

Álfar, Aelfe, and Elben: Elves in an historic and modern Heathen context

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Introduction

While the majority of modern Heathen practices focuses on the Gods and to a slightly lesser degree the ancestors there are also those who focus on or incorporating beings usually termed Álfar glossed as elves in English. This practice in modern Heathenry is predicated on a view of these beings which freely borrows from Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and German concepts and modifies all three into a new belief system.

One of the challenges in understanding the Norse and Germanic material is that many different Otherworldly beings are translated into English as "elves", just as many different Irish beings are called fairies. The Norse word Álfar appears in German as Elben, and English as Elves, while in modern Icelandic they are known as both Álfar and Huldufolk (hidden folk), although Huldufolk is also used as a generic term, like elf, that can describe Álfar, trolls and land spirits. Landwights are also sometimes conflated with the Álfar, because the two have many commonalities, but also key differences that indicate they actually are separate types of beings (Gundarsson, 2007).

The modern view of elves as tiny laborers is vastly at odds with the traditional view of them as tall, beautiful, and powerful beings. Forgive the popculture reference but if you are familiar with Tolkein's elves then you have some idea of this older view. The modern Heathen view of elves, by any name, also often differs in various ways from the older views, influenced by assorted factors including outside cultural influences and various new theological approaches to Otherworldly beings.

It is likely that all three cultural interpretations of elves are rooted in one original understanding of them, hinted at by the shared etymology of their name in each culture. However as Simek points out in his 'Dictionary of Northern Mythology' the concepts diverged and while sharing some core concepts became unique to each of the three cultures by the early middle ages, with various factors shaping the direction they went in (Simek, 1993). In their current somewhat reassembled state, particularly among English speaking populations, many of the nuances of the individual beings have been lost and in some cases the overall folk beliefs streamlined.

In order to understand Elves in a modern context and perhaps to have a fuller picture of their place in modern Heathenry there must be some understanding of elves as Norse Álfar, Anglo-Saxon Aelfe, German Elben, and early modern elves. Only by understanding each of these roots and how they have been woven together as well as the ways that the modern Heathen view has chosen to focus on particular aspects and perhaps ignore others will the entire picture be presented.

Who were the Álfar

According to mythology the Álfar were created when the Gods created the world and in Norse myth one of the nine worlds belongs to them: Ljossalfheim (Light Elf Home). In the Prose Edda there are also two other worlds which it is said the Ljossalfar inhabit: Andlang and Vidblainn, although some scholars including Holtsmark suggest that these two additional locations reflect Christian influence on Snorri's part.

Properly there are at least three groups referred to as Álfar in Norse myth: the Ljossalfar (light elves), svartalfar (literally black elves; often conflated with duergar - dwarves), and dokkalfar (literally dark elves; often understood as the mound dead), although it is difficult to know with certainty if these were originally seen as different beings altogether which were all later simply called Álfar for convenience, or if they were always seen as related beings. Jacob Grimm tried, in his *Teutonic Mythology*, to make a literal division of the groups by color, so that the Ljossalfar were white, the svartalfar black and the drokkalfar grey, but this is almost certainly his own invention (Grimm, 1883). Grimm is pulling from Snorri for this although Snorri writing about Norse mythology did not go as far as Grimm in his taxonomy of these beings. Lindow rightly points out in his 'Norse Mythology' that it is uncertain whether or not Snorri ever intended the svartalfar and dokkalfar to be distinct groups or if he was using the terms interchangeably. I think it is more likely, personally, that Álfar was sometimes used as a term to describe supernatural beings who were neither Gods nor giants and so could be used in a more general sense, as well as specifically with the Ljossalfar probably being the original beings under that name. In the lore however we do see beings referred to as Álfar at one point and elsewhere as other types of beings, including gods or giants, so it can be difficult to have any real clarity on this. There is some clear distinction between the Ljossalfar, the more traditionally understood Otherworldly elves, and the drokkalfar, who are understood to be the mound-dead, but there is also significant crossover as well which may indicate an understood connection between the two groups (Gundarsson, 2007). Hall in his text 'Elves in Anglo-Saxon England' argues for the Álfar as both a type of being that can be humanlike as well as supernatural, distinguishing them from more monstrous beings, and also for the Álfar in texts as the same as equivalent to the Vanir.

