

Religion, *Álfar* and *Dvergar*

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Abstract:

In this article we aim to explore the connection between two types of collective mythical beings, the *álfar* and the *dvergar*. We assess critically the reliability of different sources and analyse the way in which those beings are depicted in some medieval documents. Finally, we attempt to distinguish them by reconstructing (hypothetically) their respective place in religious practice and their connection with the broader morality of exchange that pervaded medieval Scandinavian society.

Keywords: *álfar*, *dvergar*, worship, exchange.

Resumen:

En este artículo apuntamos a explorar la conexión entre dos tipos de entidades míticas colectivas, los *álfar* y los *dvergar*. Ponderamos críticamente la fiabilidad de las distintas fuentes y analizamos el modo en que esos seres son presentados en algunos documentos medievales. Finalmente, intentamos distinguirlos reconstruyendo (hipotéticamente) su respectivo lugar en la práctica religiosa, y su conexión con la más amplia moral de intercambio que impregnaba a las sociedades medievales escandinavas.

Palabras clave: *álfar*, *dvergar*, adoración, intercambio.

In recent years there has been increased scholarly attention devoted to the study of “collective powers” (*kollektive makter*, Steinsland 2005, p.248) that, even if not necessarily marginal, occupy a non-central role in the mythology and/or religion of medieval Scandinavia. *Álfar* and *dvergar*, often (and misleadingly) translated respectively as “elves” and “dwarves”, are two types of such beings. However, we can argue that the differences between categories of beings are blurry as they seem to overlap considerably. There are two evident reasons that help to explain this phenomenon.

First, the evidence is widely distributed across space and time, and there is no reason to expect unified principles in such a vast range of accounts. Second, the classifications were created by people who presumably did not need precise systems of classification to understand the universe, unlike those devised by analytical forms of thought. The matter becomes more complex because of late (and/or foreign) witnesses who tried to explain or reconstruct realities through the lens of their own perception. The transition from a society whose knowledge was produced and transmitted mainly orally to one where there was (at least for part of the elite¹) an extensive written culture should have had a strong impact on those systems of classification, as the classical work by Ong (1982) has shown. To complicate the issue even further, in Iceland this process of transition from oral to written culture was at the same time the conversion to Christianity. It is only from the Christian period that we have written evidence for these beings, and this of course renders any reconstruction of the religious role of *álfar* and *dvergar* as at best highly hypothetical.

The first objective of this article is to establish differences and points of connection between *álfar* and *dvergar* as presented in the written sources. As a second step, we will try to relate these beings to religious practices present in medieval Iceland. This obviously requires taking a stance on what we understand for “religion”, considering the wide range of definitions that scholars have created for the term.

¹ Anthropological views of medieval Scandinavia have often failed to take into account the fragmented social structure of these societies and have often generalized from evidence biased towards the elite. This has been argued by Nedvítke (2000).

We follow an approach that sees religion in strong connections with the sacred², this is, that religion relates to objects, places, and forms of action that are “set apart”, separated from worldly matters as a way to add a plus of significance to them. The sacred helps to explain social order and reproduce³ social ties through ritual and through imaginary representations of the cosmos (myths). Inhuman (but in many cases human-like, as with *dvergjar* and *álfar*) imaginary beings usually play significant roles in those rituals and myths in most societies. Therefore, to establish the role and connection between *dvergjar* and *álfar* we face a double task: to clarify their mythical identity (as attested in the mythology) and to see their connection with actual religious practice.

This definition of religion also has the advantage of avoiding an unnecessarily strict division between Christian and “pagan” praxis. First, because the transition into Christianity was a long process, which did not start or end with the conversion of the insular country at the turn of the millennium, and it is impossible to know to which depth the institutional conversion meant a conversion of beliefs. Second, because the basic practices (as opposed to their worldview expressed in learned constructions) of medieval Christian cult and those in the pagan period are analogous in some important points. Both appear grounded on a principle of *do-ut-des* (“I give so you give back to me”)⁴, usually involving mediator inhuman entities and/or objects⁵. Finally, because for some early converts there was no contradiction between accepting a monotheist religion and keeping the belief in (and even the worship of) other beings⁶.

² This view is heavily indebted to the tradition that goes back to Durkheim (1960 [1912]). For the role of sacrifice, it mostly goes back to his nephew, Mauss, and his disciple, Hubert (1964 [1898] and 1990 [1923-1924]).

³ The use of religious acts to *change* social ties is widely attested, especially in ritual (see for example Turner 1969). It is important to note that the reproduction of social ties does not imply its immobility.

⁴ On this principle as fundamental for the practices of medieval Christianity, see Iogna Prat (1988).

