**Trees of Life in Old English and Old Norse Literatures**

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This paper explores religious dimensions of sacred trees in Old English literature and some Old Norse texts which, although preserved in later manuscripts, are broadly contemporaneous with the period in which the former was written down. It begins by exploring representations of the rood tree (i.e., the cross) and other trees with sacral character in Old English texts, before going on to show how trees function as sources of divine sustenance. Human beings, both a product of this world, and apart from it, are themselves compared with and presented as trees and plant life in various contexts, drawing in part on the rich metaphorical stores of Classical and Biblical symbolism, but perhaps also on traditions comparable with those found in Old Norse poetry. In Norse texts, we will consider the appearances of Yggdrasill, a tree embodying the natural world which exists ‘in time’, like the gods: prone to harm, and which will ultimately face the same doom. Yggdrasill embodies the experience of all trees in this way, being subject to physical suffering – an experience shared by humans. Old Norse literature preserves an arboreal creation myth in which wood found upon the seashore is transformed into living human beings, the first man and woman. Elsewhere, a common trope in Eddic and skaldic poetry, through which human beings are equated with trees, suggests conceptions of a common kinship between the two. Ultimately, in both Old English and Old Norse literature, the lines between the human and the vegetal, the sacred and the mundane, are blurred by the appearances of trees, which prove difficult to separate from the worlds of humans. Together, these reflect the complexities of disentangling the vegetal from the human, the sacred from the profane, and the various ways in which Classical and Biblical thought was received and naturalised by those writing in Old English and Old Norse.

**Sacred Trees and the Human Forest in Early English Writings**

A single copy of *The Dream of the Rood* survives in the Vercelli Book manuscript, likely compiled in Canterbury (c. 975), which includes several long Old English poems, prose homilies, and shorter works such as the *Dream*. The poem presents a vision of the crucifixion, narrated in part by Christ’s cross, a tree of the forest felled to serve as a weapon in the hands of his executioners, which becomes the tool of his triumph:

Þæt wæs geara iu,      (ic þæt gyta geman),   
þæt ic wæs aheawen      holtes on ende,

astyred of stefne minum.      Genaman me ðær strange feondas,   
geworhton him þær to wæfersyne,      heton me heora wergas hebban (lines 28-31).[[1]](#footnote-1)

´That was long ago, though I still remember it,

that I was cut down at the edge of the forest,

severed from my stem. Powerful foes seized me there,

transformed me into their spectacle, commanded me to raise up their criminals.

The cross in the *Dream* is remains very much a tree despite its transformation into a cross, a fact in keeping with the reluctance of Old English speakers to adopt any version of Latin *crux*. In Old English, the tree was to remain a tree: a *treow*, a *beam*, or at its furthest remove a *rod*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though the surviving text is late tenth century, it is thought to share a common ancestor with a poem cut in runic letters on the Ruthwell Cross (c. 700) and perhaps also featured in the dedication of the later Brussels Cross. The Ruthwell Cross, like many works of early English sculpture, emphasises this arboreality through the Italianate vinescroll accompanying the poem. As I have argued elsewhere, following Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Richard North,[[3]](#footnote-3) both the poem and the Ruthwell Cross can be interpreted as cultural productions that realigned tree-veneration in Insular pre-Christian beliefs with the cross and its precursors Christian tradition.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Cynewulf and the *Dream* poet almost certainly both knew of at least one other biblical vision of a sacred tree – that of Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel, chapter 4, in which he experiences a vision of a sacred tree related to those of the Ancient Near East.[[5]](#footnote-5) This was rendered into Old English verse in the poem that survives in a single copy in the so-called Junius Manuscript (Junius 11), likely produced in Canterbury c. 965, though the poem itself is usually grouped with older and more metrically conservative works.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nebuchadnezzar slumbers, and in his sleep encounters a wondrous tree:

Þuhte him þæt on foldan fægre stode

wudubeam wlitig, se wæs wyrtum fæst,

beorht on blædum. Næs he bearwe gelic,

ac he hlifode to heofontunglum,

swilce he oferfæðmde foldan sceatas,

ealne middangeard, oð merestreamas,

twigum and telgum. Ðær he to geseah,

þuhte him þæt se wudubeam wilddeor scylde,

ane æte eallum heolde,

swylce fuglas eac heora feorhnere

on þæs beames bledum name (lines 498-507).[[7]](#footnote-7)

