was there, in the middle of the city, that there was the place called lðavöllr. It was their first task to make the temples in which their seats would stand, twelve other than the high-seat which the All-Father [Óðinn] owns. That house is the best made and the biggest on earth. All over the outside and the inside it is as though it is gold. In that place is where men call Glæðsheim. They made another hall, which was the sanctuary that the goddesses owned, and it was extremely beautiful. Men call that house Vingólf ... Next the gods sat up in their seats and legislated their courts, and recalled [alt. discussed] how the dwarves had been brought to life in the dirt and down in the earth, like maggots in flesh.”)

²² Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 6; Codex Regius 1^r; Codex Trajectinus 2^r though with Sigtún rather than Sigtúnir.

²³ In *Ynglinga saga* it is not Sigtun in Sweden but Odense in Denmark that Óðinn chooses for his capital (p. 14). It is curious that Snorri at no point locates the mythic metropolis in Norway, given that he travelled there and attempted to win the favour of both King Hákon Hákonarson and the pretender Jarl Skúli (d. 1240).

²⁴ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 15; Codex Regius 4^r; largely identical with Codex Trajectinus 4^v–5^r.

Although the *Edda* is innovative in its frequent comparisons between Ásgarðr and Troy, Snorri expounds a similar model of Æsirist government in his *Ynglinga saga*, omitting Troy but maintaining the principle that the Æsir's constitution was brought with them from the East:

Fyrir austan Tanakvisl í Ásía var kallað Ásaland eða Ásaheimr, en höfuðborgin, er var í landinu, kōlluðu þeir Ásgarð. En í borginni var höfðingi sá, er Óðinn var kallaðr. Þar var blótstaðr mikill. Þat var þar siðr, at tólf hofgoðar váru æztir. Skyldu þeir ráða fyrir blótum ok dómum manna í milli. Þat eru diar kallaðir eða dróttnar; þeim skyldi þjónustu veita ok lotning alt fólk ... En Óðin ok þá höfðingja tólf blótuðu menn, ok kölluðu goð sín ok trúðu á lengi siðan.²⁵

(To the East of the river Don in Asia was called Ásaland [Land of the Æsir] or Ásaheimr [World of the Æsir], and they called their capital city which was in the country Ásgarðr. And in the city there was a certain chieftain who was called Óðinn. There was a great place of sacrifice there. It was a tradition there that twelve temple-chiefs were the highest. They would preside over sacrifices and arbitrate in the courts of men. They are called *diar* or 'Lords'. All the people were supposed to give them service and pay them reverence ... And long ago people made sacrifices to Óðinn and those twelve chieftains, and called them their gods and believed in them.)

The *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Edda* suggest that after these thirteen, eight further positions were reserved for the goddesses.²⁶ Across the Snorronic corpus, there is a clear commitment to the notion that the Æsir had been governed by a council of twelve (twenty including the goddesses), in addition to Óðinn himself. Except in the case of the prologue, the language used to describe these potentates is that of judges rather than royalty or appointed officials, e.g. *at dóma* 'to judge' and the nouns *dómr* 'court' and *landslög* 'law of the land'. This is in the spirit of the Eddic poetry from which Snorri was working, where it is implied that the gods meet in council to discuss important matters, rather than having a strict 'top-down' system of organization. Consider, for example, the refrain of the prophetic poem *Völuspá*: 'Þá gengu regin qll / á rōkstōla, / ginnheilōg goð, / ok um þat gættusk' ('The powers all went / to the thrones of fate / the divine gods / and this they discussed').²⁷ This apparent kritarchy also faintly recalls the time when the Israelites reject kings in favour of magistrates, e.g. Judges 2:18: 'And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the Lord because of their

²⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, pp. 11, 20.

²⁶ Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1; Codex Regius 18^r; Codex Trajectinus 18^r.

