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ALDRNARI

1. Introduction

THE WORD *aldrnari* occurs once in *Völuspá*, in stanza 54:¹

Sól tér sortna,
sigr fold í mar,
hverfa af himni
heiðar stjörnur;
geisar eimi
við **aldrnara**,
leikr hár hiti
við himin sjálfan.

Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to, ca. 1275–1300) has the reading *viþ aldr nara*, while the variant *ok aldrnari* occurs in Hauksbók and the manuscripts of *Snorra-Edda*.² In addition, the word is recorded once in the *þulur* verses

- 1 The text is from *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), vol. 1, 305–6. The numbering of the stanza varies in different editions. For example, in *Edda Sæmundar hinns fróða: Edda rhythmica seu antiquior, vulgo Sæmundina dicta*, ed. by Guðmundur Magnússon, Jón Jónsson, Jón Ólafsson úr Svefneyjum, Finnur Magnússon, and Gunnar Pálsson (Copenhagen: Sumtibus Legati Magnæani et Gyldendalii, 1787–1848, vol. 2, 1828), the stanza is no. 51 (*Vid aldrnára*). In *Norræn fornkvæði: Islandsk samling af folkelige oldtidsdigte om Nordens guder og heroer, almindelig kaldet Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, ed. by Sophus Bugge (Christiania: P. T. Malling, 1867), *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius samt verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Hans Kuhn, 4th ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), and *Eddadigte*, ed. by Jón Helgason. 2nd/3rd ed. (Copenhagen, 1955–59), it is no. 57. In *Edda Sæmundar hinns fróða: Collectio carminum veterum scaldorum Sæmundiana dicta*, ed. by Rasmus Christian Rask (Stockholm: Typis Elmenianis, 1818), and in *Die Lieder der Edda*, ed. by Barend Sijmons and Hugo Gering (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1888), it is no. 58. Finally, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Gisli Sigurðsson (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998), and *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, it is no. 55. I have chosen to follow the numbering (54) in *The Poetic Edda II: Mythological Poems*, ed. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 22.
- 2 Hauksbók (AM 544 4to, ca. 1300–25) has *ok alldrnari*. The manuscripts of *Snorra-Edda* comprise Codex Regius (GKS 2367 4to, ca. 1300–50), Codex Upsaliensis (DG 11 8vo, ca.

where it occurs as a *beiti* for fire, alongside other terms such as *eimr* and *eimi*.³

According to the traditional interpretation, the word *aldrnari* means ‘fire’, i.e. ‘the one who maintains life’ (see *Lexicon poeticum*, discussed below). Another idea is that it refers to the ‘tree of life’ or the ‘world tree’ *askr Yggdrasils*. It is clear that this is a compound whose first part is the Old Icelandic word *aldr* ‘age, life’, derived from the verb *ala* ‘rear’ which has cognates in related languages, e.g. *alan* ‘rear’ in Old English; in that language there is also the noun *ealdor*, *aldor* ‘life, age’. It is unclear, however, how the second part of the word, *-nari*, is to be understood. It is usually assumed that it is a masculine *an*-stem formed from the verb *næra* ‘nourish’, meaning ‘the one who rears, nourishes, supports; nourisher’.

The goal of this article is to reexamine the word *aldrnari*. The word is compared to Old English **ealdorneru*, **aldorneru* ‘life-salvation, life’s safety, refuge, asylum’,⁴ which has been argued to mean ‘the one who saves life, lifesaver’ in the particular context of the poem *Azarias* (see section 3.2). I hypothesize that the Old Icelandic word corresponds to the Old English one, and that it is an early loanword from Old English, albeit morphologically and semantically remodeled in Old Icelandic. Thus, in this case *-nari* would not be derived from the verb *næra* ‘nourish’ but adopted from Old English **-neru* ‘salvation, saving’; the latter is formed to the Old English verb *nerian* ‘save’ which has related forms in other West Germanic languages and Gothic (*nasjan* ‘save’) but apparently not in Old Icelandic. The meaning of *aldrnari* argued for here would then be ‘the one who saves life, lifesaver’, just as in the context-specific case of the Old

1300–25), Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol., ca. 1350), and Codex Trajectinus (Traj 1374, ca. 1600). For the dating of the manuscripts, see *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: Register* (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1898), 432–97.

3 *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*. A. *Tekst efter håndskrifterne*. B. *Rettet tekst*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912–15), vol. AI, 684, vol. BI, 674–5. “Anonymous Púlar: Introduction,” ed. by Elena Gurevich, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics 2. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. 3, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 449–663.

4 The nominative singular of these forms is not attested in the Old English sources, but it can confidently be conjectured on the basis of the grammatical properties of the relevant words, as will be discussed in section 3. In accordance with common practice, reconstructed forms are marked with an asterisk, irrespective of whether they are assumed to have existed at a historical stage (e.g. Old English) or at a prehistoric stage (e.g. Proto-Germanic).

English word. This sense fits the relevant context in *Völuspá*, and also the interpretation that Pétur Pétursson has proposed on the basis of possible biblical themes in this poem.⁵

2. Earlier scholarship

There are two main interpretations of the word *aldrnari*. It has most often been taken to mean ‘fire’, and it has also been suggested that it refers to *askr Yggdrasils*, the tree of life in Old Norse mythology. A third view holds that it means ‘the one who makes something narrow’. This section will trace the history of these explanations, duly considering the basis and merits of each and addressing their respective weaknesses.

2.1. *aldrnari* ‘fire’

The traditional interpretation of the word *aldrnari* assumes that it means ‘fire’. This hypothesis seems to have first been proposed by Sveinbjörn Egilsson in his *Lexicon poeticum*.⁶ There it is stated that *aldrnari* is a masculine noun, composed of the words *aldr* ‘age, life’ and *næra* ‘nourish’; a Latin translation is added: *vitalis nutritor* ‘the one who nourishes life’. The word is considered to mean *ignis* ‘fire’ or *ignis perpetuus* ‘perennial fire’, so that the phrase *geisar eimr* (sic) *við aldrnara* is given the meaning *saevit ignis contra ignem* ‘fire rages against fire’, or in other words, *ignis per omnia grassatur* ‘fire attacks everything’. The reading *geisar eimi ok aldrnari*, found in Hauksbók and the manuscripts of *Snorra-Edda*, shows a notable difference from the one in Codex Regius in that the conjunction *ok* followed by a nominative occurs instead of the preposition *við* with an accusative. The Latin translation given for this variant is *saevit ignis et aestus* ‘fire and heat rage’. In support of the idea of fire raging against fire, Sveinbjörn refers to the poem *Hákonarflokkur* of Sturla Þórðarson, where a similar image appears:

5 Pétur Pétursson, “Manifest and Latent Biblical Themes in *Völuspá*,” *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Völuspá and Nordic Days of Judgement*, ed. by Terry Gunnell and Annette Lassen (Turnout: Brepols, 2013), 185–201.