It seemed to him that there stood, exquisite upon the earth,

a peerless tree that was fast in its roots,

and bright in its fruits. It was not like any tree of the forest,

rather it soared up to up the stars of heaven,

just as it overhung the surfaces of the earth,

all Middle Earth, as far the waters,

with its twigs and branches. There, as he looked upon it,

it seemed to him that the tree sheltered wild beasts,

providing nourishment entirely from itself,

and birds, likewise, also took their sustenance

from the tree’s fruits.

Here the tree is a cosmic *axis mundi*, a source of universal sustenance comparable with the Norse world tree Yggdrasill discussed below. This tree is unquestionably awe-inspiring in its stature and beauty, and yet suffers a cruel fate: as the dream continues, the tree is felled, and its stump bound for seven years. The tree, as dream-reader Daniel explains, represents Nebuchadnezzar himself, who will endure seven years of bestial madness in the wilderness because of his denial of the God of Israel.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the poet in *Daniel* through this description of the tree’s suffering is to give the reader a tangible sense of what the otherwise thoroughly unsympathetic Nebuchadnezzar will endure.

The poet of *The Phoenix* similarly enlivens an extended allegory of the life and sacrifice of Christ: that of the miraculous bird who self-immolates before being resurrected, renewed, from its own ashes. The Old English poem significantly extends the Latin texts on which it draws, in its description of the place where the Phoenix dwells.[[9]](#footnote-9) The bird weaves its nest in the lofty branches of a tree standing in a paradisal landscape atop an equally lofty plateau:

Hafað þam treowe forgiefen tirmeahtig Cyning,

Meotud moncynnes, mine gefræge,

þæt se ana is ealra beama

on eorðwege uplædendra

beorhtast geblowen (lines 175-9).[[10]](#footnote-10)

The King mighty in glory has granted to that tree,

the Measurer of mankind, as I have heard,

that it alone should blossom

the brightest of all upstanding trees

on earth.

The symbolism of the tree is multifarious and layered throughout the poem, but it most clearly represents the Church and the cross, being both the tool of Christ’s sacrifice and the means of humankind’s redemption. The Phoenix’s nest is woven from the souls of the virtuous, i.e. the individuals responsible for the structuring the Church who are purified through the fires of judgement before re-emerging, renewed.[[11]](#footnote-11) In so far as this tree is most clearly aligned with the cross in typological terms, it operates doubly as an *axis mundi*, firstly in the sense that the cross is the *axis mundi* for the spiritual history of the world, but also because it occupies the centre of the poem’s narrative. It is like Nebuchadnezzar’s tree in other respects too, which offers sustenance to the birds and beasts dwelling within and beneath its branches. Though the tree of *The Phoenix* does not accomplish quite the same thing, it is the physical seat and support of the bird’s nest; it quite literally *sustains* it from beneath.

The function of the tree as a source of divine sustenance, always shadowed by the presence of the cross, also appears in apparently more mundane contexts. The Exeter Book, compiled c. 1000, includes poetry that ranges from sublime religious verse and heart-breaking elegy to sometimes highly sexualised and bawdy riddles, many of which are narrated from the perspective of a quotidian object or animal. Several riddles are thought to describe the experiences of trees, plants, or objects fashioned from wood, such as a cross, a battering ram, a loom, and a plough, though none are given explicit solutions in the manuscript itself. Riddle 21, commonly solved as plough, has hidden depths:

Neb is min niþerweard;      neol ic fere   
ond be grunde græfe,      geonge swa me wisað   
har holtes feond,      ond hlaford min   
woh færeð      weard æt steorte,

wrigaþ on wonge,      wegeð mec ond þyð,   
saweþ on swæð min.      Ic snyþige forð,   
brungen of bearwe,      bunden cræfte,   
wegen on wægne,      hæbbe wundra fela;   
me biþ gongendre      grene on healfe

ond min swæð sweotol      sweart on oþre.   
Me þurh hrycg wrecen      hongaþ under   
an orþoncpil,      oþer on heafde,   
fæst ond forðweard.      Fealleþ on sidan   
þæt ic toþum tere,      gif me teala þenaþ

hindeweardre,      þæt biþ hlaford min (lines 1-15).[[12]](#footnote-12)

My nib is turned downwards, and I fare forth

and groove along the ground, going as the

grey enemy of the forest guides me, and my lord

goes stooping, guards at my tail

as I move across the plain; he supports and urges me,

sows in my track. I snuffle forth,

brought from a forest, skilfully bound,

carried on a wagon, and I have many wonders;

as I go it is green on one side

and my clear track is black on the other.