²⁷ *Poetic Edda*, ed. by Neckel and Kuhn, pp. 2, 6.

groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them'. However, the most obvious analogue to the Æsir's preference for judges rather than kings must be the Icelandic Commonwealth. As Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson noted concerning the system of twelve judges in *Ynglinga saga*: 'Þetta minnir á störf íslenzkra goða í heiðnum tíð' (This reminds one of the work of the Icelandic chieftains in the age of paganism).²⁸

It would, however, do a grave disservice to Snorri if one were to suggest that he simply took the Icelandic system of governance and projected it onto the Æsir. Firstly, Snorri was no ardent republican, even if the Æsir apparently are. According to *Íslendinga saga*, Snorri was even given a feudal rank by King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1204–1263), and charged with convincing the Icelanders to accept Norwegian royal rule.²⁹ Secondly, the constitutional powers of the Æsir far outstrip those of medieval Icelandic lawmen. The councillors of the medieval Icelandic *Alþingi*, who were known as *goðar*, collectively made rulings on given cases brought to them for arbitration. They also emended the law through the appointment of judges. But as there was no executive in medieval Iceland, they could not rule on policy. For example, they could not revalue their currency or take Iceland to war — Iceland had neither mints nor a means of raising a national army. The Æsir, on the other hand, commission earthworks, build cities, and grapple with serious policy problems regarding how threats to their dominion are to be handled.

In a sense, Æsirist government is a utopian realization of the Icelandic Commonwealth. However, when all the flaws of the Icelandic situation are removed, Æsirism stands apart as a unique system in its own right. The Æsir seem to operate on the same basic principles as the Icelandic *goðar*. They have no king, and it does not ever seem to occur to them that they should. They identify as judges, that is to say as impartial deliberators rather than republican despots. But unlike the Icelanders, 1) they possess an urbanized civilization, and 2) they have a streamlined council of twelve, with Óðinn in a *primus inter pares* position, while the Icelandic *Alþingi* had thirty-nine delegates, who were frequently to be found engaged in bloodthirsty feuds.

From a transhistorical perspective, the most descriptive label one could apply to the Æsirist approach to decision making is a form of anarchism. Here, the comparison with medieval Iceland is again germane. A cynic might comment that little scholarly fruit has been harvested relative to the amount

28 Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, notes to Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* 1, 11 n. 42. There were no colossal constitutional changes between the pagan and Christian periods of the Icelandic Commonwealth, so the comparison is also valid between the Æsir and how the Commonwealth worked during Snorri's own time.

29 Sturla Þórðarson, *Sturlunga saga* [*Íslendinga saga*], 1, 340: 'En þeir Hákon konungr ok Skvili iarl gerðu Snorra lendaðann mann sinn; var þat mest rad þeira iarls ok Snorra. Enn Snorri skyldi leita við Íslendinga, at þeir sneriz til lydni við Noregs havföðingja'. The title is issued in the name of the young king, although Sturla underlines that this was really an agreement between Skúli and Snorri.

of energy expended in the intellectual skirmish between Anarcho-Capitalists and Anarcho-Socialists over who has a better claim to the medieval Icelandic commonwealth.³⁰ But at least one can say that both sides proceed from a reasonable point: it is true that for three centuries Icelanders strove to avoid kings and civil servants of any kind. *De facto*, local potentates exercised a tremendous amount of power over their compatriots. Indeed, the graphic violence of the *Íslendinga-* and *Sturlunga sögur* strongly indicates that everyday life for many Icelanders was violent and exploitative. Nonetheless, the studious avoidance of formalized executive power suggests an intense ideological commitment on the part of many Icelanders. This commitment should be broadly characterized as anarchist.³¹ It had personal liberty for its denizens at its theoretical core,³² and aimed to make decisions through courts and consensus (even if in practice thuggery and nepotism prevailed). Æsirism appears to have just the same aims, and so the Æsir attitude to domestic governance should similarly be conceived of as a species of anarchism.

It is important to stress, however, that Æsirism as a whole is manifestly *not* a species of anarchism, even if its views on specific matters are best described that way. The Æsir may believe that none of their tribe should hold official rank over another. They may be committed to government by consensus between the gods. But they in no way reject the option of exercising power over other, non-Æsir peoples. In fact, they are heavily invested in the use of violence in order to exploit and control their neighbours. As shall be seen, Æsirism may look like anarchism at home, but it looks much like colonialism abroad.