6 Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis* (Copenhagen: J. P. Qvist, 1860), 8.

Eim lék hyrr með himni,
hljóp eldr í sal feldan...⁷

[Fire played on fire against the sky; the flame leaped into the collapsed hall...]

Here the word *hyrr* is taken to mean ‘fire’, and the phrase *eim lék hyrr* (or rather *hyrr lék eim*, given the most usual word order in Old Icelandic prose) can be paraphrased as *ignis igni adludebat*, according to Sveinbjörn ‘fire was playing against fire’.⁸ As an interesting aside, it may be mentioned that Sveinbjörn also adduces words from Semitic languages (Arabic and Aramaic) which he seems to have thought important for illuminating the word’s origin. While these associations attest to considerable learning on his part, they must be regarded as far-fetched.

In the revised editions of the *Lexicon poeticum*, Finnur Jónsson reiterates Sveinbjörn’s opinion, maintaining that *aldrnari* means ‘fire’.⁹ Finnur also cites a famous stanza in *Hávamál*, presumably to emphasize the importance of fire as the basis of life, just like Sveinbjörn did in his interpretation ‘the one who nourishes life’. In *Hávamál* the importance of fire is especially noted in two places, in stanza 3 and in stanza 68.¹⁰ For some reason, Finnur refers only to the latter, but here the relevant parts of both stanzas are given (English translation by Dronke):

Elds er þorrf,
þeims inn er kominn
ok á kné kalinn... (Háv. 3)

Eldr er beztr
með ýta sonum
ok sólar sýn... (Háv. 68)

7 *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning. A. Tekst efter håndskrifterne. B. Rettet tekst*, vol. BII, 132. Cf. also for the text and English translation, “Sturla Þórðarson, Hákonarflokkur,” *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* vol. 2, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 748–9.

8 Note the similar English translation by Gade, *Ibid*.

9 Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis*, new ed. with additions by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1913–16); Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis*, 2nd ed. with corrections by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1931).

10 *The Poetic Edda III: Mythological Poems II*, ed. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3, 15; *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, vol. 1, 322, 335.

[Fire is wanted for the one who has come in, nipped with cold to the knee... Fire is best for the sons of men, and the sight of the sun...]¹¹

It should be emphasized that in these stanzas fire is seen as something positive which maintains life, whereas elsewhere, including in *Völuspá*, it appears as a destructive force.

The main argument for the fire hypothesis adduced by Finnur Jónsson is the fact that *aldrnari* is listed among the *beiti* for fire in the *þulur*. These texts are assumed to have been composed in the late twelfth or the early thirteenth centuries.¹² It is questionable, however, if the *þulur* can be considered to be an independent source in this case. Rather, as suggested by Hallberg, the interpretation of *aldrnari* in the *þulur* might be dependent on *Völuspá*, where the word's proximity to *eimi* may – mistakenly, according to Hallberg – have given rise to the view that it meant ‘fire’.¹³

In any event, most scholars lean towards the explanation of *aldrnari* as ‘fire’. The proposal is adopted in the dictionary of Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and Johan Fritzner reports that *aldrnari* means ‘fire’ in poetic diction.¹⁴ The same understanding is evident in the *Edda* commentary by Sijmons and Gering, in Gering’s dictionary ‘lebenserhalter, d.i. feuer’, and in Finnur Jónsson’s edition ‘ilden som den liv-nærende’, as well as in the glossary accompanying Kuhn’s (earlier Neckel’s) edition of the *Edda* and its English version by La Farge and Tucker ‘life-nourisher: fire’.¹⁵ Moreover, Rudolf Meissner is full of praise for ‘die schöne und

11 *The Poetic Edda* III, 3, 15.

12 *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, vol. AI, 684, vol. BI, 674–5; “Anonymous Þulur: Introduction,” 649.

13 Peter Hallberg, “Världsträdet och världsbranden: Ett motiv i *Völuspá*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 67 (1952): 155.

14 Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 12; Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. 2nd ed. (Christiania: Den norske forlagsforening, 1886–97), vol. 1, 31. See also the discussion of the word by Johan Fritzner, “Forklaring over nogle Ord og Udtryk i det gamle norske Sprog,” *Forhandlinger i Videnskabs-selskabet i Christiania* (1871): 426ff.

15 *Die Lieder der Edda*, 25; Hugo Gering, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zu den Liedern der Edda* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1903), 25; *De gamle Eddadigte*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1932), 18; *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, vol. 2, 14. See also Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda: Based on Hans Kuhn’s Kurzes Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992), 5.

für den Norden charakteristische ... Kenning *aldrnari*’ for fire, referring to *Hávamál* 68, and Falk argues that *aldrnari* expresses the idea of vitality of burning flames.¹⁶ Finally, the meaning ‘fire’ for this word is generally accepted in the etymological dictionaries of Old and Modern Icelandic by Alexander Jóhannesson, Jan de Vries, and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, as will be discussed below.¹⁷

Furthermore, ‘fire’ appears in foreign translations of *Völuspá*, for example in the English translations by Bellows, Hollander, and Larrington, as well as in German, Nordic, and other translations.¹⁸ In the same vein, Ursula Dronke, in her edition of the Eddic poems, gives the following translation of *Völuspá* 54:

The sun starts to blacken,
land sinks into sea,
the radiant stars
recoil from the sky.
Fume rages against **fire**,
fosterer of life,
the heat soars high
against heaven itself.¹⁹

As a matter of fact, Dronke does not let it suffice to translate *aldrnari* as ‘fire’ but inserts, as if to explicate further, the words *fosterer of life*, thus emphasizing the notion that fire fosters life.

John McKinnell also accepts the fire hypothesis and elucidates the imagery as follows: ‘A similar balance between fire as destroyer of evil and as sym-

16 Rudolf Meissner, *Kenningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn: Kurt Schröder, 1921), 102; Hjalmar Falk, “Ordstudier I,” *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 44 (1925): 320–1.

17 Alexander Jóhannesson, *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke, 1956), 639; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 405; Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (Reykjavík: Orðabók Háskólans, 1989), 659.

18 Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda* (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1923), 24; Lee M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*. 2nd ed., revised (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 11; Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [2nd ed. 2014]), 11.