Pierced through my back, there hangs beneath me

a skilfully made point, and another on my head,

fast and forward-looking. What I tear with my teeth

falls to my sides, if he serves me rightly

from behind, who is my lord.

The narrative surrounding the being *brungen of bearwe* (‘brought from a forest’) moves between the present and past. We see it in action to begin with, moving along the ground, drawn by the *har holtes feond* (‘grey enemy of the forest’), usually interpreted as oxen, with its *hlaford* (lord) sowing seed in its wake. This plough remembers that it was a tree – it tells us where it came from, and how it came to be bound and pierced in this way. It also recognises, like a captive soldier, a mercenary, hostage, or slave, that it has been forced to commit violence against its own tree-kind. It serves the enemy of the forest, and as it moves across the plain it divides the green from the black. In mundane terms this describes the action of the mouldboard plough turning the earth, creating a furrow. In another, it also articulates the conflict between woodland and arable farming; woodland was just as vital a resource to everyday life as land for vegetable and cereal crops and grazing, but the two remained (and remain) in tension.[[13]](#footnote-13) Though the sustenance this tree offers is not spiritual, then, it nevertheless fulfils an important function in the generative and regenerative process of agricultural production.

Trees in Old English poetry shelter these resonances more or less conspicuously, depending on how closely one looks. In a recent article on *Beowulf*, I drew attention to an unrecognised potential significance of the frosty trees overhanging Grendel’s mere, previously identified by Charles Wright as drawing upon the ‘branches of sin’ motif identifiable elsewhere in early English writings.[[14]](#footnote-14) These are described twice in the poem, once by the Danish king Hrothgar in his account of the wastes stalked by the monster Grendel and his mother, and once by the narrator when we reach the banks of the mere wherein they dwell. It is not far from his hall in a measure of miles, Hrothgar says, that the mere stands – above it hang *hrinde bearwas, wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað* (‘frosty trees, a wood fast in its roots that overshadows the waters’, 1363-4).[[15]](#footnote-15) The poem connects Grendel’s ancestry with the line of Cain, which in the Old English poems *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* can be seen to have inherited the original sin of Adam and Eve. This is transmitted via a seed of evil taken from the Tree of Knowledge (the Tree of Death, in the poem), and watered by the blood of Abel. Ultimately, I argue that the trees at Grendel’s mere remind us of the inheritance of evil shared by humans and the monster in *Beowulf*, and its enduring grasp upon the world around us.

Having thought *Beowulf* a relatively treeless poem, aside from this icy grove, more recently still I have considered how this inheritance from Eden can also be found in other parts of the poem. Trees are mentioned early on, when a court poet sings a song about the act of creation, describing how the surfaces of the earth were furnished with vegetal life, whose descendants became part of the timber hall of King Hrothgar. These trees were there at the beginning, this episode reminds us, just as they are present at Grendel’s mere to remind us of the Fall. Trees appear at the end, too. After a much older Beowulf has received his death wound from the dragon’s poison, a messenger is sent to his people, the Geats, to relay this sad news. In delivering his message, he issues a stark warning concerning the likely fate of the Geats after their ruler’s passing. They have no small share of enemies amongst their neighbours, he reminds them, recalling the Battle of Ravenswood, an episode in which the Swedish king Ongentheow was cut down in the forest by warriors whose names are totemic of the denizens of the woodland wilderness – *Eofor* (‘Boar’)and *Wulf* (‘Wolf’). This reminds us, at the end of the poem, that civilisation is a fragile construction, perpetually at the mercy of the power of forces beyond our control.