Building Walls, and Other Colonial Projects

One of the key concerns of the Æsir is their difficult relationship with the peoples that surround them, the giants. Snorri uses various terms to describe these giants (*jötnar*). Some of these are probably intended to denote separate sub-types, not all of them being tall in the way that we think of giants today (e.g. *jötunn*, the catch-all term for a 'giant', *gýgr*, 'giantess', *rísi*, probably implying a tall giant, *hrímburs* 'ice giant', *bergrísi* 'mountain giant', *leirjötunn* 'clay giant', somewhat golem-like; still further terms are found in the *Poetic Edda*). The relationship between the Æsir and the giants is more complex than simply being adversarial, although admittedly its combative dimension is the most

30 For the socialist-anarchist claim, see: Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, pp. 157–61; AFAQ Working Group, 'Medieval Iceland' (n. d., n. p.). On the anarcho-capitalist claim, see: Friedman, 'Private Creation'; Friedman, *Machinery of Freedom*, pp. 202–08; Friedman, *Law's Order*, pp. 263–78. As a corollary, see: Wax and Wax, 'The Vikings', pp. 1–10.

31 Pencak, *The Conflict of Law and Justice*, pp. 1–4.

32 As in any polity, who gets to be a denizen is an awkward topic: slaves, outlaws, non-heterosexuals, in some regards women, etc., are just some of the groups who were either on the edge of society or excluded from it altogether from the outset.

prominent strain. A good example of the differing strands in *Æsir-jǫtnar* relations is the myth of the Master Builder. In the following scene, the *Æsir* decide to build a fortification to keep the giants out, and they have no intention of paying for it themselves:

Þat var snimma í ǫndverða byggð goðanna, þá er goðin hófðu sett Miðgarð ok gert Valhøll, þá kom smiðr nokkvorr ok bauð at gera þeim borg á þrim misserum svá góða at trú ok ørugg væri fyrir bergisum ok hrímþursum þótt þeir komi inn um Miðgarð. En hann mælir sér þat til kaups at hann skyldi eignask Freyju, ok hafa vildi hann sól ok mána. Þá gengu *Æsir* á tal ok réðu ráðum sínum, ok var þat kaup gert við smiðinn at hann skyldi eignask þat er hann mælir til ef hann fengi gert borginni á einum vetri, en hinn fyrsta sumars dag ef nokkvorr hlutr væri ógjǫrr at borginni þá skyldi hann af kaupinu ... En er á leið vetrinn, þá sóttisk mjök borgargerðin ok var hon svá há ok sterk at eigi mátti á þat leita. En þá er þrír dagar váru til sumars þá var komit mjök at borghliði. Þá settusk guðin á dómstóla sína ok leituðu ráða ok spurði hverr annann hverr því hefði ráðit at gipta Freyju í Jötunheimum eða spilla loptinu ok himninum svá at taka þaðan sól ok tungl ok gefa jötnum.³³

(It was early in the first days of the settlement of the gods, when the gods had established Miðgarðr and built Valhøll, that a certain craftsman came and offered to build for them inside of three seasons a fortress so good that it would be reliable and safe against the Mountain Giants and the Ice Giants, even if they got into Miðgarðr. And he named his price as being that he would marry Freyja, and he also wanted to have the sun and the moon. Then the *Æsir* had a discussion and reached their decision, and the deal was made with the craftsman that he should have what he had named if he could get the fortress built inside of one winter, and at the first day of summer if any part of the fortress was incomplete then he would forfeit his payment ... But as winter wore on, the construction of the fortress went very well, and it was so tall and strong that one could not attack it. And when there were three days until summer it was very nearly up to the fortress gates. Then the gods went to their thrones of judgement and held council, and asked each other who it was who had advised marrying Freyja off to the Giantlands or ruining the sky and the heavens by taking away the sun and the moon and giving it to the giants.)

This episode betrays two principal ideological commitments: 1) That the giants should be kept segregated from the *Æsir*, preferably by fortifications,³⁴

³³ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 34.