19 *The Poetic Edda* III, 151.

bol or nourisher of new life can also be seen in the imagery of *Völuspá* 57, 5–8 (N-K 14).²⁰ In his translation of the second half of the relevant stanza, McKinnell adds, similarly to Dronke, the phrase *nourisher of life*:

...fire rages
opposite **fire** (**'nourisher of life'**),
lofty heat plays
against heaven itself.

For McKinnell, there is an idea of opposites: *eimi* is 'fire that destroys evil' and *aldrnari* is 'fire that nourishes and generates a new life'. Thus, there is an encounter between the annihilating fire (*eimi*) and the life-giving fire (*aldrnari*), symbolizing the collision of evil and good. Such an idea had in fact already been expressed by Sigurður Nordal, explaining the role of fire in the relevant stanza by saying that 'hann, sem áður annaðist lífið, snýst nú öndverður á hendur þess. – Eldur geisar við eld, jörðin er aelda' ['the one who formerly nourished life now turns against it; fire blazes by fire, the earth is entirely ablaze'].²¹ An informed yet critical discussion is found in Schach.²²

Thus, the predominant opinion on the meaning of *aldrnari* as 'fire' seems to be well established. Nevertheless, one may ask what the original motivation for this hypothesis is. The idea seems to be based primarily on the fact that the word occurs among the *heiti* for fire in the *þulur*; the interpretation, then, is that *aldrnari* denotes a phenomenon that is very important for the maintenance of life, fire obviously being vital in this regard, as for example in *Hávamál* 3 and 68. Although these seem valid arguments, they are not accepted by all researchers, who have attempted to find other explanations.

20 John McKinnell, "Völuspá and the Fest of Easter," *Essays on Eddic Poetry*, ed. by Donata Kick and John D. Shafer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 18.

21 *Völuspá*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1923), 102–3; *Völuspá*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, trans. B. S. Benediktz and John McKinnell (Durham: Durham and St. Andrews Medieval Texts, 1978), 110.

22 Paul Schach, "Some Thoughts on Völuspá," *Edda: A Collections of Essays*, ed. by R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 107.

2.2. *aldrnari* ‘the one who narrows’

Sophus Bugge, for one, was unable to accept the fire hypothesis, arguing instead for a different meaning of the word *aldrnari*.²³ He proposed that it meant ‘the one who narrows, makes something narrow’. In support of his view Bugge drew attention to the Old English verb *nearwian* which means ‘make narrow’:

...kaldes Ilden som den, der indsnævrrer, hemmer Livsvirksomheden, jfr. oldeng. *nearwian*, indsnævre, klemme, trykke, oldn. *nara* leve et usselt Liv.

[...the fire is called ‘the one that narrows, inhibits life’s the activity’, cf. Old English *nearwian* ‘make something narrow, squeeze, press’, Old Norse *nara* ‘live a wretched life’]

Karl Müllenhoff, who supported the fire hypothesis, expressly rejected Bugge’s idea.²⁴ He declared, not without a touch of irony, that the derivation of the word from Old English *nerwian* ‘make narrow’ was worth no more than Sveinbjörn Egilsson’s reference to words in Semitic languages (Arabic and Aramaic). More importantly, Müllenhoff compared *aldrnari* to the Old English forms **aldorneru* and **feorhneru*, both with the basic meaning ‘saving of life’, which he, however, cited incorrectly as having “-*naru*” as their second element. The Old Icelandic word is an agent noun, he asserted, which is ‘of course’ related to the action noun found in Old English. Müllenhoff concluded that ‘the one who maintains life’ here means ‘fire’ regardless of its role in this place in the poem. To quote Müllenhoff:

Das ἀπαξ λεγόμενον [hápaξ legómenon] ‘aldrnari’ ist natürlich das nomen agentis zu dem nomen actionis ags. *aldornaru*, *feorhnaru* [sic], und ‘lebenserhalter’ heisst hier das feuer ohne rücksicht auf die function die es nach der schilderung augenblicklich ausübt. die herleitung des wortes von ags. *nearwian* [sic] ‘artare’ war nicht

²³ *Norræn fornkvæði*, 391.

²⁴ Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, vol. 5, part 1 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1908), 154.

eben wertvoller als die von Egilsson aus dem arabischen und aramäischen.²⁵

[The ἄπαξ λεγόμενον [hápaχ legómenon] ‘aldrnari’ is of course the agent noun related to the Old English action noun *aldornaru*, *feorhnaru* [sic], and the fire is here ‘the supporter of life’ regardless of the function it has momentarily according to the description. The derivation of the word from Old English *nearvian* [sic] ‘artare [compress]’ was not exactly more valuable than the one proposed by Egilsson from Arabic and Aramaic.]

With this argument, Müllenhoff seems to have given Bugge’s suggestion a fatal blow. Moreover, despite the erroneous Old English forms, Müllenhoff’s contribution is noteworthy because of the derivational relations he posited between the Old Icelandic and Old English words, an issue we will return to in section 3.

2.3. *aldrnari* as a reference to *askr Yggdrasils*

Whereas Bugge’s account never got any following and can be ignored, the second major view on the meaning of *aldrnari* other than the fire hypothesis holds that the word refers to *askr Yggdrasils*, the ‘world tree’ in Norse cosmology and a symbol of the world’s vitality. This interpretation was already proposed in the so-called Copenhagen edition of the *Edda* in 1828:

Geisar eimr
Vid aldrnára
Leicr hár hiti
Vid himin síálfan.²⁶

In the critical apparatus, the forms *eimi* and *aldrnara* are given as alternative forms for *eimr* and *aldrnára*, respectively. The Latin translation provided in this edition, facing the Old Icelandic text, reads:

25 Müllenhoff, *Ibid.* Müllenhoff’s claim that *aldrnari* is a *hapax* must be qualified in view of the fact that it is attested in two different case forms in the manuscripts, as well as occurring in the *þulur*. See the discussion in section 1 above.

26 *Edda Sæmundar hinns fróða*, ed. by Guðmundur Magnússon et al., vol. 2 (1828), 51.

Sæviet ignis halitus
 Circa seculi nutritorem
 Alta flamma alludet
 Ipsi coelo.²⁷

[Vapor of fire will rage around the nourisher of the world, high flame will play against heaven itself.]

The commentary on *Vid aldvrnára* states:

Nempe stirpem, arborem vel columnam mundanam Yggdrasill dictam, qvæ seculum totum vel omnia in mundo viventia nutrit.²⁸

[Namely the stem, tree or column of the world called *Yggdrasill*, which nourishes the whole world, or all living creatures in the world.]