We have seen, so far, that there are plenty of trees in Old English poetry that are in some sense sentient, like the rood of the *Dream*, or the plough of Riddle 21. Others can aid military conquest, such as the victory tree in *Elene*, and others sustain and protect life, in *Daniel* and *The Phoenix*. The bodies of trees and humans are also aligned in other places in poetry and prose (vernacular and Latin) which compare their properties and abilities in poetry and prose. In some instances these comparisons draw explicitly on Scripture, such as the comparison made in this homily written by Ælfric of Eynsham for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, which draws directly on the Sermon on the Mount, and its commentary on false prophets, in comparing humans with trees that produce good or evil fruits.[[16]](#footnote-16) Further examples can be found elsewhere in Ælfric’s homilies, which invite congregations to consider themselves as fruitful trees – these were considered ripe subject matter for consideration by numerous commentators in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Developing in parallel with this, in wisdom poems such as *Maxims I*, thought to be representative of older and more conservative verse, there are clear signs that proverbs and gnomic statements comparing humans and trees formed part of a less cloistered exchange of knowledge. The poem expresses human life and death in terms which compare them with tree bodies:

Tu beoð gemæccan;

sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan

bearn mid gebyrdum. Beam sceal on eorðan

leafum liþan, leomu gnornian (lines 23-7).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Two are a match:

woman and man must bring forth into the world

children as parents. The tree on earth

must loosen leaves; its limbs mourn.

But a similar image is also employed to express the growth of truth and mercy within individuals and amongst communities more broadly.

Treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan,

sio geond bilwitra breost ariseð.

Wærleas mon ond wonhydig,

ætrenmod ond ungetreow,

þæs ne gymeð god (lines 159-63).

A felled tree grows least.

A tree must extend its branches, and truth must increase;

the heart must grow in those who are merciful.

It is a false and foolish man,

flawed and faithless,

who does not take heed of God.

These two examples, cohabiting the same poem, give some impression of the flexibility of this imagery in the minds and mouths of Old English poets, and how rapidly this passes between the physical, material, and the ideal (in the symbolic sense). Superficially straightforward, these lines also raise questions. Does the tree loosening its leaves represent a family, or an individual? Does the tree of truth grow in the heart, or does the heart grow like a tree of truth? Vegetal imagery in this poem complicates these ideas, and maps inexactly onto human structures and ways of thinking; it is both alike and unlike us.

Elsewhere, in Old English prose, the idea seems to have been well established enough to communicate a range of complex ideas relating to the structure of society and the qualities of individuals within it. The preface to the Old English translations of Augustine of Hippo’s *Soliloquies* describes the process of assembling a florilegium, in which a persona generally associated with King Alfred the great describes walking through the forest, selecting tools and materials for constructing a homestead. This has often been taken by literary critics to refer to the programme of educational reform and translation Alfred initiated as part of a wider range of social, economic, and military innovations in the face of threats to the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex in the late ninth centuries. It also, in referring specifically to the construction of buildings, is likely to have evoked the urban reforms begun at this time and continued by Alfred’s descendants, as part of a system of in-depth defence of the landscape.[[18]](#footnote-18) As I have also argued, however, it equally evokes the mustering of the right sorts of individuals best suited to the needs of his kingdom – praying, fighting, and working men: *on ælcum treowo* (‘in every tree’), the king tells us*, ic geseah hwæthwugu þæs þe ic æt ham beþorfte* (‘I saw something that I needed at home’).[[19]](#footnote-19)

**World Tree and Tree People in Old Norse Poetry**

Old English literary culture has its fair share of sacred trees, and a tree as *axis mundi* in the form of the cross, all of which can be understood, at least in part, in relation to the broader tradition of sacred trees in Jewish and Christian writings, and many of these appearances are drawn directly from Scripture in one way or another. Conversion of the Old English-speaking kingdoms had begun in earnest from c. 600, on an island where Christianity had been an established part of Romano-British culture. Evangelising efforts in Scandinavia and in places settled by Scandinavians came later. Iceland, where most literature recording pre-Christian mythology survives, did not formally adopt Christianity until c. 1000. And yet the regions in which Old Norse was spoken, written, and inscribed in runes, were in places closely connected with the spheres occupied by speakers of Old English. The two languages were, on a very basic level, mutually intelligible, and in certain regions occupied the same physical landscapes, though the forests of (e.g.) Yorkshire are a far cry from the pine-clad mountainsides of Scandinavia, or the denuded woodlands of Iceland.

