

Chapter 2

An Old Norse Context

Primarily because of Icelanders' late conversion, linguistic conservatism and readiness to transmit literature rooted in pre-conversion culture, Scandinavia has long provided the basis for research into all traditional Germanic-speaking cultures. Accordingly, reconstructions of *ælf*e have often been shaped by evidence for the medieval Scandinavian *álfar*. However, it would be unwise to impose Scandinavian evidence incautiously on other cultures. For all its conservatism, our Scandinavian evidence mostly post-dates the conversion to Christianity, exhibiting profound changes in consequence. If only for historiographical reasons, then, any reassessment of Anglo-Saxon *ælf*e must begin with the reassessment of their Scandinavian cousins. I begin here by showing how the traditional point of departure for reconstructing pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs, Snorri Sturluson's writings, is unreliable regarding *álfar* and certain other pertinent issues. Although later medieval Icelandic texts also afford evidence for the meanings of *álf*r,²⁶ these are even trickier as evidence for pre-conversion beliefs and as comparisons for Anglo-Saxon material, so I include them here only on a few specific points, focusing instead on poetry which seems likely to be old or culturally conservative, and which afforded Snorri's own main primary source material. I turn first to skaldic verse, the distinctively Scandinavian praise-poetry first attested from the ninth century. The association of skaldic verses with named poets and subjects, combined with appropriately critical analyses of these connections, permits the dating of poems, the reliability of the dates being somewhat assured by the poems' intricate metre and diction, which inhibited recomposition in oral transmission. Next I consider Eddaic verse, whose mythological subject matter makes it in some ways more useful than skaldic verse, but whose more flexible structures permitted greater variability in transmission, so precluding precise dating. In addition to providing this primary evidence, however, Old Norse material, combined with the prominence of anthropological approaches in recent Scandinavian scholarship, affords evidence and approaches for assessing the wider significance of beliefs in *álfar* in early medieval Scandinavian world-views. This provides models for interpreting the Old English evidence considered in the subsequent chapters. I should mention at the outset—since they will be prominent later in the thesis

²⁶ See *DONP*, s.vv. *alfr* and its compounds; Finnur Jónsson 1926–28, s.vv. *álfkona*, *álf*r; Boberg 1966, 104–107 [F200–399]; Motz 1973–74, 97–98, 100–101; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 170–75; cf. the corpus of *huldufólksögur* maintained by the Orðabók Háskólans at <<http://www.lexis.hi.is/ordlyklar/alfar/alfar.htm>>.

—that I do not extensively discuss Norse words for supernatural females. Females are less well-represented in our Norse mythological sources, partly defined in any case through their husbands, and partly functioning as units of inter-group exchange rather than as paradigmatic representatives of groups themselves.²⁷

1. Snorri's writings

Snorri Sturluson (born in the late 1170s, dying in 1241) seems to have composed and edited the texts comprising *Snorra Edda*, his treatise on Norse poetry and mythology, between perhaps 1220 and 1241—more than two centuries after Iceland's official conversion—while much of what we think of as *Snorra Edda* may derive from later editors (Faulkes 1982, xv, xxix–xxxiii; 1998, i xxxix–l). *Snorra Edda* comprises four texts: a prologue, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*, probably composed in reverse order. It is complemented (and sometimes contradicted) by the partly mythological *Ynglinga saga*, the opening part of *Heimskringla*—the magisterial history of the kings of Norway accepted probably to have been composed by Snorri in the same period as his *Edda* (see Whaley 1991, 13–19). Both texts are founded on quotations of older verse. Thus *Ynglinga saga* is built around the poem *Ynglingatal*, a poem cataloguing how each king in the dynasty founded by Yngvi died, composed by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini around the end of the ninth century (see further §§2:2, 7:1.1). Snorri's work is, therefore, a complex blend of old and new, involving preservation, re-interpretation, neatening and misunderstanding of inherited traditions by both Snorri himself and his redactors.²⁸

1.1 *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*

Álfr occurs in *Snorra Edda* most often in quotations of Eddaic verse, and in Snorri's prose paraphrases of them. But this reveals more about Snorri's sources, which are usually attested more completely elsewhere, than his own views. Snorri's most influential deployment of *álfr*, however, occurs in his own enumeration in *Gylfaginning* of the *hofuðstaðir* ('chief places') of the cosmos (ed. Faulkes 1982, 19):

²⁷ See especially Jochens 1996, 51–56; Clunies Ross 1994–98, i 64–66; 85–186; cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1989 [1977]; more generally Clover 1993; Whitney 1999.

²⁸ The seminal analysis is Holtmark 1964; see also Clunies Ross 1994–98, esp. i 32–33, with references; O'Donoghue 2003.

Margir staðir eru þar gófulgigr. Sá er einn staðr þar er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkr þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru svartari en bik.

There are many places there which are magnificent. There is one place which is called *Álfheimr*. A people lives there which is called *ljósálfar*, but *dökkálfar* live below in the earth, and they are different from them in appearance and very different in practice. *Ljósálfar* are more handsome than the sun in appearance, but *dökkálfar* are blacker than pitch.

Ljósálfir ('light-álfir') is repeated shortly after, in a detail appended to the description of *Viðbláinn*, the highest of Snorri's three *himnar* ('skies'): 'En ljósálfar einir hyggjum vér at nú byggvi þá staði' ('But we think that the *ljósálfar* alone currently inhabit those places'; ed. Faulkes 1982, 20). Snorri also mentions *Svartálfaheimr* ('black/dark-álfar's-world'): seeking a way to bind Fenrisúlfr, 'sendi Alföður þann er Skírnir er nefndr, sendimaðr Freys, ofan í Svartálfaheim til dverga nokkura' ('All-father sent him who is called Skírnir, Freyr's messenger, down into Svartálfaheimr to some *dvergar*'; ed. Faulkes 1982, 28).

Ljósálfir and *dökkálfir* are unique in Old Norse. *Svartálfir* does occur in *Ektors saga ok kappá hans*, from around 1300 (*DONP*, s.v. *alfs-sonr*), but almost certainly by borrowing from *Snorra Edda*. It has been observed before that the *dökkálfar* and *svartálfar* seem to be *dvergar* under new names: their characteristics are identical with *dvergar*'s, and *dvergar* do not otherwise occur in the cosmology of *Gylfaginning* (see Holtsmark 1964, 37–38; Motz 1973–74, 96–97 *et passim*; cf. Grimm 1882–88 [1875–78], II 444–49). When in *Skáldskaparmál* Þórr demands that Loki have *svartálfar* make gold hair for his wife, Loki goes to beings otherwise denoted by *dvergr*; Andvari the *dvergr* is found in *Svartálfaheimr* (ed. Faulkes 1998, I 41–43, 45); and Mitchell has argued that the narrative function of the *svartálfar* is best paralleled by the *jötnar* of whom Skírnir seeks Gerðr for Freyr in *Skírnismál* (2000b, 67–69), and with whom I align the *dvergar* below (§§2:2, 2:3.1). Despite long-standing scepticism, however (e.g. Vries 1956–57, I 259), the *ljósálfar* have maintained a reputation as a race of ethereal, celestial '(light-)elves' (e.g. Peters 1963, 253; Motz 1973–74, 96, 98–100, *et passim*; Simek 1993 [1984], s.v. *light elves*).

However, as Holtsmark showed in 1964, Snorri's description of *Viðbláinn* was almost certainly influenced by (and possibly based on) the account of the angels in the *Elucidarius*, an early twelfth-century digest of Christian theology translated into Icelandic by about 1200 (Firchow–Grimstad 1989, xvii, xxvi), certainly used elsewhere

in *Snorra Edda*.²⁹ The oldest manuscript of the *Elucidarius*, AM 674a 4to, includes the dialogue (ed. Firchow and Grimstad 1989, 12–14, with slight normalisation)³⁰

D(iscipulus). Huar byggver G(öb). Magister. Hvorvetna es velde hans en þo es öple hans iscilningar himne. D(iscipulus). Huat es scilningar himinn Magister Þrir ero himnar. Einn licamegr sa es ver megom sia. Annarr andlegr. þar es andlegar scepnor bvggva þat ero englar. Enn þriþe es scilningar himinn þar es heilog þrenning bvggver. oc helger englar mego þar sia G(öb).

Pupil: Where does God live? Master: Wherever his power extends; however, his native region is in the sky of intellect. Pupil: What is the sky of intellect? Master: There are three skies. One is bodily, that which we can see. The second is spiritual (*andlegr*), where the spiritual beings live who are angels. But the third is the sky of intellect, where the Holy Trinity lives; and there can holy angels see God.

From this, Snorri derived his three *himnar*; his use of the *Elucidarius* in creating the *ljósálfar*, who ‘eru fegri en sól’ (‘are more beautiful than the sun’) is suggested by the *Elucidarius*’s ‘englar es .vii. hlutum ero fegre an sol’ (‘angels, which are seven times more beautiful than the sun’; ed. Firchow and Grimstad 1989, 8; cf. ‘angeli, qui solem septuplo sua vincunt pulchritudine’ in the original, ed. Lefèvre 1954, 361). Admittedly, the *Elucidarius* situates its *englar* in the second tier of heaven, *andlegr*, rather than the third, which is where the *ljósálfar* appear in *Snorra Edda*. Nor is the phrase *fegri en sól* particularly distinctive (cf. *Völuspá* stanza 64; ed. Neckel 1962, 15). Even so, a verbal connection between the *Elucidarius* and Snorri’s description of the *ljósálfar* seems probable, *ljósálfar* being a paganisation of Christian angels. It is sufficiently likely, at any rate, that Snorri’s description cannot in itself be relied upon as evidence for pre-conversion beliefs.