Hall's suggestion of the Álfar as the Vanir is not entirely unique and he cites several other authors in his own support. His argument is multifaceted and includes the connections between known Vanic deities Freyr and Freya with the Álfar as well as the formulaic phrase 'the aesir and Álfar' found in various sources. He suggests that Freyr as lord of Alfheim is in fact lord of Vanaheim and the Vanir. Addressing Loki's assertion in the *Lokasenna* that Freya has slept with all of the Álfar present in Aegir's hall, as the author says "*the obvious explanation for the mysterious Álfar of Lokasenna is to identify them with Snorri's Vanir*" citing De Vries, Holtmark, and Nasstrom in his support (Hall, 2007, page 36). He uses these two arguments then to suggest that the formulaic phrase 'aesir and Álfar' found in the Eddas represented two godly beings with Álfar and Vanir at least sometimes representing the same beings and being used as kennings for each other. Hall does note however that are other texts where Álfar and Vanir are mentioned together and as clearly separate beings, indicating that if his hypothesis is true it may have been a regional view or one that shifted over time.

The Álfar are known to interbreed with the other beings, particularly humans, and some mythic heroes and kings as well as the king's half-sister in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* were said to be half-elfen. In a 10th century account of a man named Ragnar son of Sigurd it is claimed that he was especially tall and handsome because his mother, Alfild, was one of the Álfar, as were all her people (Du Chaille, 1889). Icelandic patronyms sometimes show this possible ancestral connection with the inclusion of the word alf (Gundarsson, 2007). This mingling of Álfar and living humans may reflect the cross-cultural belief that the birthrate among the elves is low, that the population is only male, or that females are rare. In the older Norse material Álfar always appear to be male, although in later Icelandic folklore we see females as well, and in the Swedish material we mainly see alf women (Gundarsson, 2007). As we find in

the related Celtic material a common theme in folklore is the stealing of brides and babies or of midwives to help at births.

Álfar are associated with their own world, ljossalfheim, of course, but are also believed to live in or access our world through natural sites including mountains, cliffs, and boulders. They are known to be associated with certain places, and particularly certain individual trees, and it is believed that to disturb the places belonging to the Hidden Folk is very bad luck (Gundarsson, 2007). As recently as October 2013 protesters in Iceland were trying to block a highway project on the grounds that the construction passed through an area belonging to the Álfar, who would be angered (Scherker, 2013). It is believed by many that disturbing the Álfar with construction will result in bad luck and machines breaking down and often a special person who is known to be able to see and communicate with the elves will be brought in to negotiate (Gruber, 2007). Those who are brave enough to enter an alf-hill or visit the realm of the Álfar may find that time moves very differently there, and sometimes the Álfar will not release those who have gone among them.

In folklore the Álfar are seen as being especially active during the twelve days of Yule and at Midsummer. Gundarsson suggests that the summer activities of the Álfar, while still potentially perilous to humans, are less dangerous in nature and intent than the Yule activities (Gundarsson, 2007). The Álfar ride out in full procession at midsummer and Yule, an activity which may convey blessing on the areas they pass through, but in Iceland the Yule ride of the Álfar, the Álfarieth, is equated to the Wild Hunt and is extremely dangerous to see or contact (Gundarsson, 2007). This may also reflect a wider view of the nature of those times of year, where summer is seen as a gentler time and winter harsher.

Interacting with the Álfar is always a tricky business, as they can give blessings or lay curses on a person. In many traditional tales those who encounter elves and please them - often with good manners and generosity - may receive gifts, but those who offend them are killed or driven mad. When offered a gift from the Álfar one should not refuse, and these gifts might include food, drink, or worthless things like leaves which will later turn to gold (Gundarsson, 2007). The Álfar can also heal illnesses and injuries, if properly petitioned, and can be called on with a specific ceremony to protect a baby (Gundarsson, 2007).

The Álfar are angered by several types of human activity including the aforementioned disturbance of their places. They are also driven out of an area by the placing of an alfreka or by people urinating on the ground (Pennick, 1993; Gundarsson, 2007). Alfreka could be used intentionally to bring a curse on an area or person by angering the Álfar there and encouraging their wrath so that it would impact specific targets. An alfreka is a type of nidstang or scorn pole which was created by carving runes into a 9 foot long pole and driving it into the earth then placing a horse head or skull on the top of it; this action offended the landwights and Álfar. When angered they can cause bad luck, sickness, madness, or death. Álfar were also thought to be able to inflict illness on humans through the use of alf-shot or an elf-blast, the first being a small, invisible arrow that created diseases including bone cancer and arthritis, the second being a method where they would breath or blow sickness into a person. There are several surviving charms aimed at curing alfshot (Gundarsson, 2007). There is also a reference in older material to "alf-seidhr" possibly a type of magic worked by the Álfar against humans to cause madness and death (Gundarsson, 2007).