³⁴ As Lukas Rösli has pointed out to me, it is striking that it is a giant who first offers to build the wall. The *Æsir* are excited by the idea, but the wall was a pre-existing project which was out for tender. One might read into this the tendency for a small portion of a disadvantaged

2) that giant men must on no account have access to *Æsir* women³⁵ — even if that sexual access was the agreed upon price for a 'legitimate' transaction (I use scare quotes because the notion of a transaction is itself ideologically conditioned — the minute someone tells you that what they are proffering is not ideology but is instead common sense you can be quite sure you are about to be confronted with a highly ideological gesture).³⁶ Why is it that the giants must be kept out? There is a tendency to frame this desire on the part of the *Æsir* as a defensive measure, as though it were purely reactive. Thus Gabriel Turville-Petre: '[Þórr] maintained the order of the universe, defending our world ... and the world of gods ... he held the forces of chaos in check'.³⁷ Or Hilda Ellis Davidson: '[Þórr's hammer] was not only the symbol of the destructive power of the storm, and of fire from heaven, but also a protection against the forces of evil and violence. Without it Asgard could no longer be guarded against the giants'.³⁸

There is no error here on the part of scholars. Medieval commentators too tended to frame the *Æsir's* actions towards the giants as defence, not offence. Snorri himself cites a verse by Úlfr Uggason (fl. 980s) which describes the god Heimdallr as the 'frægr ragnarein-vári' (the famous rainbow-defender),³⁹ or in Clunies Ross's alternate parsing of the verse the 'frægr rein-vári ragna' (the famous ground-defender of the gods).⁴⁰ Snorri also cites a verse by Þjóðólfr of Hvinir (fl. early 900s) which describes Þórr and the other more martial *Æsir* as the 'varnendr goða' (defenders of the gods).⁴¹ The description of the *Æsir* defending themselves against the giants is perfectly fair and accurate, but it obscures the reality that not all instances of self-defence are ethically equal. If one approaches a stranger in a public house, throws a punch at him/her, and then shields oneself against the ensuing blows one receives in return, it is wholly true to say that one is defending oneself. Yet saying that would obviously not be a complete account of events.

Similarly, while it is true to say that the *Æsir* are protecting themselves against the giants, verses such as those of Úlfr and Þjóðólfr neglect to mention how the conflict between *Æsir* and giants began. Snorri alone depicts the very beginnings of the animosity. The detail that the primordial humanoid was a giant named Ymir, and that various cosmological fixtures (the earth, the sky, the clouds, etc.) were made from his body is known from Eddic poetry, e.g. *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza 21: 'Ór Ymis holdi var iðrð um scöpuð, / enn ór beinom

group to collaborate with an oppressive power in order to pursue individual gain, but this is a topic for another time.

³⁵ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, esp. pp. 107–27.

³⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, pp. 48–50; Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, pp. 9–28.

³⁷ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, p. 75.

³⁸ Ellis Davison, *Gods and Myths*, p. 84.

³⁹ Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 20; Codex Regius 22^v; Codex Trajectinus 23^f.

⁴⁰ Clunies Ross, *Poetry and Poetics*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 31; Codex Regius 25^f; Codex Trajectinus 26^f.

biörg, / himinn ór hausi ins hrímkalda iǫtuns, / enn ór sveita siór' (From the flesh of Ymir the earth was made / and from the bones mountains / the sky from the skull of the ice-cold giant / and from the blood the seas).⁴² But Snorri provides the further detail that it was a direct ancestor of the Æsir who murdered the progenitor of the giants. In *Snorra Edda*, Óðinn admits that: "Synir Bors drápu Ymi jǫtun. En er hann fell, þá hljóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum hans at með því drektu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komsk undan með sínu hýski" (The sons of Borr killed Ymir the giant. And when he fell so much blood ran out his wounds that all of the race of the Ice-Giants drowned, except one who escaped with his family).⁴³ Borr was the father of Óðinn, and the son of Búri, the second anthropoid who emerged independently of Ymir, therefore the 'sons of Borr' most likely includes Óðinn himself. Óðinn attempts to justify this act of violence by telling Gylfi that "Fyr ǫngan mun játum vér hann guð. Hann var illr ok allir hans ættmenn" (In no way can we call him [Ymir] a god. He was evil, as are all his descendants).⁴⁴ However, coming from Óðinn, the leader of the Æsir and probably the man who threw the fatal blow, the explanation is really little more convincing than calling Ymir a 'bad hombre'. What Ymir did to deserve his fate is not mentioned by Snorri. It has been suggested that there may be an Indo-European myth here concerning the 'murder [of] a senior male kinsman on the mother's side'⁴⁵ It may well also be that Ymir, as '[t]he first anthropomorphic giant, having been created from noxious matter, was a flawed one, a giant ... [the giants'] domain was an "other world" which incorporated forces threatening to the Æsir'.⁴⁶ But these are scholarly inferences on the background of comparative mythological readings. In Snorri's literary work, the reader remains at liberty to reject Óðinn's anti-giantish bluster and press the question that Gylfi does not: 'what did Ymir do wrong?'