According to this interpretation, *eimr* ‘vapor of fire’ rages around *aldurnári* ‘the nourisher of the world’, i.e. the world tree *Yggdrasill*.

The proposed reading *aldurnára* did not find widespread acceptance. It still figures in Munch’s edition of the *Poetic Edda*, and, curiously enough, in a French translation of *Gylfaginning* by Bergmann, who claims, however, that the word means ‘killer of the world’ (*Tuant-le-Siècle*), a force of destruction.²⁹ In any case, this reading was explicitly rejected by Bugge.³⁰

Seemingly unaware of the original proposal in the Copenhagen edition of 1828, Peter Hallberg presented arguments for the same idea in the mid-20th century, even repeating them a quarter of a century later, in both cases without any reference to the earlier work.³¹ On the understanding that fire generally functions as a destructive force in *Völuspá*, Hallberg claims that

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 *Den Ældre Edda: Samling af norrøne oldkvad, indeholdende Nordens ældste gude- og helte-sagn*, ed. by Peter Andreas Munch (Christiania: P. T. Malling, 1847), 6. *La fascination de Gylfi (Gylfa ginning), traité de mythologie Scandinave composé par Snorri fils de Sturla*, ed. by Frédéric Guillaume Bergmann (Strasbourg: Treuttel & Würtz, 1861), 198.

30 *Norræn fornkvæði*, 391.

31 Hallberg, “Världsträdet och världsbranden,”; Peter Hallberg, “Elements of Imagery,” *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 47–85.

it would be ‘inappropriate to see fire as “nourisher of life” at the very moment when it swallows the world’.³² Presumably influenced by Hallberg, a number of other scholars have subscribed to the view that *aldrnari* denotes *askr Yggdrasils*. To be sure, Ólafur Briem is indecisive as to the meaning of *aldrnari* ‘eldur eða askur Yggdrasils’, but Paul Schach is adamant that ‘the life sustainer’ refers to the ‘world tree’, and Gísli Sigurðsson comments confidently on the word: ‘sá sem nærir lífið, askur Yggdrasils’.³³ While Hollander entertained this possibility as an alternative to ‘gutting fire’ in a footnote in his English translation of the *Poetic Edda*, Andy Orchard has no qualms about rendering *aldrnari* as ‘the world-tree’ in his.³⁴ Last but not least, the idea is adopted by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason in their new edition of the *Edda*.³⁵ They are of the opinion that ‘fire’ is an unlikely interpretation in the context of this stanza on the grounds that a word with this meaning would not be expected to occur with the preposition *við*. Moreover, they state that it would be awkward if ‘fire’ occurred three times within the same half stanza (*eimi*, *aldrnari* and *hiti*). They claim that the concept of *askr Yggdrasils* is more appropriate in the context.

There are dissenting views, however. Ursula Dronke, a proponent of fire hypothesis, as we have seen, discards the view that the word denotes *askr Yggdrasil* on the following grounds:

It seems improbable that *aldrnari* should refer to the world tree, whose role in the poem as a measurer, a time-keeper, ends with its groan of age in [stanza] 45.³⁶

Dronke’s counterarguments must be given considerable weight as the image described in the stanza she quotes is not easily compatible with the interpretation that *askr Yggdrasils* burns up in *Ragnarök*. In this connection, however, it should be kept in mind that, as Larrington cautions, the fate of *askr Yggdrasils* during the events of *Ragnarök* is in fact quite unclear.³⁷

32 Hallberg, “Elements of Imagery,” 63.

33 *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Ólafur Briem (Reykjavík: Skálholt, 1976), 90; Paul Schach, “Some Thoughts on *Völuspá*,” 106–107; *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Gísli Sigurðsson, 16.

34 Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, 11. Andy Orchard, *The Elder Edda. A Book of Viking Lore* (London: Penguin, 2011), 13.

35 *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, vol. 1, 305.

36 *The Poetic Edda* III, 151. The reference is to stanza 45 in Dronke’s edition, *Ibid.*, 19.

37 Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 269.

2.4. Summary

Given that the two major explanations of the word *aldrnari* discussed above – ‘fire’ or *askr Yggdrasils* – are at odds with each other, the matter seems to have reached an impasse. Most scholars assume that *aldrnari* means ‘fire’. This hypothesis is taken for granted in the principal commentaries, dictionaries, and translations. Other scholars have proposed different accounts, and the most common alternative meaning suggested is *askr Yggdrasils*. This idea, which goes back to the 19th century, has gained in popularity in recent decades, and is embraced, for example, in the new edition by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Neither hypothesis, however, is based on assumptions that are as solid as one might wish. Both have in common that *aldrnari* is assumed to mean ‘nourisher of life’, either as ‘fire’ or as *askr Yggdrasils*. The main counterargument against the former view is that fire otherwise appears as a destructive force in this poem, whereas here it would be the one who maintains life.³⁸ In addition, the arguments brought forth by Jónas and Vésteinn also undermine the fire hypothesis. On the other hand, among the problems facing the claim that *aldrnari* refers to *askr Yggdrasils* is the fact, emphasized by Dronke, that such an interpretation would involve conflicting images of the end of the world tree in *Völuspá*.

Rather than trying to enumerate further arguments for or against existing proposals, it is advisable to approach the word *aldrnari* with a fresh mind, exploring other leads, in particular comparable forms in related languages. In this regard it is worth considering the analogues in Old English, which have long been known but have so far not received the scrutiny they deserve.³⁹ It will emerge from the discussion that the scholars who cited the Old English words in connection with the Old Icelandic one were on the right track, although they seem not to have been aware of the significance of the parallel forms in the two languages, or at least only to a certain degree. Based on these premises, I propose a new account. A crucial point of the analysis is that while the first part of the compound contains *aldr* ‘age, life’, as is universally agreed, the second part, *-nari*, is not derived from the verb *nara* ‘nourish’ in Old Icelandic but is akin to forms found outside of North Germanic, related to Old English *nerian* and Gothic *nasjan* ‘save’.