Trees in Old Norse Eddic and skaldic poetry, though mainly preserved in later contexts, offer better temporal parallels with those in English writings (pre-1100) than prose saga literature. This poetic tradition did not develop in isolation from contexts in which writers of Christian texts were depicting trees, but nevertheless reflects distinct Norse mythological conceptions of trees. Chief among these is the well-known world tree Yggdrasill, most fully described in the poem *Vǫluspá*, likely composed in Iceland c. 1000.

Ask veit ek standa,

heitir Yggdrasill,

hár baðmr, ausinn

hvíta auri;

þaðan koma dǫggvar

þærs í dala falla,

stendr æ yfir grœnn

Urðarbrunni.[[20]](#footnote-20)

I know that there stands

an ash named Yggdrasill,

a high tree drenched

with shining waters;

thence come the dews

that fall in the dales;

the ash stands forever green above

the well of Urðr.

This tree connects all parts of the pre-Christian Norse cosmos, seemingly embodying the earth itself, and nourishing life with its waters and vegetation. This cosmic tree will be destroyed in the fires of Ragnarok, before seemingly rising again when the world is renewed. Before then, it suffers constantly from the actions of other beings, as *Grímnismál* tells us:

Askr Yggdrasils

drýgir erfiði

meira en menn viti:

hjǫrtr bítr ofan,

en á hliðu fúnar,

skerðir Níðhǫggr neðan.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The Ash Yggdrasil

endures agony

greater than men know:

a stag bites it above,

but at the side it is decaying

and Níðhǫggr tears it from beneath.

Christopher Abram notes that this suffering is ‘produced by the tree’s involvement in symbiosis’, its role as a tree of life reminds us that ‘life continues always at the cost of something’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Yggdrasill, like the Norse gods, is a being in and of this world, even though it possesses miraculous properties and powers.

In this way the Norse world tree is less a symbol and more a material manifestation of the natural world, which is one way of accounting for historically attested trees and pillars often regarded as analogues that seem likely to have embodied similar characteristics. These include the *robor Iovis* (‘Oak of Jupiter’), apparently felled by St Boniface c. 722 in the course of evangelising in Hesse, and perhaps also the *Irminsul* felled by Charlemagne c. 772, the name of which Rudolf as Fulda translated as *universalis columna*, *quasi sustinens omnia* (‘universal pillar, as if supporting everything’).[[23]](#footnote-23) A parallel closer in time to the Yggdrasill of *Vǫluspá*, appears in Adam of Bremen’s account of the sacred grove and temple at Uppsala, Sweden, in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, whose oldest manuscript dates to c. 1100, having possibly been penned by Adam himself.[[24]](#footnote-24) The text describes an *arbor maxima* (‘great tree’) of unknown species, near which lies a spring where sacrifices take place and victims are drowned alive; close to the temple there stands a sacred *lucus* (‘grove’) wherein human and animal victims are left hanging – and rotting – from the trees.[[25]](#footnote-25) I make no further claims here for the supposed qualities of these trees and pillar, nor the authenticity of these authors’ colourful accounts beyond noting their cosmic and sacral character, and the fact that they physically existed, or were thought to have done so by near contemporaries. If we understand trees in the environment around us as parts of a natural world encapsulated in a symbolic tree such as Yggdrasill, the presence of multiple physical manifestations of a cosmic tree becomes more understandable. In this light every tree is not representative *of* Yggdrasill, but is Yggdrasill itself. This is not far distant from the way in which many kinds of Christian relics, such as those of the True Cross, have been understood to draw on the agency of a more removed power. The difference between this and an arboreal world tree is that the tree might quite literally be understood as an offshoot of the world we inhabit.