In Norse lore iron and steel are used as a protection against dangerous Álfar and other spirits, although it is not effective against giants (Gundarsson, 2007). Any item made of this metal may be used, but traditionally bladed weapons and nails were the most commonly seen, and iron or

steel nails might be hammered into a post or doorway to protect a home. Sulfur, rowan, and juniper are also traditional Norse protections, as well as a blend of woody nightshade, orchid and tree sap which was said to protect against the "unwanted attentions" of the huldufolk (Gundarsson, 2007). It is also said that church bells ringing will drive off the Álfar, as will Christian prayers, although this may perhaps represent more of a reaction by the Álfar to a religion which offends them than a sign of any power that faith actually has over them.

Who were the Aelfe

The word aelf (plural aelfe) comes to us from Old English and is the root of our modern word elf. Further back the word is likely from the Proto-Germanic ‘albiz’ and before that the Proto-Indo-European ‘albho’ which may have meant white (Harper, 2017). It is possible this connection to white relates to the idea of brightness or shining.

Unlike our modern view of elves, which has been heavily influenced by popular culture and mass media, aelfe were a distinct class of supernatural beings. Tracing them back in Old English material we find that they were likely originally only male beings, and they appear to be a class of beings seen as seductive and potentially magically dangerous (Hall, 2004). Hall in his ‘Elves In Anglo-Saxon England’ discusses the use of Aelfe in compounds combined with geography giving us sea-aelfe, mountain-aelfe, or wood-aelfe for example. These beings would represent a cohesive class of spirits broken down into subtypes based on the geography they are connected to. In Anglo-Saxon material the aelfe are described as amoral and mercurial beings, beautiful but deadly (Jolly, 1996)

Aelfe looked more or less human in the older material although their physicality could vary from solid to more ephemeral in nature. These originally all male beings were androgynous in appearance, despite their overt sexuality, and over the centuries understandings of them slowly shifted into viewing them as male or female or even mostly female to a degree that by the late medieval period the grimoires which included them focused mostly on female Aelfe (Brock & Raiswell, 2018). Even after these beings were viewed as being of both genders however their seductiveness and beauty remained a strong factor. Female aelfe were often glossed with nymphs, angels, and particularly beautiful human women were called aelfe (Hall, 2007). Male aelfe were compared to incubi, which we see for example in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, paired with the belief that they would seduce mortal women. Hall does suggest though that it’s possible the switch from all male Aelfe to Aelfe of both genders may have partially relied on the existing belief in the amazing beauty of the male Aelfe in earlier periods.

A variety of powers were attributed to Aelfe including the ability to cause illness, take cattle, and potentially possess people. The Anglo-Saxon Leechbooks detail a variety of cures directed at Aelfe which when studied can show the existing beliefs about the abilities of the Aelfe. Aelfe are said to have a particular power or skill, referred to as ‘Aelfesīden’ which is a kind of magic roughly equivalent to the Norse practice of *seidhr* (Hall, 2007). This would denote a kind of magic that can affect people’s luck, health, and mind. Aelfe were also known to use elf-shot, small invisible arrows, to wound people and cattle who would then sicken and eventually die. Cures for elf-related disorders indicate usage for symptoms of fevers, nightmares, madness, and possession, indicating that Aelfe were thought to be able to cause these things (Jolly, 1996).

Who were the Elben

There are certain challenges when investigating Germanic lore around the Elben, particularly the later date that much of the material was recorded in and the Christians who were recording

the stories and beliefs (Jolly, 1996). Simek suggests that the Elben were never significant in German folk belief and that much of the material we have today was borrowed back into German folklore in the 18th century from English material. Certainly looking at Grimm as a source of 19th century material we do find a great deal of cross cultural comparison rather than strictly German material, although that is perhaps a criticism that can be leveled at Grimm's Teutonic Mythology more generally.