38 Hallberg, “Världsträdet och världsbranden,” 155, and “Elements of Imagery,” 63.

39 See especially, Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 659.

3. The Old English (and other West Germanic) analogues to *aldrnari*

In their dictionary, under the entry *aldr-nari*, Cleasby and Vigfússon state that this is a masculine noun and a poetic name of fire. Moreover, they include for comparison an Old English (“A. S.” or Anglo-Saxon) form *ealdornere*, translating it into Latin as *nutritor vitae* ‘nourisher of life’, exactly as Sveinbjörn Egilsson did with *aldrnari* in his *Lexicon poeticum*.⁴⁰ Although Cleasby and Vigfússon do not comment on it, *ealdornere* is in fact the dative form of a word whose nominative is unattested. In the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* of Bosworth and Toller (*Supplement*), we find the entry *ealdorneru*, with its meaning given as ‘life-salvation, life’s safety, refuge, asylum; vitæ servatio, refugium’.⁴¹ See also the entry *ealdorneru* in the *DOE*: ‘life’s safety, asylum, salvation’. This is a feminine *ō*-stem noun,⁴² occurring only three times in Old English sources, once in the dative singular and twice in the accusative (see the discussion in 3.2 and 3.3 below).⁴³ It should be noted that the Latin translation *nutritor vitae* of the Old English form in Cleasby and Vigfússon does not match the meaning given by Bosworth and Toller and the *DOE*, and must be considered erroneous.

In the entry *-nari* in his Old Norse etymological dictionary, Jan de Vries remains silent on the Old English parallels, but compares the form to

40 Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 12; Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum*, 8.

41 Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth*, 4th ed., *Supplement* by T. Northcote Toller, with revisions and enlarged addenda by Alistair Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 168. In this article, dictionary entries are not marked with an asterisk if this is not done in the relevant dictionaries.

42 Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 242.

43 In the main volume of Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 229, the entry form is given as *ealdorner*, *aldorner*. Accordingly, the second part of the compound would be the same as the simplex *ner* (and the prefixed *gener*), which is a neuter noun with a genitive in *-es* (see section 3.5). But in the *Supplement*, this has been corrected to *ealdorneru*, *aldorneru*. Apparently, the correction was made on the basis of the examples presented in section 3.3, showing that the forms must be feminine *ō*-stems rather than neuter *a*-stems (see 3.1). These corrected forms are the ones found in other Old English dictionaries, including John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 83, and the *DOE*. The source of the confusion seems to be the fact that the words **-neru* and *ner* are identical in the dative singular.

the Old Saxon word *lifnara* ‘leibesnahrung’ (in *Heliand*), and gives further references to Old Icelandic *nara* ‘dwindle’ and *næra* ‘nourish’.⁴⁴ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon provides somewhat more detailed information on the word, adding that while the etymology of *-nari* is not entirely clear, *aldrnari* may be a loanword from West Germanic:

...orðið minnir á fe. *ealdorneru* ‘athvarf, björgun’ og fsax. *lifnara* ‘næring’; hugsanl. to. [= tökuorð].⁴⁵

[The word is reminiscent of Old English *ealdorneru* ‘refuge, salvation’ and Old Saxon *lifnara* ‘nourishment’; conceivably a loanword.]

Ásgeir further observes that if *aldrnari* is not a loanword but a Norse formation one would have to assume that the lack of *R*-umlaut in *-nari* (instead of **-næri*) was due to diminished stress in the second element of the compound.

In her commentary on *Völuspá* 54, referred to above, Dronke, citing Grein,⁴⁶ presents the Old English forms **ealdorneru* and **feorhneru* (already discussed by earlier scholars such as Müllenhoff), as well as **lifneru* ‘support of life, food’. The last of these three words corresponds almost exactly to Old Saxon and Old Low German *lifnara* ‘sustenance’ and Old High German *libnara* ‘victus, alimonia’, which suggests that it has roots in Old West Germanic.⁴⁷

44 Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 405. Pace de Vries, Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 392, claims, that Old Icelandic *nara* ‘dwindle’ is unrelated to *næra* ‘nourish’, having an altogether different etymology.

45 Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 659.

46 *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter*, ed. by C. W. M. Grein (Heidelberg: Winter, 1912), 243.

47 Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 640. It is clear that **-neru*, which only occurs in compounds, is a feminine *ō*-stem. Nonetheless, the umlaut of the root vowel of both **-neru* and (*ge-*)*ner* may suggest that these were originally *i*-stem nouns in Old English, which adopted early the endings of *ō*-stems (see Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, 242, on the former). However, this assumption appears somewhat problematic given that the Continental West Germanic forms (Old Saxon *lifnara* and Old High German *libnara*), discussed in the main text, are *ō*-stem nouns showing a root vowel with no umlaut.

Here I will propose that the analogues in Old English and other West Germanic languages can be used to clarify the origin of the word *aldrnari*. In order to do this the etymology, formation and meaning of the words in question will be considered in some detail.

3.1. The formation of **ealdorneru*, **aldorneru*

The first part of the compound noun **ealdorneru*, **aldorneru* is obviously *ealdor*, *aldor* 'life, age', while the second component, the feminine *ō*-stem **-neru*, is derived from a verb that is attested in Old English as *nerian* 'save' and with a prefix as *ge-nerian* 'save, deliver, take away, set free, preserve, defend';⁴⁸ this verb is cognate with Old Saxon *nerian*, Old High German *nerien* 'save, heal; nourish', and Gothic *nasjan* 'save'.⁴⁹ Thus, the verb in question occurs in West Germanic and Gothic, going back to a form which can be reconstructed as **nazjan-*.⁵⁰ It does not seem to be attested in North Germanic. While the Old Icelandic verb *næra* 'nourish' is no doubt related to **nazjan-*, it must reflect a form with a different root vocalism, reconstructed as **nōzjan-*.⁵¹

Numerous examples of the Old English verb *nerian* 'save' are found in Bosworth and Toller's dictionary, including this one:

Wyrd oft nereþ unfægne eorl

[Destiny often saves a man who is not fey]⁵²

A further example, attested in the Old English *Orosius* (Or. 2, 5), is notable in that the verb occurs with the object noun *feorh* 'life', corresponding to the members of the compound **feorhneru*:

... þæt hé mehte his **feorh** generian.

[that he might save his life.]⁵³

48 Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 716, 421.

49 See, e.g., Ferdinand Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962) 234, who also brings up the Old High German noun *neri* 'Heil, Rettung, Nahrung'.

50 Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 385.

51 Kroonen, *Ibid.*, 392.

52 Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 716 (*s.v.* *nerian*).

53 *Ibid.*, 1015 (*s.v.* *trog*).

It is important to reiterate, for the purposes of the present article, that the verb **nazjan-* ‘save’ is found in West Germanic (Old English as *nerian* etc.) and Gothic (*nasjan*) but apparently not in North Germanic.