Snorri presumably renamed the *dvergjar*, therefore, to suggest that they were to *ljósálfar* as fallen angels were to heavenly ones—a characteristic accommodation of traditional cosmology to Christian. That Snorri chose *álfr* as a counterpart for the Christian *engill* (‘angel’) is not without interest; if nothing else it suggests that *álfr* had positive connotations. However, Snorri had few options at this point (for partial surveys of possible words, see Cahen 1921, 9–28; Kuhn 1969–78, iv 258–65). Of the other native Norse words denoting male supernatural beings which had positive connotations, Snorri had already employed *ás* and *vanr*, while the plurals *regin* and *tívar* were both archaic and well-entrenched as synonyms for the *æsir*. Snorri’s only likely alternatives were the

²⁹ Holtsmark 1964, 35–38; cf. Simek 1993 [1984], s.vv. *andlangr*, *víðbláinn*; Clunies Ross 1986, 55–58.

³⁰ Cf. the Latin original (ed. Lefèvre 1954, 362):

D. – Ubi habitat Deus? M. – Quamvis ubique potentialiter, tamen in intellectuali caelo substantialiter. D. – Quid est hoc? M. – Tres caeli dicuntur: unum corporale, quod a nobis videtur; aliud spirituale, quod spirituales substantiae, scilicet angeli, inhabitare creduntur; tertium intellectuale, in quo Trinitas sancta a beatis facie ad faciem contemplatur.

rather colourless *vættr* ('(supernatural) being') and *andi* ('spirit'). The fact that he chose *álfr* over these can be adequately explained from other evidence: Snorri knew the kenning *alfrǫðull* (denoting the sun and discussed below, §2:2; ed. Faulkes 1998, I 85, 133), which could be taken to associate *álfar* with light, and may have felt a need to fit *álfar* into his mythography which did not extend to the more generic terms *vættr* and *andi*.

Interestingly, Snorri's usage of *álfr* in *Skáldskaparmál*—probably composed before *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1982, xx)—is much closer to that of his poetic sources. For example, Snorri states that 'Mann er ok rétt at kenna til allra Ása heita. Kent er ok við jǫtna heiti, ok er þat flest háð eða lastmæli. Vel þykkir kent til álfa' ('It is also proper to call a person by the names of all the *æsir*. They are also known by the names of *jǫtnar*, and that is mostly as satire or criticism. It is thought good to name after (the) *álfar*'; ed. Faulkes 1998, I 40, cf. 5). This matches attested skaldic usage (discussed below, §2:2), but does not fit well with Snorri's own mythography. It is curious that the *vanir*, who are so prominent in *Gylfaginning* as the companions of the *æsir*, are absent. I argue below on other grounds that *vanr* and *álfr* were (partial) synonyms, and it seems likely that when Snorri wrote of *álfar* in *Skáldskaparmál*, he was thinking of the figures whom in *Gylfaginning* he would call *vanir*; but whatever the case, the problem emphasises how the innovative mythography of *Gylfaginning* fails to account fully for traditions even as Snorri himself reported them.

Álfr does occur in *Ynglinga saga*, in the epithet of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr ('*Álfr* of Geirstaðir', ch. 48–49; ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 4, 79–82), for whose son, Snorri claims in the saga's preface, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini composed *Ynglingatal*. But *Ynglingatal* itself does not contain the epithet. Although no explicit explanation for the name is ever given, it has excited speculation linking *álfar* with the dead, because in other accounts, which Heinrichs has argued to have originated in a twelfth-century *Óláfs þátr Geirstaðaálfs* (1993, 57), people sacrifice to Óláfr after his death.³¹ But, besides Heinrichs's point that the ideology of the *þátr* is very much of the later twelfth century, its account of Óláfr's cult perhaps reflecting saints' cults (1993, 44–50; cf. Baetke 1964, 40–47; Sundqvist 2002, 291), this is not clearly the reason for Óláfr's name. Various other factors might be relevant: his mother comes from Álfheimar; as I discuss below, *álfr* is common in poetic epithets for men and may be also be an epithet of Freyr, from whom Óláfr is descended in the sagas (§§2:2–3); and in the *þátr*, Óláfr is especially handsome, a characteristic shared by *álfar* in the *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, from around

³¹ e.g. Ellis 1968 [1943], 111–16; Chadwick 1953–57, 182–4; 1946, 58–59; Vries 1956–57, I 258–60; Turville-Petre 1964, 231; Schjødt 1991, 305–7.

1300 (ed. af Petersens–Olson 1919–25, 25). Óláfr’s epithet is not, therefore, useful evidence for the early meanings of *álfr*.

1.2 Snorri and the *vanir*

Before proceeding to the poetic evidence, it is worth turning briefly to Snorri’s accounts of the *vanir*, whose principal representatives are Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja. As I have observed, Snorri sometimes uses *álfr* where, according to *Gylfaginning*, we would expect *vanr*, while some of Snorri’s evidence for the *vanir* is relevant to the meanings of *álfr* and *ælf*. Aspects of Snorri’s *vanir* must be ancient (Vries 1956–57, I 467–72, II 173–77; Näsström 1995, 47–60). But our evidence for *vanir* as such is problematic. While *ás* and *álfr* are attested in all branches of Germanic, and *álfr* at least has a clear Indo-European origin, *vanr* occurs only in North Germanic—mainly in Snorri’s prose, disappearing early from the Scandinavian languages—and is etymologically obscure (Vries 1961, svv. *áss 1*, *vanr 1*, *vaningi*; §3:1).³² The simplex *álfr* occurs in ten different Eddaic poems and *vanr* in only six; excluding *Alvíssmál*, which repeats both words so often, *álfr* occurs eighteen times in the Eddaic corpus, and *vanr* only five (Kellogg 1988, s.vv. *álfr*, *1. vanr*). Whereas *álfr* is common in the skaldic corpus and a productive base for kennings (see §2:2), *vanr* occurs only thrice, once as a simplex and twice in the kenning *vanabríður* (‘bride of the *vanir* [=Freyja]’; Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v. *Vanr 1.*; cf. Kuhn 1969–78, IV 272–73). Quite what this means is uncertain. The distribution may partly reflect the poetic convenience of *álfr*, whose range of potential alliterative partners was much wider than *vanr*’s, but this does not account for the absence of cognates and later reflexes for *vanr*. Moreover, whereas *ás*, *álfr*, *jǫtunn* and *mann* are all attested as the first element of place-names in their nominative stem form (e.g. *Ásgarðr*; *Álfheimr*, *Jǫtunheimr*, *Mannheimr*), *vanr* is only compounded in the genitive plural, in *Vanaheimr*, suggesting later formation (Kuhn 1969–78, IV 274).

Kuhn inferred that ‘der Wanen-name in den westnordischen Ländern mindestens bis gegen 1000 noch kaum bekannt war’ (‘the name *vanir* was, at least until around 1000, still barely known in the West-Norse[-speaking] regions’; 1969–78, IV 276). In a variant

³² North suggested that the prototheme of OE *wanseoce*, occurring among interlinear glosses on *comitiales* (‘epileptics’) in Aldhelm’s *Prosa de virginitate* (quoted below, §6:4.1), is cognate with *vanr* (1997, 52, 177–78). However, *vanr* is an *i*-stem and as such should appear in OE as ***wene*—unless we assume declension-change, adding another hypothesis to the argument. (Alternatively, if *wan-* is considered a borrowing of *vanr*, it is not evidence for a Common Germanic etymon.) I suspect that this is simply the common if semantically problematic Old English adjective *wann* (on whose semantics see Breeze 1997; putatively ‘dark’), *wann* denoting a symptom of illness in Old English (e.g. Wright 1955, f. 124v; cf. Hall forthcoming [c], §3) and in Old Frisian *wanfelle*, *wanfelic* (‘with bruised skin, black and blue’; see Bremmer 1988, 11).

on an old theme (on which see Näsström 1995, 61–62), he posited that the cult of the *vanir* came from Sweden. However, new words do not necessarily imply new concepts—Njǫrðr at least was by no means a newcomer—and numerous other models could explain the rise of *vanr* in our sources, particularly if we posit that it was a partial synonym of a commoner word. *Vanr* might be an archaic Germanic word surviving only in Norse, its brief prominence perhaps reflecting the decaying of an earlier taboo-status followed by eradication by Christianisation, and *álfr* a euphemism (‘white one’, see §§3:1, 7:3) coined for it in Germanic. Alternatively, *álfr* might be the older word, *vanr* perhaps being borrowed into North Germanic, conceivably as a now-lost ethnonym. Either term could originally have denoted a single deity, subsequently being generalised to associated beings (cf. §2:3.1; Kuhn 1969–78, IV 272). Without establishing a conclusive argument for *vanr*’s etymology, I doubt that we will be able to resolve this question. But it is clear that while *ás* and *álfr* are well-attested, *vanr* is much less prominent than Snorri’s mythography would suggest.

