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Literature  
& Language

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Ancient Literature  
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# Norse Mythology

Course Guidebook

Jackson Crawford



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A portrait of Jackson Crawford, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue jacket over a light blue shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a dark, textured grey.

## Jackson Crawford

Jackson Crawford is a Resident Scholar at the University of Colorado Boulder's Center of the American West. After more than a decade as an instructor in Norse mythology and Old Norse language and literature at such institutions as the University of Colorado Boulder; the University of California, Berkeley; and the University of California, Los Angeles, he became a full-time public educator and translator for all things Old Norse in 2020. He received his MA in Linguistics from the University of Georgia and his PhD in Scandinavian Studies, focusing on Old Norse language and literature, from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Among other accomplishments, Jackson has built up a large YouTube following and has served as an Old Norse language and runes consultant on major multimedia projects, including some of today's most popular films and video games. His translations of the primary sources of Norse mythology include *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*; “*The Saga of the Volsungs*” with “*The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*”; *The Wanderer's “Hávamál”*; and *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes: “Hervor and Heidrek” & “Hrólf Kraki and His Champions.”*

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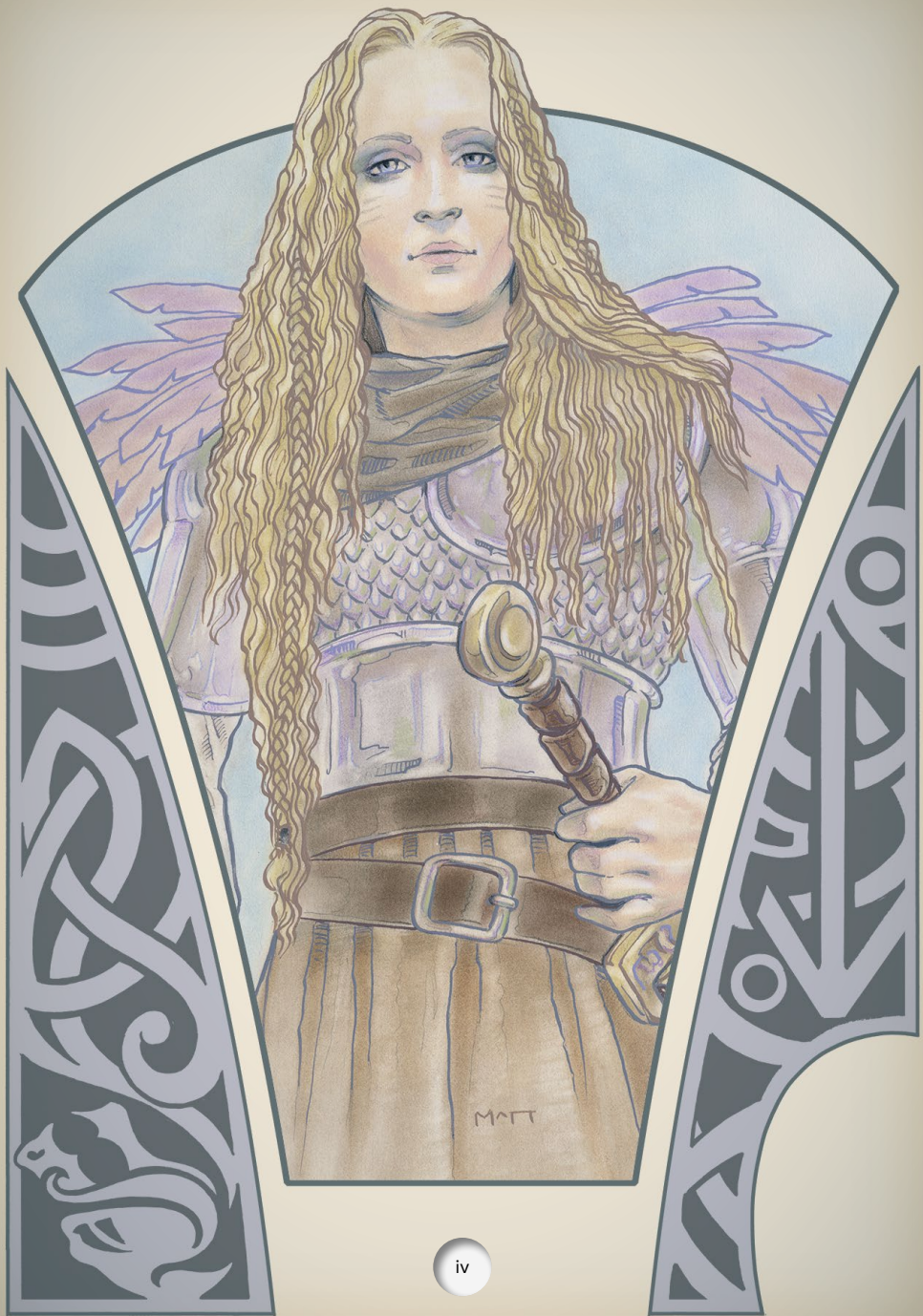
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# Norse Mythology

Norse mythology comprises the narratives of gods, heroes, and other superhuman beings passed down from Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian (“Norse”) poets and writers. The Norse gods include Odin, Thor, and Loki, who have become among the most celebrated figures in popular culture during the early 21st century. These Viking Age myths have also had an outsize influence on the fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien, which in turn have influenced almost every other work of fantasy or science fiction in the last 75 years. In spite of this surging popularity, the genuine original medieval myths remain relatively little-known outside of some highly distorted presentations.

This course explores not only the myths themselves—the stories of the gods and heroes preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts—but also the nature of the source material, the relationship of the myths to the early history of Scandinavia and England, and the human level of mythical belief as expressed in religious activities and ideas about magic and the afterlife.

The most important surviving written sources for Norse mythology are two books called Edda written down in Iceland in the 1200s AD. The first is the Poetic Edda, which is a compilation of about 30 stories in poetic form about gods and heroes, passed down from the pre-Christian period. The second is the Prose Edda, written by the Icelandic lawyer and scholar Snorri Sturluson to explain many of these poems (and more) and present them in a more cohesive narrative format. It is these books that provide most of the material that is reviewed in this course.

In the first three lectures in this course, you will orient yourself to these myths and the milieu that created them. You will consider who the Norse were and how surprisingly close the roots of their language (and mythology) lie to those of English. You will examine their dour notions of fate and predestination, which colored both daily life and the myths of the gods. And

you will review the style of storytelling in the medieval sources, which are much closer to those of dreams or modern comic books than modern novels or movie series.

Lectures 4 through 9 review the core mythical narratives of the Eddas. You meet the gods in the story of an interrupted feast at which Loki insults them all. You then consider the creation myth, the strangely close relationships of the gods with their enemies (the *jotnar*, or “anti-gods”), the place of humanity in the mythic cosmos, the constant antagonistic presence of Loki, the murder of the beloved god Balder, and the death of the remaining gods at Ragnarok.

Lectures 10 through 16 focus on the most important gods and other beings. You meet Thor, the guardian of order and the ruling Aesir gods—and the exemplar of Norse manliness—who often appears in myth as an affable, approachable figure who can even feature in comic episodes. You meet his much less approachable father, Odin, who is desperate to prevent the upcoming Ragnarok by gathering fallen warriors for his army in Valhalla. You meet the Vanir gods Njorth and Frey, beings who seem subordinate to the Aesir gods and perhaps more ritually important than their status in the narrative myths would suggest. You meet the Valkyries, Odin’s harvesters of the dead, and the goddess Freyja, desired by all the gods and their enemies and perhaps the chief of the Valkyries. And you meet the many lesser supernatural creatures that populate the myths and sagas, such as dwarves, elves, and the undead “again-walkers.”

Lectures 17 through 19 review the careers of the heroes of the Volsung family, descended from Odin and both cursed and blessed by him. Their story occupies much the same place in the Old Norse world and its mythos as the *Iliad* did in their classical counterparts. And in lecture 20, you meet other mythical heroes, including the women warriors (shieldmaidens), the fearsome frenzied berserkers, and the bear men.

Lectures 20 through 23 examine the relationship of human life to supernatural beliefs. You consider the scattered pieces of evidence that survive for the rituals and holidays of Norse religion, the place of magic in daily

life and the sagas, and Norse beliefs about death and the afterlife. Finally, lecture 24 concludes the course with recommendations for further study and a consideration of how and why the Norse myths have come to such an incredible resurgence of popularity in the early 21st century.

By the end of this course, you will have a good understanding not only of what is known about the Viking Age gods from Scandinavia, but also of how scholars have come to know anything about this distant epoch and its beliefs at all. You'll also be equipped to continue exploring these myths and their medieval primary sources—and perhaps others—on your own.





## Lecture 1

# Meeting the Norse Gods of the Viking Age

A hammer-wielding guardian of the gods named Thor. A murderer and comic sidekick named Loki. A mysterious one-eyed leader of the gods named Odin, who sacrifices himself—to himself—and demands the sacrifice of thousands of men in battle. A world-encircling serpent. A final doomed battle in which all these beings fall, at Ragnarok.

The Norse myths are largely the account of the rivalry between two great sides of a family of powerful supernatural beings fighting from the beginning of time to its end. One side of this extended feuding family, the gods, are vastly more favorable in their conduct toward human beings and thus are the only side in this cosmic struggle that the Norse worshipped. The opposing side is called the anti-gods (the *jotnar*) to emphasize their similar power and close relationship but hostile disposition.

## The Old Norse Language

The Norse myths preserve stories about the gods once worshipped throughout Scandinavia, and at an earlier period even in England and Germany as well. All of these areas of northern Europe speak what are called Germanic languages.

Because the old Germanic languages—including Old Norse, Old High German, and Old English—had split off from one ancestor language in northern Europe only a few centuries before the Viking Age, the Old Norse language remained a very close relative to Old English.

And just as these languages shared a common root in an ancestor language spoken in the early centuries AD, the cultures speaking these very similar languages originally had much in common. Before the English were converted to Christianity (largely in the 500s to 600s AD), they worshipped the same gods as their Norse-speaking cousins. And traces of these gods are still found in the English-language names of the weekdays.

The names of the weekdays in English represent the substitution of local gods' names for the names of Roman gods in the days of the week.

English	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Roman	Sun day	Moon day	Mars day	Mercury day	Jove day	Venus day	Saturn day
French			Mardi	Mercredi			Samedi
Spanish			Martes	Miércoles			Sábado
Germanic			Tyr's day	Odin's day	Thor day	Frigg day	
Old Norse							"Bath day" laugar-dagr

The Romans had a seven-day week, with a “Sun day” (our Sunday), a “Moon day” (our Monday), and the other days of the week named for gods associated with the five visible planets in the sky:

- ◆ Mars’s day,
- ◆ Mercury’s day,
- ◆ Jove’s or Jupiter’s day,
- ◆ Venus’s day, and
- ◆ Saturn’s day.

Notice how the old Roman names have been preserved in modern French and Spanish. But in the Germanic languages, the names of the Roman gods were replaced with the names of local gods of roughly similar function. Thus,

- ◆ Mars’s day became Tyr’s day,
- ◆ Mercury’s day became Odin’s day,
- ◆ Jupiter’s day became Thor’s day, and
- ◆ Venus’s day became Frigg’s day.

As for Saturday, different languages went different ways. English maintains the link with Saturn, while in Scandinavia the day is simply called “Bath day” (as in Old Norse, *laugar-dagr*).

In English, the names of the gods preserved in the weekdays’ names are slightly different from the Norse forms of those names. This is because the English language had already undergone some different sound changes than its close relative, Old Norse, before either of these sister languages was written down.

For example, in Old Norse, the sound [w] has always been lost before the vowel *o* or *u*—hence Old Norse *Odin*, from an ancestral form of the name that began *Wo-*. In Old English, the initial *W* is maintained—thus, Old English *Woden’s day*, leading to modern English *Wednesday*, versus the Old Norse name, *Odin’s day*. English words such as *wolf*, *worm*, and *word* can be compared with their Old Norse equivalents, or cognates, *úlfr*, *ormr*, and *orð*, to show just how regular this correspondence is between the closely akin languages.

Here are just a few facets of this reconstructed medieval pronunciation.

Old Norse words are always emphasized on the first syllable, no matter how long the word is—e.g., Aesir, Vanir, Ginnungagap—while many people today pronounce these names with the emphasis on the second syllable.

Most Old Norse names end in an *-r* in their nominative or subject form that is absent in other case forms and is typically removed by translators. Thus, in English the most famous Valkyrie's name is spelled *Brynhild*, rather than *Brynhildir*, as we would find her name in an Old Norse dictionary. An important exception is the name *Balder*, where the final *-r* is not a grammatical ending but actually part of the core, or root, of the name.

Old Norse has grammatical gender, but unlike in the more familiar Romance languages, feminine nouns and names do not often end in *-a*, like *Mona Lisa*, with only relatively few exceptions, like *Freyja* and *Svava*.

But 19th-century translators often added an *-a* to the end of grammatically feminine names that did not have it in order to make them sound more classically “feminine,” turning *Hel* into *Hela* and *Frigg* into *Frigga*.

And the myths and sagas were written down in manuscripts using the same Latin alphabet that is used to write English today, though with the addition of some special letters to write sounds that were not present in Latin. The two most important special letters were used to write the two sounds that modern English writes with *th*. These letters are

- ◆ thorn (Þ, þ) and
- ◆ eth (ð).

These letters represent subtly different sounds. The letter thorn represents the sound of [th] in *Thor*, which is spelled *Þórr* (where the first two letters are thorn and long *o*, respectively) in Old Norse. Meanwhile, the letter eth

represents the sound of [th] in *then*. The difference is that the vocal cords are vibrating for the [th] in *then*, as opposed to when the [th] sound of *Thor* or *thin* is made.

The letter thorn is consistently transcribed as *th* in modern English translations, but the letter eth is often spelled as *d* in modern translations. In fact, the majority of *ds* in Old Norse names that we know today are actually eths in the original. This means that the god we usually call *Odin* in English is in fact *Óðinn* (where the first two letters are long *o* and eth, respectively) in Old Norse.

## Writing Down the Norse Myths

Old Norse may look unfamiliar on the surface because of the unfamiliar letters and accent marks, but it's just a different way of writing a language that's very closely related to English.

Still, scraps like the weekday names we have in English do not really give us much of anything to reconstruct a mythology from. By the time their Norse-speaking Viking cousins arrived in England beginning around AD 800, the English had long since ceased to tell these old gods' stories. When a Viking raider landed on the soil of England, it might have been on a day that both the Viking and an Englishman called Thor's day—but only the Viking remembered or cared who Thor was.

And after the much later conversion of the Norse-speaking countries to Christianity, by around AD 1000, only the small and remote population of Iceland continued to maintain their already long-standing fascination with their pre-Christian heritage. Thus, our significant written sources—almost everything more important than just the names of gods!—come from only one country, Iceland.

The Icelanders did not start to write down these myths until two centuries after Iceland had already been converted to Christianity. Before that, during the Viking Age, roughly AD 800 to 1100, mythology was transmitted orally, not written down.

Some short inscriptions in the Viking Age alphabet, the runic alphabet called the Younger Futhark, do mention a god or gods by name—usually Odin or Thor. But these are not stories; they are simple phrases like “Thor bless.”

We also see the gods’ names abundantly in the names of places in Scandinavia and Iceland that survive from these early centuries. The maps of Scandinavia and Iceland are full of places called Thor’s harbor or Odin’s sanctuary and other designations for natural and man-made places.

This is similar to the way that a map of California, or Mexico, is filled with the names of saints—all the Sans, Santas, and Santos—reflecting the religion of the Spanish conquerors and settlers there.

And some art on stone from this period does also include scenes that we believe depict stories of the gods, though we would not be able to interpret them without the aid of the stories written down much later.



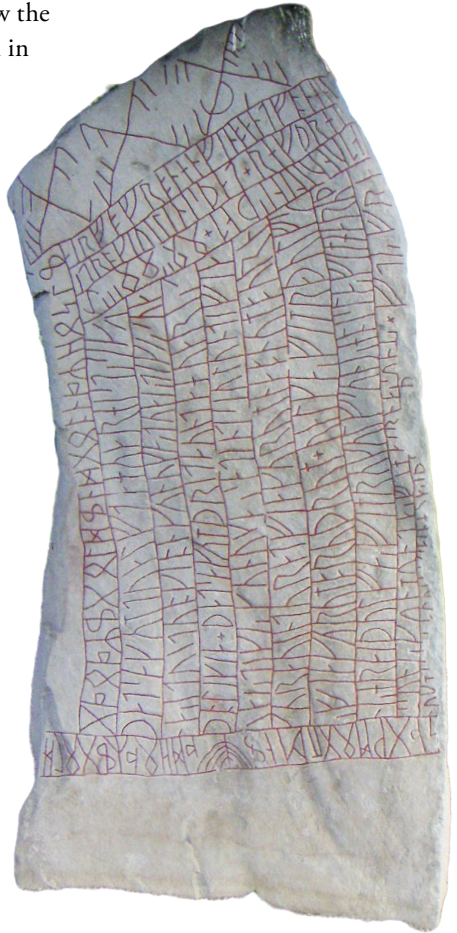
Indeed, little of the poetry that we know the pagan Vikings prized was written down in the Viking Age itself. The Rok rune stone in Sweden (right) does preserve what might be cryptic poetry about Ragnarok, carved during the Viking Age. But the rune alphabet was used mostly for carving short prosaic messages, such as memorial stones or ownership tags.

So how do we know anything more than names?

First, it is our good luck that Scandinavian settlers, largely from Norway, began to take up homes in the large, previously uninhabited island of Iceland beginning in the 870s AD.

The landscape back in Norway is fragmented by natural barriers, with the narrow valleys of cultivated land separated by high mountains and deep water. So, for the most part, each valley had developed its own local king or chieftain.

But during the last half of the 800s AD, Norway was being unified for the first time, and many of these local leading men of small regions chose to leave rather than submit. Power was being consolidated during this period under the rule of one king, remembered to history as King Harald Fairhair.



The birth of Iceland bears some similarities to the birth of the United States, for the Norwegian lords who left their homeland and established themselves in Iceland did not set up a new kingdom, but rather a kind of republic. The social atmosphere was aristocratic—all the leading families traced their lineage back to important families in Norway—but balanced by a rough frontier egalitarianism, too.

And when, in AD 1000, Iceland was converted to Christianity, it happened peacefully (unlike in Norway), by an action taken at the Icelandic parliament.

This peacefully negotiated transition to a new religion, in a place far from the rest of Europe, allowed these medieval Icelanders to continue passing on the oral poetry of their pagan forebears. They valued this poetry for cultural heritage and entertainment purposes, without the same anxiety and suspicion that might have attended it elsewhere.

At the same time, the religion they practiced was now Christian, so no instructions for the worship of the old gods (no prayers or rituals) were passed down—only the stories.

Thus, lore about the pre-Christian gods and heroes continued to be treasured in Iceland for two centuries after the conversion to Christianity, right up to the time when an unknown editor decided to write down some of the traditional mythic poems, probably around AD 1200.

This editor chose to compile in writing a total of about 30 poems,<sup>1</sup> 11 focused on the gods, dwarves, and elves and about 20 featuring the heroes of the Volsung family.

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**1** Where to separate the poems is not always obvious—the poems do not always have titles in the manuscript—and scholars disagree about whether some are separate poems or just sections of a single, longer poem.

We don't have that original compilation from around AD 1200. But we do have a copy manuscript made from it around AD 1270, and this is the compilation that has become known as the Poetic Edda.

## The Poetic Edda

The poems of the Poetic Edda originated independently of one another, from different poets at different places and times. But their anonymous editor did arrange them in a meaningful order.