3.2. *ealdornere* in *Azarias* 54

The dative form *ealdornere* occurs once in *Azarias* (Az. 54), an Old English narrative poem based on the Old Testament. The poem is preserved in the Exeter Book (Codex Exoniensis, Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501).⁵⁴ Incidentally, this tenth-century manuscript is the largest preserved collection of Old English poetry. The part of the poem that is relevant in the present context is given here:

Swa se halga wer	hergende wæs
meotudes miltse,	ond his modsefan
rehte þurh reorde.	ða of roderum wearð
engel ælbeorhta	ufon onsended,
wlitescýne wer	in his wuldorhoman,
cwom him þa to are	ond to ealdornere
þurh lufan ond þurh lisse. ⁵⁵	

A Modern English prose translation by Daniel Anlezark is as follows:

So the holy man was praising the creator’s mercy and spoke his mind aloud. Then from the skies above a radiant angel was sent, a beautiful man in his glorious robe, **who came as a favor and as a lifesaver to them in love and in kindness**. He, holy and heaven-bright, forced back the flame.⁵⁶

It deserves special attention that *ealdornere* is here translated as ‘lifesaver’. Thus, the underlying interpretation differs from the one in Bosworth and Toller, given above (‘A life-salvation, life’s safety, refuge, asylum; vitæ servatio, refugium’). The translation they offer for this particular verse is: ‘he come [i.e. came] to them for mercy and for their life’s salvation.’ This may

54 *Old Testament Narratives*, ed. by Daniel Anlezark (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), vii.

55 *Ibid.*, 304.

56 *Ibid.*, 305.

be compared to an earlier rendering by Gollancz: ‘He came then for their aid and for their life’s salvation.’⁵⁷

One may ask what the arguments are for Anlezark’s translation of **ealdorneru* as ‘lifesaver’ rather than ‘life’s salvation’. Anlezark does not explain his choice, but the interpretation he opts for is insightful: someone who comes for the salvation of life is evidently the one who saves life.

3.3. *aldornere* in *Genesis*

Aside from the occurrence in *Azarias*, there are two examples of the form *aldornere* in Old English (cf. Bosworth and Toller and the *DOE*); both are found in the poem *Genesis*, which is preserved in the Junius XI manuscript from the tenth century, like the Exeter Book. The text is cited from Anlezark’s edition:

Ne mæg ic mid idesum **aldornere** mine
 swa feor heonon feðe-gange
 siðe gesecan. ...
 Lyfað me þær
 are and reste, þæt we **aldornere**
 on Sigor up secan móten.⁵⁸

Anlezark translates as follows:

I cannot look too far from here **for the saving of my life**, with these ladies going by foot... Deliver me there with favor and respite, so that we are able to **seek survival** in Zoar.⁵⁹

Interestingly, in this passage Anlezark considers the translation ‘saving of life, survival’ to be more suitable in the relevant context than ‘lifesaver’. The interpretation in Bosworth and Toller is similar (‘I cannot seek my life’s safety... that we may seek an asylum’). *Aldornere* is in the accusative case in both examples, as is clear from the fact that they occur with the verb *sécan/ge-sécan* ‘seek’, which regularly takes an accusative object; moreover, the form of the possessive pronoun *míne* ‘mine’, modifying the noun *aldor-*

57 *The Exeter Book: An Anthology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. by Israel Gollancz (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1895), 192.

58 *Old Testament Narratives*, 174. On the dating, see *Ibid.*, vii.

59 *Ibid.*, 175.

nerē, is evidently feminine accusative. It is on the basis of these examples that the nominative in **-neru* (rather than *-ner*) is posited.

3.4. The forms *feorhnere* and *lifnerē*

Further compounds of the same type involve **feorhneru* and **lifneru*, with *feorh* and *lif* both meaning ‘life’ just like *ealdor/aldor*. The nominative case of these compounds is not attested, but the forms are conjectured, as in the case of **ealdorneru/*aldorneru*. The word **feorhneru* is attested fourteen times in oblique cases. The meaning is given as ‘life’s preservation or salvation, a refuge, sustenance, nourishment; food; *vītā servātio, refūgium, ālimentum, cibus*’.⁶⁰ In the entry *feorhneru* in the *DOE* the two meanings are more explicitly separated: 1. ‘preservation of life, asylum; salvation’, 2. ‘nourishment (to sustain life), food’. A close parallel to the passage from *Azarias* cited above is found in the poem *Daniel* (Dan. 335–339), except that it involves the form *feorhnere* rather than *ealdornere*. The text and translation are from Anlezark:

Ða of roderum wæs
engel ælbeorht ufan onsended,
wlite-scyne wer on his wuldor-haman,
se him cwom to frofre and to feorhnere
mid lufan and mid lisse.

[Then a radiant angel was sent from the skies above, a beautiful man in his glorious robe, **who came as a comfort and as a lifesaver to them** with love and with kindness.]⁶¹

Again, just as in the case of *Azarias*, the translation given here prefers the word ‘lifesaver’ to a more literal ‘life saving, life’s salvation’.

The word **lifneru*, attested once in the poem *Andreas* in the Vercelli book (late tenth century), has the meaning ‘support of life, food’.

⁶⁰ Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 279, and *Supplement*, 213. Parallel to the entry *ealdorneru*, in the main volume of Bosworth and Toller the entry form is given as *feorhner* (neuter), but in the *Supplement* this has been corrected to *feorhneru* (feminine). Remarkably, however, *lifneru* is given in its correct nominative form together with information on its correct feminine gender in the entry for this word in the main volume.

⁶¹ *Old Testament Narratives*, 270–271.

Hie ða behlidenan him **to lifnere** gefeormedon

[They fed on the dead to save their lives] (i.e. for their life's support).⁶²

As stated above, the West Germanic origins of this compound are suggested by the occurrence of similar forms in Old Saxon and Old Low German *lifnara* 'lebensnahrung, nutrition' and Old High German *libnara* 'victus, alimonia'. It is worth noting that there is an obvious semantic development from 'life's saving' to 'food', which is also found in the cognates of the Old English verb *nerian* 'save' in Continental West Germanic (e.g. the Old Saxon verb *nerian* and Old High German *nerien* which both mean 'save, heal' and 'nourish').

3.5. The forms *ner*, *gener* and *feorhgener*

In addition to the \bar{o} -stem **-neru*, figuring only as a second member in compounds, the noun *ner* appears in Old English sources as a simplex as well as with a prefix as *gener*. This is a neuter *a*-stem noun whose genitive ending is *-es*. All case forms (of the singular) are attested. It means 'refuge, safety, asylum' (cf. the relevant entries in Bosworth and Toller).