Snorri’s evidence for *vanir* cannot be reassessed here in full. Much has been made of what has become known as the ‘*æsir-vanir* war’,³³ but such evidence as we have for this—even Snorri’s own—is contradictory and problematic (cf. McKinnell’s reassessment of the poetic evidence, 2001). Likewise, the *vanir* are conventionally associated with ‘fertility’ (or *Fruchtbarkeit*, *fruktbarhet*, etc.), a supposition which has underlain various interpretations,³⁴ but this originates in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century passion for ‘fertility cults’ and needs to be reassessed (cf. Sundqvist 2002, esp. 18–38, on its historiographical partner in crime, ‘sacral kingship’). Snorri’s evidence for the association is slight, and one might emphasise instead Adam of Bremen’s unequivocal association of health and agricultural prosperity with Thor, Freyr’s probable counterpart Fricco instead being explicitly associated with peace and marriages, which could be interpreted as patronage of conflict-resolution.³⁵

One point in *Ynglinga saga*, however (ch. 4; ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 13), demands closer attention because it may have an Anglo-Saxon analogue:

Njǫrð ok Frey setti Óðinn blótgoða, ok váru þeir díar með Ásum. Dóttir Njarðar var Freyja. Hon var blótgyðja. Hon kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vǫnum var títt. Þá er Njǫrðr var með Vǫnum, þá hafði hann átta systur sína, því at þat váru þar lög. Váru þeira börn Freyr ok Freyja. En þat var bannat með Ásum at byggva svá náit at frændsemi.

³³ Turville-Petre 1964, 156–62; Dumézil 1973a, 2–25; 1973b, 93–105; Dronke 1988; 1997, 41–44; North 1997a, esp. 33–38; cf. Vries 1956–57, II 208–14.

³⁴ e.g. Vries 1956–57, II 163; Turville-Petre 1964, 156; Dumézil 1973a [1959], 2–25; Schjødt 1991, 304–5.

³⁵ *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes 1982, 24; cf. *Ynglinga saga* chapters 9–10, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 22–25; *Historia Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae*, ed. Schmeidler 1917, 257–60; cf. Mitchell 1983 on *Skírnismál*.

Óðinn established Njǫrðr and Freyr as sacrifice-chieftains, and they were gods³⁶ along with the *æsir*. Njǫrðr's daughter was Freyja. She was a sacrifice-goddess. It was she who acquainted first the *æsir* with *seiðr*,³⁷ which was customary among the Vanir. When Njǫrðr was among the *vanir*, he was married to his sister, because that was the custom there. Their children were Freyr and Freyja. But that was forbidden among the *æsir*, for people so closely related to live together.

The family relationships here are well-paralleled in Eddaic and skaldic verse (Vries 1956–57, II 173–75). Njǫrðr's incest is paralleled in *Lokasenna*,³⁸ it has caused some consternation among scholars (e.g. Näsström 1995, 66–67), but it is neither uncommon nor surprising for gods' sexual behaviour to contravene the norms of believers' societies (for Classical parallels see Lefkowitz 1993). Conversely, Snorri's association of Freyja with *seiðr* is poorly-paralleled (Näsström 1995, 82–85), especially now that McKinnell has cast doubt on the traditional identification of Heiðr and Gullveig with Freyja in *Vǫluspá* stanzas 21–22 (ed. Neckel 1962, 5–6; McKinnell 2001). But Snorri's explicit association of *seiðr* with the *vanir* is noteworthy because the second element of the Old English compound *ælfside*n is cognate with *seiðr*, possibly associating *ælf*e with *siden* as Snorri associates *vanir* with *seiðr* (see §6:3.1).

2. *Álfr* in skaldic verse

We may turn from Snorri, then, to our early poetic evidence for *álfr*. *Álfr* appears in skaldic verse almost invariably in kennings for human warriors (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v. *alfr*; cf. Meissner 1921, 264), where it is fairly common, and is attested already in the work of the earliest skald, Bragi inn gamli Boddason. Around the earlier part of the ninth century, Bragi called Jǫrmunrekr *sóknar álfr* ('*álfr* of attack') in stanza 4 of his *Ragnarsdrápa* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912, B1 1; for dating see Turville-Petre 1976, xxi–xxiii). Around the end of the ninth century, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini called Hálfðan hvítbeinn Óláfsson *brynjalfr* ('*armour-álfr*') in stanza 30 of his *Ynglingatal*, and numerous other examples followed.³⁹ Perhaps because *álfr* never actually denotes an *álfr* in skaldic verse, this corpus has been little used as evidence for *álfr*'s early meanings. But the kennings offer important insights.

³⁶ *Díar* occurs only here and in *Skáldskaparmál* in prose, probably borrowed from stanza 3 of Kormákr Qgmundarson's *Sigurðardrápa*, where Snorri took it to mean 'gods' (ed. Faulkes 1998, I 85). This is consistent with its Old Irish etymon, *dí* ('God, god'): the common translation 'priests' is *ad hoc*.

³⁷ On which see below, §§6:3, 7:1.1, 7:2.

³⁸ Stanza 36; cf. stanza 32, where Freyja is accused of sex with Freyr; on the corroboration of Loki's sexual accusations here by other sources see McKinnell 1986–89.

³⁹ Ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912, B1 12. My dating is conventional; Krag surveyed part of the debate about the poem's date and himself supported a late one (1991, 13–80), but his arguments serve best to show the value of the traditional dating (Sundqvist 2002, 43–52).

The usage of *álfr* in kennings suggests that it was not only grammatically masculine, but only denoted males. This may not, admittedly, have applied to the plural: thus *ás* denoted a male god, but *æsir* could include the female *ásynjur*. By the high Middle Ages, Icelandic had the compound *álfkona* ('*álfr*-woman'; *DONP*, s.v. *alfkona*; Finnur Jónsson 1926–28, s.v. *álfkona*), there is no early evidence for whether *álfar* could denote females. Wolff extracted a second point from the kennings, however: whereas Snorri proscribes the mention of *jötnar* in kennings for people, he accepts *álfar*, who, Wolff inferred, 'dem Menschen freundlich sind' ('are friendly towards humans'; 1952, 101). This observation has not been developed, but an examination of words for supernatural beings in kennings both confirms and elaborates it.

Strikingly, *álfr* shares its distribution in skaldic verse distinctively, among words denoting kinds of supernatural beings, with kennings containing *ás*.⁴⁰ *Ás* occurs often as a simplex, and in kennings for poetry and gods. But its most common use in kennings is, like *álfr*, as the headword in kennings denoting human warriors, such as *q' ss Fróða hriðar* ('*ás* of Fróði's storm (=battle)') in stanza 32 of *Vellekla*, composed by the pagan Icelander Einarr skálaglamm in the late tenth century (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912, B1 123; Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v. *q' ss*; cf. Meissner 1921, 264). By contrast, few other words denoting types of supernatural beings occur in kennings for humans. *Goð* and *regin* occur, but only rarely, and are partially if not wholly synonymous with *ás* (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.vv.; cf. Meissner 1921, 264). Words for *disir*—better-known by the kenning which supplanted that name, *valkyrjur*—are common as modifiers in kennings for warriors (e.g. *valmeyjar álfr*, '*álfr* of the slaughter-maid'), but not as headwords (Meissner 1921, 273–74).⁴¹ In kennings for women, *ásynja* occurs, which we may take as an extension of the data for *ás*; and possibly *band*, another synonym for *ás*. *Dis* and *norn* occur fairly often (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.vv.; cf. Meissner 1921, 408–9, 411–12), and again seem on external evidence to have been at least partially synonymous (Ström 1954, 80–95). Taking *draugr* in kennings for humans to be the

⁴⁰ Kennings are being catalogued in the *Lexicon of Kennings and Similar Poetic Circumlocutions*, at <<http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/>>, which so far reproduces and supplements Meissner 1921. I suggest below that *álfr* could have been a *heiti* for Freyr, so *álfr*-kennings might actually allude to him; they are used in much the same way as kennings mentioning Freyr. But there is little reason to assume this generally.

⁴¹ *Valkyrja* is the more prominent term in secondary literature because it is usual in *Snorra Edda* and the prose sections of the Poetic Edda, but this is historically surely an inversion: *valkyrja* is most likely a kenning ('chooser of the slain') for *dis* ('(supernatural) lady'), as *dis* is used in, for example, *Grimnismál* st. 53, *Reginismál* st. 24 and *Hamðismál* st. 28 (ed. Neckel 1962, 68, 179, 273; see Ström 1954, esp. 70–79; Näsström 1995, 125). To Ström's points I would add that *dis* is extensively attested in Old Icelandic verse and is the basis for many kennings, whereas *valkyrja* occurs rather rarely, and is the basis for none (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.vv.; Kellogg 1988). Even Brynhildr, the archetypal *Walküre* of Wagnerian mythology, is referred to as *dis skjöldunga* ('*dis* of the *Skjöldungar*') in stanza 14 of *Sigurðarkviða in meiri*, and never in Eddaic verse as a *valkyrja*.

homonym denoting living warriors rather than dead ones (Lindow 1975, 84–96), none of the numerous other Norse words for types of supernatural beings, such as *dvergr*, *jötunn*, *mara* or *purs*, appears in kennings for humans. Nor, as I have noted above, does *vanr*.

This distribution suggests that to the formative skaldic poets, *álfr* denoted something mythologically close enough to human males to be used as the generic element in kennings for them, and something close enough to *ás* to share this usage with it distinctively among words for male supernatural beings. The words for supernatural beings used in kennings for humans can thus be reckoned in three groups: *ás*, *ásynja* and their (partial) synonyms *goð* and *regin*; *álfr*; and *dís* and *norn*. Assuming that this system exhibited symmetry of gender, this analysis suggests that *dís* and *norn*, being used for women as *álfr* was for men, denoted beings which were to the *ásynjur* as the *álfar* were to the *æsir*. Finally, words denoting monstrous beings were evidently excluded from this system—except, if we accept Snorri’s claim in *Skáldskaparmál*, in mockery—suggesting that *álfar* joined *æsir* and humans in a systematic opposition to monstrous beings.