First is the story of the cosmic beginning and end, which affects all the beings. This is the poem called *Völuspá*. Then there are three poems in which Odin shares his proverbial and mythic wisdom, beginning with *Hávamál*. Next, there is a poem centered on a god named Frey, then four poems in which the god Thor is a central character, and then a poem each about a dwarf and an elf. The final half of the manuscript is taken up with about 20 poems of the human heroes of the Volsung family.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, some of the same stories, plus others not gathered in the Poetic Edda, were assembled by a leading Icelandic legal figure and scholar in the 1220s AD named Snorri Sturluson.

In the Iceland of Snorri's day, Norse poetry of pre-Christian style and content had lasted a long time. But it was becoming less fashionable and was just starting the process of being forgotten, as had happened everywhere else already. Snorri was interested to pass some of this traditional style and lore on, during this time when its popularity was beginning to wane.

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<sup>2</sup> While there are more of these poems, they are typically shorter than the poems about gods.



And so the work that would become Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda was born. Snorri titled his book simply Edda,<sup>3</sup> but to distinguish his prose work from the poems collected in the Poetic Edda, modern scholars call it the Prose Edda or Snorri's Edda.<sup>4</sup>

Snorri's Prose Edda remains the most approachable written source for Norse myth because it is fairly coherent and organized roughly chronologically, with Snorri starting his narrative at the world's beginning and ending with its fiery destruction at Ragnarok.

However, the Prose Edda is not a perfect source, and not exactly a primary source; Snorri is largely quoting and trying to explain older poems about the gods and heroes that survived into his age. These poems do not always originate in the same place or time and may contradict one another. Snorri does not know how to deal with such contradictions and sometimes jumbles different versions of one story.

However, we do not have to rely solely on Snorri, as we do have direct access to those 30-some poems that were anonymously compiled in the Poetic Edda, many of which Snorri quotes.

These poems must have been part of a much more numerous body of poetic tales that had once circulated in oral transmission. After all, Snorri also knew and quoted other poems that are lost to us.

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**3** What Snorri meant in titling his book Edda is unknown. One leading suggestion is that it means "the little eider duck" (which might sound odd, but many medieval Icelandic manuscripts were named for birds). *Edda* also means "great-grandmother," so perhaps the simplest explanation for the book's title is that it conveys old lore, such as you might learn from your great-grandmother.

**4** It is Snorri's book that was originally called Edda. The untitled compilation of poems was only given the title Poetic Edda much later, long after its rediscovery by scholars in the 1600s, to link those Old Norse poems to Snorri's clearly related work. In fact, this compilation has only been conventionally referred to as the Poetic Edda since the mid-20th century.

And keep in mind that the poems we do have did not originate as a unified, coherent body of work. Instead, think of them as a compilation of great poems that includes work by such unlike writers as Walt Whitman, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Frost, and Robinson Jeffers, all within the same covers.

In some cases, the characteristics of the language in one poem will suggest to modern scholars that the poem was originally composed in the 900s AD or even the late 800s AD. Scholars can also tell that some must have been composed in Norway based on certain dialect features. Thus, some of these poems were composed orally long before Iceland was converted to Christianity in the year AD 1000, even if they weren't written down for a long time after.

Because many of these poems contain verifiably older language<sup>5</sup> than would be expected if they had been composed when they were written down in the 1200s AD, modern scholarship accepts the Poetic Edda as essentially an authentic transmission of genuine pre-Christian stories about the Norse gods and heroes.

And then Snorri's Prose Edda stands at the beginning of a long tradition of teachers of this lore of gods and heroes, arranging and making sense of more ancient materials like those collected in the Poetic Edda.

**Snorri's work is the direct ancestor of books or courses in Norse mythology today. Like today's scholars and teachers of Norse mythology—but 800 years closer to the original poets—Snorri does not generate the myths himself but aims to pass on the stories from those old poems faithfully and clearly.**

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**5** Old Norse existed as a meaningful language community for several centuries. This means that there is older Old Norse and younger Old Norse, just as there is older and younger modern English.

## Reading

The Introduction to *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (translated by Jackson Crawford) is a useful overview of the principal beliefs and gods and the worldview of the Viking Age Norse.

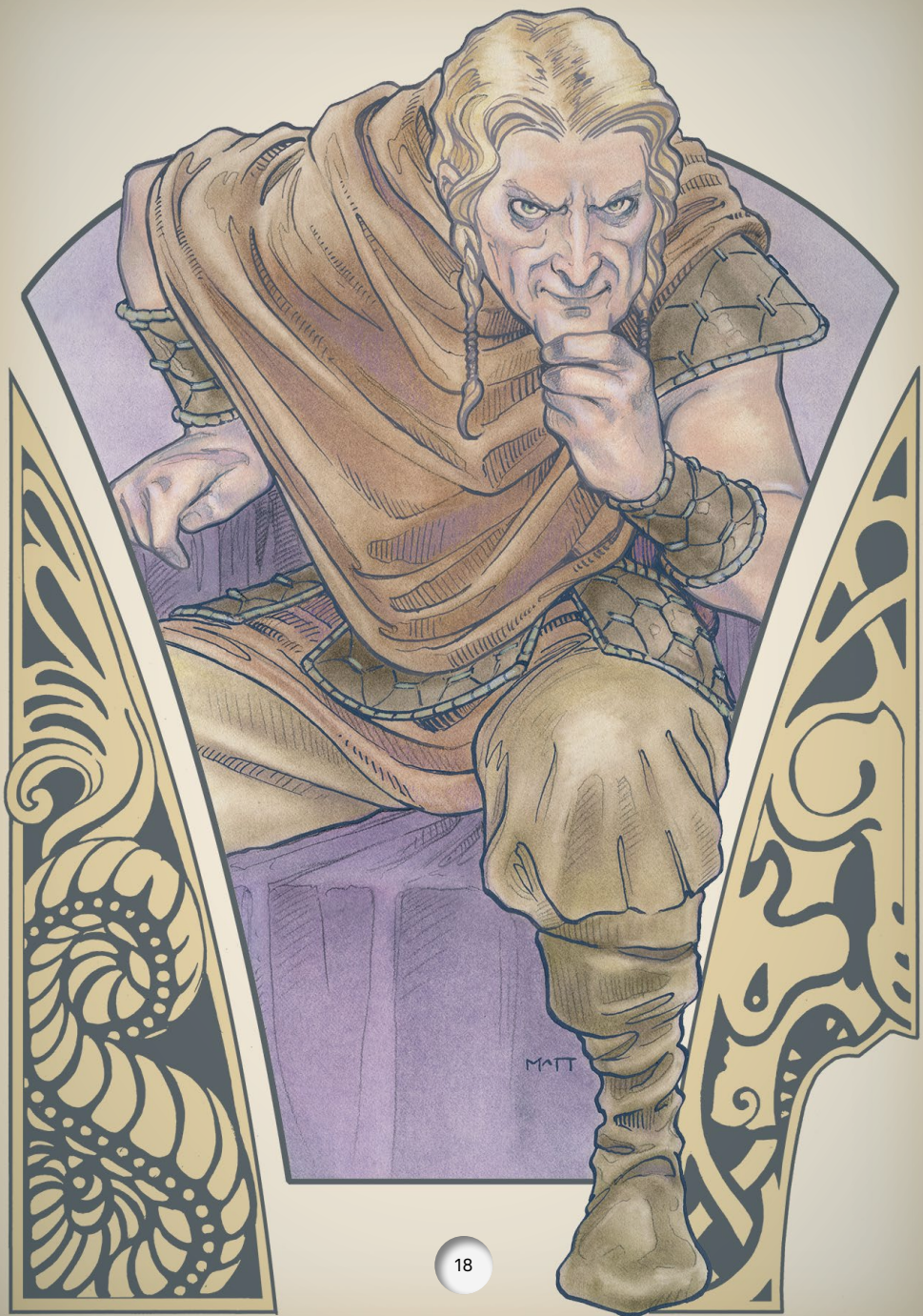
The story of Thor's fight with Hrungnir is related in pages 77–80 of the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

You can get a good feeling for how closely related Old English is to Old Norse from Orrin W. Robinson's *Old English and Its Closest Relatives*.

Those who are interested in learning the Old Norse language itself are well served by *A New Introduction to Old Norse* by Michael Barnes.

## Questions

- 1 What traces are there in the English language to attest to belief in the same pre-Christian gods as we read about in the Norse myths?
- 2 The written sources for Norse mythology come almost exclusively from Iceland. Why was this country uniquely placed—culturally and geographically—to preserve myths that were forgotten everywhere else?
- 3 The Prose Edda and the Poetic Edda have similar titles and are often confused. What is the origin and the value of each?





# Fate and the Norse Worldview

Norse notions of fate and destiny color every one of their myths. The Norse believed that every person had a particular day on which they would die. The person doesn't know what day that is. Rather, that date is determined by, and only known to, the three shadowy female beings called the Norns,<sup>1</sup> who make this determination at the birth of every sentient being.

## Inevitable Death and Reckless Courage

As Odin says in the poem of his wisdom, *Hávamál*, stanza 16:

An unwise man  
thinks he'll live forever  
if only he can avoid a fight,  
but old age  
will give him no peace,  
even if weapons do.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Norns are never called goddesses and seem to be their own category within the Norse cosmos.

A man will die no matter what—“even if weapons” “give him ... peace,” meaning that he avoids getting hurt in battle. And in old age, he will suffer anyway, just as he would have suffered from those weapons he avoided in his youth.

This expectation about the inevitable end, and what a man can do to meet that inevitable end well, colors every event in Norse mythology—and also in the sagas of Viking heroes.

For example, *The Saga of Hallfreth the Troublesome-Poet*, probably written down in the 1200s, relates the fate of two men escaping a fire in chapter 1:

They left under cover of smoke, and ran off across the island. Because of the roar of the fire and its immense size, and because they were not doomed, they escaped.

The phrase “because they were not doomed” might almost seem a redundancy to a modern reader, but the Norse storyteller accepts that each life has one certain predetermined doom, and this fire was not the doom for these men.

These beliefs encourage a code of reckless courage. There’s no fight too small or too wild for us to consider getting involved in when we know that if we die, we were going to die that day anyway. So we might as well die the brave way.

A man—and occasionally a woman—who has that kind of attitude is called in Old Norse by the term *drengr*. A *drengr*, in its original, most literal meaning, is a rock that stands alone out at sea. From this image of a rock fortress standing alone against the buffeting waves stems the meaning of *drengr* for human beings in Old Norse: a person with reckless courage in the face of whatever comes along.

The word *drengr* also has a strong sense of fair play. As in sports, there’s no honor for the *drengr* in defeating someone if it’s easy—there’s simply nothing to boast about. But the willingness to take on a challenging opponent demonstrates their reckless courage.

This can give a false impression of a certain chivalry among the Norse, when in fact the motivation is a more selfish one. He wants it appreciated that his victory wasn't easy. And the *drengr* doesn't want to hurt women or children, because doing so implies that he's so weak or cowardly that that's the only kind of opponent he can take on.

The word *drengr* is such an important Norse cultural expression that it's found abundantly not only in the sagas but also on the memorial rune stones of fallen Vikings. Even the gods, with Odin himself and the ambivalent Loki as notable exceptions, are as subject to this code as human beings are. This code is also deeply bound up with the religious conceptions of the Norse, especially as regards life after death.





## THE AFTERLIFE

In Norse mythology, there are two afterlife options. One of them is Hel: a boring, shadowy, dead reflection of our world where there is neither honor nor joy. This is not a fiery place of torment like the Christian Hell, but it has nothing to recommend it either. This afterlife is often pictured as being contained within the confines of the grave.

The alternative to the boring domain of Hel is fighting all day, every day, with other men who have fallen in battle. It's not an easy afterlife, but at least this option offers the glory of being associated with the gods in their own realm and assisting Odin in his final doomed battle against the enemies of order at Ragnarok.

Our understanding of the Vikings' cultural values comes not from any creed or explicit instructions handed down to us from this time period, but by inference from the values upheld and broken in the myths and sagas.

The myths can only rarely be said to have a message—especially any kind of moral message—and seem mostly to have been retold over the centuries as a form of entertainment rather than as a form of indoctrination. But it may be exactly from the stories a culture tells to entertain its members that the clearest picture may be seen of what they value and what they condemn as far as human behavior.

## Hospitality

In common with many ancient cultures, including ancient Greece, Old Norse society also put a premium on hospitality as a virtue. In a world without inns or hotels, and an often-predatory view of unknown people, a traveler was subject to bad weather and the potential for robbery or murder by strangers anytime he ventured outside of his familiar home neighborhood.

But because everyone might have occasion to travel for one serious purpose or another eventually, there grew a cultural understanding that there was real virtue in providing for any guests who might request a night's stay.

This hospitality was not necessarily extravagant, but surely in many rural districts, a traveler from outside of the area was a rare and treasured occasion, and it was probably a time to pull out whatever stops there were in a materially poor world.

Certain superstitions were attached to hospitality, as on some occasions in the sagas there is evidence that it was considered unlucky for a guest to knock after the sun had set.

And there was as much horror at the notion of killing one's guests as there was at the notion of killing one's family. Indeed, giving or receiving hospitality was regarded as a kind of distant kinship.

These norms all applied to the gods as well. Even the gods' direst and most violent enemies will be served as guests to their hearts' content if they come within the walls of the gods' enclosure, and the gods refuse to kill anyone who comes within those walls.<sup>2</sup>

## Oaths

Another norm that was intended to prevent bloodshed and put limits on extravagant behavior—but that, at least in the sagas and myths, often precipitates bloodshed with its unintended consequences—is the emphasis on swearing and honoring oaths in the most ironclad, literal fashion possible.

Odin, for instance, has sworn an oath for unknown reasons that when he is served a drink, the murderous Loki will be served as well. Odin keeps this oath—although he doesn't keep others!—and this is in spite of Loki's well-documented breaking of the gods' own norms, including killing one of the gods' servants within the gods' enclosure.

And many sagas contain conflicts that are precipitated because of the unforeseeable consequences of an oath either that cannot be kept or that forces the oath-bound individual into otherwise-inconceivable actions to keep their sworn word.

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**2** The gods might kill anyone to prevent them from coming within the walls, but this seems to be regarded as an accepted loophole; once you get inside the fence around a god's residence, you're in a safe zone.

This norm seems to apply to some of the gods more fastidiously than to others. Thor and Tyr, for example, are extremely loath to break oaths; Tyr even loses a hand in order to keep his word. By contrast, Odin and Loki will honor some of their oaths very seriously but openly violate others. This proclivity is attested to by Loki's sewn-together lips, which he endured as the price of breaking an oath to several dwarves.

## Reading

An English translation of *The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck* by Anthony Maxwell is in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

Judith Jesch's *The Viking Diaspora* is the best-available overview of Viking culture.

There is a thorough discussion of the word *drengr* and its uses in Old Norse in Judith Jesch's *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*.

## Questions

- 1 How did the notion that a person has a single predetermined date of death influence Norse cultural norms related to fighting?
- 2 The tragic events of Norse myths and sagas are often precipitated not by the breaking but by the keeping of an oath. Is this trope unique to the Norse, or can it be seen in recent literature as well?





# The Norse Art of Mythic Storytelling

When trying to understand the stories of Norse mythology, it helps to think about dreams. A certain frustration can result if we approach Norse myths like we would tend to approach an ordinary novel or movie from modern times. Instead, as in dreams, the actions taken by characters in mythological stories often feel constrained by limits we cannot see, understand, or even reason our way into. For example, if a wound cannot be healed once, it usually cannot be healed ever. Also like dreams, there might be consistent characters in many individual myths, but there are minor plot differences in the details of one story versus another. One version of a story says Odin tunneled into a cave; another says he tunneled out. But the original audience did not see these as plot holes. And these plot inconsistencies are seldom very serious. They're like what we might expect between the original version of a movie and a remake decades later.

## Norse Myths versus Modern Stories

Today, we are accustomed to series of novels, movie series, and television shows with internally self-consistent narratives that proceed chronologically from one scene to the next. TV shows often even employ one or more people who ensure this kind of continuity from scene to scene or season to season. Modern-day fans may even ruminate over small apparent inconsistencies as clues to logical developments to be revealed in the future.

Medieval audiences, on the other hand, had in mind a canonical set of characters with some canonical attributes and relationships between them, but they did not necessarily expect these stories to fit together to form a cohesive, chronologically ordered canon. And with no single, widely distributed version, stories changed over time as they were retold by different people in different places.

While such changeable stories are different from what modern readers expect from a religion, 21st-century audiences are familiar with this kind of franchise built around consistent characters. We find just such franchises in comic books and some movie series, even if we do not realize that the practice is pretty old.

For example, the character of Batman is highly consistent in several important respects from one portrayal or appearance to another. He is a wealthy man who fights crime at night in a bat-like costume and uses gadgets. However, the specific actors portraying Batman in different media may look quite different from one another. Likewise, the exact details of his origin story—always involving in broad strokes his parents being killed by a criminal when he was a child—may vary from telling to telling.

As we do not expect a strict canon—an internally consistent set of narratives—for Batman, we should not for the Norse myths either. If we keep this in mind, we will enjoy them more, without accusing the myths of failing to uphold a consistency that medieval storytellers and audiences never expected or cared about.

## The Value of the Original Sources

Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda is not a perfect source, but it is a more effusive source than the Poetic Edda. And because Snorri is not constrained by having to write poetry, there is in principle no limit to the details he can provide in his narrative. At the same time, because Snorri is not restricted to retelling the exact wording of poems from centuries before, we cannot always be sure where he might have misunderstood something or embellished something.

Contrast the poems of the Poetic Edda. The poem *Hávamál* was finally written down at about the same time as Snorri was writing the prose Edda, in the 1200s AD. Both are transmitting stories that ultimately were composed in oral form about two centuries earlier.

However, a poem like *Hávamál* uses stricter, more formalized language that is likely to reflect the wording of earlier centuries almost exactly. Formal requirements, such as alliteration, only give so much wiggle room.

Traditional Norse poetry does not use end rhyme of the kind we're used to in modern English:

Roses are red,  
violets are blue,  
inside I'm dead,  
and so are you.

**Snorri Sturluson is about as far from the conversion of Iceland to Christianity as Americans today are from the administration of President Thomas Jefferson and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.**

Instead, traditional Norse poetry relies on alliteration: the use of the same consonant sound in adjoining lines to bind them together. Look for the repetition of the consonants *d*, *f*, and *s* at the beginning of stressed words:

*Deyr fe,  
deyja fraendr,  
deyr sjalfr it sama.*

There is more going on for the attentive audience of Norse poetry, and this is part of what Snorri wanted to teach to a new generation of poets and storytellers as he passed on the old stories.

And remember that Snorri is largely retelling stories from these poems that he knew, and he does quote many of them. Even when Snorri is not directly quoting poems of the kind we find in the Poetic Edda, he is probably transmitting stories equally as old.

But the medieval sources do not attempt to answer questions that modern readers are often tempted to ask. There is no “expanded universe” to answer such questions, and apparently the medieval audience did not contemplate “plot holes” in the way a 21st-century audience might.

So it’s worth remembering that Norse mythology was a living body of narrative lore that expanded, contracted, and changed as it was told over the centuries. And it is not always only the latest layer that we can see, but sometimes the earlier layers shine through, too.

## Dream Logic

We also need to be prepared for the dream logic that is so characteristic of mythical storytelling. Just like in dreams, characters will often find themselves forced into illogical solutions for illogical problems, though like dreamers, they do not seem to notice the absurdity themselves.

Modern science fiction and fantasy often go to some lengths to explain why and how. But myth does not even consider these questions. Or when it does, the answers are just as strange as what was being explained.

There is not a single myth for which we could not generate such questions. But we won't find the answers in the medieval sources because the people transmitting these myths in medieval Iceland either didn't look for them in the first place or didn't care to interrupt the stories to answer them.