⁵ However, the *imaginary* aspect of religion, the worldview, of non-Christian and Christian (and especially learned Christians) people could be fundamentally different, and this affects directly our task.

⁶ This is not limited to the north, with *Landnámabók* providing the best-known accounts. A famous continental example of non-canonical belief and worship is a case of dog-worship that happened centuries after the conversion (Schmitt 1983).

1. The sources⁷

There is a relatively abundant number of sources for both types of entities. However, the texts are often frustratingly laconic or cryptic. Most sources treat *dvergar* and *álfar* separately, and the number of sources that include both of them is more limited. It should be complemented with the background provided by accounts which only mention *álfar* or *dvergar*. A very prominent literary source which depicts both is the thirteenth-century *Ars Poetica* written by Snorri Sturluson, the (prose) *Edda*. In this work, Snorri systematizes material closely connected with the so-called “eddic” poetry, and preserved (mostly) in another Icelandic manuscript from the same century, one of the many named *Codex Regius* (GKS 2365 4to).

Sagas might also be useful sources, but many of them (especially the rich *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*) are very problematic. A core problem is the influence from continental literary forms that might affect the depiction of those beings⁸. Moreover, the late date of composition of many of these accounts makes any search in them for a specifically religious (different from a literary) meaning for *álfar* and *dvergar* an extremely risky procedure. Post-medieval accounts logically increase this risk as they are far more distant from the period under study, especially as late folkloric accounts fuse *álfar* and *dvergar* into a general category of “hidden people” (Steinsland 2005, p.248). To minimize this risk, we will avoid using any post-medieval source.

Etymology⁹ (especially onomastics) and toponymy pose in general the opposite problem: they might be too old. Even if they might provide the *original* meaning of a word, it was not necessarily understood at the time under scrutiny. We can imagine that someone named Oscar today will generally be far from being seen as “the spear of the gods”, and most Alfreds will not think themselves to be “under the advice of *álfar*”, whatever the etymology of their names implies. Names can just be names when the root

⁷ *Snorra Edda* is quoted by volume and page number in the first two volumes of Faulkes’ edition. Eddic poetry is quoted by stanza and page number in Neckel’s edition. Sagas are quoted by chapter number from the listed editions. All translations are ours.

⁸ On the function of *dvergar* in the romances, see Ármann Jakobsson (2008)

⁹ After an exhaustive analysis of the names of *dvergar*, a scholar concluded that etymology “is not of much help” (Polomé 1997, p.448).

is no longer understood by the bearer, and this was certainly true for many medieval names. Nevertheless, for a (modern or medieval) Björn his connection with bears would be much easier to imagine, and an Ásgeir would possibly associate his name with its meaning much easier than his etymological namesake Oscar would. In short, we try to use these sources with care as they provide very uncertain dates and degrees of intelligibility and so are especially complex to handle.

2. The prose Edda

We chose a comparatively late (c. 1220 is a usual date) but very systematic mythological account to begin our attempt to clarify the relationship between *álfar* and *dvergar*, before proceeding to read the main poetic sources used to compose this work. *Snorra Edda* has many passages where references to both *álfar* and *dvergar* are made at the same time. In his account of the search for Sif's lost hair, we read that Loki swore to make the *svartálfar* (black *álfar*) create new hair for Þórr's wife, and

Eftir þat fór Loki til þeira dverga er heita Ívalda synir

(“After that, Loki travelled to those *dvergar* that are called the sons of Ívaldi” *Edda*, II, p.41).

The same happens in one of the early scenes of the Völsung cycle:

þá sendi Óðinn Loka í Svartálfaheim ok kom hann til dvergs þess er heitir Andvari

(“Then Óðinn sent Loki into the world of the black *álfar*, and he found this *dvergr* who is called Andvari”, *Edda*, I, p.45)

And a third time, when they are trying to bind the wolf (of) Fenrir:

*þá sendi Alfǫðr þann er Skírnir er nefndr, sendimaðr Freys,
ofan í Svartálfaheim til dverganna nokkurra*

(Then the father-of-all sent that one, who Skírnir is named, the messenger of Freyr, down into the world of black *álfar* to some *dvergar*, *Edda*, I, p.28)

In these passages is evident that, for Snorri at least, there was some connection between *álfar* and *dvergar*, and that either some *dvergar* live in the world of black *álfar*, or that there is identity between them. The second option is more likely, as there is no mention of any being called a *svartálfr*, so we can suppose it is largely a synonym for *dvergar*. Another passage adds more to this idea of “dark *álfar*”:

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

(There is a certain place there, which is called the world-of-*álfar*. There dwells that people that are called the *álfar* of light, but the dark *álfar* dwell under the earth, and they are different in appearance, but much more different in behaviour. The *álfar* of light are fairer¹⁰ than the sun to the sight, but the dark *álfar* are blacker than pitch. *Edda*, I, p. 19)

The French folklorist Claude Lecouteux (1988, pp.129-131) thinks that Snorri was depicting a tripartite system, with *álfar* of light carrying a positive value, black *álfar* a negative one, and dark *álfar* in an intermediate position. He points towards a clear analogy with medieval systems of classifications for angels, where those who stood on God’s side stay in heaven, those who kept neutral fall to earth, and those siding with Lucifer turned into demons. The analogy has severe problems: on the one hand it rests on a rather tenuous association between Loki¹¹ and *dvergar* / black *álfar* based in post-medieval Swedish accounts (Lecouteux 1988, pp.116-118) that assimilate both *dvergar* and Loki to

¹⁰ Manuscript U reads *hvítari*, whiter.

¹¹ Who is also here too easily assimilated with Lucifer, even while the demonic role in many sagas is in fact played by Óðinn.

spiders¹². On the other, the distinction in *Snorra Edda* between dark and black álfar is not clear at all. Both terms never appear together, and both are contrasted with *ljósálfar*. Therefore it seems more reasonable to think of them both as the same, thus creating an opposition between *álfar of light* and *black álfar / dark álfar / dvergar*, in binary terms (as does Boyer 1990, p.48). Lecouteux rightly points towards Snorri's Christian education as probably influencing his account. In this scenario, an important question is if the description of a divergent behaviour is what makes Snorri attach a corresponding visual appearance, or if a traditional difference in appearance was cause for attaching behaviour, or if Snorri simply created both, or took them from tradition. In other words, we can ask if the main difference between (*ljós-*) *álfar* and *dvergar* is one of appearance, or one of attitude.

3. Eddic poetry

Eddic poetry also has instances where both *dvergar* and *álfar* appear together. One of them is in the cosmological poem *Völuspá*¹³. In a long list of names of *dvergar*, we find *Gand-álfr* and *Vind-álfr* (*Völuspá*, 12, p. 3) and later *Álfr* and *Yngvi* (*Völuspá*, 16, p.4). This list is reproduced in *Snorra edda* with generally the same names, *Ingi* for *Yngvi* being the only (and not problematic) difference (*Edda* I, p.17). The first three names name these *dvergar* as *álfar* (*gand-* refer to a type of magic, *vind-* is wind). *Yngvi* is an interesting name, as is also one of the names of *Freyr*, the god most obviously connected to *álfar* as owner of *Álfheimr*, which was given to him: *Álfheim Frey gáfo i árdaga tívar at tannfé* ("The gods gave the world-of-álfar to Frey as a tooth-gift", *Grimnismál*, 5, p.58).

¹² Another association we do not explore here, but which deserves more attention is the one between *dvergar*, *álfar* and the dead. It tends to focus on names (for *dvergar*) and on ancestry cults (for *álfar*). It is alternatively taken as fundamental (Boyer 1994, closely followed by Lecouteux 1988), considered plausible (Gunnell 2007), not seen as necessary (Clunies-Ross 1994, I, p.55), or even dismissed (Ármann Jakobsson 2005) by different scholars.

¹³ Our quotations follow the non-normalized spelling of Neckel's edition, but we call the poems using standard, normalized spellings.

Elsewhere in the poem both types of being appear as different, and there is no explanation on why the list of the names of *dvergar* labels some of them as *álfar*¹⁴. The difference is very marked in the only poem where a *dvergr* is the protagonist, *Álvissmál*, where *álfar* and *dvergar* are clearly identified as different groups, as are men, *Vanir*, *Æsir*, and *jötnar*. However, *Álvissmál* is regarded by most scholars as a late poem, from the 12th or 13th century (Von See et al. 2000, p.292), and the neatness of its classification system probably points towards a learned background. If we compare this date with the common accepted point of view of *Völuspá* as being composed orally near the turn of the millennium (Dronke 1997, p.62), it is not difficult to see a progress in the systematization of the classification system used in each poem. *Álvissmál* classifies beings in a way which is even clearer than what we find in *Snorra Edda*. In that poem, *álfar* and *dvergar* are different groups, two parts in a system composed of six kinds of entities. However, the poem does not provide any clue on what makes them different, just on that they are, and says that they have different names for things.