The arboreal anthropogonies of Eddic poetry connect the creation of humans directly with this material. The clearest evidence of this appears in *Vǫluspá*, where a first man and first woman are created on the seashore by Óðinn and two other gods, who find them in the course of a journey – or perhaps a search. Here, *Ask ok Emblu* (‘Ash and Elm’) are given human life through the gifts of breath, spirit, voices, and flesh.[[26]](#footnote-26) The appearance of Ash and Elm on the seashore may, like some of the volcanic pyrotechnics of *Vǫluspá*, stem from the Icelandic contexts in which the poem was likely written – an impressive quantity of driftwood washes up on the island’s shores. But the seashore is also liminal ground, moving with the tides between dry land and water, and an unstable and generative space. Elsewhere in Eddic poetry we see Óðinn carrying out a similar experiment. In a strophe of the wisdom poem *Hávamál* (49), a composite work of various parts, Óðinn describes how he gave his clothes to *tveim trémǫnnum* ('two tree-men‘) in a way that seemingly grants them life and self-consciousness.[[27]](#footnote-27) This opaque episode has been interpreted in various ways by commentators. It is not, as in *Vǫluspá*, presented as anthropogony, and has arguably more in common with the sorcerer’s apprentice conjuring broomsticks in Goethe’s *Der Zauberlehrling* than with the primordial shaping of human life. And yet, the essential elements are the same: two figures, literally ‘tree-men’, are here seemingly enlivened by these gifts – not only dressed as warriors, but also capable of thinking of themselves in this way.

Comparisons between humans and trees in Eddic poetry are commonplace, though by and large these descriptions either align the increase of heroes with that of trees and plant life, or use images of violence done to vegetation as a means of expressing human suffering.[[28]](#footnote-28) The first of these is the metaphor of ‘people as plants’ found plentifully in other literary traditions.[[29]](#footnote-29) To take just a few of the examples I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere, we might consider how the two Helgi poems present the hero as both an elm and an ash:

Þá nam at vaxa

fyr vina brjósti

álmr ítrborinn,

ynðis ljóma;

hann galt ok gaf

gull verðungu,

sparði eigi hilmir

hodd blóðrekinn.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Then began to grow

in his friends’ hearts,

that shining-born elm tree

with the brightness of joy;

he dispensed and gave

gold to the troop

and that chieftain did not stint on

the bloodstained hoard.

Helgi here in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* grows and prospers in the same way as Beow in the opening lines of *Beowulf*, whose military successes become a source of material wealth for the men he commands. The same is true of his appearance in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, where he is compared with an *ítrskapaðr askr af þyrni* ('bright-growing ash beside the thorns‘).[[31]](#footnote-31) In terms of stature and prowess, Helgi towers like a high-growing ash, whilst more diminutive chieftains spread beneath him like thorns – a comparison similar to the one in *Guðrúnarkviða* II, where Sigurðr‘s prowess among men is that of a leek among blades of grass.

Human suffering expressed through trees is also fairly commonplace in Eddic poetry. *Hávamál*, as we have seen, has plenty to offer with an arboreal focus. If clothes make a tree-man a warrior, a tree without its bark or foliage is in *Hávamál* is like a man without a place in human community not long for this world.[[32]](#footnote-32) As I have again discussed in greater detail elsewhere, trees are used to grant greater insight into the emotional experience of (for instance) losing loved ones. Guðrun, in *Hamðismál*, offers insight into what the withered fir tree of *Hávamál* might *feel*:

Einstœð em ek orðin

sem ǫsp í holti,

fallin at frændum

sem fura at kvisti,

vaðin at vilja

sem viðr at laufi,

þá er in kvistskœða

kømr um dag varman.[[33]](#footnote-33)

I stand alone

like an aspen in the forest,

with my kinsmen cut away

like the branches of a fir;

deprived of happiness,

like a tree of its leaves,

when a girl comes

cutting branches on a warm day.

This is visceral, but also speaks to human ignorance of the suffering of these cohabitants, as we have already seen in the case of Yggdrasill above. Humans in Old Norse literature may be conscious of the pain inflicted on other beings, but seem best able to understand this through metaphors connected with kinship.