Dreams are no more readily susceptible to these kinds of why and how questions. But we accept them on their own terms while we dream, even though we can't go back and find out more if we try writing them out the next morning. In the same way, we'll be happiest if we can take the myths as they are—strange, dreamlike stories that defy our whys and hows.

Unfortunately, by the early 21st century, so many writers and enthusiasts have been trying for so long to fill in the gaps in the surviving record of Norse myths that it can be hard for the casual enthusiast to tell what are the genuine bricks of medieval date and what is the mortar laid down by frustrated or questionably inspired enthusiasts who came later.

So we need to be careful that, in approaching the real medieval written sources, we do not drag along layers upon layers of modern interpretations that are often based on clever but flimsy speculation.

**Arguably what characterizes true myth as opposed to storytelling in the modern vein is the very strangeness and dreamlike quality of the stories. We need to remember to think of the interlinked stories as a franchise based on character, rather than a unified logical sequence, and to accept the premise of the stories in the way of a dreamer, rather than a critic.**

## Reading

Snorri Sturluson's longer version of the Odrerir story can be found on pages 61–64 of his Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

The shorter, alternative version of the Odrerir story is told in stanzas 104–110 of *Hávamál* (English translation on pages 51–55 of *The Wanderer's Hávamál*).

## Questions

- 1 What are the disadvantages of approaching the Norse myths as a single, cohesive body of chronologically linked stories (like a modern series of novels or television seasons)? What are some forms of modern storytelling that more closely parallel the storytelling in the Eddas?
- 2 What is meant by the “dream logic” of myth? What are some examples of dream logic in Norse myths?





# The Norse Gods Are Characters with Flaws

There's no better way to get acquainted with the cast of Norse gods than to let them introduce each other to us—by means of pointing out each other's personal shortcomings and character flaws. The roles of the gods are, after all, not as clear-cut and one-dimensional as popular treatments and assumptions often suggest. It is their personalities—not their “powers” or abilities—that make them unique, memorable individuals.

## Names and Personalities of the Gods

Looking up the name of any god in a popular print or online encyclopedia will lead us to a short definition, such as “god of thunder” for Thor or “goddess of love” for Freyja. But the gods are never given such titles in the authentic Old Norse sources. It is only modern readers who have tried to impose these definitions by role on the Norse gods.

Take Thor, for example. His name does literally mean “thunder” and is exactly cognate with, or from the same ancestral word, as the English word *thunder*. In other words, the ancestral word that became the English *thunder* also became the Old Norse *Thor*.

Likewise, his great hammer with which he smashes the skulls of the gods’ enemies is named “lightning,” or so we assume is the original meaning of its name, which in Old Norse is *Mjollnir*. This bears a close resemblance to, and a close relationship with, the Russian word *molnija*, “lightning.” This is not to suggest that the Norse word is borrowed from the Russian, or vice versa, but that both come from a common shared root in the ancestral proto-Indo-European language.

So at an early, unrecorded stage, we can assume that Thor was closely associated with the natural phenomena of thunder and lightning. Yet in the written sources in Old Norse, he is associated with thunder only one time: during his duel against his stone-headed enemy Hrungnir, when Thor is said to appear amid thunder and lightning. Otherwise, Thor does nothing associated with thunder or lightning.

By contrast, the Eddas give us a strong sense of his personality. Thor is a man who hates lies and prefers to deal directly with his enemies. Thor is a man with a huge appetite for food, and for drink. And Thor is an exemplary upholder of the Norse ideal of manliness; he is what the Norse call a *drengr*. Thus, we know Thor—and likewise the other gods and supernatural beings of the Norse cosmos—very well as a character, as someone whose personality an actor might assume on a screen.

But our simple contemporary ideas of which god is god of what and which goddess is goddess of what are based mostly on the meanings of names, and not on the behavior of these beings in the only real sources available to us.

So it is best to let go of trying to put labels on the gods and instead try to get to know them more as one would get to know the characters and motivations of people in a novel or a biography.

## A Celebrity Roast of the Gods

The gods introduce each other to us in a poem collected in the Poetic Edda called *Lokasenna*,<sup>1</sup> in which they mock one another at a great feast. The scene in this story is much like that in a celebrity roast, where all the participants know one another and are basically at peace but show how well they know each other by making knowing jabs at the other.

Modern readers sometimes wonder if a tale in which the gods are all insulted and made to seem less than perfect could actually be a relic of the pagan era. Some have suspected that this poem must have been composed by a Christian who was contemptuous of all the old gods.

But there is a rich tradition in many polytheistic societies, including India and ancient Greece, of acknowledging the imperfections of the different gods, especially since different worshippers will favor different ones and perhaps have friendly or not-so-friendly ideas about why their particular favorites are the best.

Plus, the language of the poem in which this tale is told is in fact archaic enough that it was likely composed in the 900s AD, before the conversion to Christianity. So believers in the Norse gods seem to have had a complicated relationship with their gods, just as their gods did with one another—and with the anti-god beings who are rivals but also parents to most of the gods.

In ruthlessly insulting one another, the gods also behave not too differently from human beings in the sagas of Norse heroes. Many of the sagas of poets—for example, *The Saga of Gunnlaug* or *The Saga of Bjorn*, both written in the 1200s—feature poets who insult each other very publicly in elaborately constructed stanzas about each other’s real and imaginary failings.

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**1** In Old Norse, *senna* is a “truth-telling,” and *Loka* is the possessive form of Loki’s name, so this is “Loki’s truth-telling”—though the truths in question are not pleasant, and some might be exaggerated to have a more caustic effect.

So, in *Lokasenna*, we see the gods interacting in a way that highlights their shortcomings, but their shortcomings, like ours, may define their personalities in other stories where we meet them, including

- ◆ the honorable and honest Tyr, who we know has given up a hand to imprison the monstrous wolf Fenrir;
- ◆ the ever-vigilant watchman Heimdall, who, we hear hints, might have sacrificed his ear for unknown purposes;
- ◆ the cynical, war-mongering Odin, who isn't afraid to dabble in forbidden or dangerous magic and lore, including the lore that he sacrificed his own eye to gain;
- ◆ the hardy but simple Thor, who's always ready with a hammer but not as ready with his tongue; and
- ◆ the author of devastation and chaos, Loki—the murderer who's also at home trading barbs with his victims' families. He is a liar, and his compulsive lies have come at a price. He will be imprisoned beneath the earth with snake's venom falling on his face. And before that, a group of dwarves sewed his lips shut for his awful lies.

The tales of Norse mythology are woven from the threads of these personalities of these gods and goddesses, and also from the threads of their injuries. Many of the gods, including the most important ones, have sustained distinctive, life-altering losses of limb or function. The gods are not wholly good—not in character, and not in body.

And not in their family relationships, either. Even in our own lives, we may find that we are often in conflict with the people we know the best and are most closely related to, and the gods are no exception.

## Reading

The poem *Lokasenna* in the Poetic Edda.

An English translation of *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People* by Alison Finlay is in *Sagas of Warrior Poets* (Penguin Classics, 2002).

## Questions

- 1 The prose note that follows the poem *Lokasenna* in the Poetic Edda describes Loki's awful punishment, which includes watching one son turned into a wolf and forced to kill his other son as Loki watches. Considering how many norms of Norse society that Loki otherwise breaks, could it be significant that even for him, the worst-imaginable crime is to have family do injury to family? Where else do we see family injuring family as a motif of horror in the Norse myths?
- 2 Do you think that all of Loki's accusations against the gods (and theirs against him) are true? Why or why not? Keep Loki's accusations in mind as myths about these other gods are examined in later lectures and see if you change your mind as you get to know the gods better from more flattering portrayals—or not.





# The Norse Creation: Dawn of Strife

The Norse myth of creation is narrated together with the myth of how the gods die at Ragnarok. The narrator is an unnamed fortune-teller, what we might call a seeress or a clairvoyant witch. Her narration appears in the first poem of the Poetic Edda collection. The poem told by this *volva* is known as *Voluspá*, “the prophecy of the *volva*.” For the Norse, the past and the future are intimately bound. Both lie beyond our present realm of the living, accessible only by the magic of the *volva*.

## The Norse Story of Creation

The scene in *Voluspá* is not described, as the seeress begins by addressing Odin—and humankind—and explaining that Odin asked her to tell the earliest events and beings she remembers. But we can conjure a probable picture of the scene.

The one-eyed god Odin sits on his throne, Hlithskjalf, in his hall, Valhalla. Perhaps his two ravens—Thought and Memory—are perched on his shoulders. He leans forward, in the company of thousands of dead human warriors who dwell in Valhalla with him to hear the *volva* tell of the mighty “yawning gap” that preceded the creation of the earth and, even before that, the creation of Ymir, the first living being—who precedes our earth, as it will be created from him.

The *volva* says:

It was at the very beginning,  
 it was Ymir’s time,  
 there was no sand, no sea,  
 no cooling waves,  
 no earth,  
 no sky,  
 no grass,  
 just the yawning gap.

The *volva*’s allusive words here presume an audience who already know the story. This can be a difficulty with the archaic poems collected in the Poetic Edda. They were composed in a time and place where the broad outlines of these stories were well known and probably constantly told, so the poet could focus on evoking individual scenes in striking words.

But Snorri Sturluson knew that his later medieval audience didn’t get all the allusions in the Poetic Edda, so he built on the *volva*’s account to give a fuller story in his Prose Edda.

**The *volva* is able to see and share some knowledge of the future. And at the same time, the future she foresees is not changeable—no matter what.**

## Snorri's Expanded Version of the Creation Story

At the beginning, “many ages before the earth was shaped,” there are two realms: watery Niflheim to the north and fiery Muspell to the south.

From a spring in the watery realm, poison water flows out into the emptiness between them. This emptiness is the cold primordial void called “the yawning gap” or “mighty gap,” or Ginnungagap in Old Norse. There, the poison waters freeze.

But as more and more of this poisonous outflow fills the gap with ice, some of the ice approaches the warm region closer to fiery Muspell and melts once again. And from the drops of this melting poison water the first living being, Ymir, is formed.

Ymir is said by Snorri to be “in a man’s likeness” but not a man. Rather, the first living being is an anti-god, called a *jotunn* in Old Norse—not a god.

What most clearly separates the gods from the anti-gods is that the gods are the forces of order, while the anti-gods are the forces of chaos. So in the Norse story of creation, the forces of chaos precede the forces of order—just as evil, destructive beings outlast the gods in the final myth of Ragnarok.

Alone at the beginning, the original being Ymir’s own body produces his children spontaneously. The sweat under his left armpit grows an anti-god man and a woman, and another anti-god man is born from Ymir’s two legs mating with each other.

In addition to Ymir’s first offspring, another living being is produced from the dripping poison soon after Ymir, and this is a cow, “the rich heifer,” or Authumbla.

The cow licks the remaining blocks of ice around her, and as she does so, she licks a man's hair free. Then, the next day she licks his head out, and the third day she licks the rest of him out. This male being appearing from the ice is Bor (as Snorri calls him), or Bur (as his name is given in the Poetic Edda). This former ice-man Bor then marries Bestla, an anti-goddess granddaughter of Ymir. Together Bor and Bestla have three sons: Odin, Vili, and Ve.



Odin and his brothers will grow up to kill their anti-god great-grandfather Ymir, for unspecified reasons. And so is set in motion the never-ending strife between the competing gods and anti-gods above that will roil the cosmos until their final battle long ages hence.

After Odin and his brothers kill the first being, Ymir, the three brothers take their great-grandfather's corpse to the middle of the void, "the yawning gap," and make the earth from his dead flesh.

Odin and his brothers make the sky from his skull and fill it with the clouds made from his shredded brain. A dwarf is assigned to hold up each end of the sky, and these dwarves are named Northri, Suthri, Austri, and Vestri—closely related to the modern English words *north*, *south*, *east*, and *west*.

The gods plant some of the sparks from fiery Muspell in fixed positions in the sky as stars and leave some to wander loose underneath as comets or falling stars. The two largest of the sparks from fiery Muspell then become the sun and the moon.

Odin and his brothers break up Ymir's bones to pile up the mountains, and they build up high ranges all along the outer rim of the earth. They use Ymir's eyelashes to make a great fence around the earth on top of the high mountain ranges.

Then, Odin and his brothers drain Ymir's body to make the oceans and rivers from his blood. In addition to an interior ocean (corresponding to the Atlantic plus Mediterranean), they surround the earth with an impassable outer ocean beyond the encircling mountain chain.

On the shores of the other end of this impassable encircling ocean, Odin and his brothers give homes to the anti-gods, called the Jotunheimar, or "homes of the *jotnar*." The realm within the encircling ocean is called the "middle-enclosure," or Midgard,<sup>1</sup> and this is the home of humans.

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<sup>1</sup> This was an inspiration for J. R. R. Tolkien's notion of Middle-earth.

## The Final Battle of Ragnarok

The dreadful last battle of Ragnarok—in which the gods will be killed by Surt, the anti-gods, and other enemies—is a long way off from the mythic present, and the distance in time from the creation of these beings is even more enormous.

But the seeds of the conflict are already planted in that first killing of Ymir by Odin and his brothers. From that point forward, the gods, and later especially Thor, are constantly occupied with fighting the anti-gods.

We read hints in *Voluspa* of other early chapters in this ongoing war, much of which is not elaborated in Snorri's Prose Edda. Because the seeress passes over them so quickly, we're not clear on what the details were.

The *volva* mentions a woman named Gullveig—perhaps one of the anti-goddesses—who is burned three times in Odin's hall yet is born again three times. The *volva* also names a *volva* in her story, Heith, who comes among the gods. Whoever these enigmatic ancient women are, somehow they ignite the first all-out war. The walls of Asgard are broken, and the gods, Thor especially, fight hard to prevent the coveted goddess Freyja from being seized by the anti-gods.

But as is clear by now, this is a conflict between rival households of what is one extended family. In the Norse sources, the rivals to the gods are beings on the same scale as the gods. The gods and anti-gods often have intimate relations with each other and even intermarry. In fact, these rival anti-gods are the parents of most of the gods.

The gods and the anti-gods are roughly equivalent in power and so closely related to one another that it is a struggle to know how one qualified to be a god or an anti-god. Perhaps it was a matter of simply pledging allegiance to, or against, the Aesir gods as led by Odin. Yet that line is drawn, and it is held firm in certain respects.

## Reading

The poem *Voluspa*, stanzas 1–26 in the Poetic Edda (on pages 2–8 of the Crawford translation; note that some translations number the stanzas of this poem differently).

In the poem *Vafthruthnismal* in the Poetic Edda, Odin and an anti-god exchange questions and answers about the creation (and Ragnarok); much of the material in this poem informed Snorri Sturluson's account in the Prose Edda.

*The Saga of Arrow-Odd*: The scene with the prophecy of Arrow-Odd's death is in chapters 2–3; his death is in chapters 31–32. A good English translation of the saga by Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson can be found in *Seven Viking Romances*.

Snorri Sturluson gives his version of the creation myth on pages 9–12 in the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

The story of Thor fishing for the Midgard-serpent is told in its most archaic form in the poem *Hymiskvitha* in the Poetic Edda. Snorri Sturluson also relates a version of this story on pages 46–47 of the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

The account of Hermoth's ride to Hel is on page 50 of Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

## Questions

- 1 Poems like *Voluspa* in the Poetic Edda were composed for an audience that already knew the outlines of the mythical stories. How does that affect the way the story is told in a poem like this? By contrast, how does Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda affect the way these stories are preserved for us?

- 2 The gods are preceded in existence by their enemies, the *jotnar*, or anti-gods, who also are the parents and lovers of many gods. Could it be significant that the universe is imbued with evil from the very beginning and that the good beings are ultimately made from the evil?





# First Humans, the Nine Realms, and Yggdrasil

Sometime early after the creation of the earth and its various realms, Odin went walking along the shore with two other gods. Snorri says that the gods found two pieces of driftwood. One was ash (the Old Norse word is *ask*), and the other was something called *embla*, which is often thought to mean the “elm.” According to the seeress in *Voluspa*, the gods then had certain gifts to bestow on the two pieces of wood:

They had no breath,  
no minds,  
no hair, no human voice,  
they looked inhuman.  
Odin gave them breath,  
Honir gave them minds,  
Lothur gave them hair  
and human faces.

And so the first two members of humankind were molded from the driftwood on the shore of the ocean. The whole rest of humankind would come from these two.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The story of how humankind came to be more populous, and to be divided into separate classes with separate tasks, is told in the poem called *Rigsthula*.

## The First Humans and Yggdrasil

The first human man is Ask, or “ash-tree.” This means that humankind is made of the same kind of tree that binds the realms of the mythic cosmos together—with one root among the gods, one among the anti-gods, and one among the dead.

According to the poem *Voluspa* in the Poetic Edda, the seeress remembered at the very beginning “the seed from which Yggdrasil sprang.” We do not know if this seed was planted deliberately or where the tree came from ultimately, but in what we can call the mythic present of Norse mythology, Yggdrasil is an enormous ash tree whose roots bind the realms.

It is not clear how the tree Yggdrasil should be pictured with respect to the different realms. Snorri calls it “the chief place or holy place of the gods” and goes on to describe it in his Prose Edda:

The gods pass their judgments there every day. ... This ash tree is the biggest and best of all trees. Its limbs are spread over the whole world and stand over the sky. Three roots of the tree hold it up, and they extend very far. One is with the gods, and the second is with the anti-gods, where the Yawning Gap once was. The third is over Niflheim.

The Eddic poem *Grimnismal* also states that there are three roots, but it goes on to say that

Hel is beneath one,  
Jotunheimar beneath another,  
Midgard is beneath the third.

This may be roughly what Snorri says, but it's expressed differently. Jotunheimar is home of the anti-gods. Niflheim can be identified with Hel. And possibly the root that is “over” us in Midgard is the same as the one that is “with the gods” in Asgard.

## The Realms

Asgard for the gods, Midgard for humankind, Jotunheimar for the *jotnar*, and Hel or Niflheim for the dead are four of the realms, and the ones with which Yggdrasil is bound. So what are the other five, given that we often see mention of “nine homes” (*heimar*)?

In fact, nowhere in the sources are nine realms counted out. Three other places with a name ending in *-heim* are alluded to in the Eddas—Vanaheim, “home of the Vanir gods”; Alfheim, “elf-home”; and Svartalfheim, “dark elves’ home”—but no action in any surviving myth takes place in any of them, and Snorri even places Alfheim inside of Asgard.

Muspell may be another top-level realm, given that Hel seems to be the same as another home or realm, Niflheim, which is the opposite realm in the creation myth to Muspell. But this still only gets us to eight “realms” at best.

Most likely, there was never a fixed definition of what these nine realms were, and the number nine—so significant in Norse mythology—was used mostly for its mythic resonance. Or perhaps the identity of the ninth realm was as mysterious to the original audience as it is to us.

But where are these realms? The gods’ enclosure Asgard is vaguely “higher” than humankind’s middle enclosure Midgard, and the anti-gods’ homes seem to lie outside of the Midgard’s protective outer ocean.

Hel, the realm of the dead, is perhaps underground but is physically reachable by living beings that travel there from other realms. On the other hand, human beings who die in Midgard may get a one-time “teleportation” there,

which in the Norse conception finds them appearing in that other spot on the map with whatever they had in their possession and whatever vehicle they were in at their funeral.<sup>2</sup>

If Hel is below, Asgard vaguely above, and Jotunheimar vaguely around our human realm of Midgard, what can we say about Midgard?

We do not have so much as a single map preserved from Viking Age or medieval Scandinavia, so we cannot replicate with precision the Viking conception of the world. But we can infer a rough shape of what their world map might look like from offhand comments in sagas and myths.

At the center of the map is ocean, specifically what we would call the Atlantic joined with the Mediterranean. Around this body of water is a ring of land—Europe in the northeast, Africa in the southeast, and so on all around clockwise.