Snorri continues to expound a history of Æsir-giant relations founded on exclusion and appropriation. Having used Ymir's blood to make the sea, his flesh to make the earth, his skull to make the sky and his brains to make the clouds, the Æsir have one last gruesome and mocking use for his corpse. Óðinn explains that:

"Hon [jǫrðin] er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggir hinn djúpi sjár, ok með þeirri sjávar ströndu gáfu þeir lǫnd til bygðar jǫtna ættum. En fyrir innan á jǫrðunni gerðu þeir borg umhverfis heim fyrir ófriði jǫtna, en til þeirar borgar hófðu þeir brár Ymis jǫtuns, ok kǫlluðu þá borg Miðgarð."⁴⁷

⁴² *Poetic Edda*, ed. by Neckel and Kuhn, p. 48.

⁴³ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 11; Codex Regius 3^v; Codex Trajectinus 3^v.

⁴⁴ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 10; Codex Regius 2^v; Codex Trajectinus 3^v.

⁴⁵ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, 158, see also p. 198.

⁴⁶ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, 185.

⁴⁷ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 12; Codex Regius 3^f; Codex Trajectinus 4^f.

("It [the earth] is circular on the outside, on the outside lies the deep ocean, and by the shore of that ocean they [the Æsir] gave land for the settlement of the race of giants. But further inwards on the earth they made a fortification all around the world against the warlikeness of the giants, and for those fortifications they used the eyelashes of Ymir the giant, and they called the fortification Miðgarðr.")

The story that Snorri tells — which our other sources do not — is that the Æsir stole the future from the giants.⁴⁸ Listening uncritically to Óðinn's words, or reading only the *Poetic Edda*, one might get the impression that the giants are innately covetous and destructive. The walls that the Æsir erect, both in the passage cited above and in the myth of the master builder cited previously, would then be straightforward responses to an implacable threat. *Snorra Edda* reveals that the history is not so simple: In fact, 1) the giants predate the Æsir, 2) the giants' patriarch was killed by Óðinn, apparently on very suspect grounds, 3) the Æsir were then relegated to the fringes of the world, kept out by palisades fashioned from their progenitor's slain body. On this third point, it is worth noting that Óðinn is keen to play down the inclemency of the giants' remaining territories. Like an Apartheid minister defending the policy of confining indigenous people to unviable Bantustans, he says merely that the giants live on lands by the coast.⁴⁹ However, the places where giants appear to live elsewhere in *Snorra Edda* are very much inhospitable areas. There appear to be giants living in the area of the universe known as Muspell, which is unbearably hot:

Fyrst var þó sá heimr í suðrhálfu er Muspell heitir. Hann er ljóss ok heitr. Sú átt er logandi ok brennandi, er hann ok ófœrr fleim er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar óðul. Sá er Surtr nefndr er þar sitr á lands enda til landvarnar. Hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda veraldar mun hann fara ok herja ok sigra ǫll goðin ok brenna allan heim með eldi.⁵⁰

(The first world was in the southern region and is called Muspell. It is bright and hot. This part is on fire and burning, and it is impossible

⁴⁸ Clunies Ross discusses the myth as a totalized system rather than *Snorra Edda* exclusively, as we do here. Although she focuses on erotic elements, her phrase '[t]he gods' designs upon the giant world' pre-empt my own giantish sympathies: Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, 127.

⁴⁹ I admit that this is a highly emotive example. It is worth stressing that the Giantlands, like the Bantustans, are carved out of whatever territory is left over once those in control have allotted for themselves all the resources they desire: 'With little employment opportunities on their own territory, being economically unimportant, and having poor-quality land that made agriculture nearly impossible, the Bantustans acted as reservoirs of cheap labour for the South African economy. Some of them were simply oversized dormitories for migrant African labourers whose stay in South African industrial centres was dependent upon their remaining in employment', Datta, 'Bantustans', p. 153.