The distribution of words for supernatural beings in kennings for men is paralleled by other sorts of early Old Norse lexical evidence.⁴² Meanwhile, the theophoric associations of *álfr* are emphasised by two Norse dithematic names. As Müller pointed out, the Old Norse deutertheme *-arinn*, probably cognate with Old Icelandic *arinn* (‘hearth’), Old High German *arin* (‘altar’), appears only in the names *Þórarinn* and *Álfarinn* (Müller 1970, 40–41, 131–32). The fact that *álfr* occurs here uniquely beside the deity-name *Þórr* suggests again that *álfr* had theophoric connotations in its lexical usage. Likewise, in Denmark, probably in the eleventh century, the sons of one Eykil were named Alfkil and Þorkil (where the second element, a contracted form of *ketill* ‘cauldron, pot’, may, like *-arinn*, have ritual associations; Hald 1971–74, I 15; ed. Jacobsen–Moltke 1942, I cols 432–33 [no. 376]). Hald found that ‘Áskell og Þórkell er de mest udbredte navne på

⁴² For dithematic personal name elements see §3:2. Compounds ending in *-kunnr* and *-kunnigr* (variant forms of the same word, not to be confused with the homophonous *kunnigr* ‘knowledgeable’) and their cognates were used in Germanic languages either to denote descent from or origin in the determiner (e.g. Old Norse *reginkunnr*, Old English *godcund*, ‘originating with god(s)’), or similarity in nature to it (e.g. Old High German *manchunt* ‘male’). The determiner usually denoted a being (Hofstetter 1992, 340–42). Of determiners denoting supernatural beings, only *goð-* and its cognates are well-attested; Old English also innovated *engelcund* and *deofolcund*; but Old Norse exhibits compounds with the determiners *ás-*, *álf-*, *regin-* and *goð-* (see Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.vv. *áskunnigr*, *áskunnr*, *alfkunnigr*, *alfkunnr*, *godkynningr*, *reginkunnigr*, *reginkunnr*; cf. Fritzner 1886–1972, IV s.v. *alfkyndr*; Hofstetter 1992). These are, of course, precisely the words for supernatural beings used in kennings for men. The dataset is very small: *regin-* compounds occur in two verses and two runic inscriptions; *áskunnigr* and *alfkunnigr* only in *Fáfnismál* stanza 13 (ed. Neckel 1962, 182), and *alfkunnr* only in Snorri’s discussion of it (ed. Faulkes 1982, 18); *guðkunnigr* occurs in verse only by emendation (from *-konungr* in *Ynglingatal* st. 27). There is also an exception, *trollkunnr*, in *Ynglingatal* stanza 3 (quoted §7:1.1). The difficulty of *trollkunnr* notwithstanding, then, the correlation of the *-kunnr*, *-kunnigr* compounds with the kennings for men using words for supernatural beings is impressive in all respects: they include the same words as initial elements, excluding other words for supernatural beings; and they show a semantic association both with divinity and with the denotation of types of human being.

ketill’ in early medieval Denmark, reflecting a general pattern of alternation between *Ás-* and *Þór* in personal names (‘*Áskell* and *Þórkell* are the most widespread names in *-ketill*’; 1971–74, I 48–50, at 49). Once more, we find *álfr* distinctively associated with a theophoric name.

Álfr appears in one other kenning, less useful here: *álfrǫðull* (denoting the sun), which occurs occasionally in both skaldic and Eddaic verse (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v. *álfrǫðull*). Unfortunately, its precise significance is unclear: since in verse *ǫðull* itself denotes the sun, *álfrǫðull* was no doubt used for metrical convenience as a formulaic variant, but the association of *álfr* with a word denoting the sun must have been semantically congruent, presumably adding connotations which could be employed to literary effect. However, we must proceed from our knowledge of *álfar* to the explication of the kenning, rather than the other way, so *álfrǫðull* may be excluded from consideration for now (see further below, §2:3.1).

Likewise stanza 5 of Sigvatr Þorðarson’s skaldic *Austrfaravísur*, recounting the Christian Sigvatr’s travels in the pagan lands east of Norway around 1020, describes a heathen *ekkjja* (‘widow’) refusing Sigvatr board for the night for fear of ‘Óðins ... reiði’ (‘Óðinn’s wrath’), because an *álfa blót* (‘*álfar*’s sacrifice’) is taking place in the house (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915, B1 221). This text implies that *álfar* might be worshipped in late Swedish paganism, and it is of interest, in view of the association of *álfar* with Freyr elsewhere (see §2:3.1), that there is strong evidence for the prominence of Freyr in Swedish paganism (Vries 1956–57, II 194–203; Turville-Petre 1964, 168–70). But it gives no other concrete information. Sigvatr’s association of the *álfa blót* with Óðinn could be mere stereotyping of pagan practice. It has been supposed that the *ekkjja* must have been running the *álfablót* (see de Vries 1932–33, 170–71; Jochens 1996, 46, 48), but all Sigvatr really tells us is that she answered the door. The stanza does recall our scattered evidence for sacrifices to *dísir* and may reflect the pairing of *álfr* and *dís* suggested by their respective use in kennings for men and women.⁴³ This conclusion is supported by a lexical connection between *álfar* and *dísir* in addition to those perceived by Ström, being the word *dísablót* (‘*dísir*’s sacrifice’), which occurs, for example, in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 29 and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* chapter 44 (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 58; Nordal 1933, 107): *dís-* and *álfr-*, besides the more general (*skurð*)*goða-* (‘(carved-)gods’-’) and the borrowed *djöfla-* (‘devils’-’), are the only words for types of supernatural being to be compounded with *-blót* (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v.; *DONP*, s.v.).

⁴³ See Ström 1954, esp. 12–31; Näsström 1995, 127–29; Sundqvist 2002, 225–32, and 99–105, 285–89 for a broader contextualisation.

Skaldic verse suggests the basic associations of *álfr* and *álfar* in pre-conversion Scandinavian traditions: with gods and, metaphorically, with men. *Álfar*, along with these groups, were systematically contrasted with monsters. Taking the evidence for words denoting males alone, my inferences so far can be presented as a componential analysis in terms of the two features \pm MONSTROUS and \pm SUPERNATURAL:

	karlmaðr	ás	álfr	jötunn
SUPERNATURAL	–	+	+	+
MONSTROUS	–	–	–	+

Figure 1: *componential analysis of Norse words for beings*

Needless to say, this analysis is crude; introducing distinctions of gender to it, for example, would produce the familiar problems of binary componential analyses (see Lyons 1977, esp. 1322–25). While it would be possible to speak hereafter of *álfar* as ‘non-monstrous supernatural beings’, I suggest instead ‘otherworldly beings’ as an appropriate alternative; its mixed connotations of wonder and fear will emerge below to be fitting to members of this category. Likewise, it is possible to reconstruct a semantic field diagram:

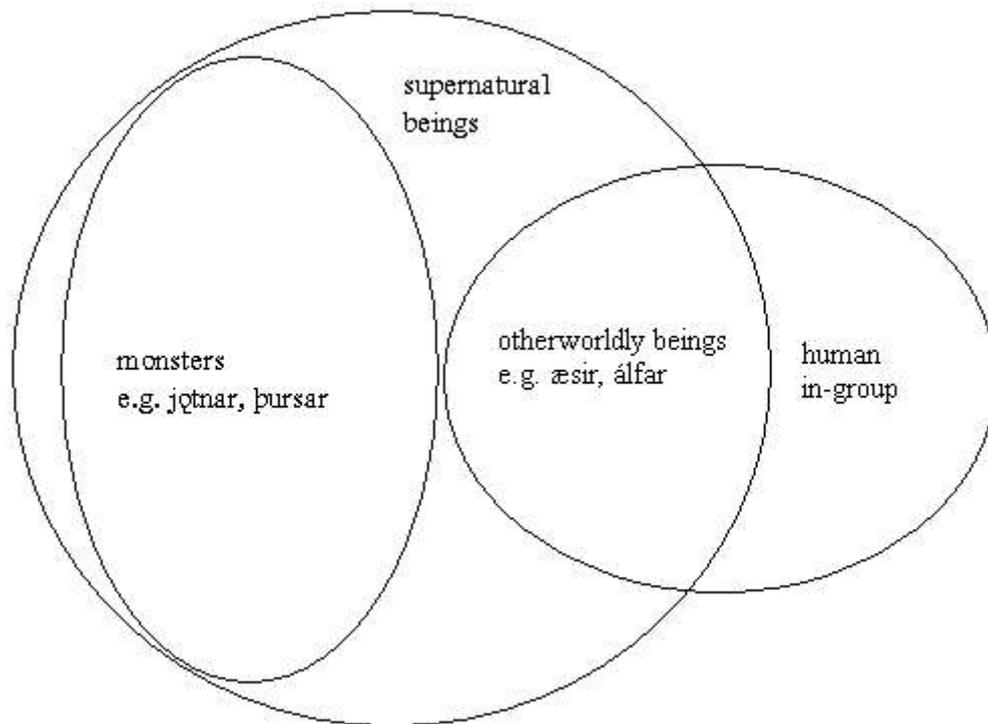


Figure 2: *semantic field diagram of Norse words for beings*

This interpretation differs from a predominantly German tradition linking *álfar*, like Snorri, with *dvergjar*, in aligning *álfar* primarily with *æsir* and *disir*, and *dvergjar* with the

monstrous *jǫtnar*.⁴⁴ Although the alternative alignment would help to explain German folklore, mine is the one suggested by the kennings, the earliest Norse evidence. Basic though it is, it provides important information about the early meanings of *álfr*. Moreover, it hints at a major mythological pattern in early-medieval Scandinavian world-views, delineating a fundamental binary opposition between beings which are human or otherworldly on the one hand, and those which are monstrous on the other. These themes are elucidated by reference to the next body of evidence, Eddaic verse.