Völuspá, on the other hand, does provide some substantial information. It associates *dvergar* with earth and stone, and tells that they were created by *regin*, “the powers”, which must mean the gods (*Völuspá*, 9, p. 2). *Dvergar* are created beings as men are, and they are¹⁵ also said to be the owners of a building made of gold (and therefore, rich) located “in the under-plains” (*á niðavöllum*). They groan on their stone doors, but they do not do anything else when the *ragnarök* approaches. The *álfar*, on the other hand, are as worried as the *Æsir* are (*Völuspá*, 49, p.11) with the upcoming destruction of the cosmos. Yet, the poem provides no more clues on who they are; their origin is shrouded in mystery, but they appear as ancient, and as associated¹⁶ with the gods. In *Lokasenna*, for example, we see them feasting together with the *Æsir* and so presented as friends or

¹⁴ The fact that this list might be an interpolation in the poem probably explains why it fits so uncomfortably with the rest of the poem; yet, as Ármann Jakobsson (2005) has noted, its inclusion in the poem should not have been a random mistake, but must have been intentional. The problem is *when* this was made. It is clear that for Snorri it was part of the poem, but when in the period c.1000-1220 did it happen, and how old is the list itself, is unclear; the alliteration and rhythmic diction might point towards an oral origin.

¹⁵ If we assume, as Snorri did, that *Sindra ættar* refers to the *dvergar* (*Völuspá*, 37, p.8).

¹⁶ Or maybe as identical. *Álfar* and *vanir* are different in *Álvissmál*, yet *Völuspá*, *Lokasenna* and most Eddic poems make no clear difference between both groups, and use the word *vanir* sparingly. Yet, the only *álfr* named as an individual in Eddic poetry (*Völundr the smith*) is quite below in terms of power and has different behaviour compared with Freyr or Njörðr. The collective group of *álfar*, on the other hand, seem to share a lot with *vanir* in function, maybe being a lesser version of them.

allies of the gods: *ása oc álfa, er hér inni ero* (“The *Æsir* and *álfar*, that here [in *Ægir*’s hall] inside are”. *Locasenna*, 2, p. 97).

Even if it does not mention *dvergar*, *Völundarkviða* also presents plenty of analogies between a specific *álfr* and *dvergar*. The protagonist is qualified as an *álfr* three times (*Völundarkviða*. 10, p.118; 13, p.119; 32, p.122). He is stunted, a smith, vengeful and rich, and is married to a woman who is not from his same group; in all this, *Völundr* echoes *dvergar*. He is mentioned in Old English poems *Deor* and *Beowulf* (as *Weland/Welund*), hinting that he is an ancient mythical figure. Ursula Dronke suggests that there was a replacement of an “old tradition in which *álfar* were subtle smiths”, their role taken later by the *dvergar* (Dronke 1997, p.262). However, we have seen how for *Snorri* there seems to be identity between a type of *álfar* and *dvergar*. Moreover, those *dvergar*/*svartálfar* are smiths, who give their craft only under the threat of force¹⁷, in the same way that *Völundr* does.

Hávamál also presents a stanza in which *álfar* and *dvergar* are mentioned together. *Hár* (*Óðinn*) describes those who carved the runes for different groups¹⁸: he did it himself for the *æsir*, *Dáinn* for the *álfar*, *Dvalinn* for the *dvergar*, and *Ásviðr* for the *jötnar* (*Hávamál*, 143, p.41). Here we seem to face a classification where *dvergar* and *álfar* are clearly different, as in *Álvissmál*. But we should notice that we lack the name *Vanir*, which might indicate that *álfar* in fact refers to them. Moreover, *Dáinn* is also the name of a *dvergr* that is mentioned in *Völuspá* (stanzas 11 and 13, in H manuscript only) and in *Hyndluljóð*, an Eddic poem preserved in *Flateyrbók*, where he is said to have created *Freyja*’s golden boar with another *dvergr* (*Hyndluljóð*, 7, p.289). This might be a simple coincidence in names or it can even be argued that a *dvergr* made the runes for the *álfar*. However, we can point out another instance where both kinds of beings are mixed. Stanza 160 of *Hávamál* names again a *dvergr* who deals with *álfar*. It says:

¹⁷ A similar figure is prominent in Eddic sources, and shares some traits with *Völundr*. *Reginn*, foster-father of *Sigurðr Fáfnisbani*, is also told to be a “*hveriom manni hagari, oc dvergr of vøxt*” in the prose introduction to *Reginismál*. This can be translated as “the most skilful of all men, and a *dvergr* in stature”. But could *vøxt* also be read as “state”, “condition”. Price (2006) has shown that the depictions of *Reginn* in runestones do not present him as short in height. This could suggest that *Reginn*’s nature is *dvergr*-like beyond his physical outlook.