At the farthest edges of this ring of land inhabited by humans is a high range of mountains. This far-out ring of mountains is topped by a fence, which is made of the eyelash hairs of Ymir, the first living being. This fence gives our realm its name, as the *-gard*<sup>3</sup> in both the names *Asgard* and *Midgard* means “enclosure.”

Midgard is the “middle enclosure” on two axes: Hel is below it and Asgard above it, and on the horizontal axis, the ring of land on which humans dwell is surrounded by another ocean. This is the forbidding outer ocean, which few but the gods and their great enemies have ever seen.

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**2** The Norse do not distinguish readily between the body and the soul. The whole person travels into the next world, with whatever was on them and whatever had marked them.

**3** This related to the English word *yard*, which was originally the “enclosed” pasture or garden around a home.

Within this outer ocean is the great serpent Jormungand, also known as the Midgard-serpent because it is so huge that it encircles Midgard completely and bites its tail at the other end.

Beyond even this outer ocean is more land, sometimes generically called the *utgard*, the “out-of-yard” or the “out-of-the-enclosure.” More often, this chaotic, fenceless realm is called Jotunheimar, “the homes of the *jotnar*,” or anti-gods.

Meanwhile, the gods dwell in “the gods’ enclosure,” or Asgard, a walled-in area of unclear location, but perhaps above Midgard. Asgard is where the gods’ homes and halls are located, such as Odin’s famous Valhalla.

Asgard seems high—as Odin can see what happens everywhere else on earth from his throne—but it does seem to be located on the same solid ground as Midgard. It is perhaps at a higher elevation (such as a mountaintop), where the realms below can be observed.

## Reading

The poem *Rigsthula* in the Poetic Edda.

In the poem *Grimnismal* in the Poetic Edda, Odin alludes to the homes of the different gods and the organization of the mythic cosmos. Much of this account is quoted in Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda.

Snorri Sturluson’s account of the mythic cosmos is on pages 12–21 in the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

The short poem *Helreith Brynhildar* in the Poetic Edda recounts Brynhild’s ride to Hel.

## Questions

- 1 How can the Norse conception of the cosmos be described? Are the nine “worlds” or “realms” (Old Norse *heimar*, “homes”) planets in our modern conception?
- 2 We do not have maps from Viking Age or medieval Scandinavia. Why would precise geographical knowledge not be part of the lore that gets transmitted to us from this period?





# Loki and His Children

The gods live every day—from the earliest memories of the seeress near creation and forever on—under the looming shadow of past disaster and future torment. This is all largely due to Loki: the complicated, ambivalent figure who lives alongside the gods but compulsively troubles them.

## Loki's Origin

Snorri, in his Prose Edda, characterizes Loki in largely negative terms, though with a slight qualification at the end:

One is counted among the Aesir gods, who is called by some “the slanderer of the gods” or “the first maker of lies” or “the blemish on all the gods and all humankind.” ... He is handsome in appearance, evil in disposition, and extremely changeable in mood. Before all others, he is the champion of the kind of wisdom that is deceit, and he uses lies for all his purposes. He often causes the gods terrible problems, and just as often solves those problems with his schemes.

Loki's origin is clouded in uncertainty. His father is said to be an anti-god. His father's name means "dangerous striker," which in Old Norse is *Farbauti*. Loki's mother is said to be a goddess with a name that means "leaf-island," *Laufey*.

Other details of Loki's origin are entirely lost to the forgotten lore of the past. Loki is not an adopted son of Odin, in spite of the Marvel Universe portrayal.

Of Loki before adulthood, Snorri writes in the Prose Edda only that he had two brothers and says nothing about either of them. Neither of Loki's brothers is mentioned in the slightest detail in any of the poems of the Poetic Edda, either.

There is also something strange about Loki's shadowy birth. Many of the Aesir gods, including the most prominent—Odin and Thor—have anti-god mothers. But the fact that Loki's father is from the "wrong side of the cosmos" is almost unique, shared only with Tyr.

Remember, gods have higher status than anti-gods, and it's considered socially appropriate for women to marry men of higher or equal status. But this is the reverse status of Loki's (and Tyr's) parents, and that implies something not quite right in the union of these two gods' parents—perhaps an abduction, or some other unusual tale that unfortunately is lost to us.

**One of Odin's strange names in poetry is "Loki's friend." This name might be accusatory in nature, given the destruction Loki will one day reap. But it also reminds us of the mysterious pledge that Odin and Loki made to one another that they would never drink separately, as recorded in the poem *Lokasenna* in the Poetic Edda.**

## Loki's Children

Whatever the details of where Loki came from, what has been preserved is that he has dallied with many beings of the anti-god family, both female and male beings, as well as associated monsters and even animals. And these dalliances would cause the gods suffering, for the most part.

The worst of Loki's affairs was with an anti-goddess who had the ominous name of "Sorrow-offerer," or Angerbotha. Each of Loki and Angerbotha's children is foretold to bring harm to the gods: the huge wolf Fenrir, the goddess Hel, and the world-sized serpent that encircles mankind's dwellings in the outer ocean and is known as Jormungand, or often simply as the Midgard-serpent.

The gods learned that these children were growing up in Jotunheimar, the homes of the anti-gods, and the gods sent messengers to retrieve the children and bring them into the gods' enclosure, Asgard.

Snorri tells us that the gods sent for these children in response to exactly the prophecies that foretold these children would do the gods irreparable harm, such as the prophecy in the poem *Voluspá*. Presumably, the gods wished to have control over the fates of beings they were doomed to come into conflict with.

When these three ill-propheesied children were brought before Odin, he first threw the huge serpent into the outer ocean. The serpent lies in wait out there, in the waves that surround the human realm, Midgard.

Odin then threw Loki's daughter Hel into Niflheim, the watery realm from the creation story. Niflheim will become her domain as queen of the dead, and it will be renamed Hel when it becomes her domain. That's according to the story, anyway. In fact, the name *Hel* in Old Norse and English alike most originally mean the buried afterworld itself; the word is from the same root as *hole* in English.

But the biggest problem for the gods, contrary to what you might expect, was with the wolf son of Loki, the enormous Fenrir. According to a prophecy well known to the gods, this wolf would be the death of Odin at the final battle of Ragnarok.

## Loki's Name

Loki is consistently referred to as one of the gods, never as one of the anti-gods, even though Loki leads the anti-gods at the final combat of Ragnarok and even though his ability to shape-change into animals makes him resemble the anti-gods more than the gods.<sup>1</sup> This uncertain identity—this duality between Loki as the author of evil and the goofy sidekick—is present everywhere we come across his name.

The meaning of Loki's name is not immediately obvious but probably shares the same root as the English word *lock*. A similar formation, *broti*, from the root for *break*, means “broken trees,” so possibly Loki is “the locked one”—a reference either to his lips being locked shut by being sewn together or perhaps to his punishment of being locked below the earth.

**Loki** (“the locked one”)  
*broti* (“broken trees”)

*luk* (“**lock**,” “end”)  
*breut* (“break”)

Another possibility, since the same root for *lock* is used for ending a period of time, is that Loki is “the ender,” perhaps with reference to his role in the Ragnarok story. In that case, his name would be formed from the *lock* root in the same way that *skoti*, “shooter, archer,” is formed from the *shoot* root.

**Loki** (“the ender”)  
*skoti* (“shooter,” “archer”)

*luk* (“**lock**,” “**end**”)  
*skout* (“shoot”)

---

**1** The gods, other than the two most morally dubious, Odin and Loki, aren't said to take animal forms.

But like most of the gods, Loki is known by many alternate names in poetry. The most prominent is *Lopt*, suggesting “sky.” This name has perplexed scholars because he’s not a god particularly associated with the sky.<sup>2</sup> But there may be another explanation of this name that accords better with the known facts about him.

If *Lopt* is formed from the root *lof*, which means “praise,”<sup>3</sup> then it could conceivably be an archaic form of the past participle “praised,” “the praised one.” It’s interesting to note one context in which this name is used for him by someone else, the goddess Gefjun in the poem *Lokasenna*:

I think Lopt (Loki)  
is a cheerful fellow;  
everybody loves him.

In many other mythic traditions, fearsome gods—or god-approximate beings like Loki—are given euphemistic or conciliatory names. For example, the name *Shiva* means “the civil one,” hardly a fitting title for the Hindu bringer of death. Likewise, although Loki is a god who brings trouble even when he’s not actively malevolent, it’s possible that he might be addressed with a name that softens him up in a comparable way. That was certainly the context when Gefjun calls him Lopt, when she is trying to get Loki to stop his mockeries in the poem *Lokasenna*.

## Reading

The account of Loki’s children with Angerbotha (Fenrir, Hel, and the Midgard-serpent) is on pages 26–29 in the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation). The account of Loki as the mother of Sleipnir is on pages 35–36.

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**2** He flies through the sky on some occasions, but with wings borrowed from a goddess.

**3** Its English relative, with slightly different meaning, is *love*.

## Questions

- 1 Does the frequent popular characterization of Loki as a “trickster god” do justice to his role in the medieval Norse myths of the Eddas? Why or why not?
- 2 Most of the gods are at least half *jotunn*, or “anti-god,” in their parentage. Why is Loki’s anti-god ancestry unusual? Might this be significant?





# Balder's Death: Tragic Murder of a God

Odin had a son named Balder, a god so beloved that his shocking death is one of the principal stories of the Eddas. The poets of the Eddas remember the trauma of losing Balder as the greatest tragedy of the mythic present, as well as an omen of darker things to come—for Balder would not be the only Norse god to die, not by a long shot.

## Dreams about Death

Even before his death, Balder was seized with terrible dreams about losing his life. Odin was disturbed enough that, when he heard Balder tell of these dreams, Odin rose straight out of his hall, saddled his horse Sleipnir, and rode down to Hel, the realm of the dead.

The poem in which this is told is called *Baldrs draumar*, “Balder’s Dreams,” though it concerns Odin’s reaction to those dreams rather than Balder as the dreamer.

Odin rode the long, dark way until he saw the high hall of Hel before him. But instead of riding right up to the gate, he steered east of the hall, where he knew that a particular *volva*, or seeress, was buried. Speaking his spells for raising the dead, he animated her corpse, and she lurched up and spoke with him.

Odin presented himself under a false name and asked her why the hall of Hel was prepared for a grand banquet. Whose arrival would be celebrated with the mead that had been freshly brewed? Why were the benches inside draped with straw for the comfort of the banqueters?

It is for Balder's imminent arrival in the realm of the dead, she tells him.

Who will kill him? asked the shaken father.

Your other son Hoth will kill him with a spear, she replied.

Well, then, who will avenge Balder?

You will have another son, named Vali, with a woman named Rind, replied the witch. Furthermore,

He will avenge Balder  
when he is only one night old.  
He will neither comb his hair  
nor wash his hands  
till he puts Balder's killer  
on the funeral pyre.  
I was forced to speak,  
now I return to silence.

This wasn't the *volva's* only attempt to end the conversation before Odin had heard everything he had come for, and he retorted, "Don't go silent, *volva!*" But by now she had figured out who her interrogator was and refused to answer further questions. And as Odin rode away back to the living in his home realm, she taunted him:

Ride home, Odin! Feel triumphant, for now.  
 But you will come  
 for a second visit  
 when Loki breaks free  
 from his chains,  
 and Ragnarok  
 comes to end everything.

In other words, Odin would come back on the maybe not-so-soon, but nonetheless foreseeable, occasion of his own inevitable demise.

## Balder's Death

In response to Balder's dreams, his father Odin traveled to the underworld. But Balder's mother Frigg traveled everywhere else, in a memorable story related in Snorri's Prose Edda.

Because Balder was so beloved, Frigg went through all the realms and made every single thing swear never to harm Balder. She got willing oaths to that effect from fire, water, iron, every kind of stone, the earth itself, every tree, every sickness, every poison, and every animal, bird, and serpent.

The story of Balder's death is the only known story in which Balder figures—and without him even having a speaking part.

And after Frigg had assured herself that every possible means of death that might occur to a Norse imagination had promised not to cause Balder's death, she returned home.

The Aesir gods were joyful that Balder had become impervious to all these attacks. Naturally, they expressed this joy by throwing things at him, or shooting him with arrows, or striking him with axes and swords—since nothing hurt him.

Loki disliked this, though not for any stated reason. He used his shape-changing powers to take on the appearance of one of Frigg's serving women and went to Frigg and asked whether every single thing really had sworn an oath not to harm Balder. All things but one, replied Frigg; she had not asked the mistletoe because she thought it was too young to ask to swear an oath.

Loki went straight to where Frigg told him the mistletoe grew, west of Valhalla, and plucked some and brought it to Balder's blind brother Hoth, who didn't get to play in any of the Aesir games—such as “throw things at Balder”—on account of being blind.

Why aren't you playing “throw things at Balder”? Loki asked his mark.

“Because I'm blind and I can't see where he is, and more than that, I have no weapon to throw.”

“Do like the others do, Hoth, and give Balder some honor. Here, I'll put this stick in your hand, and I'll guide your arm so you know where to throw it.”

Hoth took up the stick and, with Loki guiding his hand, threw it at Balder, who fell down dead.

## Hopes of Getting Balder Back

The Aesir gods were so horrified at the loss of their most beloved member that they were speechless with grief and wept openly. Odin, it is said, wept all the more insensibly because of his greater wisdom and his knowledge of the fall of all the gods that Balder's death foreshadowed.

When the Aesir came to their senses, Frigg asked whether anyone in Asgard would be willing to receive all her love and favor in return for riding to Hel and asking whether Hel would release Balder back to them. Hermoth, a warrior from Valhalla, volunteered. Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir was brought forward and saddled for Hermoth, and he rode off on the road to Hel.

Hermoth's journey would take a long time, so the gods prepared Balder's funeral in the meantime. They decided to cremate his body at sea on his great ship.

The ship was launched with fire and earthquakes to mark its passage to the water, and Balder's body was placed upon it. Thor stood by with his hammer to bless the blaze.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the hopes of getting Balder back rested on Hermoth, who rode for nine nights through deep, dark valleys on his way from Asgard to Hel before he saw the golden bridge over the river Gjoll into Hel. When Hermoth reached the gates of Hel, he spurred the horse Sleipnir over the gate.

In Hel, Hermoth found Balder sitting in the seat of honor in Queen Hel's hall. The next morning, Hermoth made his plea that Hel release the most beloved of all gods.

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**1** The verb used for "bless" in this passage is the same used on rune stones that call on Thor to bless the dead, so it may be that Thor had an established role as a guardian of the dead in their passage to the afterlife.

But Hel responded that she needed proof of how beloved Balder really was. If not only all the Aesir but everyone else living, and everyone dead, and every thing would weep for him, then she would let him go home.

With her stipulation agreed to, Hermoth stood up from Hel's table to make the long ride back to Asgard. Balder walked him out.

Hermoth returned to Asgard and announced the tearful way by which Balder might come home. The Aesir gods immediately sent messengers through all the realms, asking everyone and every thing to weep for Balder. And every thing did—even the trees and stones and ores.<sup>2</sup>

But when the gods' messengers had gone through all the realms and gotten everyone and every thing to cry, they found one last being who hadn't: an anti-goddess in a cave who gave her name as Thanks. Unbeknownst to the messengers, this was Loki in disguise.

And when the messengers asked Thanks if she would cry to bring Balder back from Hel, she responded:

“Thanks” will weep  
only dry tears  
for Balder's funeral.  
I never enjoyed  
that son of Odin alive or dead,  
let Hel hold what she's got.

And with that, Loki has not only put Balder into Hel, but kept him there, too.

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**2** Snorri parenthetically remarks that these things' “tears” are the dew, or the condensation, on these items.

Because of the obvious hand Loki takes in guiding the blind Hoth's hand in Snorri's story, the modern audience tends to think that Balder's death is Loki's fault and Loki should be punished for it.

## Reading

The poem *Baldrs draumar* in the Poetic Edda.

Snorri Sturluson recounts his version of the death of Balder on pages 48–52 of the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

Book 3 in Saxo Grammaticus's *History of the Danes* (Peter Fisher translation).

## Questions

- 1 Are the gods any less victims of fate than human beings are? Consider what the Balder myth might tell us.
- 2 In the story of Balder's death in the Eddas, and especially Snorri's lengthy account in the Prose Edda, Loki could have simply killed Balder himself with the mistletoe. He could have simply openly refused to cry for Balder after his death. But is the strange, elaborate indirection of his methods in disguise say something important about Loki's character?





# Ragnarok: The Final Battle and Fall

It is foretold that certain signs will precede the final battle of Ragnarok. First there will come a monstrous winter, with snow blowing from every direction and great frosts and unending, sharp winds. The sun will be hidden by gray cloud, and these conditions will last for three straight years with no intermission of spring or summer. Humankind will turn to desperate wars and battles for survival amid these conditions. Brother will turn against brother, and incest will run rampant amid the filthy, wretched last humans trying to eke out their survival in a dying world.

## The Prophecy of Ragnarok

Here's a stanza from the great poetic prophecy of Ragnarok, the poem *Voluspa*:

Brothers will fight one another  
and kill one another,  
cousins will break peace  
with one another,  
the world will be a hard place to live in.  
It will be an age of adultery,  
an age of the axe, an age of the sword,  
an age of storms, an age of wolves,  
shields will be cloven.  
Before the world sinks in the sea,  
there will be no man left  
who is true to another.

The Old Norse term *Ragnarok*, which occurs in poems such as *Voluspa* and *Vafthruthnismal*, is a compound. *Ragna* means “of the gods,” and *rok* is a plural meaning “events, fates”—so, roughly, “fates of the gods.” Snorri and the text of the eddic poem *Lokasenna* use a different ending, *rokkr*, which means “twilight,” so “twilight of the gods.”

Then, the two wolves who have been chasing the sun and moon will finally catch and swallow them, plunging the earth into total darkness. The dwarves will tremble before the doors to their stone halls. Then, the stars will fall from the sky, while the earth quakes and the mountains break and all chains holding prisoners crack and let their holdings run free.

Among them will be the monstrous wolf, Fenrir. And Jormungand, the Midgard-serpent, churning the waves as it approaches Midgard from the east, will heave itself up on land amid horrible tidal waves. Above, eagles will cry out in their hunger for the feast of corpses soon to come.

Surt, the fire-wielding being from Muspell, also comes forward along with these awful beings, with the Midgard-serpent spewing poison all over the land and sky, while the wolf Fenrir emits fire from his eyes and nostrils. Eagles and other carrion beasts will eagerly follow the monsters, assured of a good feast on the dead.

The doomed evil ship called “Nail Vessel,”<sup>1</sup> or in Old Norse, *Naglfar*, will sail from the homes of the anti-gods westward toward the unprotected enclosure of humankind.

Loki, too, will break free of his chains and come at the head of the troops of the anti-gods as the captain of the ship *Naglfar*. Behind him in this grotesque ship will come legions of the undead, released from their graves in Hel.

As these regiments of monstrous troops approach their final battlefield, the guardian of the gods, Heimdall, will blow his horn to alert the forces of good.

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**1** Just like in English, Old Norse uses the same word for both the nail of a finger and the nail that one hammers, but Snorri states that it does mean “fingernail vessel,” because it is built of the portions of human nails that are still untrimmed when each person dies.



While the great tree Yggdrasil trembles in the quaking earthquakes that seize the whole world, Odin will consult with the pickled head of the sage Mimir at his well of wisdom, seeking some final bit of wisdom to forestall the inevitable downfall of all he holds dear.

Finally, the gods, too, and Odin's troops in Valhalla, will dress themselves in their armor and ride out to the immense field of battle—said to be a hundred miles wide in every direction—against these monsters and anti-gods.

Odin will ride out to fight his last fight adorned in a gilded helmet and with his spear Gungnir in hand. Next to him will be his son Thor, who will single-handedly take on the titanic Midgard-serpent.

