Loki, Lugh and Logos

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Apologies to my followers for my absence of nearly a year! Much has happened in the world, and with the imminent demise of the European Union and the election of the anti-globalist, Donald Trump, as president of the United States of America, I have felt compelled to write a number of articles surrounding the subject of the Norse myth of the ‘day of judgement’, Ragnarok (which translates literally as ‘Twilight of the Powers’)…

Loki, also called Loke or Loptr, is perhaps the most enigmatic of the many characters populating the surviving pagan myths of the old Norse people, details of which are preserved largely in the surviving corpus of medieval literature known as the Eddas and Sagas. In some of these poems and tales Loki appears as an adventurer and a loyal and helpful companion to the gods, yet ultimately he seems to ‘turn bad’ and function as a murderous trouble-maker and rebel who challenges their authority. He taunts and angers the high gods in the poem Lokasenna and causes the death of Baldr – an act recounted in Snorri’s prose text Gylfaginning. For these acts he is punished horribly and cast out from their company, only to return to reek his vengeance on the day of Ragnarok as recounted in the poem Völuspá.

As a character who defies the conventions of the elemental world and nature, Loki seems able to change his sex at will, and becomes the mother of Odin’s horse Sleipnir as well as father to many of the mighty beasts and monsters (often referred to by the term troll) against whom the gods struggle and eventually fall prey to, most notably the Midgard Serpent, Jörmungandr and the giant wolf, Fenrir. His status as a god or jötunn (giant) is never explicitly clear. Indeed, he often seems to assume whatever sex, form or shape suits his poetic or prosaic purpose as provocateur! He embodies unto himself, as is perhaps suggested in the origin of his name, the concept of Logos or ‘Reason’.

Of course, the existing written myths concerning Loki come from a Christian era and were written down by persons with an interest in incorporating their ancestors’ legends into this new intellectual continuum. It is quite possible that Loki is portrayed in these retold myths as analogous to the biblical and Christian idea of Satan or the Devil as tempter and confounder of humanity. However, another aspect of this metamorphic mythological personality is to function as a confounder of the heathen gods, and as such he may well have represented a kind of anti-hero to a 14thC Christian audience. Of all the gods and their virtues, be it the strength of Thor or the wisdom and guile of Odin, his is perhaps closest to the fallible human condition. It is usually his tongue which lands him in trouble, in turn convulsing him into some form of desperate action by which he hopes to make good again.

The poem Lokasenna (“Loki’s Quarrel”) is an explicit case where Loki takes centre-stage in criticising all of the gods during a feast to which he arrives uninvited. Among other choice insults, he somewhat piously criticises their sexual morality – particularly that of the female gods. This in itself marks his performance as potentially Christian in its intent, and certainly of interest to medieval church leaders who were keen to consolidate their power and reduce the risk of kin-strife within Irish and Norse dynasties, resulting from monarchs having many concubines and bastard children. For his transgressions, Loki is eventually bound to stones with the entrails of his son and forced to endure poison being dripped upon him – a scene somewhat redolent of both the crucifixion of Jesus and the punishment of Prometheus. In Gylfaginning, Snorri claims Loki is so punished for causing the death of Baldr – the theme of kin-slaying again. That the event of the binding of Loki appears to be displayed on a number of surviving viking-era syncretic memorial stone crosses from England, is telling of the sense that Loki’s function was viewed in some way as analagous to that of Christ. Indeed, at Ragnarok, the Völuspá tells us that Loki will escape these bonds and return at the head of the raging hosts of trollfolk and giants to overthrow the old gods – another theme with distinct parallels to the Christian belief in the apocalypse and second coming of Christ.

His renegade activities, mixed parentage and adventures bring to mind Ireland’s Lugh Lámhfhada with whom Loki bears a close resemblance in name as well as certain mythological attributes. Lugh was, in Irish mythology, the leader of the ‘fairy cavalcade’, much as Loki leads the great charge from Jötunheim at Ragnarok. The names of Loki and Lugh appear to derive from a common Prot-Indo-European linguistic root: leuk, meaning ‘flashing light’, being the root of the Latin words lucis (actual light) and lux (spiritual light) and the Old Norse worse logi (fire) as well as the Greek word for ‘white’ or ‘bright’. The Hurrian/Luwian (Anatolian) god Aplu, and his Greek and Etruscan counterparts: Apollo and Apulu respectively also contain the -lo/-lu designator. Loki certainly rages like an untameable fire in the Norse narratives, and it is notable that he leads the army of giants out of Muspelheim (land of the fire-giants) during the Raganrok event. Like the Hurrian Aplu and Greek Apollo, Loki’s actions cause panic, dismay and dis-ease. Where Apollo was believed to have used his mighty arrows to inflict disease, Loki fashions the misteltoe spear or arrow with which Hermod poisons/kills Baldr, whereas Lugh Lámhfhada was a caster of spears. There appears, at least superficially, to be a link. Both Lugh and Loki are tricksters, much like Apollo’s brother Hermes, and both certainly charge around on quests in a similar manner to the wing-heeled Greek god of mischief and errands. Hermes and Thoth (egyptian god of language and writing) were often worshipped together as equals in Hellenistic era Egypt, and among the early proto-christian sects of Gnostics and Hermetics, bringing us back to the concept of ‘Logos’ which these syncretic religions developed as a key concept.

Logos:

The essence of this early christian thinking about λογος or Logos and the concept of light is expressed succinctly in the opening passages of the Christian Gospel of John (KJV):

1 In the beginning was the Word (λογος, Logos), and the Word (Logos) was with God, and the Word (Logos) was God.

2 The same was in the beginning with God.

3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

9 That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

11 He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

The concept John is embodying with the Koine Greek word λογος, translated in the KJV Bible as ‘Word’ is more than just the idea of ‘word-as-thing’, but instead closer to ‘word-as-meaning’ or ‘reason’. To Zeno of Citium (3rdC BC) and the Stoic school of philosophy, Logos embodied the divine animating principle or reason behind nature and existence, to which man should strive to conform his thoughts and deeds in order to live a life sublime. This is the sense in which John employed the term, except that his divine order was expressed through a monist deity whose Logos had manifested itself in a man: Jesus Christ. His comparison of the divine logos to divine light was not in itself a new concept, being derived from oriental ideas which filtered in earnest into the Greek continuum through Asia Minor (particularly Lydia and Ionia) with the expansion of the Achaemenid empire during the 6th century BC. Plato of Athens wrote about this specifically, connecting the idea of light to that of the soul (which gave sentience), to reason and to thought. Of all the Greek gods, these concepts became embodied in the solar god Apollo, who himself had origins – apparently known to Homer – in Asia Minor, predating the Achaemenids, where he was known to the Hurrians as Aplu and in ancient Mesopotamia as Nergal. These were solar gods of death and disease.

So, to recap: The meanings in Loki’s name encapsulates both the concepts of fire, and pure idea. The ancient philosophies of light and the mind held that thought was a form of divine light and was pure reason itself. Elemental fire is as chaotic and uncontrollable as a cavalcade of fire giants and trollkin rushing from Muspelheim at Ragnarok….