¹⁸ The last verse of the stanza might indicate that he brought the runes to men, but the reading is ambiguous.

Þat kann ec iþ fimmtánda / er gól Þíóðrørir,

Dvergr Fyr Dellings durom /

Afl gól hann ásom / enn álfom frama

Hyggio Hroptatý

(I know the fifteenth [spell]/ that Þíóðrørir chanted

a *dvergr* from Delling's door [this is, dawn]

strength he chanted for the *Æsir* / but for the *álfar*, prosperity

knowledge for Hroptatýr [a name of Óðinn].

(*Hávamál*, 160, p.44)

Here we seem to have a *dvergr* who is skilled in magic, and who also gave – we do not know why, but he did it thrice - benefits to other beings, including the *álfar*, whom he gave *frami*, a word which means “prominence” and “prosperity”¹⁹. He therefore gives the other gods attributes that are typical of them: *Æsir* are mighty (and warlike), and *Óðinn* is famed for his intellectual attributes. Giving the *álfar* prosperity, therefore, seem to remark that this was one of their fundamental attributes, here given through the spell known by the *dvergr* (who, interestingly, sings nothing for himself or his kind).

So far, our analysis of Eddic material, both in prose and poetry, generally shows instances of *dvergar* and *álfar* appearing in the same scenes. The only text that presents them as clearly distinct and unrelated is *Álvissmál*. *Snorra Edda* seems to divide clearly between *álfar* of light, in the one hand and dark/black *álfar/dvergar* on the other and in this way makes *dvergar* a subtype of *álfar*. Names and attributes in *Völuspá*, *Völundarkviða*, and *Hávamál* point instead to the lack of systematic definitions.

¹⁹ The *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis* translates the term with *trivsel* (prosperity), but the Cleasby-Vigfússon dictionary gives the meanings “distinction, renown, fame”. Given the context, the first meaning seems more appropriate. Even so, the connection between both ideas is an even more interesting possibility. The glossary to the poem by Faulkes (1987) lists both meanings.

However, none of these sources says anything about the religious role of these beings, if they had any. The useful sources for this aspect are sagas and skaldic poems, where we find accounts of religious practice related to these beings.

4. Religious links

Kórmaks saga, an early example of *Íslendingasögur* that tells the life and deeds of a poet, presents a scene where a sacrifice to *álfar* is described:

“Hóll einn er heðan skammt í brott, er álfar búa í. Graðung þann, er Kormákr drap, skaltu fá og rjóða blóð graðungsins á hólinn útan, en gera álfum veizlu af slátrinu, ok mun þér batna”

(There is a certain hillock nearby, in which *álfar* live. You are to take the bull that Kormákr killed, redden the surface with the bull's blood and make the *álfar* a feast of the meat; then you'll recover”, *Kórmaks saga* 22)

This sacrifice follows a typical *do-ut-des* logic. The sacrificer offers a gift, thus establishing a friendly link, and the counter-gift will take the form of improved health. The word *blót* is not used but *veizla* (feast), so the idea is one of conviviality. The skald Sigvatr þórðarson mentions a certain *alfablót* (“sacrifice for the *álfar*”) in his *Austrfaravísur* (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B1, p.221), composed circa 1020 and preserved in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. This sacrifice seems to be enacted as a private matter, as they expel the visiting Christian poet and his companion. It is a plausible tale, as it is set in Sweden, which was still pagan (unlike the other Scandinavian countries) at that moment when the scene happens. Both accounts differ in the physical setting for the *blót*. Lindow (2002: 54) gives the poem the upper hand, dismissing regional variation as an explanation. Gunnell (2007) points to this association as a possible late development.

On the other hand, nothing like a “*dvergablót*” is ever recorded, nor is there any account transforming a worshipped ancestor into a *dvergr*, as it happens with the dead and prosperity-inducing King Ólafr who turns into an *álf* (the best version of the story is *Óláfs þáttur Geirstaðaálfs* in *Flateyjarbók*, II, pp.3-9). In fact, the relationships that the myths establish between *dvergar* and gods are less than friendly, as implied by the lack

of reciprocity. As Lindow (2002, p.101) noted “the flow of goods is always from the dwarfs to the gods, never the reverse”. In the same vein, when men receive things from *dvergar*, especially crafted items, it is generally not following any form of reciprocity. The *fornaldarsögur* (and the romances) present several scenes of *dvergar* being helpful and friendly, but their lateness and heavy continental influence in style and themes point towards a very different tradition from the sources so far discussed. However, a few scenes are consonant with Eddic material, and are worth mentioning because they are present in some of the oldest examples of the genre.