But first we hear of the god Frey and his duel against Surt, who will wield a sword of flame. Frey will be unarmed, since he has previously given up his sword to his servant Skirnir to woo his bride. And Frey will fall before his enemy.

Now Thor will have his battle against the serpent and will kill it with his hammer. But Thor will then walk only nine steps after his victory before he, too, dies, succumbing to the poison that the serpent spat upon him.

Odin's battle will be short and simple, as all his centuries of preparation will be for nothing when the wolf simply swallows him.

But then Odin's son Vithar will step forward and stomp one foot down on the outstretched lower jaw of the immense wolf, using an enormous shoe assembled over the ages from the scraps of leather trimmed off of people's shoes. But because of this massive shoe, Vithar will stomp the wolf's fearsome jaw without injury to himself and then tear the wolf's jaws asunder, killing the wolf.

After Vithar's defeat of the wolf, Loki and Heimdall kill one another, bringing their strange ancient rivalry to an end.

Since early on, we learn from Snorri's Prose Edda that the sun and the moon have been closely followed by two monstrous wolves. Now and then a wolf will swallow the heavenly body it follows and cause an eclipse until the sun or moon somehow escapes.

But always, while the gods live, the wolf called Hati, or "Hate," is just a whisker's length behind the moon, slavering on it in its awful hunger, and the one called Skoll, or "Skulker," is never more than several inches from the midday sun. At Ragnarok, as the gods die, the wolves will finally swallow their quarry for good and plunge the survivors in the singed world into inky blackness.

And then the surviving Surt will use his flaming sword to set everything left in the world aflame. The flames will reach so high that the bowl of the sky itself will not be left unscorched.

Not one human being will survive, if any are left who could have survived the three years of continual warfare and famine during the unending winters. Even Odin's chosen warriors in Valhalla will fall for their final time, apparently joining the other dead for a more final afterlife in the grave or in Hel.

And now, as the world burns with towering flames reaching all the way up to the stars, even the sky is burned black. And finally all things, up to the very stars, sink into the sea.

**What most modern adaptations critically miss about Ragnarok is that it wasn't envisioned as an action movie, but as a horror movie: The gods are shockingly helpless against their enemies, and there's little hope for human beings when only two are destined to live through it.**

## The Reborn World after Ragnarok

Yet even after the death of all the gods and all of humankind—even after the complete fiery destruction of the earth—this is not the end. The earth will rise again from out of the sea, green and new. Fields of grain will grow without any human labor required. And somehow, some of the gods will return to the land of the living from Hel.

The returning gods will include Vithar, Odin’s avenger, and Vali, Balder’s avenger. Vithar and Vali will reunite at the former site of Asgard with Thor’s sons Magni and Mothi, who will bear their father’s hammer. Then, Balder himself will emerge from Hel, together with his blind brother and accidental slayer Hoth.

Aside from these children of the former ruling gods, another survivor will be Loki’s enigmatic, frequent companion Honir, said to “choose fate-sticks” after the end. What this vague action by this insignificant figure means cannot be known with certainty, but possibly he will take over the role of the three Norns and determine the fates of those who live after Ragnarok.<sup>2</sup>

But now not just some from among the gods, but also two mortals will survive. The two human beings, named Life and Pulsing-with-Life,<sup>3</sup> will survive in an unknown place called Hoddmimir’s Forest, where they will keep themselves alive by feeding on the morning dewdrops. The children descended from this couple will repopulate the world.

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2 Compare the way the Norns are said to carve fate on wooden sticks.

3 The former seems to be the woman and the latter the man.

A new sun will then shine down upon this new world, a “daughter”<sup>4</sup> of the old sun. This new sun will travel the same path as the old one, and night and day will return with their old lawful regularity, with no more of the permanent darkness of Ragnarok.

Yet not all will be well in the reborn world after Ragnarok. The prophecy of the seeress, the poem *Voluspa*, ends not on a note of hope in the new age but on a profoundly disturbing note—for the witch speaks finally of the survival of the huge serpent, Nithhogg, who chews on a root of Yggdrasil during the mythic present. He returns now, flying over the surviving gods:

Then the dark dragon  
will come flying  
down from the dark mountains,  
that glistening serpent.  
Nithhogg will bear corpses  
in his wings  
as he flies over that valley ...  
now I must retire.



The world is destroyed by evil, then repopulated by good, and then threatened anew by surviving evil.

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<sup>4</sup> Since it's never clear that heavenly bodies like the sun and moon are living beings in Norse myth, this may be only a metaphorical “daughter,” a spark from the same flame.

The looming end for the Aesir gods and all other life, predestined since early in cosmic history, parallels the long-destined death day for each individual human being.

### Reading

Ragnarok is described in the poem *Voluspa*, stanzas 27–63, in the Poetic Edda (on pages 8–16 of the Crawford translation; note that some translations number the stanzas of this poem differently).

Snorri Sturluson's account of Ragnarok is on pages 52–58 in the Prose Edda (Anthony Faulkes translation).

### Questions

- 1 Could the Ragnarok myth be cyclical? Could old worlds fall away and new worlds be born with regularity? If so, how could one account for the details of the Norse creation myth?
- 2 The gods allowed Vali to kill Hoth for the murder of Balder. Why did they not invent pretexts for killing Loki or Fenrir, or at least move them outside of Asgard to kill them there before they could participate in Ragnarok?





# Thor among the Gods' Enemies

**H**umans and gods alike are doomed to one end or another, usually unknown but equally inevitable. The god Thor—the most popular of all the Norse gods—is himself doomed, as told in the poem *Voluspa*, stanza 54:

Then Thor comes,  
Earth's son,  
Odin's son,  
to fight the Midgard-serpent—  
the protector of Midgard  
will kill that serpent in his rage.  
But all humankind  
will die out of the world  
when Thor falls  
after only nine steps,  
struck down by the venom  
of the honorless serpent.

These lines relay quite a bit of information, in addition to simply telling of the fall of Thor.

## Thor's Name and Symbols

In the original Old Norse text of that stanza, the plain name Thor does not occur at all. Instead, there is a rich vocabulary of poetic synonyms and circumlocutions for referring to Thor, both familiar and magnificent to us mortals.

In this stanza, Thor is “the famous son of Hlothyn” (a name of the earth), “son of Fjorgyn” (another name of the earth), “protector of Midgard,” and, more simply, “son of Odin.”

Snorri, in the Prose Edda, calls Thor by two dozen different titles in a single list, many of them occupational in nature: He is “nemesis of the Midgard-serpent,” “killer of anti-gods,” or “steerer of Mjollnir,” the hammer he fights with.

One of the most frequent names for Thor, Hlorrithi, has puzzled scholars for a long time. But recently it has been persuasively explained by scholar Anatoly Liberman as meaning “pig rider”—which suggests a close affinity with pigs at an earlier layer of myth that’s now lost to us.

While many gods, especially the more elite and mysterious Odin, have numerous names and titles, none of them have as many positive, praising names as Thor has. He is, after all, known as the “killer” of numerous notorious *jotnar*, or anti-gods, and the “defender of Asgard.”

So Thor is familiar enough to be recognizable under many different names, and many of them suggest his positive role as a protector. Connected to that positive role is the anxiety that we must feel at the prospect of losing him. After all, as that previously quoted stanza of *Voluspá* says that “all humankind will die out of the world when Thor falls.” The honorless Midgard-serpent, Jormungand, will kill him then.

From the first we hear about him—swinging his hammer in the gods' shadowy first war that the *volva* remembers—to the last, when he falls against the Midgard-serpent, the primary role of Thor is combat. In every word that is uttered about Thor, he is always fighting, or traveling to go fight. And his enemies are the enemies of the Aesir family of gods, and of humankind, and he fights to make the human realm, Midgard, and the gods' enclosure, Asgard, safer.

Thor's work is defined by his tools. He fights using his great hammer, Mjollnir, which can destroy anything it touches and returns to him when thrown. To lift it, he wears a magical pair of gloves and a magic weight-lifting belt that together double his already prodigious strength. When not in use, the hammer can also shrink to be worn by Thor as a small pendant around his neck, much as historical Vikings wore pendants that represented his hammer around their own necks.



Several hundred such pendants in the shape of Thor's hammer have been unearthed from Viking Age finds. No other pendant is so common in such finds, and the hammers get more frequent in finds from later in the Viking Age.

This increasing frequency through time has led scholars to suggest that the hammer was worn in response to the wearing of crucifixes in the Christian world that the Vikings were increasingly in contact with and under pressure from. That Thor would be chosen as the pagans' protector was natural; there was no such beneficent role for a figure such as Odin, for example.

## Thor, God of the Common People

According to a story told by Snorri in the Prose Edda, Loki flies into Jotunheimar—the realm of the anti-gods—using the falcon skin he often borrows from Frigg or Freyja.<sup>1</sup>

In a hall in Jotunheimar, Loki the falcon lands on a windowsill and peeks inside, where a *jotunn* named Geirroth sees him and casts a spell on him to make his feet stick to the ledge so he cannot fly away.

Geirroth sends a hireling to fetch this god in the form of a bird, and from the eyes of Loki-as-falcon, Geirroth can deduce that this is in fact a god and not a bird. But Loki will answer none of his questions, so Geirroth has him thrown into a closed chest and starved for three months.

At the end of those three months, Geirroth brings Loki out, and now Loki is ready to answer some questions. Loki swears to Geirroth, in return for being set free, that he will convince Thor to come visit Geirroth without his hammer or the belt or gloves that Thor must wear to summon up the strength to even lift the hammer.

We are not told how Loki managed to make his case to Thor, but soon enough Thor is on his way. He stays the night along the trail with an anti-goddess named Grith,<sup>2</sup> who warns Thor of Geirroth's evil intentions. And in place of what Thor has left behind in Asgard, she loans him her own belt of supernatural strength, as well as some iron gloves and a staff to use.

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1 Which goddess owns it, if indeed they are separate beings, is inconsistent across the myths.

2 Grith is the mother of Odin's avenging son, Vithar.

Thor travels along his way the next day and comes to a river that begins to rise dangerously high as he wades across it. But Thor looks upstream at this point and sees that one of Geirroth's daughters, an anti-goddess named Gjalp, is standing there and urinating this flood at him. Well, says Thor, "A river must be dammed at its source."

So Thor picks up a large rock from the riverbed and throws it into her, damming this unusual river at its source. He then pulls himself to shore by the use of a rowan tree, earning for this type of tree the designation of "Thor's helper."

Once at Geirroth's, Thor is shown inside a shed and given a chair to sit on. But once seated, the chair begins to rise from under him, and Thor is pushed up dangerously hard toward the ceiling. So Thor uses the staff given to him by his hostess Grith to push back against the ceiling and crash the chair back onto the floor. It turns out that Geirroth's daughters, Gjalp and Greip, had been pushing from below, and Thor has broken both their backs.

Now Thor comes into the hall, where Geirroth invites him to entertain himself. But once Thor comes inside, Geirroth picks up a lump of molten iron and forcefully throws it at Thor with some tongs. Thor catches it with the iron gloves Grith had loaned him and throws it back at his bad host and kills him.

We're starting to see that there's sometimes a humorous side to Thor's adventures in Jotunheimar—a tone that tells us that Thor was also an approachable god. He was a consummate fighter, someone you might respect, but also someone you might feel comfortable enough with to gently rib from time to time.

It's hard to imagine the desperate, often severe, and self-mutilated Odin trying to struggle through a river of urine. But Thor is a god of the common people, and there's something to be said for the man of the common people who's able and willing to do the hard work to maintain a good reputation while shrugging off some occasional humor at his expense.

Such a man, in human society or among the gods, almost enhances his reputation by staying cool amid the jibes and jests.

From this story of his visit to Geirroth, we can see that Thor is dangerous to the gods' enemies even without his hammer.

**Thor's association with goats is strong. One of his titles is "the lord of the goats," and his two goats are his usual means of transportation when he leaves the enclosure of the gods. Furthermore, his great magical hammer, Mjollnir, has among its powers the ability to resurrect goats—though apparently only goats and not anything else!**

### Reading

From Anthony Faulkes's translation of Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, pages 37–46 (Thor's visit to Utgard-Loki) and pages 81–83 (Thor's visit to Geirroth).

### Questions

- 1 After mostly seeing Loki play a decidedly fierce and oppositional role, we see him here as a goofy sidekick to the valorous Thor. Is there something unique in Thor's character that might bring out such characteristics in an otherwise well-defined evil character like Loki? And why is Thor a character who can himself have comical characteristics and adventures?
- 2 Do you think it is significant that the mightiest of the gods—the defender of the gods and humans alike—isn't strong enough to lift his own weapon without his magical belt and gloves? Why might the Norse gods have these kinds of glaring limitations?





# Thor among the Gods

We can be sure that Thor was the most popular of the gods in the Viking Age. And only a very popular god—one whose manly attributes could not really be questioned—had a reputation that could “survive” embarrassing setbacks like he faced in his visit to Geirroth in the realm of the anti-gods.

## Thor’s Overwhelming Popularity

Outside the myths, Thor’s status is assured in other written sources, such as the sagas, where we find that a quarter of all named human individuals have *Thor* somewhere in their names. Enormous numbers of men are named “Thor-stone” (Thorstein), “Thor-helmet” (Thorkel), or “Thor-spear” (Thorgeir); just as many women are named “Thor-beautiful” (Thorfrith), “Thor-love” (Thorunn), or “Thor-battle” (Thorhild).

It is hinted in the sagas that it was regarded as lucky to give a name to a child with *Thor* in it, or sometimes a man might add *Thor* to his name in adulthood to reflect his favor for Thor or the favor he wished Thor to show him.

Archaeological evidence backs up Thor’s overwhelming popularity as attested by the written sources. Several Viking Age rune stones contain the words *Thor bless* in consistent-enough language that it must have been a well-known formula. In some, there is no object to the verb *bless*, leading us to suppose that the deceased individual memorialized on the stone is the one Thor is supposed to bless in his journey to the next life.

## Thor Confronts Odin

There is a myth in which Thor directly confronted the darker figure ranked above him in the Eddas: his one-eyed father, Odin.

It might seem strange that two gods are pitted against one another here, but it’s likely that this was fairly normal for the Norse, who were apparently henotheistic.<sup>1</sup> One analogy is a sports fan who acknowledges that other sports teams exist but buys tickets only for their own team’s games, unless they are visiting a different part of the country or looking to see a particular spectacle—a special bowl game, perhaps.

Believers in different gods might be on different “teams,” with Odin’s followers largely comprising elite warlords and their poets and Thor’s followers consisting of a larger but less poetically prolific section of the common people. This team rivalry means that both sides might feel no shame or blasphemy in insulting other gods casually or even in laughing at clever barbs directed at their own preferred god.

And Thor—as an approachable, likeable god—is extra vulnerable to being drawn into such conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> Henotheism means that a given Norse person acknowledged the existence of, and believed in the powers of, multiple gods but preferentially worshipped one.

**Thor is not normally regarded as clever or wise, unlike his father Odin, but this in no way hinders Thor from being held in higher regard.**

Most stories about Thor involve him either traveling east of the enclosure of the gods to fight their enemies or preparing to do so. And on one occasion when Thor is returning from his battles in the east, he comes to a fjord, where a ferryman waits to take travelers across in his boat. Thor calls out and introduces himself and tells the man that he will give him good food in exchange for ferrying him over.

But when Thor finishes telling the ferryman about the good breakfast he could promise him, the man retorts that he is just bragging about breakfast and tells him that Thor's mother is dead at home.

Thor seems as taken aback at hearing this out of the blue from a stranger as anyone would be, but the man continues to berate him.

He says that Thor, standing before him, looks far from mighty—he looks like a poor man who doesn't even own a pair of pants. Thor is flustered. He tells the man to bring his boat in and asks who really owns it, a subtler accusation of poverty than the one being made at Thor.

But the ferryman says that the owner of the boat told him only to take men onto the ferryboat who he knows are of good character and who are known to him. That means not carrying a likely “horse thief” like the one standing before him.

This infuriates Thor, who tells him:

I am Odin's son, Meili's<sup>2</sup> brother, and Magni's father,  
warrior of the gods. You're talking to Thor here!

The man Thor's talking to surely knows who Thor is, and Thor expects him to be impressed and probably to grovel in apology. But when Thor asks him for his name in turn, the man replies simply:

Graybeard is my name.

Graybeard is explicitly one of the names that Odin claims as his own in another poem in the Poetic Edda called *Grimnismal*.

So the audience, at least those with a passing familiarity with the old poems, can identify the ferryman at this point as Odin, even if his own son Thor cannot.

This is a very common situation with Odin, as he seems to have a superpower that deflects recognition when he does not wish his identity to be known. But it is certainly surprising that his own son is affected by it.

What Odin says in full is this:

Graybeard is my name, I rarely lie about that.

This might be the greatest lie that Odin ever tells, as he goes by dozens of names just in the surviving sources.

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**2** Meili is an obscure figure in the Eddas, his name occurring only in identifying Thor as his brother in passages like this.

But Thor is a simpler and more innocent character who does not catch on to the hint in his father's answer. Thor simply asks in befuddlement:

Why would you lie about your name unless you were guilty  
of some crime?

To which his barely disguised dad replies:

Even if I were guilty of crimes, I'd still defend my life  
against people like you, unless I were doomed.

Thor threatens the Graybeard now with the harm that he would do to him with his hammer if he were to be able to get his hands on him without getting his pants wet. His father mocks him still, saying that if Thor could even catch him, he would find him the hardest opponent since he fought the stone-headed anti-god Hrungrnir.

Thor replies now:

You want to talk about  
when I killed Hrungrnir,  
that arrogant giant  
with a stone head?  
I knocked him down,  
I laid him out flat.  
What were you doing meanwhile, Graybeard?

This last question sets off the rest of the poem, as Thor and Odin take turns telling some brief characteristic anecdote of what each was doing, and then each asks the other what he was doing meanwhile. Odin tends to emphasize all the women he's seduced or forced into sleeping with him, while Thor dwells on his successful combats with enemies.

Thor's characteristic acts of protection and honorable conduct contrast markedly—and for most of the Norse audience, probably favorably—with his father Odin's penchant for womanizing, theft, and stirring up conflict.

Reversing the expectations many have based on their respective ages, it is his impulsive father Odin who boasts of romancing and seducing women, stealing, and threatening the harmony of the Norse mythological cosmos.

Near the end of their exchange, Odin tells Thor that Thor's wife Sif is sleeping with another man at home—reflecting the dire fear of Norse men that their wives were unfaithful, a fear that is also reflected in the insults of *Lokasenna*.

Finally, a thoroughly insulted Thor simply accepts directions around the fjord from Odin, with each grimacing insults at the other as they part in anger.

Thor no doubt goes back to killing anti-gods and pursuing all the honorable work he engages in. And it can be assumed that Odin goes back to his business of starting wars and bringing death.

## Reading

The poems *Thrymskvitha*, *Alvissmal*, and *Harbarthsljoth* in the Poetic Edda.

## Questions

- 1 How did Thor's well-established reputation as a *drengr*, or valorous warrior, insulate him from being tarred by his more humorous adventures?
- 2 In what ways does a henotheistic attitude toward the Norse gods show through in the Eddic source material? How might a henotheistic Norse person regard a poem like *Harbarthsljoth* or *Lokasenna* (lecture 4), in which a favored god is mocked?





# Odin, Lord of War and the Dead

The god Odin has no known close parallels outside of the pantheons of the pre-Christian peoples who spoke Germanic languages. In Old Norse, he is Odin—in Old English, Woden or Weden. The last variant is the source of Old English *Wednesdaeg*, i.e., “Woden’s Day,” the modern English *Wednesday*. In Old High German, he is Wuotan or Wotan.<sup>1</sup> On the surface in Old Norse, his name means “the mad one.” This has the same ambiguity the word *mad* has in English: potentially both crazy and angry. The name fits him well, for there is little Odin does that is readily understandable to humankind.