In Germanic sources the Elben may be described as beautiful and the word Elben was sometimes glossed with incubus. However, in other Germanic sources these beings were explicitly called ugly and were said to have long or crooked noses. Grimm, adhering to the pattern laid by Snorri, describes the appearance of Elben in two groups, a beatific light group clad in white and an ugly, deformed group of darker elves. He differs from the earlier Norse and Anglo-Saxon sources however in describing Germanic Elben as small, saying that "*An elf comes as much short of human size as a giant towers above it*" (Grimm, 1888, page 449). Later in the same passage he goes on to describe Elben variously as the size of a four year old child or no taller than a human thumb, and talks of Elben and Dwarves interchangeably, perhaps again following the lead of Snorri.

Of the home of the Germanic 'light elves' Grimm claims that folklore has nothing to tell us. Grimm does offer us a small and important window into belief about Elben nearly 150 years ago however. For example he relates one folktale wherein an elf-maid enters a room through a knothole in the wall, marries the man living in the home, bears him four children, only to leave through the same knothole inexplicably some time later (Grimm, 1888). This idea of Elben being able to enter through cracks or small holes is reinforced in other anecdotes suggesting it was a power of all Elben and indeed Grimm assigns particular importance to knotholes in wood, claiming that looking through one will grant sight of the hidden people. He also offers a charm which can be uttered by a person standing on an elfmound to invoke an elf, if it is repeated 15 times: "*elf-woman, are you here, so shall you come out through 15 oak knotholes*" (Grimm, 1888, page 461-462).

Like their Celtic counterparts, and perhaps influenced by that folklore, German Elben are said to have the ability to appear or disappear from human sight at will and to be seductive beings, elben at one point being a common German gloss for nymph (Grimm, 1888; Edwards, 1994). They are also known to mat people's hair into alpzopf or elfklatte, called elf-locks in English, although unlike their counterparts elsewhere the Elben may not merely tangle the hair but also chew through it (Grimm, 1888). They are particularly renowned in folklore for causing confusion and misleading people, perhaps by befuddling their minds (Edwards, 1994). Like the Måran the Elben can cause nightmares and sleep paralysis by riding a person at night, tormenting them in their sleep, and this association with night terrors led to a variety of charms and prayers against them. One example found in Hall and given here in his translation is:

*“Elf, or also little elf,
you shall remain no longer
elf's sister and father,
you shall go out over the gate;
elf's mother, trute and mare,
you shall go out to the roof-ridge!
Let the mare not oppress me,
let the trute not pinch me,
let the mare not ride me,*

*let the mare not mount me!
Elf with your crooked nose,
I forbid you to blow on [people]*” (Hall, 2007).

The German Elben seem as dependent on humans as Celtic fairies can be, needing to borrow midwives, seek humans advice to solve disputes, and to borrow the use of places to hold their festivities (Grimm, 1888). As with most cognates to these beings across cultures they always pay back these loans or any debts generously not only giving valuable items in return but bestowing luck and prosperity on those humans who aid them. They are also renown in German lore for their magical ability and particularly healing skill, although it would be unwise to assume from the picture given so far that they are overly benevolent. As Grimm says “*From the dependence of the elves on man in some things, and their mutual superiority in others, there naturally follows a hostile relation between the two*” (Grimm, 1888, page 460). He goes on to discuss the ubiquitous concept of elf shot, mentioning that the German name for it, albshoss, is given sometimes to lightning and also that the Celtic concepts of elf-stroke – a paralyzing or killing fit brought on by the touch of elves or a wind associated with them – is in Germany attributed to Elben. Those who are touched by elves and robbed of their mental abilities are called elbentrotsch

Grimm associates the Elben particularly with Frau Holde and Holle, suggesting that these beings travel in the retinue of those Goddesses. He mentions a Hessian tale of three male Elben who are in service to Holle and do her bidding by blessing people with gifts. He also relates several German euphemism for the Elben including ‘die guten holden’ to the goddess Holda and therefore connects her to the Hiddenfolk and elves more generally.

Early Modern Elves

Having discussed the Icelandic Álfar, Anglo-Saxon Aelfe, and German Elben we arrive at the English elf.

