Cosmology and the Soul: The Nine Worlds

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The ancient Northern Europeans did not see a simple universe with a heaven above and a hell below. Instead they saw a complex of other planes and enclosures interconnected with our own. According to the Eddas, these planes or worlds were born when the realm of fire, Muspellheimr, in the south moved north to meet the realm of Niflheimr in the south. They met in what is known as the Ginnungagap "the yawning void." From this union sprang forth two beings Ymir the primeval giant and Audhumla, the primeval cow. By licking the ice, Audhumla made a new being appear, Buri. From Buri sprang Borr who married Bestla, who gave birth to Woden, Willi and Wéh. They slew Ymir and from him created the Nine Worlds and the World Tree that supports the worlds.

Although the Nine Worlds are linked by the World Tree, they by no means lie near each other, for there are hills, valleys, mountains, and even rivers between them formed by the bark of the tree. Beyond the Nine Worlds are unknown worlds resting in the Útgard "that outside the enclosure". Each world as well as the World Tree and the Well of Wyrd are described below with the Old Norse name followed by the Anglo-Saxon version or an Anglo-Saxon reconstruction where possible.

Yggdrasil/ *Éormensyll

Yggdrasil, also known as the Irminsul in Old Saxon (the Anglo-Saxon reconstruction being Éormensyll) is the World Tree and holds all the known worlds and rises out of the Well of Wyrd. It is often spoken of as an ash, though it was thought to have needles like a yew and also bore fruit. More likely than not the tree cannot be compared to any mortal species of tree, but may, indeed be a combination of them all. The World Tree gives the universe its infrastructure. The Nine Worlds rest within its branches and due to this the World Tree often serves as a pathway for travel between the worlds.

Niflheimr/ *Nifolham

Niflheimr "the misty home" was thought of lying in the metaphysical north of Miðgardr below Hell. It is a world of pure cold or ice, shrouded in mist. From it flowed the rivers into Ginnungagap at the beginning of time that now flow into Hvergelmir, a part of the Well of Wyrd. It is believed that the Nibelingen (MHG) or Niflungar (ON) of the Sigurd myth may have originated there.

Ásgarðr/*Ésageard

Ásgarðr literally means "enclosure of the Æse (Æsir)" or "enclosure of the gods." It is possible it was also called Heofonróce in Anglo-Saxon, but there is no way to prove this definitely. Ásgarðr
is centered on a higher plane above Midgarðr and can be reached through several means. Chief is Bifrost or Ásbrú, the fiery rainbow bridge that links the world of men to the realm of the gods. It can also be accessed from Hell by Gjallarbrú "the resounding bridge." One can also reach Ásgarðr through the Myrkviðr the "mirk wood" which separates Ágarðr from Múspellheimr. Finally there are the rivers which flow around Ágarðr and these Thunor (Thor) must cross as he is too heavy for the bridges.

There are many halls in Ágarðr; Valaskjálfr of Woden, Bilsskirnir of Thunor, Fensalir of Frige, Víngolf (AS Wyngeard) of the goddesses, Glitnir of Forseta and Valhöll (AS *Wælheall) of the fallen heroes.

Jöttingheimr/*Eotenham
Jöttingheimr was home to the Jötnar (AS Eotenas) or ettins, the giants. Traditionally it is seen as north of Midgarðr. In Eotenham lie the fortresses of the ettins. Within its borders also lies the Jarnviðr or the "iron wood."

Alfheimr/ *Ælfham
Alfheimr is the home of the elves and was given as a gift to the god Fréa for his first tooth. It was thought of as a place of great beauty, as were its inhabitants. Many believe it lies near Ágarðr.

Midgarðr/Middangeard
Midgarðr is the realm of Man and is thought of lying in the center of the Nine Worlds. It is surrounded by a vast ocean and about it lies a wall built by the gods to protect it. Several variants of the name survive, amongst them Middenerd and Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

Múspellheimr/Múspell
Múspellheimr is a region of pure fire ruled by the ettin Surtr. Others like him inhabit the realm and are the closest thing to evil incarnate that can be found in Northern European mythology.

Hel/Hell
Hel is the lowest of the Nine Worlds besides Niflheimr resting below the World Tree. It is not at all a bad place, parts of it are an afterlife paradise while other parts are seen as dark and gloomy. Unlike the Christian purgatory, it is not an abode of punishment, but simply a resting place for the dead. It may be reached by the road Helvergr "the Hell way" or "Highway to Hell" if you like, a river of blood called Gjoll, or a cave called Gniphellir. Hel's gate called Helgrind or Nágrind is guarded by the ettin woman Modgud and the hound Garmr. Below Hel and in a northern part of it lies the mansion of the goddess of death Hel. It is called Elviðnir "misery" and is surrounded by a wall called Fallanda Forad "falling peril." Still deeper is Kvøllheimr, a place of punishment for the wicked. Within it is Nástrønd/*Nástrand "corpse
strand" a dwelling made of adders for which there may be an Anglo-Saxon term in Wyrmsele "snake hall." Here the evil dead are sent to forever have burning poison drip down upon them.

Svartálfheimr/*Sweartælfham

Svartálfheimr is the home of the Svartálfar, the black elves. Their identity is unclear though a few believe them the same as the Dokkálfar or "dark elves." Still others hold they are the dwarves of Norse mythology. It is thought of as a subterranean region and folk tales suggest it can be accessed through caves in Midgarðr.

Vanaheimr/*Wanaham

Vanaheimr is the home of the Wena (Vanir) the second family of Gods of which Fréa and Fréo are members. It is thought to be west of Midgarðr and like Ágarðr is said to have many mansions.

Urðarbrunnr/ *Wyrdesburne

Urðarbrunnr or the Well of Wyrd lies at the base of the World Tree. There lies the dwelling place of the Norns as well as the thing stead or assembly area of the Gods.

The various directions given in the above descriptions should not be thought of as literal directions. They come down to us from many sources and we can not be certain of their accuracy. Certainly Earthly directions would have little bearing on what are essentially metaphysical planes bordering our own. Still, it may be that these directions may give some idea of where the planes lie in relation to each other and which may be closest to our own.