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<sup>1</sup> This variant was used as his name in the operas of Wagner.

## Odin's Hanging

Spurred on by the prophecy of his imminent death at Ragnarok, Odin seeks to build up the greatest army that he can in his hall of Valhalla to fight his enemies. Valhalla—or in Old Norse, Valholl—means “hall of the men killed in battle,” and indeed the only way for a man to join Odin’s ranks is to fall, pierced by a weapon, in the world of the living.

Odin, harvester of the dead, has died on at least one occasion himself. In numerous poems, he is described as “the hanged god” or given other titles hinting that this story was fairly widely known.

But we have nothing more than two terse and mysterious stanzas to attest to the details of the important myth of Odin’s hanging, in which for unknown reasons Odin had to sacrifice himself to himself by being hanged and speared.

Here are those two stanzas, narrated by Odin himself, from the poem of his wisdom, *Hávamál*:

I know that I hung  
 on a wind-battered tree  
 nine long nights,  
 pierced by a spear  
 and given to Odin,  
 myself to myself,  
 on that tree  
 whose roots grow in a place  
 no one has ever seen.  
 No one gave me food,  
 no one gave me drink.  
 At the end I peered down,  
 I took the runes—  
 screaming, I took them—  
 and then I fell.

Why did the god hang himself? He offers a clue in the second stanza, saying “I took the runes”—so was this self-sacrifice necessary to learn those letters? Why? We never learn more.

In a scene carved on a picture stone from Ardre on the Swedish island of Gotland, three men appear to hang from a gallows. A fourth man has already fallen to the ground with the noose around his neck. A fifth man stands to the side, apparently the hangman. To the right of the scene rides a bearded figure on an eight-legged horse.

No other individual in Norse lore besides Odin is associated with the eight-legged horse, so it is hard to escape the conclusion that Odin is in some sense presiding over this hanging. Perhaps the sacrifice is made to him, or perhaps he is giving the orders to the hangman. Unfortunately, the enigmatic picture stones of Gotland contain no text, whether in runes or otherwise.

Beyond archaeology, there are also written narratives that associate the hanging of men with Odin. The best-known and most detailed story of a man hanged for Odin comes from *The Saga of Gautrek*, a series of miscellaneous adventures written down in Iceland in the late 1200s.<sup>2</sup>

## The Spear

Besides hanging, Odin is clearly also strongly associated with the spear. Early poets call him “Lord of the Noose” but also give him such names as “Lord of the Spear” or, using the name of Odin’s magical dwarf-forged spear, “The Shaker of Gungnir.”

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**2** Like so many other Icelandic writings from the 1200s, including the Prose Edda of Snorri, this saga is based largely on stories from a much earlier time than the century in which it was committed to writing, as evidenced by occasional references to its characters in much older poetry.

The spear Gungnir became almost Odin’s most characteristic attribute, second to his eye. We see it in his hands on a great many occasions, from his manifestations in heroes’ sagas to his final fight at Ragnarok. Even when he walks with a staff in one of his more “deep-cover” but still transparent disguises, we might see an echo of the more martial spear in the long-shafted tool he holds.

Thus, the fact that Odin is speared in his self-sacrifice in the enigmatic stanzas of *Hávamál* is probably owing to the strong association of Odin with this weapon. Odin is given by himself to himself, he says in *Hávamál*, and he’s given with his own weapon.

**Odin is a fearsome, and feared, author of calamity—a lord of war and death.**

## Odin’s Connection to Death

The naming of Wednesday for Odin, as the equivalent of Roman Mercury, might in a subtle way point toward his connection with the dead.

But then why would Odin be associated with Mercury in the first place? The obscure Tyr may have had some functions related to war like Mars, and Thor’s name that means “thunder” is probably what identifies him with Jove to get Thursday, just like Frigg’s association with love gets her Venus’s day. The Mercury-Odin connection seems at first glance not very easily explained.

But Mercury does also have, like Odin, a salient role as the link between the realms of life and death. Mercury travels the whole Greek cosmos as the messenger of the Olympian gods, just as Odin travels even to Hel, the realm of the dead, in his desperate quest for wisdom and prophecy that might help forestall the tragedies of Balder’s death and Ragnarok.

## Speaker to the Dead

Odin is more than a collector of the dead; he is also a speaker to the dead. As he recites his various spells he knows at the end of his wisdom poem *Hávamál*, he mentions this one:

I know a twelfth spell;  
if I see, hanging from a tree,  
a dead man's corpse,  
I carve some runes  
and paint them,  
and then that corpse will walk,  
and speak with me.

The advantages in speaking with the dead are great. The Norse separated the dead into a category that was closer to the nonhuman than to living humans. Dead men and women had crossed a certain boundary and, standing beyond the normal human perception of time, could see the future more clearly than the living—even more clearly than a living god.

No dead person would be more advantageous to speak with than one who was already skilled in seeing the future in life. As described in [lecture 8](#), Odin travels to Hel to dig up a dead witch and interrogate her about what Balder's premonitions of Balder's own death mean. Of course, Balder had been dreaming that Balder is going to die, and the dead witch confirms it for a fact: Balder is going to die.

The underlying reason for Odin's prominent connection with death and the dead is always his overriding quest for wisdom—particularly the wisdom that might somehow prevent his son Balder's, or later his own, death.

In spite of Odin's formidable and unapproachable nature and his well-established habit of communing with corpses and parts thereof, Odin was a prominent and lasting power in the pantheon of the north. In some respects, Odin is the best-attested god in the old Germanic languages outside of Scandinavia.

### Reading

The poem *Hávamál*, stanzas 138–145, in *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

The tale of Starkath's sacrifice in *Gautreks Saga* is translated by Jackson Crawford in an appendix to *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

### Questions

- 1 What was the purpose of Odin's self-sacrifice? What characteristics does his self-sacrifice share with sacrifices of men made to Odin?
- 2 What might it say about the Norse attitude toward fate that Odin must gather dead warriors for his army, rather than living ones?





# Odin and Wisdom

**H***ávamál* (“The Words of the High One” or perhaps “Words of the One-Eyed One”) is one of the most famous poems preserved in Old Norse. It is 164 stanzas long, making it by far the longest in the Poetic Edda.<sup>1</sup> Each stanza of the first half is a short, pithy, individual proverb, each on its own theme. The sentiments of these proverbs in the first half of *Hávamál* are similar to some parts of Proverbs in the Bible and even more so to the cynical, world-weary tone of Ecclesiastes. These proverbs emphasize practical virtues that are critical to the Norse and many other ancient societies, such as hospitality and courage.

## Odin, the Lord of Wisdom

It is hard to believe that *Hávamál* could reflect the established, typical mores of its time. Rather, it reflects the kind of wisdom held by the old, bitter, and experienced all around the world who fail generation by generation to transmit it to younger generations in time for it to do them any good.

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<sup>1</sup> It's unlikely that it was all originally composed by one poet from the first stanza to the last. These stanzas could easily have originated and been passed on independently of one another.

The advice in these stanzas is not altogether typical of the characterization of Odin. But consider the way that today, wise-sounding, or at least eloquent, quotes get shared more respectfully on social media if they are attributed to someone with authority—or, even better, to someone with authority who also has attributes that suggest wisdom.

And the easiest way to suggest wisdom is age. The dispensers of wisdom in films and literature are not callow youths but wrinkled graybeards. And although Odin might not be the oldest living being, he's a member of the first few generations of living beings.

Wisdom is also often expensive, with the scars of a long life reflecting hard lessons learned. Odin has certainly suffered for his own wisdom. Mimir demanded Odin's eye as the price for a drink from his well that grants wisdom. And Odin hung from a tree for nine nights, apparently dying in the process, to learn the wisdom of the runes.

So it is not surprising that the proverbs collected in the first half of *Hávamál* came to be attributed to Odin, whatever their exact individual origins. In other cultures in other times and places, other appropriate wisdom figures would have been found—a Solomon, a Confucius, an Obi-Wan Kenobi. Each of them, like Odin, is pictured as a mature or older man with hard experience that shows in his face.

**In a sense, Odin is the mentor to the ruling classes of humans in Midgard, a conduit of wisdom from the realm of gods in Asgard. Yet, as is seen in the first half of *Hávamál*, his role as dispenser of wisdom did not exclude offering down-to-earth advice that would be applicable to anyone's life.**

## The Riddle-Weaver

*Hávamál*, the fascinating wisdom text, combines practical real-world advice with the mysteries of Odin’s sacrifice of himself to himself. The timeless wisdom in this poem is largely independent of the specific cultural milieu from which it originated. *Hávamál* is an approachable collection of real-world wisdom delivered through the person of the Vikings’ war-loving, one-eyed god, who suffered so much to become wiser.

In the poem in the Poetic Edda called *Words of Riddle-Weaver*, or *Vafþruthnismal*, Odin and his wife Frigg are surveying the realms from high up on Odin’s throne. Odin tells his wife that he intends to visit an anti-god named Riddle-Weaver<sup>2</sup> in his court to find out if he really is the wisest of all beings. This anti-god is someone who “weaves” words and lays traps for those less wise in contests of wisdom.

But Frigg warns Odin not to go. Riddle-Weaver is indeed so wise that Odin cannot help but lose his head if he does as he is accustomed to doing and bets his head about the matter. But Odin ignores her and travels immediately to his enemy’s lair.

There, Odin appears in Riddle-Weaver’s hall, calling himself “Good Advisor” and states his business right away: He’s here to see if this being who owns the hall really is the wisest one of all.

Riddle-Weaver accepts the challenge and says that only the wiser of them will leave the hall alive.

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<sup>2</sup> A very literal translation of the anti-god’s name might be nearer to “Web-Strengthened.”

The two of them begin to ask each other questions of the most arcane and particular kind. Riddle-Weaver asks Odin the names of little-known horses in the mythology, for example, or the name of the river that separates the gods' enclosure from the anti-gods' realm, or the name of the battlefield where the gods will face their enemies for the final combat at Ragnarok.

Odin then asks trivia questions of Riddle-Weaver in turn. Odin wants to know more about the beginning of the world—something Riddle-Weaver apparently is nearly old enough to remember—and as much as he can about the coming events of Ragnarok.

The two successfully answer all of each other's questions about these matters, providing information and cryptic clues that supply much of the narratives of the creation and end of the world.

Finally, Odin asks Riddle-Weaver how Odin himself will die, and Odin hears the same answer as he gets from the seeress in *Voluspa*: He is destined to die in the jaws of the wolf Fenrir.

But Odin has one more question for Riddle-Weaver. He asks:

I have traveled so much,  
 I have tried much,  
 and I have often tested the mighty.  
 What did Odin whisper  
 in Balder's ear,  
 before he placed him on the pyre?

And Riddle-Weaver, realizing simultaneously who his challenger has been and that he has lost to him, says:

No one knows  
 what you said  
 in those ancient days, in your son's ear.  
 I have spoken my aged wisdom,

I have told you of Ragnarok,  
 I have spoken with a doomed mouth.  
 Now I know that I wagered  
 my head against Odin's in wisdom—  
 but you, Odin, are forever the wisest of all.

Odin wins one other similar contest by again deploying the same question about a private moment at his dead son's funeral as the unknowable ace up his sleeve.

**Odin's motivations are always suspect, but the one eye that's left to him sees men and women keenly.**

## Reading

Introduction to *Hávamál* in *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

The poem *Hávamál*, stanzas 1–137, in *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

The poems *Vafthruthnismal* and *Grimnismal* in the Poetic Edda.

The full text of *The Cowboy Hávamál* is featured in an appendix in *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

## Questions

- 1 What makes Odin the ideal dispenser of wisdom in the context of Norse culture? How is he like, or not like, dispensers of wisdom in other cultures and places?
- 2 What makes *Hávamál* such a unique text? Is there something typically “Viking” about its wisdom, or is it more universal?





# A Second Family of Gods? The Vanir

**B**oth Snorri, in his Prose Edda, and the poets of the Poetic Edda usually call all the gods collectively “the Aesir.” But another term for a more specific family of gods, “the Vanir,” occurs occasionally, too.

There are only three Vanir whose names we know: the fairly obscure Njorth and his twin children—his son Frey and his daughter Freyja. Other Vanir gods are said to dwell elsewhere, but it is these three who dwell among the Aesir in Asgard and enter the stories of the Eddas.

## The Division of Gods into Two Families

Popular presentations of Norse myth often depict the division into these two families as very important and somewhat self-evident. The division does appear to be old, but nowhere in the archaic poems of the Poetic Edda does it ever seem important.

Curiously, it is only in a work by Snorri, and not even in his Prose Edda, that this much-repeated family division is put front and center. It is in Snorri's *History of the Kings of Norway* where he discusses the gods as the ancestors of the Norwegian kings.

In the process of discussing the kings' divine origins, Snorri also happens to spend a few paragraphs on how the gods became divided into two families.

The tradition of tracing the origin of the medieval Norwegian kings to the Norse gods did not originate with Snorri. Rather, Snorri was consciously trying to assemble and harmonize much older material from the oral tradition. His procedure was similar to what he did in the Prose Edda in collating stories from scattered poetic sources about the gods. But in the *History of the Kings of Norway*, the main sources were quasi-historical, rather than mythic.

In retelling the mythic origin of the kings, Snorri says that Odin led the Aesir in an attack on the Vanir (the reason is not stated). The Vanir defended themselves well and also launched their own violent raids against the Aesir in retaliation.

Eventually, the war, which is described in no detail whatsoever, ended in a draw. The two sides exchanged hostages, with the Aesir taking the Vanir god Njorth with his children, son Frey and daughter Freyja. In exchange, the Aesir sent to the Vanir an obscure god named Honir,<sup>1</sup> and with him went Mimir.

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<sup>1</sup> Honir occasionally comes up in company with Odin and Loki, such as in the creation story.

The Vanir felt that the exchange had been made in bad faith when Honir, who they expected to take a leading role among the Vanir, refused to decide anything for himself and leaned entirely on Mimir to make all decisions.

While Honir's silence might be justified based on the legendary wisdom of Mimir, the Vanir killed Mimir in their frustration and sent Odin his head.

Odin made use of the head, smearing it with herbs and speaking spells over it so that it came back to life and was able to answer all his questions.

Incidentally, this story contradicts what Snorri says about Mimir elsewhere in the Prose Edda, where he is not an Aesir god but rather an anti-god and dwells in a well in Jotunheimar, the homes of the anti-gods. Probably there is no "right" tradition about Mimir but rather two traditions that grew up separately about this mythically wise figure.

The Vanir hostages—Njorth, Frey, and Freyja—became incorporated among the Aesir. Freyja, for her part, was the first to teach any of the Aesir the magic that will become forbidden to men, called *seith*, which is the magic of the *volva*.

These are the bare lines of Snorri's, in his *History of the Kings of Norway*, on which an entire edifice of centuries of scholarly and pop-culture visions of Norse mythology has been built up. From this comes the important latter-day distinction between Aesir and Vanir gods.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate reason for the division into two families is not well understood and still seems somewhat exaggerated by Snorri in his quasi-historical account.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a "latter-day" distinction because the term *Aesir* is used throughout the Eddas mostly to refer to all the gods together; on numerous occasions, it is explicitly used when Vanir gods are meant to be included.

## Social Differences between the Families of Gods

There is a social difference between the gods from the different families and between their worshippers.

In the written sources, which are largely from Iceland, if a religious man is especially dedicated to Thor or Odin—powerful gods of the Aesir—no special distinction is added to his title of *priest*. But if he is dedicated to one of the gods of the Vanir group, that will be reflected in his title as such—for example, *Frey's priest*.

This suggests that at least in Iceland, the worship of the Vanir gods was a more unusual practice and thus might call for special comment. In the same way, if the word *priest* were used of a character in a 19th-century English story, we would assume the character was a Christian priest, while we would need a descriptor like *Zoroastrian priest* to indicate a less common case.

The social difference between the families of the gods themselves is most noticeable in the way that the Vanir men take their wives from the lower-status anti-gods, not from among the Aesir.

In fact, the stories of the Vanir gods, Njorth and Frey, marrying are the most important stories we know about either one from the Eddas.

This marriage imbalance suggests that, at minimum, the Vanir group is socially subordinate to the higher “true” Aesir group. This is because in Norse society, men are supposed to marry women of equal or lower status, never higher social status.

## Early Norwegian Kings

Snorri's entire original purpose for discussing the difference between the Aesir and the Vanir is in the context of his exploring the divine origin of the early Norwegian kings.

As Snorri tells it, following traditional oral accounts, the first king of a united Kingdom of Norway was Harald Fairhair in the last half of the 800s AD, a statement that is borne out by other histories and sagas. Many of those on the losing side of Harald Fairhair's unification of Norway fled to Iceland, at least according to traditional histories told in the Middle Ages.

**Snorri had been raised by a relative of the king of Norway, and as a young adult, he spent two years at the court of the Norwegian king.**

Three centuries later, Snorri supported the incorporation of Iceland into the Norwegian state from which his ancestors had fled. His support for Norway eventually took the form of his collection of sagas about the old Norwegian kings and their descent from the gods.

Following a list of traditional begats that runs through several historical, semi-historical, and completely legendary earlier figures, Snorri (again, following traditional oral accounts) makes Harald Fairhair only 27 generations removed from a direct paternal ancestor who was divine, the god Frey.

If we look in the other direction, toward the present, there is not an unbroken succession to the throne of Norway from Harald Fairhair to today's Norwegian kings. The reigning kings of Norway today are descended from the originally German House of Oldenburg.

But in pre-Christian times, the ruling family of Norway—at the time, the House of Yngling—was descended from Harald Fairhair and could therefore also be considered a branch of the Vanir family of gods.

This may provide some context for the division between Aesir and Vanir.

The Vanir are ever-so-slightly subordinate to the Aesir. Thus, the rulers of Norway, in Snorri's telling, are not set up as members of the tip-top supreme beings but rather of the junior partner family in the ruling of the Norse cosmos.

The relative humility of this claim to divine descent might have played better than a pharaoh-like insistence on supreme godhood among the independent-minded Norse.