3. *Álfr* in Eddaic verse

As I have mentioned, *álfr* is frequent in the Eddaic corpus, whose usage is largely consistent with the skaldic verse, and which presents mythological traditions more fully. Tempting though it is to try to order the Eddaic poems by date or place of origin, the uncertainties and complexities of transmission in the corpus make this too problematic to be attempted here (see Fidjestøl 1999). Nor do I analyse every occurrence of *álfr*. This is not because they are not of interest: rather because my primary concern here is to develop a reliable and pertinent context for interpreting our Anglo-Saxon evidence. In particular I avoid *Alvíssmál*, despite the fact that *álfr* and certain other words for supernatural beings occur here more than in any other Eddaic poem. *Alvíssmál* is essentially a catalogue of poetic diction structured as a wisdom-contest. Most stanzas catalogue the names given to parts of the world by *menn*, *goð*, *vanir*, *jǫtnar*, *álfar* and *dvergar*, in that order. This may be of interest, in that it seems broadly to move from the centre to the periphery of the Scandinavian world-view, while the juxtaposition of *jǫtnar* and *álfar* is paralleled in *Beowulf*'s half-line 'eotenas ond ylfe' (§4:1 esp. n. 104). But the exigencies of metre as the poem marshals alliterating diction from limited pools lead to variations in the order or vocabulary in most stanzas, including certain apparent duplications (such that *æsir* and *upregin* appear in st. 10, *menn* and *halir* in 28, and *jǫtnar* and *Suttungs synir* in 34): *Alvíssmál*'s subject matter is primarily poetic diction, not mythography; its portrayals both of Þórr and of the *dvergr* Alvíss are inconsistent with other sources (Acker 2002).

On the other hand, one poem is in various respects unusual, but particularly important to the present study because it not only contains *álfr* by seems also to have English

⁴⁴ Associating *dvergar* with *álfar*, e.g. Grimm 1882–88 [1875–78], II 443–72; Vries 1956–57, 252–64; Motz 1973–74; Lecouteux 1997; and on Old English Jente 1921, 167–91; Philipsson 1929, 69–78. Associating *dvergar* with *jǫtnar*, cf. Boor 1924, 550–57; Holtsmark 1970, 75–80; Clunies Ross 1994–98, I 50–51, 54–56; Acker 2002.

connections: *Alvíssmál*'s neighbour in the Codex Regius, *Vǫlundarkviða*. Accordingly, I consider *Vǫlundarkviða* separately from the other texts (§2:3.2).

3.1 Formulae, and Freyr

As commentators have often noted, *álfr* mainly occurs in Eddaic poetry in the formulaic collocation *æsir ok álfar*, which we have met already in Old English form in the pairing of *ese* and *ælfes* in *Wið færstice*. The formula and its variants occur fourteen times in verses, as in *Hávamál* stanzas 159–60, particularly noteworthy because *æsir* and *álfar* both seem to be denoted there by *tívar* ('gods'; ed. Neckel 1962, 43–44):

Þat kann ec iþ fiórtánda, telia tíva fyrir: ása oc álfa ec kann allra scil, fár kann ósnotr svá.	ef ec scal fyrða liði	I know it, the fourteenth, if I must reckon up <i>tívar</i> in front of a company of people: I know how to distinguish all the <i>æsir</i> and <i>álfar</i> ; few who are not wise can do so.
Þat kann ec iþ fimtánda, dvergr, fyr Dellings durum: afl gól hann ásom, enn álfom frama, hyggio Hroptatý.	er gól Þjóðrørir,	I know it, the fifteenth, which Þjóðrørir the <i>dvergr</i> chanted in front of Dellinger's doors: he chanted strength for the <i>æsir</i> , but success for the <i>álfar</i> , intelligence for Hropt-Týr [=Óðinn]

Ás always comes first in the pair except in *Skírnismál* stanzas 17–18. The collocation is doubtless sometimes merely formulaic, and besides showing that *æsir* were associated with *álfar* is not in itself very informative.⁴⁵ Rather it is contexts like the one just quoted that give us evidence that *álfar* here denoted something very like *æsir*.

Uncertainty as to the precise significance of *álfr* in *æsir ok álfar* does not usually much trouble modern readers, and need not have troubled medieval ones, but it does present a serious inconvenience in *Lokasenna*. *Lokasenna*'s prose introduction gives a list of gods, explaining that at Ægir's feast, 'Mart var þar ása oc álfa' ('Many of the *æsir* and *álfar* were there'). In the poem itself, Loki says *ása oc álfa, er hér inno ero* ('of the *æsir* and *álfar* who are here within'; st. 2, 13, 30, ed. Neckel 1962, 97, 99, 102) three times. However, despite the presence in *Lokasenna* of most of the Scandinavian pantheon, conventional accounts of Norse mythology list no *álfar* among them, following Snorri in labelling the named gods *æsir* or *vanir*. But *Lokasenna* is a tightly-constructed poem and mythologically well-informed (see McKinnell 1986–89). It would be uncharacteristic, then, for it to repeat a formula which within its mythological frame of reference is partly otiose. Stanza 30 is rhetorically a fine insult:

⁴⁵ Gurevič's exhaustive classification of Eddaic formulae (1986 [1982]) makes some ostensibly interesting observations, but the classifications are subjective and insufficiently sensitive to the meaning of each formula in the different contexts where they occur. Acker has since invoked a subtler classificatory system, but has not investigated its implications or underpinnings (1998, 4).

Þegi þú, Freyja! Þic kann ec fullgerva,
era þér vamma vant;
ása oc álfa, er hér inni ero,
hverr hefir þinn hór verið.

Shut up, Freyja! I know you completely,
there is no lack of vices in you;
of the *æsir* and the *álfar* who are in here,
each has been your lover.

But it is somewhat deflated if we envisage Freyja being accused of sex with some anonymous and shadowy collection of *álfar*.

The obvious explanation for the mysterious *álfar* of *Lokasenna* is to identify them with Snorri's *vanir* (cf. Vries 1956–57, II 203; Holtsmark 1970, 78; Näsström 1995, 61). This prospect is particularly supported by *Grímnismál* stanza 5, where Óðinn declares that (ed. Neckel 1962, 58)

Álfheim Frey gáfo í árdaga
tívar at tannfé.

The gods gave Freyr Álfheimr in ancient days
as tooth-money [i.e. a gift at a child's first
tooth]

Freyr is here portrayed, then, as the lord of the world of the *álfar*. In *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, Freyr is, of course, a prince of the *vanir* rather than the *álfar*. However, *vanr* occurs neither in *Lokasenna* nor *Grímnismál*, despite the extensive mythological lore in these poems. The simplest interpretation of these texts is to take Snorri's pairing of *æsir* and *vanir* to be a variant of a pairing of *æsir* and *álfar*, with *vanr* and *álfr*, in at least some times and places, denoting the same mythological construct. This reading would explain why Freyr would rule Álfheimr; why *ás* and *álfr* are used in the same way in kennings for men with *vanr* never being used, alongside the related question of why Snorri would suggest using names of *æsir* and *álfar*, but not *vanir*, in kennings for gods and men; and why Freyja stands accused of having sex with all the *æsir* and *álfar* at Ægir's feast. Indeed, if Freyja, Freyr and Njörðr are to be interpreted in *Lokasenna* as a kin-group of *álfar* as they are normally interpreted as a kin-group of *vanir*, then Loki's use of the *æsir ok álfar* formula in indicting Freyja would imply that she had not simply slept with all the *æsir*, but with her own family—neatly foreshadowing that very accusation, in stanza 32. Admittedly, some Eddaic poems do present *álfar* and *vanir* as different races, as in *Sigrdrífumál* stanza 18 (ed. Neckel 1962, 73; cf. *Skírnismál* st.17–18; ed. Neckel 1962, 72–73), which says of runes that

Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar,
oc hverfðar við inn helga mið,
oc sendar á víða vega.
Þær ro með ásom, þær ro með álfom,
sumar með vísom vqnom,
sumar hafa menzcir menn.

All were shaved off, those which were carved
on, and mixed with the sacred mead,
and sent on wide ways.
They are among the *æsir*; they are among the
álfar, some with the wise *vanir*;
human people have some.

This list of peoples is attractively consonant with the association of men, *álfar* and *æsir* in skaldic poetry, though it aims equally to indicate the diversity of the runes'

destinations. This distinction between *álfar* and *vanir* I take as a variant tradition, probably exhibiting a tendency to reanalyse synonyms as words denoting different things, perhaps partly through syncretic processes which brought together variant mythologies and terminologies without integrating them fully.

One wonders further if *álfr* might have been used as a cognomen of Freyr, since this could explain the kenning *álfrǫðull*: if we may adduce Snorri's statement in *Gylfaginning* that Freyr 'ræðr fyrir regni ok skini sólar' ('rules over the rain and the shining of the sun'; ed. Faulkes 1982, 24), then perhaps *álfr* in *álfrǫðull* denotes Freyr himself. Snorri's claim gains some slight support from the name of Skírnir, whom Freyr sends to woo Gerðr in *Skírnismál*: Skírnir's name is transparently derived from *skírr* ('clear, bright'), and links Freyr indirectly with this characteristic. Reading *álfr* in *álfrǫðull* as a *heiti* for Freyr brings an arguably appropriate mythological connotation to the kenning, suggesting 'the *ǫðull* (denoting the sun) of the *Álfr* (=Freyr)', and such developments of names for supernatural beings into gods' names are well-attested.⁴⁶ The names *Álfarinn* and *Þórarinn* would correspond the better if *álf-* here is taken to denote an individual god. But little can be made of these hints.