The greed of the *dvergr*-like smith Reginn, who incites to the violent way in which his own brother Fáfnir (who is so greedy that he turns into the stereotypical hoarder, a dragon-like *ormr*) and his foster-son Sigurðr behave about treasure (in the Eddic poems *Reginismál* and *Fafnismál*, also retold in *Völsunga saga*), parallels other tales of forceful taking from *dvergar*. Among these, we have the episode of the forge of the sword Tyrfingr in the H redaction of *Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks* (edited in *Hauksbók* 1892-1896, p.351), where King Sigrlami exchanges the magical (and cursed) sword for the lives of the *dvergar* who forged it. Similar is the episode about the wealth of the *dvergr* Andvari, where Loki takes the role played by Sigrlami in the other account (*Völsunga saga*, 14). The same tale is told in the prose passage that unites stanzas 4 and 5 of *Reginismál* (p-174), thus obtaining another cursed treasure²⁰.

Violence and greed²¹ also mark the transfers of the mead of poetry told in *Snorra Edda* (II, p.3). The story goes that the wise god Kvasir went to visit two *dvergar*, Fjalarr and Galarr, who chose to kill him and turn him into the mead of poetry. Later they murder a *jötunn*, whose brother seeks revenge. Afraid of his anger and death threats, they concede the mead as compensation. This tale is congruent with the listed scenes of greedy *dvergar*, and it contrasts sharply with what we know about the relationships between gods and *álfar*, who feast together in good terms. The *dvergar*, on the contrary, invite Kvasir planning to kill him and then use him as a resource. The second stanza in the poem

²⁰ This is of course the “Rhinegold”, which drives a tragic plot in the cycle of the *Völsungar* / *Nibelung*s.

²¹ One of the etymologies for *dvergr*, “twisted one” (*tordu*, Boyer 1994, p.46) fits nicely into this conception, as does another one who links the term with “deceive” (Polomé 1997, p.448). In both cases, it contrasts strongly with the accepted etymology of *álf*, “radiant, white, brilliant”, that incidentally reinforces the idea that Snorri’s *ljósálfar* are in fact “standard” *álfar*.

Ynglingatál (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B1, p.7) is similar in tone, and it tells how a *dvergr* invited king Svegdir to a death trap inside his stone-home.

This greed of *dvergar* may explain why they did not receive any worship. They are “reluctant donors” (Acker 2002: 216), fundamentally asocial beings, very different in this aspect from *jötnar*²², gods, men or *álfar*. This is not contradictory with the idea that *dvergar* and *álfar* descended from a common figure of a mythical master-smith associated with earth (Motz 1974). The *dvergar* might have retained the smith-like features in an unsociable way, while the *álfar* kept their association with earth (and related notions such as fertility, health, hills, earth, *vanir*...) and its friendly²³, reciprocal nature, which made them suitable to receive sacrifices and worship²⁴: “Elves are *associated* with humans and gods” (Emphasis is mine. Clunies-Ross 1994: I, 51). The worship is hinted in the vocabulary, like Swedish *älv-stenar* and *älv-kvarnar* (–stones and –mills. Boyer 1990:161), which refer to likely sacred places in the landscape²⁵, the “mills” being cup-marks carved in rock.

This does not exclude reciprocal negative traits in *álfar*, this is, eye-for-an-eye behaviour, as the tale of *Völundr* illustrates. He reciprocates the violence endured with vengeance and murder, but in his case, his plan is very different from the unprovoked aggression of figures like *Fjalarr* and *Galarr*. Moreover, the retaliation is delayed in time, which is necessary in reciprocal logics (Bourdieu 1997). In other words, it is a negative form of (gruesome) gift.

²² The *jötnar* were sociable, but alien and antagonistic to gods, especially to the *Æsir*. This applies chiefly to male *jötnar*, while females can be taken as sexual partners (even as wives for *Vanir*) by the gods.

²³ “Alvane kan bli blanda saman med dvergane fordi dei bur under jorda (...) men alvane har ikkje illtenkt og vondvis karakter”. (“the *álfar* can be mixed with the *dvergar* because they live underground (...) but the *álfar* have no bad thoughts nor harmful character”) Holtsmark 1989, p.77)

²⁴ “The idea of active worship of figures known as *álfar* (admittedly only supported by the above references) certainly suggests that a number of people saw these beings as having the power to influence the world around them, almost like gods” (Gunnell, 2007, p.121). In this, they resemble saints, whose worship followed similar same logics.