The English word elf has a convoluted history. It can be traced back etymologically to Old English and Anglo-Saxon ‘alf’, and the aelfe are not only the predecessors of the later elves but also cognate to them. Etymologically Elf, like its predecessor Aelfe, is related to a root term from Proto-Indo-European which likely means white. In its older forms it was glossed with a variety of Otherworldly and supernatural beings, including fairies, sprites, goblins, and incubi, showing the range of associations that elves had within the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic cultures (Douglas, 2017). By the 16th century elf was used to both describe a malicious creature, often used interchangeably with incubus and goblin, as well as more generically to describe any Otherworldly being (Williams, 1991). The fluidity of the usage of the word is an indication of the wide range of applications it was given.

Understanding Elves present a unique difficulty in English because of this long use to gloss several words in other languages and its long use as a generic. Because of this we end up with a range of beings that fall under the label ‘elf’ but are very different in nature and description. We may perhaps divide them into two main groupings, the taller elves and the small elves. The latter are generally described as about a foot tall and can appear as old and wizened or younger. The former group are often described as more human in appearance, although they are clearly supernatural in their abilities and are averse to iron.

The Scottish view of elves may have been strongly influenced by the Norse, and we find the use of the word elf as a generic for Otherworldly beings in use there much as fairy is used elsewhere. This is carried through to the terms related to these beings as well, so that the world of Fairy becomes Elfhome [elf home] or Elfland and the Queen of Fairy becomes the Queen of

Elfland or Elfhame. This Norse influence in Scotland may have affected both the terminology as well as the imagery around the Scottish elves who strongly resemble the Norse *Álfar* (Briggs, 1976). This is important to note given the possibility of Scottish elflore influencing English belief which in turn may have influenced Germanic belief relating to the Elben.

Elves in folklore are described as difficult to see or invisible beings who can wield elfshot and cause great harm to humans and livestock (Hall, 2007). They were regularly compared to or glossed with incubi because of their habit of seducing mortal women and it was believed, as with the Norse *Álfar*, that children could be produced by these unions.

Another power that was found among elves and shared by their cultural predecessors was human possession. Demonic possession and possession by elves seem to have been understood as different and distinct situations, but they were also seen as somewhat overlapping in nature. Looking at the Saxon evidence we see that cures for elf-possession were found alongside exorcism for demons and in the case of one example found in the marginalia of a manuscript it simply adds the word 'aelfe' into the existing Latin rite of exorcism (Jolly, 1996). The symptoms for elf-possession in the Anglo-Saxon and Saxon evidence however is not what we would in modern contexts associate with demonic possession, necessarily, and is marked by fevers, nightmares, and madness more generally. Madness in these cases was usually described as marked changes in personality, nervousness or anxiety, or significant behavioural changes. Elves are often grouped with demons and night-hags as beings which both possess and torment humans and for which there are specific prayers, charms, and herbal cures (Jolly, 1996). In Germany while outright possession is not explicitly described the Elben are clearly connected to both madness and nightmares, two things that are closely tied to the ideas of elven possession. Grimm, for example, says that in German there were two closely related expressions for nightmares: "*dich hat geriten der mar*" [the night-mare has ridden you] and "*ein alp zoumet dich*" [an elf bridles you i.e. has a horse's bridle on you] (Grimm, 1888).

There is a specific word for possession by elves in Old English: *ylfig*. *Ylfig* seems to have been associated with both divine possession and possession by aelfe and had both negative connotations which could require exorcism as well as some connections to prophecy (Hall, 2007). The fact that there was a particular word for this exact type of possession tells us that it was either widespread enough or understood enough in the culture to necessitate its own vocabulary and that is significant.

Elves and the Dead

There is a convoluted connection between elves, of any cultural iteration, and the human dead. Where and how this connection began is difficult to say although traces of it can certainly be found throughout the mythology.

The Norse god Freyr is said to be the lord of the *ljossalfar* and there is a story in the *Ynglinga* saga which directly relates him to the mound dead and potentially the *dokkalfar*. We are told that Freyr, also known as *Yngve*, was a king in Sweden who built the temple at Uppsala and was a good and just ruler. When he grew ill his people built a great mound for him and when he died he was placed in it although the populace wasn't immediately informed; instead people brought their taxes to pay into the mound. Eventually his death was discovered but because the land had continued to prosper it was decided that he should be kept in the mound and offered to in that way. In the *Ynglinga* saga the text says that this is because he was seen as 'the God of this world' but the story of his interment in the mound and continued benevolence also fits the

description of the mound elves and a potential pattern of some ancestral dead joining the ranks of the elves.