Again, the association of *álfar* and *dvergar* which has often been assumed is ill-supported. I have quoted stanza 160 of *Hávamál*, in which the *dvergr* Þjóðrörir 'afl gól ... ásom, enn álfom frama' ('sang strength for the *æsir*, and for the *álfar* success'; ed. Neckel 1962, 41), but whatever is afoot here, it associates *dvergar* with *álfar* no more than with *æsir*. More striking is stanza 143 of *Hávamál* (ed. Neckel 1962, 41), which, describing the carvers of runes, recalls the binary division between *æsir* and *álfar* on the one hand and *jǫtnar* and *dvergar* on the other:

Óðinn með ásom, enn fyr álfom Dáinn,	Óðinn among the <i>æsir</i> , and for the <i>álfar</i> ,
Dvalinn dvergom fyrir,	Dáinn, Dvalinn for the <i>dvergar</i> ,
Ásviðr iqtinom fyrir,	Ásviðr for the <i>jǫtnar</i> ,
ec reist síálfr sumar.	I myself carved some.

Dáinn is the name of a *dvergr* in *Vǫluspá* 11 and (possibly derivatively) *Hyndluljóð* stanza 7 (ed. Neckel 1962, 3, 289); meanwhile, the names *Vindálfr* and *Gandálfr* also appear in *Vǫluspá*'s list of *dvergar*, in stanzas 12 and 16 (ed. Neckel 1962, 3, 4).

However, the list in *Vǫluspá* is a gallimaufrey, and the recurrence of the transparently meaningful name *Dáinn* ('the dead one') no cause for surprise—it is, after all, the name

⁴⁶ Cf. **iīwaz* 'god' > Old Norse *Týr* 'the god Týr' but *tívar* 'gods'; Stroh 1999 for the argument, inverting previous assumptions, that Faunus may owe his name to the *fauni*. Likewise, Freyja, seen as the pre-eminent, divine *dis*, is usually assumed to be the *dis* of the *Disarsalr* ('*dis*'s hall') mentioned in *Heiðreks saga* and *Ynglinga saga* (ed. Jón Helgason 1924, 44; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 158; cf. see Ström 1954, 32–69; Näsström 1995, esp. 133–35).

of a hart in *Grímnismál* (st. 33; ed. Neckel 1962, 64). I maintain, then, my binary division between *æsir* and *álfar* on the one hand and *dvergjar* and *jötnar* on the other.

3.2 *Vǫlundarkviða*

Vǫlundarkviða (ed. Neckel 1962, 116–23) demands special attention because it is the only Old Norse poem where a character is clearly identified lexically as one of the *álfar*: *Vǫlundr* is described as ‘álfa líóði’ (probably ‘member of the *álfar*’, st. 10) and ‘vísi álfa’ (probably ‘wise one of the *álfar*’, st. 13, 32). This identification presents the alluring prospect of associating *álfar* with narrative motifs as well as lexical contexts. Moreover, the poem probably exhibits Old English linguistic influence, so, problematic though the connection is, it may offer evidence which is especially relevant to Anglo-Saxon culture. Consequently, it is discussed more fully below (§7:3). Here, I simply introduce the poem and establish *Vǫlundr*’s association with *álfar*.

Vǫlundarkviða begins with the flight of three women identified in stanza 1 as *meyjar*, *drósir*, *alvitr* and *suðrænar* (‘young women, stately women, foreign beings, southerners’) and in the prose introduction as *valkyrjur*, to a ‘sævar strönd’ (‘lake/sea-shore’) where they take for themselves the three brothers Egill, Slagfiðr and *Vǫlundr*. However, nine winters later, they leave the brothers; Slagfiðr and Egill go in search of their women, but *Vǫlundr* remains at home instead, forging *baugar* (‘arm-rings’) for his woman (stanzas 1–6). This part of the story is not present in our other main version (*Piðreks saga af Bern*, chs 57–79, commonly known as *Velents þáttr*; ed. Bertelsen 1905–11, I 73–133), though it is an essential part of the *Vǫlundarkviða* that we have (cf. Burson 1983, 3–5). However, chapter 23 of *Piðreks saga* does contain a narrative like this concerning the birth of the father of *Velent* (its counterpart to *Vǫlundr*), and some process of transference may have taken place (ed. Bertelsen 1905–11, I 46; II 63–65). Discovering that *Vǫlundr* is living alone, *Níðuðr*, ‘*Niára dróttin*’ (‘lord of the *Njárar*’), has him taken in his sleep (stanzas 7–12). *Níðuðr* takes *Vǫlundr*’s sword and gives one of the rings which *Vǫlundr* made for his missing bride to his daughter *Böðvildr*, and, at his wife’s instigation, he has *Vǫlundr*’s hamstrings cut, imprisoning him on an island (stanzas 13–19). *Vǫlundr* takes his revenge on *Níðuðr* first by enticing his two sons to visit with promises of treasure, killing them, and making jewels of their eyes and teeth (stanzas 20–26); and then by enticing *Böðvildr* by promising to mend the ring which she was given, getting her drunk, and implicitly having sex with her (stanzas 27–29). *Vǫlundarkviða* culminates in *Vǫlundr* taking to the air by some means which is not clearly described and

telling Níðuðr what he has done (stanzas 30–39), focusing finally on the plight of Þoðvildr (stanzas 40–41).

McKinnell has recently consolidated the long-standing idea that *Vǫlundarkviða* contains a number of Old English loan-words, and perhaps influence from Old English poetic metre (1990, 1–13). This fits with the fact that Vǫlundr is otherwise rather poorly-attested in Scandinavia (see Dronke 1997, 271–76): *Velents þáttr*, the other main Scandinavian source for Vǫlundr, is based mainly on German sources (see Davidson 1995), while there is a plethora of medieval references to Vǫlundr’s southern counterparts, including several from Anglo-Saxon England showing that his story there was similar to *Vǫlundarkviða*’s (Maurus 1902, 7–57; Lang 1976, 90–93; Nedoma 1990; Dronke 1997, 258–86). Precisely what *Vǫlundarkviða*’s English connections were is harder to guess—there are various cultural and perhaps linguistic layers to the text and there were many points of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction (cf. Dronke 1997, 287–90)—but their existence is not in doubt.

However, the two terms by which Vǫlundr is linked with *álfar* are obscure. Both are formulaic half-lines, appearing in the following stanzas:

Sat á berfialli, bauga talði,
álfa lióði, eins sacnaði;
hugði hann, at hefði Hlǫðvés dóttir,
alvítr unga, væri hon aprt komin.
(Stanza 10)

He sat on a bearskin, counted (arm-)rings,
lióði of *álfar*, he noticed one was missing;
he thought that Hlǫðvér’s daughter,
the young otherworldly being, had come back.

Kallaði nú Níðuðr, Níára dróttinn:
‘Hvar gaztu, Vǫlundr, vísi álfa,
vára aura í Úlfðolom?’
(Stanza 13)

Níðuðr cried now, the lord of the Njárar,
‘Where did you get, Vǫlundr, *vísi* of *álfar*,
your wealth in Úlfðalar?’

‘Seg þú mér þat, Vǫlundr, vísi álfa:
af heilom hvat varð húnom [MS: *sonom*]
mínom?’
(Stanza 32)

‘Tell it to me, Vǫlundr, *vísi* of *álfar*:
what came of my healthy cubs?’

The phrase *vísi álfa* occurs only in Níðuðr’s speeches, one preceding and one following Vǫlundr’s vengeance. The repetition is significant, since in the first instance it helps to express Níðuðr’s gloating, emphasising that he has captured an otherworldly being, but in the second, it emphasises his humbling by that being’s revenge (cf. Grimstad 1983, 198–99; Dronke 1997, 257). Evidently, *vísi álfa*, whatever it means, is a status to be vaunted. The phrase could equally be understood as ‘leader of the *álfar*’ or ‘wise one of the *álfar*’, and there is little to choose between these on internal evidence (see See and others 1997–, II 182–83, where the former interpretation is preferred). If the formula is related to Alfred the Great’s repeated alliteration of *Weland* with *wis* in the tenth of his

Metres of Boethius (lines 33, 35, 42; ed. Sedgefield 1899, 165) and chapter 19 of his earlier prose *Consolation of Philosophy* (ed. Sedgefield 1899, 46), both times in an addition to his source (ed. Moreschini 2000, 1–162), then *vísi* would be ‘wise one’ (this is unambiguous only in the prose, but surely holds also for the verse). But the alliteration of these words was so obvious a device, even in prose, that the two formulae are likely to be independent.⁴⁷