⁵⁰ Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, p. 9; Codex Regius 2^f; Codex Trajectinus 3^f.

to those who are foreign to it and do not have their native land there. He who is named Surtr sits at the land's end to defend it. He carries a flaming sword, and at the end of the world he will go and attack and defeat all the gods and burn all the world with fire.)

It is reasonable to assume that Surtr is a giant, although Snorri does not explicitly identify him as such: he is opposed to the gods, and later he will ride with the Muspellssynir (the coalition of giants who will attack the gods at Ragnarøk/Ragnarøkkr). He is therefore uncontroversially counted as a giant by both Lindow and Simek.⁵¹ Snorri does not make clear who exactly counts Muspell as their *óðal* (native land), but one presumes that, like Surtr, they are other giants. Just as the giants are condemned to live in searing heat in Muspell, they seem to be relegated to the freezing cold in the land known as Niflheimr. Ymir appears to have lived in Niflheimr before the creation of the other worlds (Muspell, Miðgarðr, etc.). Snorri describes a spring in the country's interior which has an apparently Giantish name, Hvergelmir, lending further support to the ongoing presence of giants in the region. ('The -gelmir element is common in the language of the giants, both in the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, e.g. Aurgelmir, the Giantish name for Ymir, Bergelmir, the Noah-like giant who survived the great flood, Þrúðgelmir, his father according to stanza 29 in *Vafþrúðnismál*).⁵² Indeed, the type of giant known as a *hrímburs* (Ice Giant) is arguably best explained as hailing from frozen Niflheimr. The dispersal of the giants across several, isolated reservations also explains why Snorri does not speak of a singular *Jötunheimr* 'Giantland', but instead prefers the plural *Jötunheimar* 'the Giantlands'. As Lindow points out, this accords with Scandinavian traditions that certain areas of mountain and forest — places which humans did not find hospitable — were home to giants and trolls.⁵³

The Æsir's walls, then, are more than reactive defences. They are both symbols and means of an enduring marginalization of the giants. A reader might find it frustrating that although Snorri is the only author to supply the detail that Óðinn and his brothers killed Ymir he does not tell us what precise justification Óðinn had in mind. Óðinn expresses the view that Ymir was *illr* 'evil', but does not substantiate this opinion with examples of the giant's wrongdoing. Conceivably, this omission is deliberate: Snorri is configuring Óðinn as an unreliable narrator, who does not provide a sound moral reason for his act of violence because there *was no* sound moral reason. Perhaps the real reason that the proto-Æsir felt entitled to take the world from the giants, rather than attempting to found a bicultural Æsir-giant society, was simply that they could. The history of colonialism at many times and places has been

one of a civilization taking land and resources from another, and inventing a pretext afterwards, e.g. the invention of the 'manifest destiny' principle long after the first conquests of indigenous Americans, or the pinnacle of European scientific racism in the nineteenth century coming *after* the establishment of paternalistic regimes in Africa and Australasia. As Homi Bhabha notes: 'The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.'⁵⁴ Action precedes justification.

This history of violence and conquest between the Æsir and the giants means that the walls around Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr are most fully understood not as ideologically neutral defensive measures (indeed, a basic premise of this chapter is that there is really no such thing as ideological neutrality). Rather, the defences of the Æsir are more like the castles built by conquerors in the Middle Ages, during Snorri's own days. They are not just for keeping out threats, but also for reminding locals of the new order, and for legitimizing ownership over land that has essentially been claimed through the principle that 'might makes right'. It seems fair at this point to conclude that Æsirism features a strain of something like what we would today recognize as colonialism.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In the opening to this study, the condition was made clear that comparison between Æsirism and other ideologies could only ever offer analogies: in such-and-such a regard, Æsirism is *like* such-and-such an ideology. It is not a forerunner thereof. That is to say, Æsirism is not anarchism before anarchism, or fascism before fascism, etc. The prospect of comparing ideologies past and present — or, fictional and historical — poses the question of *how* an ideology exists. It would be convenient if it could be said that an ideology did not really exist until it had been proposed in a printed manifesto. However, this is not a tenable suggestion, as the manifesto is essentially an eighteenth-century genre, and it is self-evident that ideologies have governed human behaviour for a great deal longer.⁵⁶ Here, the etymology of manifesto, 'I make clear', is revealing: a manifesto only makes apparent a thing which previously existed unnamed.