Geworden is [Dryhten] **ner** oððe rótnes ðam þearfan
[The Lord has become a refuge or protection for the poor]⁶³

Ðú eart **gener** mín
[You are my refuge]⁶⁴

Hí oðer **gener** næfdon
[They had not another refuge]⁶⁵

Hý sceoldon fægnian, þonne hý on **genere** wáeron
[They should rejoice when they were in safety]⁶⁶

62 Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 640, 391.

63 Ibid., 716.

64 Ibid., 421.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., *Supplement*, 379.

Ongin ðé **generes** wilnian

[Desire a refuge for thyself]⁶⁷

Furthermore, a compound **feorhgener* ‘preservation of life’ is attested once.

...buton se cyningc him **feorhgeneres** unne

[...unless the king grant him that his life be spared]⁶⁸

The derivational relationship between the neuter abstract nouns *ner* and the feminine action noun **-neru* is not entirely clear; presumably both words are derived independently from the verb *nerian* ‘save’. There is a semantic overlap, however, as **-neru*, which basically means ‘saving’ can also have the sense ‘refuge’, which is the basic meaning of *ner*.

3.6. Conclusions about Old English **-neru* and *ner*

The relevant nouns in Old English are derived from the verb *nerian* ‘save’, which has cognates in other West Germanic languages and Gothic. It is reconstructed as Common Germanic **nazjan-* ‘save’. The Old English nouns are of two kinds. On the one hand, there is a feminine action noun, attested only in compounds, whose conjectured nominative singular would be **-neru* (**ealdorneru*/**aldorneru*, **feorhneru*, and **lifneru*). These nouns are *ō*-stems in Old English, but presumably they were originally *i*-stems, which would explain the umlaut of the root vowel. The meaning of the word **-neru* is basically ‘saving’, but in accordance with Anlezark’s analysis, it can also be taken to mean ‘the one who saves, savior’. On the other hand, there is a neuter abstract noun *ner* (with a prefixed form *gener* and the compound **feorhgener*). This is an *a*-stem noun, but given the root vocalism of *ner*, it was perhaps originally an *i*-stem like **-neru*. The noun *ner* has the basic meaning ‘refuge’ (i.e. ‘a place of safety’).

4. *aldrnari* ‘lifesaver’

The Old English analogues, **ealdorneru* and related words, shed new light on the meaning as well as the formation of the word *aldrnari* in *Völuspá*. Their proper evaluation diminishes the strength of earlier interpretations,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 421.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 279. *DOE*, s.v. *feorhgener*.

the fire hypothesis and the idea that the word refers to *askr Yggdrasils*, both of which take for granted that *-nari* is derived within Old Norse-Icelandic from the verb *næra* ‘nourish’.

Here it is proposed that the Old Icelandic word has a similar meaning to the Old English one, although the formation of the latter part of the compound is different in the two languages. Thus, Old English **ealdorneru* is an action noun meaning ‘salvation of life’, but Old Icelandic *aldrnari* is an agentive noun. There is no need to exaggerate the semantic difference between the two words; Old Icelandic *aldrnari* could in effect be synonymous with **ealdorneru* in *Azarias*, as understood by Anlezark, signifying ‘the one who saves life, lifesaver’. On the assumption that the second part of *aldrnari* is not derived from Old Icelandic *næra* ‘nourish’, two possibilities present themselves with respect to its origin:

- (i) The Old Icelandic word is directly related to the Old English one, both going back to Common Germanic.
- (ii) The Old Icelandic word is a loanword from Old English.

According to the first hypothesis, *-nari* would be akin to the verb **nazjan-* ‘save’ just like Old English **-neru*. This verb is attested in Old English *nerian* and related forms in other Old West Germanic languages and Gothic (all meaning ‘save’). However, a problem with this possibility is that there is no real evidence for an exact cognate of this verb in North Germanic, except possibly in loanwords from West Germanic.⁶⁹ If the element *-nari* were truly derived from the verb **nazjan-*, it would be a unique archaism in Old Icelandic. Although conceivable, such an assumption is not supported by any other evidence. Therefore, it seems more likely that this verb was confined to Gothic and West Germanic and was absent from the vocabulary of Old Norse-Icelandic.

The second hypothesis, according to which *aldrnari* is borrowed from Old English, is more feasible in my opinion. As mentioned above, this

69 See Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 385. It may be noted that Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 680, posits two verbs *næra* in (Old) Icelandic: *næra* (1) and *næra* (2), which would be virtually synonymous. The former (Old Icelandic *næra*) is hypothesized to be a loanword from Middle Low German while the latter (Old Icelandic *næra*) is assumed to be a genuine Norse word, most probably derived from **nōzjan-* (on which, see section 3.1 above). I cannot pursue this matter further here.

possibility was already entertained by Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon.⁷⁰ The premise is simple enough: the similarity of the forms **ealdorneru* and *aldrnari* is so striking that it is unlikely to be due to chance. As I have argued, it is implausible that the Old Icelandic form is a Norse formation or goes back independently to Common Germanic **nazjan-*; therefore, the relationship of the words in the two languages must involve borrowing from Old English to Old Icelandic. Obviously, this account is in accordance with the facts of the chronology, since the Old English word occurs in the Exeter Book, a document from the tenth century. It is therefore clearly very old, at least one or two centuries earlier than *Völuspá* in its preserved form, and it could therefore be a model for Old Icelandic *aldrnari*. Thus, since the attestation shows that *ealdorneru* existed in Old English at an early period, the timing fits an early borrowing into Old Norse-Icelandic. In this connection, it is worth keeping in mind that alleged Old English loanwords are not unknown in the *Edda*, as McKinnell has argued, for instance.⁷¹ It is even possible that the ‘poet’ who composed some layer of *Völuspá* knew Old English poetry of the tradition that produced *Azarias*, in which the dative form *ealdornere* is arguably to be understood as an agent noun meaning ‘lifesaver’ rather than ‘life’s salvation’.⁷² In this case, an *an-*stem noun would be a plausible outcome within Old Icelandic.

This analysis requires that both the form and the meaning of the word in question were altered in the borrowing process, with subsequent morphological and semantic remodeling in Old Icelandic. A direct borrowing of Old English **-neru* into Old Icelandic would presumably never have yielded a straightforward result. Rather, it seems plausible that Old English **-neru* was remodeled to *-nari* in Old Icelandic, a form which is unlikely to ever have developed regularly within North Germanic. Perhaps the creation of *-nari* rather than, say, a form like **-næri* (from **-nazan*) with the expected *R*-umlaut was in some way connected to lack of stress in the second part of a compound.⁷³

70 Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 659.