Another similar example is the Norwegian king Olaf Gudrodsson who would later be known as Olaf Geirstad-alf, or Olaf the elf of Geirstad. Although Ellis Davidson argues that Olaf is an example of a draugr rather than an elf in folklore and accounts found in the Saga of Saint Olaf the story goes that Olaf was interred in a mound and that his people offered to him for prosperity, calling him Olaf the elf of Geirstad. Vigfusson and Powell, writing in the 19th century note this as an example of ancestor worship and further suggest that referring to such benevolent mound-buried human dead as elves was not unusual.

There is a particularly strong connection in Norse belief between the dokkalfar and the human ancestral dead, with Gundarsson noting that the Norse term 'alfkarl' [male elf] was translated in Irish as alcaille – ghost or spectre – rather than the perhaps anticipated fir sidhe [man of the fairy mounds]. This is important to note as it indicates an understanding within the cultures that differentiated the clearly Otherworldly beings from the human dead, placing the dokkálfar among the human dead rather than Other.

Further to this Turville-Petre suggests that the Álfar were the male ancestral dead who balanced the disir or idises as the female ancestral dead. The waters here are somewhat muddied however. The word Álfar itself is masculine and in mythology we see only mentions of male Álfar, with only a small group of female deities including Sunna and Idunna being referred to as related to elves. This may imply that like the Anglo-Saxon Aelfe the Álfar were all originally male beings, inline with Turville-Petre's theory. In later folklore and stories though there are accounts of female Álfar and as Gundarsson notes in his book '*Elves, Wights' and Trolls*' women were also buried in the mounds, connecting them at least theoretically to the mound dead and potentially dokkalfar.

We should also be cautious not to assume that because some elves are human dead that all elves must therefore be so; as with the distinction between elves and dwarves the lines are not clear here and the evidence can be contradictory. Hall touches on this in his work, using a Venn diagram to show the overlap between the two groups but also illustrate a separation wherein there would have existed some Álfar who did not fall into the grouping of former humans. In Grimm's Teutonic Mythology we are told: "*On the nature of Elves I resort for advice to the old Norse authorities, before all others.....the Elder Edda several times couples æsir and âlfar together, as though they were a compendium of all higher beings, and that the Anglo-Saxon ês and ylfe stand together in exactly the same way. This apparently concedes more of a divinity to elves than to men.*" (Grimm, 1882). From this we can understand that in both Norse and Germanic as well as Anglo-Saxon belief the Álfar were seen as a semi-divine race of beings that were often placed alongside the Gods and distinct from humans. While this doesn't negate the arguments in favour of some elves as human mound dead it must be considered in the context of the wider discussion, both for its place within the cultural views of the time and for the layers of nuance it adds to the wider discussion.

Elves in Heathenry

There is a long and reasonably well documented history of offering to the elves which can be described as a more formal religious ritual or sacrifice. We will begin here with a quote from Grimm which touches on an example from Kormaksaga and also discusses 19th century folk

practices associated with elves, here referred to as subterraneans, and other similar types of beings:

"It appears even that to these black elves in particular, i.e., mountain spirits, who in various ways came into contact with man, a distinct reverence was paid, a species of worship, traces of which lasted down to recent times. The clearest evidence of this is found in the Kormaksaga. The hill of the elves, like the altar of a god, is to be reddened with the blood of a slaughtered bull, and of the animal's flesh a feast prepared for the elves....An actual âlfabôt. With this I connect the superstitious custom of cooking food for angels, and setting it for them. So there is a table covered and a pot of food placed for home-smiths and kobolds; meat and drink for domina Abundia; money or bread deposited in the caves of subterraneans, in going past" (Grimm, 1888).

Here Grimm is conflating the dokkalfar with mountain spirits rather than the human dead and noting that they were given worship similar to that of gods. He mentions the Norse term *alfablót*, or sacrifice to the elves, in association with this action of offering a bull on the elves' hill. In *Kormaksaga* we are told that the *Álfar* sometimes lived near humans and when a man named Thorvald is injured and healing slowly he is advised by a *Volva* to take a bull killed by Kormak, use its blood to redden the *Álfar*'s hill, and make a meal for them of its meat. While this is done to petition them for a boon it does follow a formula that as Grimm notes applied to various supernatural beings as a means of honouring or appeasing them.