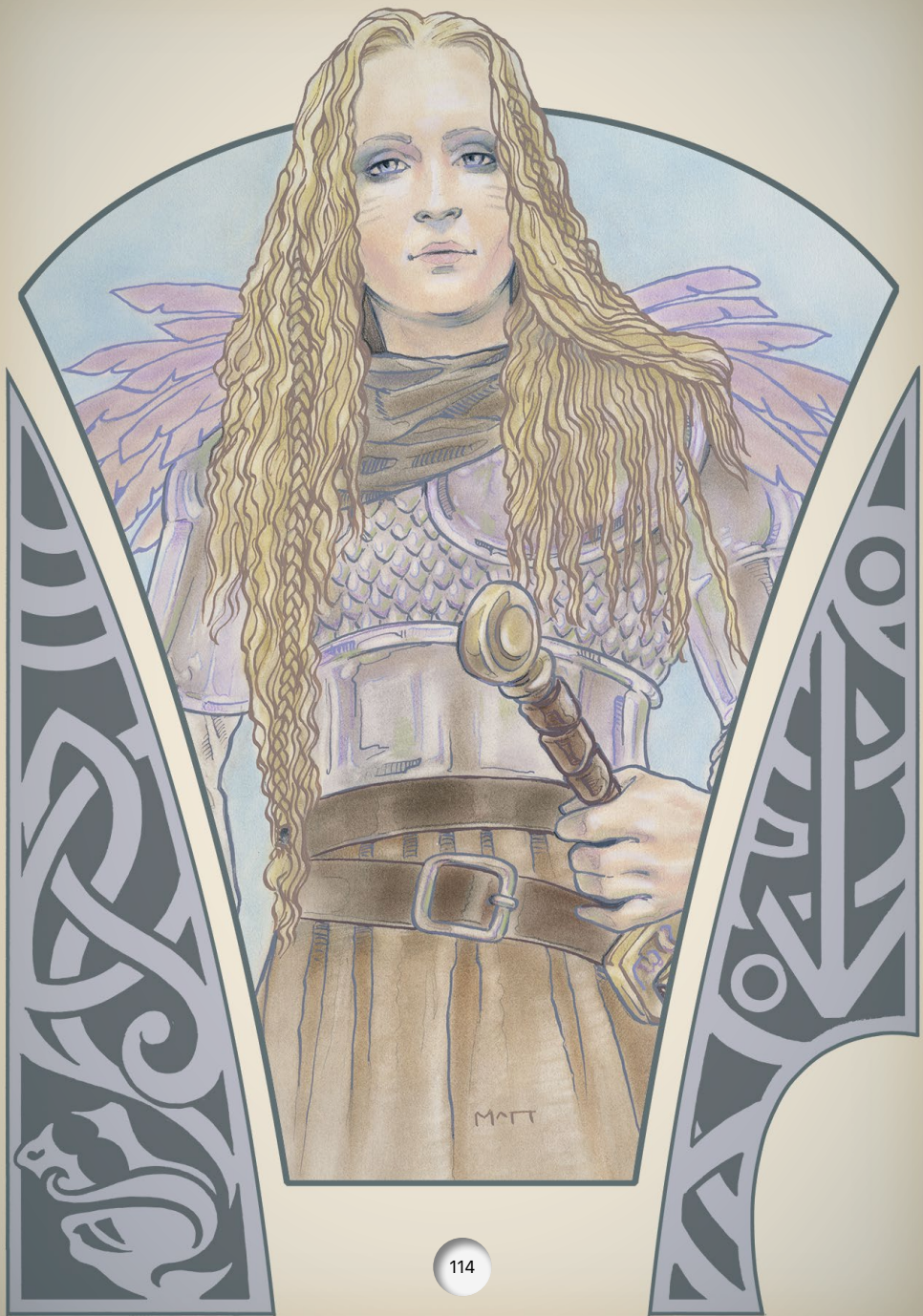
## Reading

The poem *For Skirnis* (*Skirnismal*) in the Poetic Edda.

Pages 59–61 in the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

## Questions

- 1 Why is it difficult to ascertain whether the distinction between the Aesir and Vanir gods is old or significant if it is old?
- 2 What are some of the implicit signs in the Eddas that the Vanir gods are regarded as socially inferior to the Aesir?





# Valkyries and the Goddess Freyja

For many modern fans of Norse myth, the Valkyries are especially intriguing characters—women positioned somewhere between mere mortals and the divine. But recent pop-culture depictions of Valkyries have tended to distort what we learn about them in the medieval Norse myths as preserved in the Eddas.

## Valkyries: Human Women with Supernatural Powers

In the Eddas and sagas, the Valkyries are mortal human women born of mortal human parents. It is not their origin, but their service to Odin, that bestows on the Valkyries certain supernatural powers.

One of these powers is that Valkyries can fly. This might be by means of the “feather-cloaks” they wear, like the one Freyja owns that Loki often borrows to fly.

Valkyries also have the ability to travel between the realm of living mortals on Midgard and Odin's hall in Valhalla, carrying dead warriors from Midgard's battlefields to Valhalla. The Valkyries also serve these dead heroes their drinks in the evening in Valhalla.

*Valkyrie*, then, is a job rather than a species. But it's a job with special perks.

How women become Valkyries is not clear. The most famous Valkyrie, named Brynhild, alludes on one occasion to the day she became a Valkyrie:

A brave king  
 ordered the feather-cloaks  
 of us eight Valkyries  
 to be carried beneath an oak.  
 I was twelve years old,  
 if you want to know,  
 when I gave  
 a young prince my oath.

This seems to be a sort of group induction ceremony beneath an oak tree. We don't know who this young prince is or what the oath she gave might be.

But though we are very unclear about what is involved in a Valkyrie's "hiring," Brynhild's story clearly reveals that a Valkyrie can be "fired" for cause. In her case, the cause of her firing is that she made the wrong king die in a battle, which meant that Odin did not get the man he wanted for Valhalla. This is all told in the magnificent *Saga of the Volsungs*.

**In Richard Wagner's influential *Ring* cycle, he takes many liberties with the myths as presented in the Eddas. He combines characters, invents new roles for the gods, and even changes characters' species.**

Based on some other stories, it also seems that getting married means a woman must quit her position as Valkyrie. And a marriage might even be used as a punishment for a disobedient Valkyrie, which is another part of the retribution against Brynhild in the Volsungs legends.

## Freyja: Chief of the Valkyries

So the Valkyries are not goddesses, but they are some of the most prominent female figures in Norse mythology. And it seems likely that the goddess Freyja is their commander, or can even be counted at times as holding the job of Valkyrie.

One reason to think that Freyja might be the chief of the Valkyries is that Odin himself says that Freyja “chooses half the dead who fall in battle.” While this isolated remark has made some modern readers see Freyja as keeping her own separate afterlife for dead warriors, a more economical explanation is that she is simply the main or most powerful chooser among the Valkyries. *Valkyrie*, after all, translates to “chooser of the slain in battle.”

But there are other sides to the goddess Freyja as well. At the great feast described in the poem *Lokasenna*, Loki accuses Freyja of being promiscuous—of having slept with just about everyone.

In one story, we even see Freyja in the company of a human lover, who she seeks to get a powerful witch to help. This is the poem called *Poem of Hyndla*, or *Hyndluljóth*, which is usually included in the Poetic Edda because of its content, though it is not found in the Codex Regius manuscript of the Poetic Edda.

In this poem, Freyja went to the cave of an anti-goddess named Hyndla and woke her up, saying that she wanted to ride to the enclosure of the gods, and to Valhalla specifically, alongside her.

Freyja said that Odin might do some favors for Hyndla if she'd agree to come with her to Valhalla. And Freyja offered to sacrifice to Thor on Hyndla's behalf—seeming to take more the role of a priestess or devotee than of a goddess—and said she would intercede with Thor, even though he hates the anti-gods.

Freyja's true purpose in consulting the witch, however, was to learn the family tree of her human lover Ottar's ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Freyja sang the praises of young Ottar as a devoted worshipper of his goddess:

Ottar made me  
 an altar of stone,  
 and the stones of that altar  
 glisten like glass,  
 reddened with fresh blood  
 from sacrificed oxen—  
 Ottar believed faithfully  
 in the goddesses.

The witch began to answer Freyja soon, and there follow 17 stanzas about Ottar's ancestors, until the witch revealed that Ottar's family was specially blessed by the gods.

The witch then went into a short disquisition on the gods, narrating some mysterious, terse stanzas that hint at stories. Some of them are well known to us (such as the death of Balder and the coming Ragnarok), but other allusions are thoroughly obscure (such as the birth of Heimdall to nine mothers and Loki giving birth to an evil woman after eating a half-burned heart he found on a tree).

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**1** Ottar needed to hear this because he is planning to fight an enemy who challenged him about the worthiness of his ancestry.

But the main point to observe here is that the goddess Freyja can be seen in a romantic liaison even with a human man and that this makes her all the more like the Valkyries.

The lesser Valkyries, human as they are, are very often the love interests to the human heroes of the Norse poems and sagas.

**Valkyries must remain unmarried during their term of service to Odin.**

## Supernatural Women in Norse Mythology

Other than Freyja and the Valkyries, and some of the antagonistic anti-goddesses that heroes encounter in their adventures, there are not many active supernatural women figures in the Norse myths.

This might seem somewhat surprising, because the Norse sagas are strikingly different from other medieval literature in the way women are portrayed. Women occupy much more active roles in these stories than in, say, the King Arthur universe. They inherit property, choose to marry or divorce, and in some unusual cases even take up arms and fight alongside men.

While it's an exaggeration to call medieval Norse society anything like feminist, it's fair to say that it had a less limited conception of the roles that women might take than are seen elsewhere in Europe at the time. So why are the goddesses poorly represented in the surviving mythic material?

It's possible that more stories of the goddesses simply weren't preserved, even if they once existed, so that the apparent bias is more an artifact of imperfect transmission than anything else. But the confusion about the goddesses in the Eddas suggests that it goes much deeper than that.

We might never know why the goddesses are present in relatively few stories as active characters, but it's a shame if more were not preserved, because Freyja is certainly a complicated and intriguing character.

And she reminds us that a culture's gods are not necessarily embodiments of its highest values and moral precepts. Just as in one story Odin departs from the expected man's role by dressing as a witch, Freyja departs from the proper woman's sphere in her truly prodigious sexual explorations.

Gods are above us, then, both in terms of their lofty residence and in terms of what they can get away with. No man or woman could live as Odin or Freyja does, but they are not held up as moral exemplars either. The gods are not characters in fables with a moral to convey; they are not living lessons in good conduct. Odin might have wisdom to deliver in *Hávamál*, but he does not have to live by it. And Freyja's role among the gods is by no means one that a mortal woman of any status could imitate without grievous consequences.

Like a dream, the myths follow a certain storyline without regard to whys or hows that a deliberate author would have to contemplate. And the gods, like characters in a dream, also behave without whys and hows that are perceptible to us mortals.

## Reading

The poems *Voluspa en skamma* (*Hyndluljóth*), *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar*, and *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I* in the Poetic Edda.

## Questions

- 1 What do we know about how women become or cease to be Valkyries? What about their role is exceptional in terms of Norse society's expectations of women?
- 2 In what way does the goddess Freyja's role intersect with that of the Valkyries? If the poem *Grimnismal* in the Poetic Edda says that Freyja chooses half the men slain in battle for a place called Folkvang (literally "Army-Valley"), do you take this to be another name for Valhalla or (as Snorri does in a brief allusion to that passage) as a name for her own encampment of dead warriors?



MATT



# Dwarves, Elves, Trolls, and Zombies

Not all the supernatural characters of the Norse myths are the high and mighty gods, such as Odin and Thor, whose every move might hold the fate of cosmic order in the balance—nor are all the rest among their cosmically powerful enemies, the anti-gods. Instead, whether existing alongside humans or alongside the greater beings, there are certain lesser supernatural beings who lack the magnificent powers of the gods. These are the beings that translators call dwarves, elves, trolls, zombies, and the like.

## Lesser Supernatural Beings

Dwarves are the best-defined category within the class of lesser supernatural beings. These are the master craftsmen who appear in many Norse stories to forge some spectacular weapon or other tool to aid a god or hero in their quest.

The dwarves also have some powers of shape-changing, often assuming the form of animals, such as fish or otters, or even inanimate objects, such as a needle. This shape-changing ability might make us think of evil beings who share it, such as the anti-gods or Loki, but the dwarves are depicted as beings on the side of the gods, or at worst selfish neutrals.

The English word *dwarf* is a translation of the related Old Norse word *dverg*, which is not related to any notions of shortness per se. Rather, it is likely to be related ultimately to the root in English *dizzy*, as dwarves and elves were supposed in Old English and Old Norse folklore to be the causes of many human ailments, both minor and severe.

Contrary to most recent presentations, which are heavily inspired by the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, elves are not a well-defined category of being. In fact, some characters called elves in Snorri's Prose Edda are also called dwarves in the same paragraph.

So the term *elf* is very vague, but it does not seem to be simply a synonym for *dwarf*. At the banquet where Loki insulted the gods, there were some beings who were serving the gods. These might be "elves," too, since the prose preface of *Lokasenna* says that elves were present at the feast. In that case, these "elves" are lesser beings attending to the gods, though they are not called dwarves and don't seem to share dwarven characteristics like craftsmanship or shape-changing.

So in fact, the best we can probably do to define an elf in Norse mythology is just to understand it as a very broad category of benign supernatural beings that includes dwarves and potentially also some other beings we know much less about today.

This simple, broad definition of *elf*<sup>1</sup> fits the facts in the texts closely. And this benign super-category of elves contrasts with an equally vague super-category of malicious lesser supernatural beings: trolls.

Much like *elf* on the other side of the ledger, the word *troll* is used so broadly that all we can really say to define it is to call it “a lesser supernatural being who is malicious.” But a troll is not a particular nonhuman species, as even human witches with normal human parents are routinely called trolls.

Another malicious being often referred to within the very wide category of “troll” is the Norse zombie, in Old Norse called the *aptrganga*, or “again-walker.” These zombies are a frequent presence in the sagas.

## Dwarves and Elves

Dwarves are the best-documented and best-understood of the lesser supernatural beings. The dwarves’ prime role in the myths is as makers of weapons and treasures. The story of how they made the greatest weapons and treasures of the gods is told by Snorri in his Prose Edda.

There are three major characteristics of dwarves in Norse mythology: They are craftsmen who make extraordinary tools for gods and heroes; they often live in non-humanoid forms, such as animals and even tools; and they live inside of stones.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition was advanced recently by major scholar Ármann Jakobsson.

The primary role of a dwarf in any Norse story is as a maker of fantastic and unordinary things. This strong association with craftsmanship is a major hallmark of dwarves. But there is no such equivalent hallmark to distinguish the elves.

In fact, the only speaking character ever referred to as an elf in Norse literature is a man named Volund. Yet everything about Volund suggests that he is much the same thing as a dwarf, with the dwarven proclivity for craftsmanship.

Volund's story—involving awful, crude vengeance—is preserved in the Poetic Edda in a poem called *Volund's Poem*, or *Volundarkvitha*. From a modern perspective, Volund's story might not stand out against some of the more sophisticated and sympathetic narratives of the Eddas. But for the medieval audience, it was an important narrative that was preserved in pieces and allusions not only in Scandinavia but in England and Germany as well.

In fact, there are multiple versions preserved in Old Norse literature. In another version, where Volund's story is told in a compendious saga of old legends, called *The Saga of Thithrek of Bern*, certain details fill in gaps in the Eddic narrative and are apparently quite legitimately old.

Some of these additional details are featured in the oldest known reference to the Volund myth: on an English artifact from the 700s AD known as the Franks Casket, a shoebox-sized box carved with numerous scenes, including two from the Volund legend.

## Trolls and Zombies

But while Volund is an overzealous, psychotic avenger who is a terror to the family members of those who have wronged him, a troll is yet a worse kind of supernatural being. A troll is an indiscriminate terror to everyone.

The “again-walker,” or Norse zombie, is a shambling corpse that hunts and feeds on the living. Belief in such creatures was remarkably common in medieval and early modern Europe, from England to the vampire of eastern Europe and medieval Greece.

Even otherwise realistic sagas may involve the “again-walker.” In one, *The Saga of the Swamp-Dwellers* (*Eyrbyggja saga*), multiple generations of the residents of a marshy district in Iceland must deal with the ravages of such a being.

Typically, an again-walker is a man who died under certain conditions: disappointed with his son, or sitting up inside his house or with his eyes open, or just being a mean old person. Any one of these conditions is a warning sign, but the confluence of several is an almost sure sign of a zombie threat.

**Between the fantastic craftsmanship of the dwarves and the depredations of again-walkers, the Norse had a rich set of lesser supernatural creatures to populate their imaginations and stories with. But the myths don't typically center on these lesser creatures.**

## Reading

The poem *Volundarkvitha* in the Poetic Edda.

Pages 96–97 in the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

*The Saga of the Swamp-Dwellers* is translated into English by Hermann Pálsson, but under its Old Norse title, in the book *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Ármann Jakobsson's *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* is a fascinating and informative look at Norse beliefs in the undead and other “trolls.”

## Questions

- 1 The Norse poets of the Viking Age were not interested in providing clear-cut definitions of words like *elf* (*álf*), *dwarf* (*dverg*), or *troll* (*troll*). From the material in this lecture and the associated reading, what traits would you associate strongly with each of these terms? Where are the terms fuzzy and potentially even overlapping?
- 2 The extreme vengeance of Volund for his capture and laming puts him beyond the sympathy of a modern reader. But does he violate the behavioral norms that gods and supernatural heroes in medieval Norse literature are expected to adhere to? Compare the boasts that Thor and Odin make to one another about their various deeds in the poem *Harbarthsljóth* in the Poetic Edda (addressed in [lecture 11](#)).





# Odin and the Rise of the Volsungs

While less well known than the gods are today, Old Norse stories of great human heroes comprise fully half of the Poetic Edda. Moreover, the great human heroes account for most of the mythical saga material that comes to us outside of the Eddas. The most important of the mythical heroes are those of the Volsungs. A family of celebrated warriors, their fortunes are shaped by strange magic and the meddling of the god Odin. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, in its canonical form, spans at least six generations. Moreover, there are works that might be characterized as fan fiction that cover more still.

## Sigmund, Son of King Volsung

The story of the Volsungs begins with Sigi, the family patriarch, who is a son of Odin. Sigi was banished from his homeland for killing another man's slave. But Sigi is still favored by his father Odin, who gives Sigi ships and Viking troops to go conquer his own kingdom. Sigi does so successfully and enjoys a long reign as king. When Sigi later dies, he leaves this kingdom to his son Rerir.

**Many of the most important and most beloved Norse myths were centered around human heroes, not gods.**

Rerir proves as strong and aggressive a ruler as his father had been, but he and his unnamed wife grieve because they are unable to produce an heir. They pray to Odin and Frigg for help, and Odin sends an apple carried by one of Odin's Valkyries, disguised as a crow, who drops the apple in Rerir's lap. After eating the apple, Rerir is able to conceive a child.

But Rerir dies before the child is born, and his unnamed wife remains pregnant for a total of six years. But six years is finally all she can take, and she orders her men to cut the child out of her. They do so, and as she lies dying on her bed, her son, born as a six-year-old, emerges. He kisses his dying mother and promises that he will never flee from iron nor from fire.

This individual—named Volsung—also bequeaths his name as a designation for his entire extended family.

The medieval Norse, as well as Icelanders to this day, do not have inherited family names. Even an apparent family name, like Snorri Sturluson, is actually a patronym: Snorri is literally “Sturla's son.” Snorri's own son would have the last name Snorrason, his daughter would have the last name Snorradottir, and so on.

So there is no way to designate an entire family by a shared last name—because there is no shared last name. Instead, the descendants of this individual man Volsung are known collectively as the Volsungs. So there is an individual named Volsung, but each of the men descended from him in later generations may also be called a Volsung.

This individual man Volsung marries the Valkyrie who brought his dad the apple,<sup>1</sup> and they have numerous children. The oldest are twins: a son, Sigmund, and a daughter, Signy. They also have nine other sons, whose names are not given.

The children grow up, and the king of a nearby land, Siggeir, shows up to bid for the hand of Volsung's daughter, Signy.<sup>2</sup> Signy tells her father that nothing in her heart smiles for her suitor, but Volsung pledges his daughter to Siggeir regardless.

The wedding feast is held at the father of the bride's home. Peculiarly, Volsung's home has a huge tree growing at its center. In the midst of the feasting, an unknown stranger enters the hall. This man is barefoot and dressed in a spotted cloak and a wide-brimmed hat. He has only one eye.

**While modern stories often try to keep the names of characters very distinct from one another for the reader's benefit, the early Norse storytellers in contrast preferred similar names for people in the same family, partly because of the possibilities for alliteration.**

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1 Presumably she is no longer in crow form.

2 *Sig* is a very common element in Norse names; it means “victory.”

As the stranger—clearly Odin—enters the hall, he draws a sword and stabs it through the tree in the middle of the hall. He declares that the sword is a gift to whomever can draw it out of the tree. Then, he departs.

All the men present try to draw the sword from the tree to no avail, until Sigmund, the oldest son of King Volsung, manages to draw it out. Thus, Sigmund is groomed by Odin to become a hero in the Norse stories.