71 John McKinnell, “The Context of *Völundarkviða*,” *Saga-Book* 23 (1990): 1–27.

72 John McKinnell, “Heathenism in *Völuspá*: A Preliminary Survey,” *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Völuspá and Nordic Days of Judgement*, ed. by Terry Gunnell and Annette Lassen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 95.

73 As discussed above, Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 659, remarks that the lack of *R*-umlaut in *-nari* instead of **-næri* is an argument against its Norse origin. While

A potential counterargument to the loanword hypothesis involves the different gender of the words; the Old English form **ealdorneru* is feminine, whereas Old Icelandic *aldrnari* is masculine. However, this argument does not weigh heavily for two reasons: first, incongruity in gender assignment is generally common in borrowings,⁷⁴ and secondly, assuming that the word was remodeled as an agentive *an*-stem noun in Old Icelandic, it is only natural that it would be assigned masculine gender because such nouns are almost always masculine in Old Icelandic.⁷⁵

Given the above considerations, I propose that *aldrnari* in *Völuspá* is a loanword from Old English which was remodeled as an agentive *an*-stem noun in Old Icelandic and interpreted as ‘the one who saves life, lifesaver’. Therefore, a translation of the relevant lines in stanza 54 would be:

...fire rages
against **the lifesaver**

In view of the theory of Pétur Pétursson that there are biblical themes in *Völuspá*, a view primarily founded on a variety of visual and Christian sources, in particular Doomsday icons, it appears that the ‘lifesaver’ in question is a ‘savior’, who would then be none other than Jesus Christ. In fact, Pétur has interpreted the word *aldrnari*, mainly on non-linguistic grounds, as a *kenning* for Christ.⁷⁶

5. Conclusion

The word *aldrnari* in Old Icelandic appears only in stanza 54 of *Völuspá* and in the *þulur*. The traditional explanations of the word assume that either it means ‘fire’ or refers to *askr Yggdrasils*; a further proposal is that it

this is a fair point, in my view the vocalism in this form is a problem for all three accounts: not only the derivation from Old Icelandic *nera* ‘nourish’, but also the derivation from Common Germanic **nazjan-* ‘save’ and the borrowing from Old English. In all three cases an extra assumption is required to account for the form. Given the problems with the other possibilities, the assumption that *aldrnari* is a loanword is the most viable one.

74 For a comprehensive discussion, see Greville Corbett, *Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

75 Adolf Noreen, *Altnordische Grammatik I. Altisländische und altnorwegische Grammatik (Laut- und Flexionslehre) unter Berücksichtigung des Urnordischen*, 4th ed. (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), 276.

76 Pétur Pétursson, “Manifest and Latent Biblical Themes in *Völuspá*,” 192.

means 'one who makes narrow'. In this article, it has been argued that the meaning is rather 'the one who saves life, lifesaver'. The interpretation is based on comparisons with the Old English word **ealdorneru*, **aldorneru*. The second part of the Old English compound, **-neru*, is derived from a verb that appears in Old English as *nerian* 'save', with parallels elsewhere in West Germanic and Gothic, but not in North Germanic. The meaning of the Old English noun **ealdorneru* is usually given as 'life-salvation, life's safety, refuge, asylum', which in a certain context can be interpreted as 'lifesaver'. It is concluded that *aldrnari* is a loanword in Old Icelandic, rather than a Norse formation going back to Common Germanic. In Old Icelandic the loanword *aldrnari* was arguably interpreted as an agent noun meaning 'the one who saves life, lifesaver'. This meaning is suitable in the context in which the word occurs in *Völuspá*, especially in light of Pétur Pétursson's reading of biblical themes in this poem. The word *aldrnari* is therefore a testimony to the relationship between Norsemen and Anglo-Saxons at the time when *Völuspá* came into being, and a further indication of the merger of Christian and pagan ideas in the compositional history of the poem.

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SUMMARY

aldrnari

Keywords: *Völuspá*, historical linguistics, loanwords, Old Icelandic, Old English

The word *aldrnari* is attested once in the Old Icelandic corpus, in *Völuspá* verse 54. It occurs in the form *við aldrnara* in the *Konungsbók* manuscript and in the form *ok aldrnari* in *Hauksbók* and other manuscripts. The word also appears among

the *heiti* for ‘fire’ in the *þulur*. *Aldrnari* is usually taken to mean ‘the one who nourishes life’ as a reference to fire. Others have suggested that the word refers to *askr Yggdrasils* the ‘tree of life’. Neither explanation is entirely sufficient. Scholars have noted that *aldrnari* corresponds to a form in Old English that is preserved in tenth-century manuscripts and is thought to denote ‘lifesaver, refuge’ or even ‘the one who saves life’. The Old English noun *ealdornere*, *aldornere* is attested only in oblique cases (accusative/dative) but would be *ealdorneru*, **aldorneru* in the nominative. This article investigates the Old English and Old Icelandic words more closely and argues that *aldrnari* in *Völuspá* is a loanword from Old English. The article also explains how the form was adapted grammatically into Old Icelandic. The article concludes that the word *aldrnari* is in keeping with Pétur Pétursson’s interpretation of *Völuspá* in light of Christian visions of the Apocalypse.

ÁGRIP

aldrnari

Lykilorð: *Völuspá*, söguleg málvísindi, tökuorð, forníslenska, fornenska

Orðið *aldrnari* kemur fyrir einu sinni í forníslensku, í *Völuspá* 54, með lesbrigðum í Konungsbók annars vegar (*við aldrnara*) og Hauksbók og öðrum handritum hins vegar (*ok aldrnari*). Enn fremur kemur orðið fyrir meðal eldsheita í þulum. Hefðbundin skýring er að það merki ‘sá sem nærir lífið’ og eigi við um eld. Aðrir hafa stungið upp á að orðið tákni ask Yggdrasils. Hvorug skýringin er fullnægjandi. Fræðimenn hafa veitt því athygli að *aldrnari* samsvarar orðmynd í fornensku sem varðveitt er í handritum frá 10. öld og talin er merkja ‘björgun lífs, athvarf’ eða jafnvel ‘sá sem bjargar lífi’. Fornenska nafnorðið *ealdornere*, *aldornere* kemur aðeins fyrir í aukafalli (þolfalli/þágufalli) en væri **ealdorneru*, **aldorneru* í nefnifalli. Hér eru forníslensku og fornensku orðin rannsökuð nánar og ályktað að *aldrnari* í *Völuspá* sé tökuorð úr fornensku og beyging þess aðlöguð að forníslensku. Niðurstaðan um merkingu orðsins *aldrnari* er samrýmanleg hugmyndum Péturs Péturssonar um túlkun *Völuspár* í ljósi kristinna dómsdagsmynda.

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