In the 11th century *Austrfararvísur* there is a passage which recounts the story of a Christian traveler who is turned away from a Swedish home because the family is celebrating an *álfablót* and the people fear to offend the Gods by allowing the unbeliever in (Hall, 2007). The widow who turns him away specifically cites a fear of '*Odin's wrath*' which may indicate a link between the *Álfar* and Odin, something which may be reinforced by Odin's connections to the Wild Hunt (Gundarsson, 2007). The Wild Hunt itself is a nebulous grouping which can include everything from ghosts to Gods depending on the folklore being looked at, but in some accounts does include Otherworldly beings. Although it should of course be remembered that it is Freyr that is primarily connected to the *Álfar* and the mention of Odin's wrath in this account may simply be a more general suggestion of the anger of the Heathen Gods as recorded by a Christian author.

Evidence suggests that the Swedish *álfablót* took place in late autumn and this seems to have been the traditional timing for that celebration. The reference mentioned by Grimm from *Kormak's Saga* involved an injured man who was offering a bull sacrifice to the elves in hope of healing (Gundarsson, 2007). There is also an account from Norway from 1909 of a man whose family sacrificed a cow to 'the mound dwellers' when his father died (Gundarsson, 2007). This indicates that *álfablóts* were possibly both seasonal and done when need dictated, both a yearly rite as well as something that could be looked to under various specific circumstances.

Unfortunately because of the nature of the seasonal *álfablót* which was celebrated privately in the home, very little is known about it today. Scholars tend to assume from what evidence we do have that it was overseen by the woman of the family and occurred after the harvest had been gathered in. Steinsland and Muelengracht suggest that the *álfablót* would have hinged on ancestor worship, potentially of male dead, fertility, and the family unit more generally.

Modern Heathen Practice

In modern Heathenry there is often an emphasis on the *Álfar*, or elves, as specifically or exclusively the male mound dead and celebrating the *álfablót* seasonally as an honouring of the male ancestral dead. Examples of this are abundant on the internet, with the blog entry

‘Ancestors or Álfar?’ by Allvildr typifying the viewpoint in its description of the ljossalfar as originating entirely with the male human dead (Allvildr, 2017). This is likely an outgrowth of Turville-Petre’s theories about the Álfar as the mound dead and male ancestors, something that has found a strong foothold in modern practice. Through this lens many modern American Heathens tend to view the elves, particularly as the Álfar, as largely or entirely benevolent and helpful specifically to those living humans they are connected to. Through this viewpoint the Álfar have become the male counterpart and mirror to the female disir as protective beings who watch over their descendants. The historic and folkloric aspects of elves as ambivalent or dangerous beings is largely or entirely ignored in favour of this more benign view.

Although the exact date of the historic álfablót and its nature is unknown some modern Heathens tend to place it in October. The date that it is now celebrated can vary from early October to early November depending on personal preference and region, although I have seen multiple sources directly equating the álfablót to Halloween and timing it around then. There are multiple possible reasons for this although I would suspect the strong modern connection between the Álfar and the male ancestral dead plays a significant role. It is difficult to be certain that this was indeed the older Heathen perspective, and there has been some suggestion by scholars like Hutton that the connection between the dead and Halloween or Samhain was intentionally created later by the Church with springtime the original date for pagan acknowledgement of the dead. Nonetheless modern Heathens have firmly connected the two and the time of year creating a strong modern tradition.

I am also aware of Heathens who place alfablót in September and see it as balancing a disirblót that is celebrated for the female ancestral dead in February. Although the dating is different the theme and approach to the celebration as well as the view of who and what the Álfar are remains the same, with an emphasis on them as the male ancestral dead who can and will bless a family or person who engages correctly with them.

Personal Practice

My own personal practice is far more Álfar focused than many other Heathens so perhaps it is no surprise that the álfablót is a more significant celebration for me. Unlike others however I do not tend to focus on the Álfar exclusively as male ancestral dead but rather more broadly as being an amalgam of human dead and beings who have never been human. I also tend to see them as less inherently benevolent than other people may view them as, and would categorize them as ambivalent. They can be helpful and blessing, particularly for those who also work magic, but they can also be dangerous and harmful if they are offended or angry and that danger shouldn’t be underestimated.