The *ljóði* of ‘álfa lióði’, on the other hand, is unique, with no certain meaning (see See and others 1997–, II 170–73; Dronke 1997, 310–11). *Ljóði* must be related to the rare and poetic Norse *ljóðr* (‘a people’) and the common Old English *leod* (when masculine, ‘man, warrior’; when feminine, ‘people’), amongst other cognates. The usual assumption is that it is a native Norse noun, guessed to mean ‘leader’, in which case *Vǫlundr*, ‘leader of *álfar*’, need not have been an *álf* himself. However, borrowing from Old English is a more tempting explanation. That Old English *leod* could be borrowed as *ljóði* is shown by the borrowing of Old English *hreoðan* as Old Norse *hrjóða* (showing *eo~jó*); *hired*, *hird* as *hirð* (showing *d~ð*; de Vries 1961, s.vv. *hrjóða* 2, *hirð*); and *kastali* (‘castle’ < *castel*), *munki* (‘monk’ < *munuc*), *postoli* (‘apostle’ < *postol*) and *prófasti* (‘provost’ < *prafost*, showing weak masculine for strong; see Vries 1961, s.vv.).⁴⁸ As Dronke pointed out, *álfa ljóði* is most closely paralleled in poetry surviving in the Germanic languages by the Old English poetic formula *genitive plural ethnonym + leod*, as in *Ebrea leod*, *Geata leod* and *Secgena leod* (‘male member of the Hebrews/Geats/Secgan’; for my translation of *leod*, *contra* Dronke’s ‘leader’, see Brady 1983, 205–6). Dronke was concerned that ‘elves’ are not ‘associated with the term “people” (*ljóðr*, *lēod*) in ON or OE’ (1997, 311), but I demonstrate otherwise for Old English below (§§3:2–4), emphasising the validity of the reading. *Álfa ljóði*, then, could be Norse in origin, but it is more likely a sign of the

⁴⁷ My interpretation here is diametrically opposite to McKinnell’s (1990, 3): McKinnell considered that *wisan* in poetic lines like ‘hwær sint nu þæs wisan Welandes ban’ is ambiguous between Old English *wis* (‘wise’) and *wisa* (‘leader’); but in fact it is disambiguated by Alfred’s earlier prose, ‘Hwæt synt nu þæs foremeran 7 þæs wisan goldsmiðes ban Welondes?’ (‘What now are the bones of that renowned and wise goldsmith Weland?’). Whereas McKinnell thought the parallel significant, however, I do not.

⁴⁸ This argument is similar to McKinnell’s, which linked *ljóði* with Old English *leoda*, putatively a weak derivative of *leod* attested only in the plural, defined by Bosworth and Toller as ‘a man, one of a people or country’ (1898, s.v.; cf. Toller 1921, s.v.; McKinnell 1990, 3; 2001, 331; de Vries 1961, s.v. *ljóði*). But, as I have shown, there is no need to posit a weak Old English etymon, and *leoda* is almost certainly simply a weak variant of *leod*: morphologically, *leod* was complex, having both masculine forms with *i*-stem inflections and feminine forms with *ō*-stem inflections (cf. Campbell 1959, §610.7 n. 3). Weak variants of the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension plurals appear already in early West Saxon (Campbell 1959, §610.7); moreover, in non-West Saxon dialects, the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension inflected in the same way in the plural as the feminine *ō*-stems, which was also liable to collapse with the weak declension, especially in Northumbrian with its loss of the final nasals which helped to distinguish weak inflections (see Campbell 1959, §§379 n. 3, 472, 587, 617; cf. Appendix 1). The conditions were therefore ripe for the creation of a weak plural *leodan*.

English influence on *Vǫlundarkviða*. Either way, however, the balance of probability suggests that *álfa ljóði* indicates that Vǫlundr is one of the *álfar*.

Vǫlundr's association with *álfar* has caused some discomfort among critics who see him as a human hero, particularly since *Vǫlundarkviða*'s prose introduction states him and his brothers to be 'synir Finnakonungs' ('sons of the King of the *Finnar*').⁴⁹ In its manuscripts, it unarguably keeps mythological company, as does the depiction of Vǫlundr on the Viking-age Swedish picture-stone Ardre VIII (Lindqvist 1941–42, I 95–96, 99, 107; II 22–24 and fig. 311). I take this debate as the first of various pieces of evidence to be considered here that our culture's categorial distinction between human-like supernatural beings and ethnic others is anachronistic; we might think more usefully in terms of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. Individuals from the out-group are liable to be associated with the supernatural; supernatural beings are liable to be associated with out-groups. As Grimstad observed, Vǫlundr's revenge is reminiscent of Óðinn's in *Grímnismál*. Here Óðinn visits the hall of the human king Geirrøðr, testing his hospitality. Tortured between two fires by Geirrøðr, he imparts wisdom to Geirrøðr's son Agnarr, reveals his identity, and escapes, indirectly causing Geirrøðr's death as he does so (ed. Neckel 1962, 56–68). Here, then, an otherworldly being 'triumphs over his human opponent and then vanishes', effectively acting as an arbiter of appropriate behaviour (Grimstad 1983, 193, 200–202; cf. McKinnell 1991, 24–25). This reading also seems the best way to explain Vǫlundr's flight (cf. Grimstad 1983, 189–90), itself reminiscent of Óðinn's escapes in eagle-form in prose texts.⁵⁰ The interpretation also fits nicely with the consequence of Vǫlundr's seduction or rape of Bǫðvildr, the birth of Viðga/Widia, which in *Þiðreks saga*, and implicitly the Old English *Waldere* and *Deor*, is presented as the real culmination of the story (Grimstad 1983, 199–200). A potentially unenviable pregnancy out of wedlock serves here in part, then, to provide a supernatural lineage for a hero.

⁴⁹ Cf. See and others 1997–, II 120–21; Grimstad 1983, 190–91; McKinnell 1990, 24–25; though note Dronke's cheerful juxtaposition of the two readings, 1997, 261–62, 287–89.

⁵⁰ *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 1 (ed. Faulkes 1998, 4–5); *Heiðreks saga* ch. 11 (ed. Guðni Jónsson–Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1943–44, 225)—though this may be cognisant of *Snorra Edda* (Hall forthcoming [a], §2). Grimstad also thought it necessary to explain Vǫlundr's revenge, which is 'carried out secretly, and, although Vǫlundr does at least confront his adversary and reveal what he has done, there is no final man-to-man battle or heroic last stand, but rather a most unheroic escape' (1983, 190). However, Grimstad's expectations are high, both in view of Níðuðr's own ignominious behaviour, Vǫlundr's crippling, and 'heroic' behaviour elsewhere in Eddaic texts (cf. Steblin-Kamenskij 1982, 87–89 on Sigurðr Fáfnisbani).

4. Interpretations

We can now see *álfr* to have denoted something conceptually similar to *ás*, and both *ás* and *álfr* to have been metaphorically associated with humans. *Grímnismál* declares that Freyr was given *Álfheimr* to rule, consolidating the circumstantial evidence that in a number of Eddaic poems, the *álfar* relate to the *æsir* as do the *vanir* in Snorri's mythography, and some partial synonymy between *álfr* and *vanr* seems likely. The group *æsir-álfar-menn* was in turn systematically opposed to another group, at least sometimes anthropomorphic, which I have termed *monstrous*, including *jötnar*, *pursar* and *dvergjar*. *Völundarkviða*, whose story seems certainly to be about one of the *álfar*, also suggests narrative motifs associated with *álfar*, which I discuss further below (§7:3). To conclude this analysis of Norse evidence, I argue that my more basic observations concerning *álfr*'s semantics correlate with wider (albeit later) evidence for early-medieval Norse-speakers' cosmologies, and that we can correlate the semantics of key terms in Old Norse mythologies, including *álfr*, with wider world-views. Essentially, the semantic field diagram presented above (§2:2 fig. 2) can also be taken as a schematic map of early medieval Norse-speakers' cosmologies. This correlation provides support for taking similar approaches to Old English semantic evidence.

I have argued from skaldic evidence in particular that *álfar*, *æsir* and *menn* were semantically aligned with one another in contradistinction to monsters. This binary opposition corresponds well with a horizontal cosmology which scholars have deduced primarily from conservative-looking elements of Snorri Sturluson's mythography.⁵¹ To quote Hastrup (1985, 147),

There was a fundamental distinction between a horizontal and a vertical axis. Horizontally, the cosmos was divided into *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*. *Miðgarðr* was the central space, as implied by the name {'middle-enclosure'}, inhabited by men (and gods), while *Útgarðr* was found 'outside the fence', beyond the borders of *Miðgarðr*, and inhabited by giants and non-humans. We note here the close parallel to the conceptualization of the farmstead (*innangarðs* {'literally 'within the enclosure'}) and the surrounding uncontrolled space (*útgangarðs* {'literally 'outside the enclosure'}). According to the myths of creation, this initial division of cosmos into two separate spaces was brought about by the gods (*æsir*), who subsequently built their own abode, *Ásgarðr*, somewhere inside *Miðgarðr*. There was no opposition between heaven and earth in this model, and topologically *Ásgarðr* was inseparable from *Miðgarðr*. Consequently there was no absolute distinction between men and gods. In opposition to the men and the (controlled) gods stood the uncontrolled, often hostile, *jötnar* ('giants') and other kinds of supernatural beings.

Inferring this binary system involves a number of simplifications. In particular, Kuhn warned that the terms *Miðgarðr*, *Ásgarðr* and *Útgarðr* used by Hastrup may be

⁵¹ Vries 1956–57, 372–92; Gurevich 1969, 42–47; Meletinskij 1973ab; Hastrup 1985, 136–54. Cf. Schjødt 1990; Clunies Ross 1994–98, esp. 148–56.

comparatively late innovations in Norse; the proper noun *Útgarðr* is attested only in one passage in *Gylfaginning* (ed. Faulkes 1982, 38–39), the opposition of the terms *Útgarðr* and *Miðgarðr* being a scholarly construct. However, our earliest Norse evidence does suggest a similar division into *Mannheimar*, *Goðheimar* and *Jötunheimar* (‘Human-, *goð-* and *jötunn*-world(s)’; Kuhn 1969–78, iv 295–302), which, if we can assume that *Goðheimar* was within *Mannheimar*, is consistent with the system which Hastrup posited. These three *heimar* correlate neatly with the three groups of beings which I have identified on semantic grounds, *æsir* and *álfar*, *menn*, and monsters. Although this kind of simple, binary cosmological paradigm is internationally widespread, it is by no means universal, differing—to give an important counterpoint—from the world-views implied by Biblical Judaic writings (see White 1972; for further examples Helms 1988, 22–30). The boundaries between the worlds were not rigid, varying according to contexts social (e.g. subsistence farming vs. trading), temporal (e.g. day vs. night), literary (e.g. *historia* vs. *fabula*), and so forth. While the model might be applied on a macrocosmic (or mythological) scale, it had a microcosmic dimension, with the farm a *miðgarðr* surrounded by a chaotic outer world (cf. Gurevich 1969, 43–45).