⁵¹ Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, pp. 282–83; Simek, *Dictionary*, pp. 303–04.

⁵² *Poetic Edda*, ed. by Neckel and Kuhn, p. 59.

⁵³ Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, p. 206.

⁵⁴ Bhabha, 'The Other Question', p. 23.

⁵⁵ Further colonial dynamics, pertaining to the 'race' and gender of the giants, are studied in detail by Cole, 'Æsirist Ideology', pp. 69–77. See also: Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1, 48–50, 56–84.

⁵⁶ Myth itself can serve as ideological articulation *avant la lettre*, e.g. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, esp. pp. 19, 29. A related but distinct question is whether there was ever a 'prelapsarian' time when humans did not produce ideology. Runciman has argued that in the earliest part of the palaeolithic 'for many tens of thousands of years, bands of anatomically modern human beings no longer dominated by alpha males were able to solve the problem of order without

It is sensible to believe that ideologies do not require manifestos or other texts in order to exist. If ideology is an assemblage of beliefs which governs the behaviours and inclinations of individuals, the key thing is that ideologies reside in the mind, rather than on the page. Texts may serve as vessels for the preservation and communication of ideology, but they are not themselves the seat of ideologically conditioned thought. When, in medieval Europe, an illiterate Christian townsman attacked his Jewish neighbour, the crucial psychological mechanism was that the ideology of anti-Semitism had been internalized in his mind. The existence of anti-Semitism is not affected by how he became inculcated with a hatred of Jews: through preaching texts read aloud, caricatures painted on a church wall, or gruesome miracle tales spread by word of mouth. Is it true, then, to say that an ideology exists so long as people believe in it? There are ideologies which are extensively documented (even if none of the texts which record their tenets are manifestos in the modern sense), but which are no longer practised. Feudalism has not ceased to exist — thinkers continue to explore its consequences and its ideological intricacies today just as one could have done in the thirteenth century. It has only ceased to shape the world.⁵⁷

It seems, then, that ideologies do not require texts, and they do not require faithful, active believers. They must therefore be considered immaterial phenomena. The implication is therefore that they are timeless. In some difficult metaphysical sense, anarchism 'existed' before the first self-declared anarchists of the eighteenth century. Norman Cohn was therefore quite right to describe the Taborites and similar heretical movements of the fifteenth-century as 'anarcho-communist'.⁵⁸ If we could travel through time and interview a Taborite, he/she would not even understand the word 'anarcho-communist'. But their beliefs, so far as they are preserved in the sources, would to a great degree be harmonious with those of today's anarcho-communists. We would obscure the true nature of the ideology in question if we were to insist on a separate designation.

On the other hand, identifying an 'ism' is a task which ideally would require perfect ideological neutrality on the part of the identifier. The optimal situation would be for a scholar to rid him/herself completely of their own ideological commitments, and turn their mind into a sort of 'ideology detector'; hovering over a particular text, we would then be able to recognize the ideological message it seeks to convey with such clarity that it would be

any awareness of the possibility of, let alone the need for, formal institutional roles to which there attached impersonal economic, ideological, or political inducements and sanctions' ('Stone Age Sociology', p. 138). I am sceptical that we have ever been anything other than *homo ideologicus*, but I have neither the space nor the credentials to remark further. The argument is certainly fascinating.

⁵⁷ Note that some commentators worry about the re-emergence of a 'techno-feudalism', though this is beyond the scope of the present chapter, e.g.: Seabrook, *Cut Out*, p. 240.