As part of the religious aspect of my practice I do celebrate álfablóts although I am not in a position to sacrifice cattle. I generally offer butter and milk or cream, as these are two things that folklore across many cultures says that the hidden folk value. I have a boulder in my yard, and for all intents and purposes I consider it an álfur steinn, or elf-stone. Elf-stones, called elf-stenar in Swedish, are boulders with cup like indentations, or that are strongly associated as being the homes of the Álfar, and are believed to have healing powers (Lockey, 1882; Towrie, 2016). These boulders were places that people would go to make vows, and to leave offerings which ranged from lard and butter to copper coins, flowers, and ribbons (Lockey, 1882). The

acknowledgment of the one in my yard is obviously personal gnosis on my part but I have my reasons for believing this is what it is - I can say for example that the spring after I started this acknowledgment my entire backyard was inexplicably taken over by raspberry canes, something I consider a great gift and the only fruit that grows wild in my area - and the stone serves this purpose for me certainly. It is at this elf-stone that I leave my offerings for the Álfar and where I celebrate my álfablóts.

I celebrate my álfablóts twice a year on the equinoxes, as well as at any point that I feel one is needed. Some years that may only be the two seasonal ones, some years that may be often. My connection to the Álfar is an organic thing that is always in motion and depends a lot on my respecting them, knowing what I should and should not do, and listening when I need to listen. I do a lot of listening.

I like honoring the Álfar on the equinoxes. To me the equinoxes are a good time symbolically to honor the Álfar because they represent a time of balance, a time which is naturally liminal, but I also like this because to me the Álfar are tied into the fertility of the earth and the harvest, something that we do find reflected in the folklore. Honoring them on the vernal equinox when the earth in my area is just beginning to ready itself for a new year of growth and planting as well as at the autumnal equinox during the harvest seems very appropriate. There is also a nice balance in the twice yearly offering specifically to the elves at such a time, or the spirits that we may call elves in English. At Yule I honor my house spirits, and at Yule and Walpurgisnacht I honor the Wild Hunt. I like the idea of having those two equinoxes to honor the Álfar, the elves, to remember them and offer to them.

Conclusion

It is wise to remember to honor the elves, with rituals and offerings. The elves are closer to us and our world, and perhaps more invested in it, and affect us more often than the Gods generally do, and they should be respected. It is also a good idea to understand how the elves can affect us, for good and ill, and ways to best deal with them. Although the modern Heathen view, particularly in America, tends to see elves through the lens of Álfar as benevolent ancestral male dead the picture is far more complex than that, and perhaps even that is largely ignoring the potential harm angry ancestors may cause us. Gundarsson for example notes cases of angered disir attacking living humans, often for converting to a new religion, and notes the similarity between this and accounts of elves harming humans who refuse their advances using their Christian religion as an excuse. If we do choose to view the elves as connected to or even equivalent to ancestral dead we should none the less be cautious about not seeing them as too kindly inclined.

The mythology and the folklore of the Álfar, Aelfe, and Elben demonstrates notable differences as well as similarities, coming from a shared source and eventually returning to a conglomerate view. These different views and combined view shape the modern understanding of elves and at least effect the 19th century German view of elves, although the current heathen view of Álfar has tended to take the positive features and discard the more negative or potentially harmful. Moving forward into a fuller understanding of these beings would likely require a balancing of the material that would continue to value their potential benefits to living humans who honour them but also acknowledge their power and potential to harm.

Modern rituals honoring of the elves can certainly follow the pattern of the historic álfarblót, both seasonally and for specific purposes. While we have little to work with in reference to the seasonal celebration, beyond knowing that it occurred in the home, the reference in Kormaksaga.

Grimm's connection to related folk practices, and the early 20th century example from Norway do give us a rough template to follow that would involve going to a place associated with the elves, specifically the mound elves, and offering a meal to them there or as Grimm suggests money which would likely mean coins. I might suggest the seasonal holy day following a similar outline but being celebrated in the home rather than at an elf site.

Elves can be petitioned for good health, for fair weather, for good crops, as well as called on in cursing. Viewed as the male dead they may be offered to for strength of the family line and protection. Although they are given only a small role in many forms of modern Heathenry it seems likely that they were more significant historically to pre-Christian Heathens and into the early modern period. I might suggest that this importance would be valuable in contemporary Heathenry throughout its diverse expressions as well. Rather than relegating the elves, by any name, to simply being the male ancestral dead and acknowledging them once a year it would be useful to take a more nuanced perspective that incorporates the array of material discussed here and the possibility of offering to them for various reasons at different times.

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