

**Musings on Fire, Ice, and the Importance of Salt**  
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We know from *Voluspa*, and Snorri Sturlson's *Edda*, that in the time before Midgard existed, there were two realms, Muspelheim and Nifhelheim. Between them yawned Ginnungagap. The rivers which poured from Nifhelheim's spring, Hvergelmir, eventually froze, "and when this ice came to a halt and stopped flowing, the vapour that was rising from the poison froze on the top in the same direction and turned to rime, and this rime increased layer upon layer right across Ginnungagap (Faulkes, p.10)." It is worth taking a strong look at these three elements, fire, ice, and rime (or salt) using the mythology of creation to determine their importance.

Muspelheim is the realm of fire. Surt stands with his flaming sword at the edges of the land, prepared to defend it. Muspelheim is described in the Prose Edda as being in the south, and as "bright and hot (Faulkes, p. 9)." Fire is cataclysmically destructive, as is obvious both from the mythological example of Ragnarok and more modern photographs from California show. Fire, particularly fire that sweeps across the land, is also a renewing force in that it leaves behind more fertile topsoil in which new life can grow. Fire can also create new land itself, as evidenced by volcanic activity throughout the world. Small, contained fires benefit mankind in general, used for warmth, light, and the cooking of food.

Ice, on the other hand, is often referred to as a "polar opposite" of fire. At first appearance this is certainly true – ice is cold where fire is hot. Ice is solid while fire is mutable and ever-changing. Nifhelheim, we are told is a source for "coldness and all things grim (Faulkes, p. 10)" and is presumably to the north, because the part of Ginnungagap that "faces in a northerly direction, was filled with the weight and heaviness of ice and rime (Faulkes, p 10)." However, ice is also cataclysmically destructive and a bane to mankind. Ice, particularly in the form of glaciers, changes the topography of the land as it slowly flows forward and then recedes. When glaciers recede, they leave fertile topsoil behind, dredged up by their passage. Small, contained ice benefits mankind as well, cooling us on hot days, certainly but more importantly acting as a natural food preservative.

Thus, the two "polar opposites" are in fact remarkably similar. While their lands lay to the "north" and "south" generally, they do meet – and it is in the fertile middle ground that life is created. This must have seemed obvious to our ancestors, particularly in Iceland, where fire and ice hold a strong geographic sway over life. The third element, rime or salt, is equally vital to life itself.

Human beings require salt to live. Our adult bodies contain nearly 250 grams of salt, which is constantly being lost in our own bodily functions. Salt is a remarkably efficient preservative for food, and from our earliest recorded histories (many in China, but also in Egypt, Greece, and Northern Europe) salted meat and vegetables were staple items. Salt also protects from harm, and in Northern Europe farmers learned to soak their grain in brine (salted water) in order to protect it from ergot while in storage. It should come as no surprise that Anglo Saxon farmers used salt as a magical ingredient when blessing plows. Finding salt must have been a problem for our ancestors.

Here the mythology begins to correspond once more with practice. Animals require salt, as well, and in the wild will find and use "salt licks" wherever they will find them. Long practice of early hunters showed that following a wild animal path –particularly that of an

herbivore – led to salt, whether in the form of a lick, a brine spring, or other source. We know from the myths that Audhumla licked the rime stones, and it was from Audhumla that Ymir was fed. Audhumla, in fact, licks Buri into existence in this fashion (Faulkes, p. 11).

Other ways of salt gathering included harvesting it off of the edges of shallow brine pools as they evaporated or boiling brine until only the salt crystals remained. Evidence shows that this method was practiced in China as early as 800 B.C.E., and spread into the Roman Empire about 1000 years later. It stands to reason that our ancestors, living as they did on the oceans, would have a similar method to produce salt.

It is an easy jump to realize that our ancestors knew and understood the importance of salt. We see in the creation myth that rime formed, and from that rime was brought forth the first ancestor of Odin himself. It is presumed that the Vikings knew to freeze fish (particularly cod) by hanging it in the frozen air until it lost its fluid and became plank-like (the earliest “freeze drying” process). Later, cod were gutted and filled with salt as a preservative. Thus practice shows us that the ancestors knew about the importance of these elements (ice, salt, and fire in the sense of smoking meats to preserve them) and used them to great effect in order to survive. These are methods, the “how” of using the elements to one’s advantage. The myths, as always, give us the “why” behind the practice. Fire and ice were important because they were from lands that existed before Midgard. Salt was important because from it the first ancestor of the gods was formed. These three elements were in place in the beginning and are presumably present even after the end.

### **Book Hoard**

Kurlansky, Mark, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Kurlansky, Mark, *Salt: A World History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Sturluson, Snorri: *Edda* (Anthony Faulkes, trans.). London: Everyman, 1987.