²⁵ The association of milling with offerings and fertility does not require much imagination, while stones are less clear. There are also attestations of *dvergr*-stones (*dvergasteinn*, attested in Iceland and in Norway. Polomé 1997, p.441), but those are interpreted more easily as a reference to their mythical abode than to any cultic actions performed in them. Considering this, it seems arbitrary to read *älvsten* as a mark of worship, but the existence of a common association with stones for both *álfar* and *dvergar* (of uncertain date) contributes further to their similitude.

The main obstacle in this explanation are the attempts at sociable behaviour displayed by some individual *dvergar*. This is illustrated by the desire of Álviss towards Þórr's daughter, which sets *Álvissmál* in motion. Assuming this feature as normal rather than as exceptional can lead to a position where *dvergar* lack any defining feature except that, precisely, "all kinds of absence seem to be the dominant figure of dwarfs" (Ármann Jakobsson 2005, p.66). However, there are several reasons not to consider Álviss as normal. We already mentioned the lateness of the poem. Moreover, that he has the desire²⁶ to reproduce is not the same as to state that he knows how to reproduce socially speaking²⁷. His request of a bride is not done properly, and Þórr's dismissal is therefore predictable. Perhaps more importantly, as Acker (2002, p.217) has noted, is that the desire of this *dvergr* and Þórr's sudden skill with riddles are more narrative necessities to keep the poem going rather than expected features of a myth. The same could be applied to another *dvergr* who appears in *Snorra Edda*, whose single reason to exist is to be kicked into Baldr's pyre as a spark (*Edda I*, p.46).

5. Religious practice: Telling *Álfar* and *Dvergar* apart

We have seen how, if guided by mythical accounts alone, *dvergar* and *álfar* seem to be related, but are difficult to tell apart. Yet they were distinct for learned people like Snorri, who tried to classify them into schemes that are hard to justify. The differences in attributes seem to be more of degree than of nature. To list the usual traits: *dvergar* relate to artisanship and to earth in the physical sense (stone, the underground, metals), while *álfar* are connected with the fecund aspect of earth, light, and health. Both might have also had associations with the dead (as many chthonic figures have) and certainly their attributes might appear mixed to a higher or lesser degree in particular cases. Vǫlundr is a crafting, rich *álfr*, and Þíóðrǫrir is (apparently) a quite generous *dvergr*.

²⁶ A similar argument can be made about the *dvergar* in the late *Sörla þáttr*, who have sex with Freyja.

²⁷ Taken this way, the statement "Dvergar are all male and they cannot reproduce; they are created beings" (Clunies Ross 1994, I, p.55) makes sense. It should not be taken in a literal way, as there are some *dvergar* which are explicitly said to be the sons of others (the aforementioned sons of Ívaldi in *Snorra Edda*) or to belong to a lineage (*Vǫlospá* 16, p.4).

Rather than categorical differences, both beings could be seen as placed in a continuum of figures with a common background in terms of attributes and mythical roles. The core difference in their mythical identity seems to rest in the level of sociability that each of these collective powers have, and this should be connected to their place in cult practice, this is, to their religious role. If *dvergar* are (generally) reluctant donors, we can say that *álfar* are willing donors.

6. *Álfar* and *dvergar* in a wider social context

If we assume that sacrifice is one of the forms taken by the gift (as explored by Godelier 2002 [1994]), then theories about exchange might help to understand the position and descriptions of both *dvergar* and *álfar* as deriving from their religious role.

While making a typology for the types of exchange according to the social ties that they create, Marshall Sahlins (2004 [1974]) described a continuum of modes of reciprocal exchange. It moves from the most positive, purely generous exchange, to balanced, friendly gift-giving. Later it goes towards sociable but competitive gifting (the *potlatch*), to neutral commercial exchange (being it market-based or barter) and it finally reaches negative, harmful modes (pillage, theft). The social (and usually also spatial) distance between the partners heavily influences the corresponding modes of exchanges, and the nature of the relationship established between them, and accordingly, and how each group will tend to portray the other.

These ideas, especially those of negative reciprocity, have been applied to studies in Norse myths (Clunies-Ross 1994), but they also have been used to understand historical Scandinavian societies, from the continental Iron Age (Hedeager 2008) to medieval Iceland (Miller 1986). Some of these texts (like Gurevich 1992 [1968]) take a holistic approach, and explore in a Maussian²⁸ vein the nature of the general (we should say *total*) nature of gifting, be it sacrifice, feasting or hospitality, mythical or mundane. We think

²⁸ Mauss himself did analyze part of the Fáfñir myth and some stanzas in Hávamál in his famous *Essai* (see Mauss 1990 [1923-1924]).

that this perspective could help to clarify the position of both *dvergar* and *álfar* in a wider context.