Within this broad binary paradigm, gods and monsters related to men in two main ways. As recent commentators have emphasised, mythological narratives of relationships between *æsir* and *jötnar*—which involve violence but also intermarriage—probably reflected, or provided models for, relations between Norse-speaking in-groups and their ethnically different neighbours, principally the *Finnar* (‘Sámi’).⁵² But in another kind of relationship, more useful for interpreting the Anglo-Saxon evidence for *ælf*e, gods and monsters were not mythological parallels to men, but corporeal beings walking in men’s world, whom men might in theory encounter. Gods and monsters were conceptually similar to, and might even be identified with, ethnic others, while members of the human in-group could, actually or metaphorically, become monstrous, particularly if they remained in contact with the in-group after the severances of outlawry or death.⁵³ This is the situation in *Völundarkviða* and the canonically mythological *Grímnismál*, as well as various later sagas, among them the *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, from around 1300, which says that ‘er kunikt i ollum fornum frassognvm um þat folk, er Alfar hetv, at þat var miklu friðara en engi onnur mankind a Norðrlondum’ (‘it is made known in all the

⁵² Mundal 2000; cf. 1996, 110–12; Hermann Pálsson 1997, esp. 16–23, 154–56; cf. Koht 1923; Meulengracht Sørensen 1989 [1977]; Clunies Ross 1994–98, i 60–66; more generally Cohen 1996, 7–12; Uebel 1996. For recent archaeological evidence for Norse-Sámi interactions which emphasises the validity of these parallels see also Götherström 2001a, 25–26; 2001b, 11–12; cf. Zachrisson and others 1997; Price 2000, 18–22.

⁵³ DuBois 1999, 69–91; Sayers 1996; for outlawry cf. Orchard 2003a, 140–68; more generally Olsen 2001. For the partial synonymy of *Finnr* with monster-words, see Hermann Pálsson 1997, 18–20.

old histories of the people which is called the *Álfar*, that it was much more beautiful/handsome than any other human race in the North-lands'; ed. af Petersens–Olson 1919–25, 25, with slight normalisation; see also Lassen 2003; Lindow 2003, 105). It is often assumed that Christian Scandinavians' depictions of the pagan gods as powerful humans with magical powers, as in the prologue to *Snorra Edda* or the first book of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, necessarily shows Christian euhemerisation of pagan divinities (notably Krag 1991, 58–59; Johnson 1995, 42–44). But this view assumes that pagan gods had the incorporeal character of the Christian God. I suspect instead that the 'euhemerisations' in our Norse sources involved no paradigm shift from traditional culture; indeed, the euhemerised gods of Snorri Sturluson and Alfred the Great, unlike those of other early medieval euhemerists, deliberately use their magical powers to establish divine reputations, rather than simply being apotheosised after their deaths, perhaps suggesting that Alfred and Snorri altered their inherited conceptions of pagan gods to a minimal extent (see Johnson 1995, 43–44; ch. 38 of Alfred's translation of the *De consolatio philosophiae*; ed. Sedgefield 1899, 115–16, 194–95). Gods and men were not essentially different, an argument well-established for medieval Ireland which also enjoys Classical parallels.⁵⁴

A more subtle supplement to the binary model is required to interpret how men of the in-group related to gods and to monsters. A convincing one is suggested by the relationships between the Hellenic citizens of the city-states, wild beings such as satyrs and nymphs (*Σάτυροι, Νύμφαι*), and barbarians and monsters such as the centaurs or cyclopes (*Κένταυροι, Κύκλωπες*), in ancient Hellenic world-views.⁵⁵ As Bartra put it (1994, 14, citing White 1972), the mythology implies

the existence of a mythological space inhabited by wild men that are clearly distinguishable from barbarians. In contrast with barbarians, who constituted a threat to society in general and to Greek society as a whole, the wild man represented a threat to the individual... White clearly demonstrates that, conventionally, barbarian lands were geographically remote, and the moment of their incursion upon the frontiers of the Greek world would signal an apocalypse: the appearance of hordes of barbarians implied the fracturing of the foundation of the world and the death of an epoch. In contrast the wild man is omnipresent, inhabiting the immediate confines of the community. He is found in the neighbouring forests, mountains and islands.

This is undeniably a grand tidying up of the evidence; a full investigation would develop Buxton's self-consciously pluralistic approaches to Hellenic mythological landscapes (1994, 80–113, cf. 197, 205–7). But the model is convincing and ethnographically

⁵⁴ See Hamel 1934, esp. 207–27; Sjoestedt 1949 [1940], esp. 92–93; Ó Riain 1986, esp. 245–51; cf. Carey 1995, 53–54; *pace* Mackey 1992, whose objections, where relevant, strike me as insubstantial. For Classical material note in addition to the identification of *fauni* as Italy's *aborigines*, the primeval ancestors of the Romans (Stroh 1999, 565–66). Though long ridiculed, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century demythologisations of fairies as past races (on which see Spence 1946, 53–64, 115–31; cf. Purkiss 2000, 5–7) were not so far off the mark.

⁵⁵ White 1972; Bartra 1994, 9–41; Dowden 1992, 123–36, 158–61. Cf. Brink 2001, 83–85.

paralleled (see Helms 1988, 23–24). In it, the role of the barbarians is identical to that of the *jǫtnar* in Old Norse material concerning the Ragnarǫk (on which see Vries 1956–57, II 392–405; Turville-Petre 1964, 280–85), recalling the binary division between humans and monsters and the alignment of monsters with ethnic others. The wild men, however, falling between Hellenic citizens and barbarians afford a neat parallel for the *álfar*. Like the wild men and in contradistinction to monsters, Óðinn in *Grímnismál* and Vǫlundr in *Vǫlundarkviða* are not threats to humanity itself, but to individuals within humanity. Whereas the threat of the monsters is chaotic and final, the threats posed by Óðinn and Vǫlundr serve to punish transgressions of acceptable behaviour, and to warn those who hear of them against similar transgressions.

Ethnic others in early medieval Scandinavian world-views need not only have been identified with monsters. As Lindow has emphasised, *Finnar* can also be associated with otherworldly beings; the *Írar* ('Irish') likewise are associated in the sagas with positive supernatural powers and worlds.⁵⁶ Both *Finnar* and *Írar* may threaten members of the in-group, but, at least at times, in ordered threats to transgressing individuals, affording close parallels to *Vǫlundarkviða* and *Grímnismál*. Non-monstrous but supernaturally-empowered ethnic others, gods, wild men and so forth can be seen in some ways as one conceptual group, conveniently labelled *otherworldly*. Lindow considered that readings of this sort are 'incompatible' with the association of *jǫtnar* with the Sámi (2003, 103 n. 2), but I think rather that we have variation. It might be attributed to chronological, social or regional factors, but also to the slippery nature of the concepts involved. As Cohen argued, 'representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic' (1996, 7–8), and in contexts of conflict, one might expect the monstrous potentialities of *Finnar* to gain prominence. The same point stands, *mutatis mutandis*, for pagan gods faced with Christianisation. On the other hand, mediated social contact in a stable, if uneasy, co-existence might promote instead the otherworldly potentialities of neighbouring peoples. It should also be admitted that the monstrosity of the *jǫtnar* can be overstated (see Clunies Ross 1994–98, esp. 156–79; cf. Motz 1984; Acker 2002); there is probably a case that the connotations of *þursar*, for example, were nastier than those of its partial synonym *jǫtunn*. We should, then, view our second model as a cline between two poles, the extremes marked by men of the human in-group on the one hand and beings like *þursar* on the other:

⁵⁶ On *Finnar*, Lindow 1995; cf. 2003 and the inclusion of *Vǫlundarkviða* in Mundal 1996; on *Írar* Hermann Pálsson 1996, 139–49; cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1998, 268–74. Cf. generally Ó Giolláin 1987.

-MONSTROUS					+MONSTROUS
human in-group	gods etc.	ethnic others	<i>jǫtnar</i>		<i>þursar</i>

Figure 3: *monstrosity in medieval Scandinavia*

This cline puts ethnic others in a suitably ambiguous position, from which they might be associated either with gods and the like or with monsters.

This handling of the Norse evidence does not incorporate all of the complicating detail which could be adduced, such as vertical cosmological elements, other words for supernatural beings in Norse, or the place of gender. I advance these models, therefore, only tentatively as a reconstruction of world views in any given variety of medieval Scandinavian culture. However, I do think that they suggest an acceptable range of likelihoods for the ways in which concepts of *álfar* related to those of *æsir*, *menn* and *jǫtnar*, and to discourses of group identity. They also show how semantic evidence for the meanings of these words indeed reflects Scandinavian world-views as attested by other kinds of evidence, providing a framework for exploring the earliest Old English evidence for the meanings of *ælf* and *ælfes*.