Though the poetry of the *Poetic Edda* is difficult to date with confidence, mostly being preserved in the thirteenth century Codex Regius, there is good evidence that these ideas are significantly older. This can be found in the corpus of surviving skaldic poetry, which is generally thought to be more securely dateable than Eddic poetry, as its metre requires the retention of word forms that could not undergo the sorts of changes Eddic poetry may have undergone without breaking metrical rules. The comparison between humans and trees in skaldic poetry, is commonplace. The thirteenth century Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson comments on this in his *Skáldskaparmál*, a sort of poetics for would-be skalds, surmising that the kinds of trees associated with men are those which reflect culturally masculine pursuits such as warfare and expeditions, while women are associated with trees more representative of the security and governance of the household.[[34]](#footnote-34) As I have discussed elsewhere, one of the most memorable descriptions of a person as a tree appears in *Sonatorrek*, or ‘on the hard loss of sons’, written by the tenth century warrior poet Egill Skallagrimsson, according to *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*.[[35]](#footnote-35) The explains that Egill composed this poem after the death by water of his son Boðvarr, who was shipwrecked off the coast of Iceland by a sudden storm in around 960. Another of Egill’s sons, Gunnar, had died of fever some time before. The saga recounts how Egill took up the body of his son from the seashore and took him to be buried in a mound beside his own father, before falling into a deep depression. Egill’s *Sonatorrek* takes the form, in part, of his attempt to make sense of the senseless death of his children. He reflects that:

Þvítt ætt mín, á enda stendr,

hræbarnir sem hlynir marka;

esa karskr maðr sás köggla berr

frænda hrørs at fletjum niðr.[[36]](#footnote-36)

My line stands at its end,

its men like weather-beaten forest trees;

it is no happy man that must carry down the joints

of the corpse of his kinsman from his home.

Later in the poem, in lines that seem to refer to both Boðvarr and Gunnar, Egill says that:

Þat mank enn es upp of hóf

í goðheim Gauta spjalli

ættar ask, þanns óx af mér

ok kynvið kvánar minnar.[[37]](#footnote-37)

I remember when the comrade of the Gauts [Óðinn]

raised up into the realm of the gods

the ash of my kindred that grew from me,

and the kinwood of my wife’s kin.

In the saga Egill, a poet and a farmer, but also a warrior, is a devotee of Óðinn – an aristocratic deity, whose motives and actions are often obscure, often thought to be preparations for the battle at the end of time, at Ragnarǫk, in which he will die. As I have suggested elsewhere, if Egill in the mid-late tenth century was familiar with the same story of tree anthropogony recorded in *Vǫluspá* at the turn of the millennium, these lines in *Sonatorrek* may reflect a pre-Christian understanding of how his son, a bright growing ash, has completed the human journey that first began with Óðinn‘s gift of vitality to two trees similarly found bereft of life, upon the seashore.

**Conclusion**

Though connected by common linguistic roots, and in daily contact at the level of ordinary people from the ninth century onwards in northern and eastern Britain, there are significant differences between the representations of trees in Old English and Norse literature. The landscapes of southern England, where the Old English poetic manuscripts were likely produced, are not much like those of Iceland. And yet the literature of these languages expresses comparable and complementary ideas about trees and their relationships with human lives that shed some light on the equally complex and shifting landscapes of belief in northern Europe in the early Middle Ages. In some contexts, the tree operated as a sacred symbol, a source of life and vitality, comparable with sacred trees in other ancient and medieval cultures. In others, it not only symbolised this agency but physically embodied it. The tree one might encounter in the landscape could be understood as a material extension of the cosmic world tree, rather than its representative. The line between the material and the metaphor becomes confused in some contexts, thin in others, and perhaps barely visible in the mind’s eye of those unaccustomed to tracing it. So too is the separation of the vegetal and the human. Some of these writings are clear about what this means – people are plants, as Lakoff and Johnson have determined in multiple written traditions. This metaphor offers a framework for what we have seen in the above, but does not fully account for the different ways in which people are plants, and whether in this context this metaphor is used as a means of explaining human life (or indeed plant life), and expressing similarities and parallels between the animal and vegetal, or of articulating *commonalities* between the lives of both. Both have limbs vulnerable to breaking, fire, and rot. Both, as early medieval people perceived, had their period of burgeoning and growth, as well as vulnerability and allotted span of years. Together, these texts suggest an awareness of the shared commons of life on earth, whether from a non-/pre-Christian or Christian perspective. Norse mythology presents us with a world in time, from whose materials all things are formed, that will be destroyed and return once again, perhaps doomed to suffer the same fate.[[38]](#footnote-38) The material world of Christianity of Old English texts is in many ways no different, albeit with the expectation that the world, its people, and its trees are all finite, and once burned will no longer exist. We might only hope, in this age of conflagration, for the former.