Álfar are close to the primary targets of pre-Christian worship in the myths, feasting with the *Æsir* and (presumably) living in the dominions of Freyr. Moreover, whenever they are worshipped by humans, they inhabit close, yet separated, special places: a hill in *Kórmaks saga*, and a grave mound for Ólafr Geirstaðaálfr in the *þáttr* about him. On the other hand, *dvergar* seem to always live far away. There is a travel to undertake to meet them in the myths, as their world (*heim*) is the underworld. Going into this world might mean death for men, as we have seen in the account of king Svegdír. Socially speaking, men can become *álfar* (the case of Ólafr) and they can also be named after them, as the numerous Germanic names²⁹ composed with *álf-* (or an analogous root) attest, while nothing like that could be said about *dvergar*³⁰, whose names are always clearly distinct from human names.

We therefore can place the *álfar* in the positive side of reciprocity, and the *dvergar* in the negative side. Exactly where to place them in the continuum is more complicated to say. *Álfar* are (for once!) maybe easier to understand, as the relationship with them generally and uniformly friendly, and the exception –*Vǫlundr*– can be read as a warning (as Callmer 2002 does) on what happens if you break the rule, thus leaning to confirm it. *Dvergar* are negative, but we are unsure if in the impersonal side (like merchants) or in a hostile side, like murderers and hoarders. There is abundant evidence of both in the episodes where they appear.

There exists a type of being, *ormar* (and the related dragon, *dreki*), which represents to a monstrous degree the negative greed and violence seen in *dvergar*. This leads to make

²⁹ There are examples at least in Old English (to quote two famous examples: *Ælfred*, *Ælfric*. For a complete analysis see Hall 2007, pp. 55-95) and in Norse (*Álfr*, *Álfhildr*, etc.). The most interesting Norse example is probably *Álfarinn*, which probably means “altar/hearth of the *álfar*” (See Hall 2007, pp. 30). A theme that associates *dvergar* and *álfar* in Anglo-Saxon sources is illness, but it seems not to appear in Norse sources clearly.

³⁰ *Reginn* (and his family?) might be an exception, but they are more “like *dvergar*” than *dvergar stricto sensu*.

us think about placing *dvergar* as just moderately negative³¹. There are ways to deal with them that do not involve force. Men and gods can cut a deal with a *dvergr*, while they cannot do so with an *ormr* or *dreki*, that needs to be killed in order to put its hoard back into circulation, as both Sigurðr and Beowulf remind us. In any case, *dvergar* are negative enough to be far from receiving sacrifices, a practice which belongs in the positive forms of reciprocity, simply because asking gifts from greedy beings is not a logical course of action. It is impossible to establish if, historically speaking, the mythical portrait of *dvergar* and *álfar* made them be worshipped (or not), or if inversely, the actual practice of worship by offering made the *álfar* separate from *dvergar*.

6. Conclusions

In fact, by the central Middle Ages, when our written sources begin, the idea of offering to supernatural beings other than those venerated by Christianity was scandalous and bore the stain of paganism. This might account on why references to *álfar* are so meagre in the sources, while *dvergar* are somewhat more abundant. Another possibility is that our main source, Snorri, emphasizes the role of individual gods (particularly Óðinn) as the centre of the old system, thus leaving the collective *álfar* as marginal. This is consistent with the view of a Christian learned man, whose main understanding of “pagans” will come from ecclesiastical ideas based on classical pantheons and centred on the idea of worship. It is tempting to imagine that *dvergar* might have been less prone to disappear as mythical figures precisely because they were never worshipped.

In fact, the influence of medieval Christian conceptions is evident in Snorri’s account, who associated the *álfar* with highness (always a positive value in medieval thought, as lowness is negative.) and light/whiteness, while pairing darkness/blackness (negative, demonic) and lowness with beings that can hardly be other than *dvergar* (on the ideas about space, see Pastoreau 2004). However, we have also seen that he

³¹ As Vestergaard (1991, p.353) comments about Fáfnir’s hoarding: “denne vågen over skatten er en afvisning af alle sociale relationer og alliancer” (“This watch over wealth is a rejection of all social relationships and alliances”). Emphasis is mine).

commented that they are even more different in “experience” or “behaviour” (*reyndum*). The reference is obscure, but it is possible to believe that he was pointing out a difference in the ways to interact, maybe in the morality of exchange that could have been central to tell apart both groups. Such morality might stem from (or at least be concordant with) actual religious practices from pre-conversion times, which were at the core easily understandable by a medieval Christian, whose own religious practices often took the form of offerings and gifts (see Nedvitkne 2009, pp.146-153).

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(Icelandic authors are listed under name and patronymic following conventional use.

Other authors are listed by surname, name as usual)

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