⁵⁸ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millenium*, p. 215.

as though we could read the mind of the author. However, this is obviously not possible. Any commentary on the ideology of another person is always conditioned by the commentator's ideological concerns. I do not mean only that it is extremely challenging to refrain from implicit value judgements (for example, it is challenging to describe fascism in terms that are anything other than excoriating, even while we strive for academic objectivity). Rather, even our categories for examining a foreign ideology inevitably betray our own commitments. I have asked how Æsirism understands gender, government, and race. These are all ideological concerns one might expect from someone living in north-western Europe during the early twenty-first-century. People from other times and places might well find wholly different categories to be their obvious starting point. No set of categories is necessarily superior to any other — they are all just symptoms of the impossibility of ideological translucence.

The same dilemma is observable in *Snorra Edda*. The sword-juggling jester at the opening of *Gylfaginning* compares Óðinn to a king in order to depict a foreign ideology in terms Gylfi can understand. It is not a wholly misleading exercise. Óðinn is clearly a leader of sorts, *de facto* if not *de jure*. But it would never occur to Óðinn to call himself a king. The same is true of my comparisons with anarchism. The Æsir's kingless society may be *de facto* 'anarchist' in our eyes, but obviously neither Óðinn nor Snorri would have used that term. Thus, we turn again to de Vries and Waddell: Is a study like mine no nobler than the undertakings of the Nazi or Victorian philologists, who so brazenly projected their own world-view onto the past? One might protest that where they found a glorious Germanic past, ripe for cross-fertilization with nationalistic expansionism, patriarchal normativity, and anti-Semitism, I have found lessons for our own time on colonialism (and, elsewhere, desire, racism, and the twilight of capitalism).⁵⁹ I would therefore have corrupted Old Norse myth no less than they did. To draw the aforementioned equivalence would be a relativist interpretation of the situation, and I would not propose to prove somebody wrong who subscribed to that approach.

But there is also a more generous, absolutist interpretation to be had. Let us take a pinch of relativism for a moment, and assume that a person of a given ideological bent (for example, fascism) will, given enough time and creativity, be able to warp any body of myth to meet their needs. Even from this relativist starting point, I would not suppose that all bodies of myth are equally susceptible targets. An absolutist might protest that in this regard there are manifest differences between, for example, Christianity and pre-Christian Scandinavian paganism. The Christian Bible contains many moments where secular power is explicitly rejected, and equality between genders and races is strenuously recommended, e.g. Galatians 3. 28 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all

⁵⁹ Cole, 'Æsirist Ideology'.

one in Christ Jesus' (see also Joel 2. 29, 1 Corinthians 12. 13, Colossians 3. 11, Acts 2. 32–47, etc.). This presents a serious stumbling block for a fascist who would commandeer the Christian mythos. True, the persistent fascist will overcome it eventually (as shown by the historical example of the *Deutsche Christen*, and other Christian groups who embrace far-right politics today). Contrary examples from elsewhere in the Christian corpus will be found, or exegetical apparatus will be constructed which explains away the ideologically uncomfortable parts of the text.⁶⁰

However, co-opting the Æsir requires no such effort, because so far as we can see in the surviving mythological sources there are no statements which promote egalitarianism or intercultural understanding to the extent that, for example, Acts or Galatians do. I do not mean to say that the fascist philologists really had some sort of glimmer of insight into Old Norse myth. There is also much that a fascist might desire from *Snorra Edda* which they will not find in its pages. For example, Snorri has virtually nothing in the way of concepts that might be interpreted as whiteness, heteronormativity, or the nation state. But I would like to dislodge the implication that Snorri's myths were ideologically neutral before the grubby fingers of the far-right began to caress them. I am sceptical of moral relativism when comparing different ideologies. Some are peaceable and/or well-intended. Even if their attempted implementations have resulted in unimaginable cruelty, in the abstract realm where ideologies properly exist, they recommend kindness. Other ideologies are bellicose and exploitative. They are kind neither in theory nor in practice. My contention has been that Æsirism belongs more to the latter sort than the former.

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⁶⁰ A similar process has occurred with Christianity in America, where although a kernel of compassionate Christians remains, many of those who identify as 'Christian' presently support a regime which is extremely hostile to the ideological commitments of the New Testament. My point is that a protracted history of ideological wrangling was required to reach this point — hundreds of years of dubious exegesis were required to make Christians amenable to slavery, capitalism, etc. (see Salley and Behm, *Your God*, pp. 15–28; Block, *The Future of an Illusion*, pp. 94–96).

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II

Scholarly Uses