1. References to *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Michael Swanton, 2nd edn, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1987. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This term is used Old English sources almost exclusively to describe the physical shape of a cross, as enacted (e.g.) posturally. See Michael D. J. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2015, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition*,London: The British Library, 2005, p. 49; Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 275, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. Michael D. J. Bintley, Recasting the Role of Sacred Trees in Anglo-Saxon Spiritual History: The South Sandbach Cross “Ancestors of Christ” Panel in its Cultural Contexts, in *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Michael D. J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland,Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 211-27; Bintley, *Trees in the Religions*, pp. 91-127. Here, I follow approaches to conversion discussed in (e.g.) John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Nebuchadnezzar of the Bible is thought to be the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556-39 BC), a successor to Nebuchadnezzar the Great (605-562 BC). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Leslie Lockett, An Integrated Re–examination of the Dating of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, in “Anglo-Saxon England”, 31 (2002), pp. 141–73; R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, pp. 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. References to *Daniel* from *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. George P. Krapp, New York, Columbia University Press, 1931, pp. 111-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Daniel 4. 19-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These being principally the *De ave phoenice* attributed to Lactantius, and Ambrose’s *Hexameron*. See discussion in N. F. Blake, ed., *The Phoenix*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. References to *The Phoenix* from *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, ed. Bernard J. Muir, 2 vols, 2nd edn, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2000, pp. 164-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Discussed in Bintley, *Trees in the Religions*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. References to Riddle 21 from Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Michael D. J. Bintley, Brungen of Bearwe: Ploughing Common Furrows in Riddle 21, *The Dream of the Rood*, and the *Æcerbot* Charm, in *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 144-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Charles D. Wright, The Blood of Abel and the Branches of Sin: *Genesis A*, *Maxims I*, and Aldhelm’s *Carmen de uirginitate*, in “Anglo-Saxon England”, 25 (1996), pp. 7-19; Michael D. J. Bintley, *Hrinde Bearwas*: The Trees at the Mere and the Root of All Evil in *Beowulf*, in “Journal of English and Germanic Philology”, 119.3 (2020), pp. 309-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. References to *Beowulf* from *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 4th edn, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Malcolm Godden, ed., *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: the Second Series Text*, EETS, SS.5, London, Early English Text Society, 1979, p. 235 (lines 7-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. References to *Maxims I* from Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, pp. 251-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bintley, *Settlements and Strongholds*, pp. 144-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *King Alfred’s Old English Version of St. Augustine’s Soliloquies*, ed. Henry L. Hargrove, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1902, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. All references to Eddic poetry from Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds, *Eddukvæði,* 2 vols, Íslenzk fornrit, Reykjavík, Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014. The numbering of stanzas follows this edition. *Vǫluspá*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Grímnismál*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Christopher Abram, *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature*,Charlottesville, VA, University of Virginia Press, 2019, p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio Sancti Alexandri*, in *Scriptores Rerum Sangallensium: Annales, Chronica et Historiae Aevi Saxonici*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 2, ed. G. H. Pertz, Hanover, 1929, pp. 673-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See discussion in Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, 2 vols, Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2009, I, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, in *Quellen des 9. Und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hambugischen Kirche und des Reiches*, ed. Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner, Darmstadt, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Vǫluspá*, 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Hávamál*,49. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions*; Michael D. J. Bintley, Plant Life in the Poetic Edda, in *Sensory Perception in the Medieval West*, ed. by Simon Thomson and Michael D. J. Bintley, Turnhout: Brepols, 2016, pp. 227-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. As identified and discussed in various contexts in George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 5-8, 12-16, 25-30, 52-53, 73-75, 79-80, 84, 92, 107. A study of this in an especially relevant context is Jennifer Metten Pantoja, The Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People: Stinking Grapes or Pleasant Planting?, Leiden, Brill, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Hávamál*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Hamðismál*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Bintley, *Trees in the Religions*, pp. 134-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions*, pp. 131-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. References to *Sonatorrek* from Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, 2, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska Fornritfélag, 1933, pp. 246-56; *Sonatorrek*,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Sonatorrek*, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. As Abram argues in *Evergreen Ash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)