## Sigurth, Son of Sigmund

In one poem, Sigmund seeks to marry a woman named Hjordis, but a certain King Lyngvi wants the girl, too, and leads an attack on Sigmund's kingdom.

In the ensuing battle, Sigmund, standing at the front of his troops, comes face-to-face with an old man dressed in gray astride a gray horse—a man with one eye and a wide-brimmed hat—who brings a spear down to bear on Sigmund. Sigmund swings for the spear, but his sword shatters on it. And so Odin harvests his long-cultivated hero for his army in Valhalla.

The battle turns against Sigmund's forces. They are finally routed. Sigmund's rival, King Lyngvi, and his men descend on Sigmund's capital to search for his new bride. But she has been hidden in the woods while the battle raged, and Lyngvi and his troops leave without finding her.

In the dark after the battle, Hjordis, the bride turned widow, and her servant go picking among the bodies looking for Sigmund. They find him at last, and beyond all expectation, he still has a little breath left in him, and as a major protagonist, he has last words.

He tells his wife that she is pregnant—and she's pregnant with a boy. Name the boy Sigurth, he tells her, and he'll be the most famous man to ever live. And give the boy the sword broken by Odin, for Odin has decided that Sigmund shall fight no longer. And then Sigmund dies.

Now the widow Hjordis sees a new army of Vikings landing on shore. The new arrivals are King Alf of Denmark and his men, and they take Hjordis and her servant aboard and then home with them.

The son of dead Sigmund and Hjordis is born and grows up amid the royal family in Denmark. Sigurth is tutored there by the dwarven smith Regin, who teaches Sigurth all the skills that an up-and-coming Viking prince should know, from sword fighting to languages to board games to archery.

Sigurth is the man regarded as the single greatest hero of all—groomed by Odin like his father.

## Reading

The prose intermission “Fra dautha Sinfjotla” in the Poetic Edda.

Chapters 1–12 of *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

## Questions

- 1 Gods and heroes alike are not subject to the same moral restrictions placed on the acts of ordinary human beings. While Viking society did not observe the same ethical principles as today, in what ways do the various members of the Volsung family conduct themselves unethically from a Norse perspective?
- 2 When they are in conflict, does it seem that one’s relations by marriage or one’s relations by blood take precedence? Does this apply to the gods as well?





# The Fall of the Greatest Volsung Hero

The family of the Volsung heroes has been raised up by Odin's own hand to the heights of Viking Age honor and glory. The Volsung hero Sigmund is a clear favorite of the god, who receives Odin's help throughout his life and is finally harvested by Odin for his army in Valhalla. Sigmund's son Sigurth will be guided by the hand of Odin as well and will be regarded as an even greater hero. But his death, by contrast, will not be to Odin's purposes.

## Two Eligible Bachelorettes

Sigurth needs a wife. And there are two eligible bachelorettes he hears about. One is a princess named Guthrun, daughter of King Gjuki. Another is a Valkyrie named Brynhild, who disobeyed Odin by killing the wrong man in a battle. Odin punished Brynhild by forcing her to marry. But because of Brynhild's ironclad oath to marry no man but the man who knows no fear,

she is imprisoned on a mountaintop within a burning ring of fire. There, only the man who knows no fear can reach her, and when he does, she will then marry. Perhaps Sigurth is just the fearless man for the Valkyrie.

Sigurth rides up the mountain and at the top sees a great fire burning. The flames leap all the way to the bowl of the sky. But our hero is unafraid. He spurs on his great horse Grani to ride down through the burning ring of fire and comes inside to a fine hall topped by splendid flags.

Inside, he finds a person asleep wearing chainmail armor and a helmet. He takes the helmet off and sees that it is a woman. Then, using his magic sword Gram, he slices off her armor, and she awakes.

The Valkyrie gives him a horn full of mead to drink, and she introduces herself. She wonders if her rescuer is one of the Volsungs, and he confirms that he is.

Brynhild tells Sigurth her story, too, and then gives Sigurth advice about runes and good living. Apparently, Sigurth is impressed. Even though she concludes by predicting that Sigurth is going to be killed young by his brothers-in-law, the two of them effectively get engaged, swearing oaths that they will marry one another.

Yet Sigurth then rides away. After all, he has another eligible bachelorette to evaluate and consider. So *The Saga of the Volsungs* has Sigurth arrive in the land of King Gjuki to meet the second young woman.

In King Gjuki's realm, Sigurth is greeted as a kind of celebrity warrior. He quickly becomes an ally, friend, and eventually blood brother to King Gjuki's two adult sons, Gunnar and Hogni.

Sigurth remains in this kingdom for a few years before King Gjuki's wife, the witch Grimhild, decides that he is such an aid to them and such a credit to their reputations that they have to get him to stay for good.

Grimhild contrives the idea of getting Sigurth to marry Guthrun, daughter of Gjuki and Grimhild and sister of Gunnar and Hogni. But Sigurth can't stop talking about Brynhild. So at a feast, Grimhild serves Sigurth a magical potion that he drinks, and then he forgets about Brynhild.

Once the magic has taken effect, King Gjuki offers to marry his daughter Guthrun to Sigurth. And Sigurth accepts the extraordinary offer.

So Sigurth is married to Guthrun, becoming the brother-in-law of Gunnar and Hogni. For some years, this arrangement persists peacefully. Sigurth and Guthrun even have a young son they name for Sigurth's father, Sigmund.<sup>1</sup>

But in time, Sigurth's brother-in-law Gunnar also feels the need to find a bride and decides that the right fit for him would be Brynhild. Inexplicably, Sigurth announces that he knows the way to her place, which seems to contradict the notion that he's forgotten her.

In preparation for their journey, they pack another one of Grimhild's patented magical potions, which will allow Gunnar and Sigurth to exchange faces.

At the burning ring of fire, Gunnar tries to ride through, but his horse won't do it. So Gunnar asks Sigurth if he can ride Sigurth's great horse Grani, but then Grani won't ride with anyone on his back except Sigurth.

So Sigurth drinks Grimhild's magic potion and takes on Gunnar's appearance. Then, he rides down through the burning ring of fire, within which he again finds Brynhild, who seems genuinely surprised that anyone has ridden through.

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<sup>1</sup> It is normal for names to be reused in every other generation in this way, as a child will typically be named for the most recently dead ancestor or other relative of the appropriate sex.

Sigurth, looking like Gunnar, tells Brynhild that she must now honor her promise to marry the man who rode down through the burning ring of fire. She agrees to do this, but she says that Gunnar must agree in turn to kill any other man who has ever tried to woo her.

Sigurth rides out of the fire, resumes his own appearance, and tells Gunnar that Gunnar's marriage to the famous Valkyrie is arranged. Brynhild will arrive to marry the real Gunnar at the prearranged time, and somehow the two couples—Gunnar and Brynhild, Sigurth and Guthrun—will live together peaceably for years.

## Sigurth's Demise

*The Saga of the Volsungs* tells us that Brynhild does not know that Sigurth had ever ridden through her burning ring of fire. But one day Guthrun declares to Brynhild that it was Sigurth “who rode through your fire when you thought it was King Gunnar.” Brynhild becomes furious, obsessing now over the need to cause the death of Sigurth.

Her drive to kill Sigurth—rather than, say, Guthrun (who enraged her), or Gunnar (who married her under false pretenses), or Grimhild (who facilitated the treachery with her magic)—is mystifying to some present-day readers.

But remember that Brynhild's bloodlust is born from her shame at being forced to break her oath. She swore to marry only the man who knew no fear. Her rage is that someone else did, and since in myth there are no do-overs, she must remove Sigurth from existence rather than, say, divorce Gunnar.

Many people in the village try to talk Brynhild out of her murderous intent—including Sigurth himself, who explains the magic that made him forget Brynhild and lamely offers to leave Guthrun for her.

But finally, Brynhild prevails on Gunnar that Sigurth needs to get killed. This leaves Gunnar with his own problem related to breaking his own sworn word.

Gunnar, and his brother Hogni, have both sworn blood brotherhood with Sigurth, making it impossible for them to shed his blood without becoming the worst kind of traitors and criminals.

But Gunnar and Hogni also have a much younger brother, Guttorm, who was too young to swear an oath of blood brotherhood with Sigurth and can therefore draw Sigurth's blood without the same guilt.<sup>2</sup>

And so, with the help of a magic potion made by his mother, Grimhild, to boost his ferocity, young Guttorm bursts into Sigurth's bedroom while the great hero is still sleeping one morning and stabs him through the heart. Sigurth wakes up and throws his own sword, Gram, after the fleeing Guttorm and cuts him in half at the hips.

But Sigurth is not yet quite finished—like his dad, he's a major protagonist and gets last words. He tries to comfort his wife, reminding her that her brothers and their son are still alive. But with this vain attempt at consolation, he dies.

Not content with the killing of Sigurth, Brynhild also ends Sigurth's family line here, ordering his three-year-old son, Sigmund, to be killed. She also pierces herself with Sigurth's sword before lying down next to him and dying.

**Odin groomed Sigmund and got him for his army. But he groomed Sigmund's son Sigurth and lost him.**

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**2** This echoes the killing of the beloved god Balder, where the cause of his death was also something that had been too young to swear an oath not to bring harm—in that case, the mistletoe plant.

When Brynhild next awakes, she is in the afterworld, heading toward the gates of Hel. Inside those deathly gates, she will find Sigurth. And so the Valkyrie—whose purpose once was to bring men killed in battle to Odin in Valhalla—has engineered the death of the greatest hero of all. But because this greatest of heroes died in bed and not in battle, he is denied to Odin and his hall of dead heroes, Valhalla.

## Reading

Chapters 13–31 of *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

Pages 99–103 in the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

The poems from *Gripisspa* through *Helreith Brynhildar* in the Poetic Edda.

## Questions

- 1 What motif does the death of Sigurth share with the death of the god Balder? Is there something significant about the way that an oath that is technically kept, but severely bent, occurs so often as a tragic device in Norse myths?
- 2 Sigurth does everything expected of a Norse hero, and Odin's grooming clearly has him hallmarked for a special place in Valhalla after his death. Yet he goes to Hel more through the actions of others than his own. However, from a Norse perspective, is Sigurth somewhat at fault for the way he dies?





# Viking History Becomes Volsung Myth

**T**he *Saga of the Volsungs* concludes with the last acts of Guthrun and her children. After Sigurth's death, a certain King Jonaker marries Guthrun, becoming her third husband. And they have three sons: Hamthir, Sorli, and Erp. The three boys all grow up together with their half sister Svanhild (who is Guthrun's daughter with Sigurth)<sup>1</sup> in Jonaker's kingdom.

## The End of the Volsungs

One day, a marriage proposal arrives for Svanhild from an emissary representing the distant, elderly King Jormunrekk. The marriage is agreed to, but the elderly King Jormunrekk is unable to make the long journey himself, so he sends his young son Randver to retrieve the girl instead.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a daughter that we previously had no indication existed—but for plot convenience, she is dropped here.

On the long voyage back to Jormunrekk's kingdom, the king's counselor, Bikki, who has been traveling with the son, begins to make improper suggestions to him. Isn't it a shame, says the counselor, that this lovely young woman is meant for your old dad when she seems better suited for a strapping young fellow like yourself?

Randver and Svanhild take these suggestions well and have an affair during the long voyage. But upon returning home to Randver's father, King Jormunrekk, this same counselor tells the king that his son has betrayed his trust and slept with his intended bride.

King Jormunrekk's vengeance turns on his now-tainted wife, and he has Svanhild trampled to death by horses. When Guthrun hears the news of her daughter's awful death, she is distraught. She approaches her two sons, Hamthir and Sorli, and exhorts them to avenge their half sister. Guthrun promises to use her magic to protect them somehow on this errand (although she hasn't previously been depicted as a witch).

Hamthir and Sorli ride off toward Jormunrekk's kingdom, but on the way out, they happen to cross paths with their other brother, Erp, who offers to help them on their mission. When they ask him how he intends to do that, he says that he'll help them like hand helps hand, or like foot helps foot. They don't understand what he means, so they kill him.

Once Hamthir and Sorli arrive at Jormunrekk's hall, they break in during the night and attack the king in his bedchambers. Hamthir hacks away the king's hands, and Sorli cuts off the king's feet.

But Erp is not there to cut off his head—the real reason they should not have killed their brother, which was perhaps discussed beforehand in a now-lost part of the story.

**The assignment of a task to one person who is the only one who can do it is a common trope in myth and folklore.**

The king hollers out, since his head is still in place, and summons his men to attack his murderers. But the king's men find that their weapons are no good against them (evidently the effect of Guthrun's magic).

Then, a tall, one-eyed old man approaches the crowd of warriors and tells them not to use their weapons but to throw stones at Hamthir and Sorli instead.

And sure enough, Odin knows how to end a family as well as he knows how to start one. Hamthir and Sorli fall, and so Guthrun is left to die alone as the last person connected to the Volsungs.

## Linguistic Relatives

It is clear that the various strands of the long *Saga of the Volsungs*—by far the most famous and most celebrated sequence of legends of medieval Scandinavia—were not composed by one author, from beginning to end, as a cohesive plot.

More likely, the individual episodes, with stories involving a few characters, developed independently of one another and were transmitted that way for many centuries. It was only later compilers, such as the author of the saga from the 1200s AD, who attempted to create one through-plot for all these episodes.

The seams are readily visible. In looking at how these episodes grew together, we might get some insight into how other myths, of gods and heroes alike, might have come into being.

**The Volsung mythos was in an ongoing process of adding material, which even after centuries can sometimes leave visible seams.**

A powerfully clear example comes from an event near the end of the Volsungs story, which seems to have its roots in the exaggeration of a real historical event.

In the 500s AD, the Gothic peoples, close linguistic relatives of the Norse, presided over much of the shattered Roman Empire. A historian named Jordanes recorded much Gothic history and told of a king named Ermanaricus who killed his prospective bride, Sunilda, by having her trampled to death by horses.

The woman's death was avenged by her brothers, Ammius and Sarus, who were aided by a witch named Guthrune.

It's striking to see how close these Gothic names are, even on the surface, to the names at the end of the Volsungs story. In fact, the names are even closer than they appear at first because of regular sound changes that distinguish Old Norse from Gothic.

A good example is the change of an old *e* to *jo* in Old Norse under certain predictable conditions; this makes the initial *E* of Gothic *Ermanaricus* a perfect match to the initial *Jo* in *Jormunrekk* in Old Norse.<sup>2</sup>

A different version of the story appears in the Poetic Edda in a poem called *Hamthir's Poem*, or *Hamthismal*. This poem is the source material on which the end of *The Saga of the Volsungs* is largely based.

It is interesting to observe that this particular poem is written in some of the most archaic preserved Old Norse we know of. Its language is so old that it might have been composed orally as early as the 800s AD.<sup>3</sup>

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**2** This is the same change that distinguishes the English word *earth* from its Old Norse cognate, *jorth*.

**3** Note that this is not to say that this is close to the distant historical source, but it's a lot earlier in the evolution of the story than the saga from the 1200s AD is.

In this old poem, the story is more self-contained, as might be expected from a more ancient and shorter telling of one episode. To the modern reader, this shorter, older telling also makes more sense, as it makes clear that Erp is not Guthrun's son but the son of Guthrun's third husband, Jonaker, with another woman.

Suddenly, in a way that's unclear in the prose saga, the suspicion and murderous resentment of Hamthir and Sorli about Erp have a basis. And it makes more sense that Guthrun approaches Hamthir and Sorli about avenging Svanhild but never approaches Erp—who is the son of another woman.

Over the centuries, and through the work of compilers like the saga author, this episode has been slightly simplified within its own bounds but also connected into a much more complex plot frame.

So over hundreds of years of tellings, a Guthrun who wasn't originally the boys' mother at all, but an unrelated witch, becomes their mother and eventually becomes the same woman as the Guthrun who was the wife of the dragon slayer Sigurth.

Of course, that Guthrun does not show up as a witch in the earlier chapters of the saga shows that these episodes have not been seamlessly attached to one another, even after hundreds of years of telling.

There's no doubt that many of the stories of the gods evolved in just such a way as this, slowly flowing together from their disparate fountainheads in multiple different poets' mouths.

In that process, some of the dream logic that's so characteristic of myths was introduced, often just from details being glided over. All of this happened as originally separate narratives became prequels and sequels to one another and originally separate characters became the same.

In fact, it can be hard to draw a line between the canon of the Volsungs stories and what might be called the fan fiction that appeared later. There were just too many poets and scribes who reworked the material over the centuries.

But there was never a Homer for the Volsungs—no great poet who single-handedly reworked the old material into an original composition that completely superseded all others.

Even the prose *Saga of the Volsungs* itself, the most coherent presentation of these myths, is a fairly thin paraphrase of the old, disjointed poems. *The Saga of the Volsungs* is more narratively akin to the compilation offered by Snorri's Prose Edda than it is to a work like the *Iliad*.

Yet some other fan fiction was partly on its way to a sort of canonization even in the medieval period. The surviving medieval manuscript of *The Saga of the Volsungs* continues—without interruption or even a new title—into the work known today as *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. Here, once again, dimly remembered history enters the realm of myth.

## A Legendary Danish Viking

Ragnar Lothbrok is a legendary Danish Viking of uncertain historical reality and probably a conflation of multiple real individuals from around the 800s AD. Just as famous, and of slightly more historical verifiability, are the sons of Ragnar: mythical figures in their own right who are much implicated in the legends that grew up around the Viking invasion and occupation of England.

In the saga, these sons of Ragnar become not just famous raiders but god-descended heroes from the line of the Volsungs. Ragnar marries Aslaug, who turns out to be a previously unmentioned daughter of Sigurth and Brynhild.

In terms of actual history, given that some of the Eddic poems about the Volsungs have language that can be dated to the 800s AD, Ragnar himself, if he lived, already heard stories of Sigurth as a long-ago mythical figure. But regardless, the story has marched on and folded the much younger Ragnar into the saga.

It is not even easy to see when in the canonical Volsung stories that Sigurth and the Valkyrie Brynhild could have had the daughter who marries Ragnar, since the dragon slayer and the Valkyrie are only said to sleep together when Sigurth is disguised as Gunnar. And on that occasion, he even places a sword between the two of them, specifically to prevent coital relations.

But *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* was written in the Catholic Iceland of the 1200s AD, so it's a reminder that even after belief in the old gods had been eclipsed by the conversion to Christianity, stories about the pagan heroes, at least, remained living traditions that could be extended and magnified. This fact cautions us to remember that similar tweaks could have continued to be made to stories even about the gods, now regarded as entertainment.

But we should always keep in mind that poetry is much more difficult for later generations to modify because of its rigid structure. So it is going to give us a more faithful witness to the myths of pre-Christian times.

This is why the Poetic Edda—in its poems about the gods as well as about the Volsung heroes—is so crucial. Snorri's Prose Edda and *The Saga of the Volsungs* are both important sources, too. But they may contain minor distortions that we can't see now, in addition to those that we can see by comparing their accounts to the accounts of the same material in the Poetic Edda or to historical sources, such as Jordanes.

## Reading

Chapters 32–42 of *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

*The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* (included in the Crawford translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs*).

Pages 103–105 in the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

The poems from *Atlakvitha* through *Hamthismal* in the Poetic Edda.

## Questions

- 1 Linguistic evidence, as well as the works of historical writers such as Jordanes, points to the assembly of parts of the Volsungs legends over time, often from stories that originally had nothing to do with one another. Are there stories you or your family have told, or that you have heard in popular culture, that have come together in similar ways? Can you project how any popular stories (e.g., from major movie franchises) might converge over time in this way if relegated to oral transmission for hundreds of years?
- 2 In myth, there often is no chance for a redo. Just as Frey gave up his sword for his bride and thus has no weapon, Sorli and Hamthir killed their brother Erp, so they have no one to cut off Jormunrekk's head when they cut off his hands and feet. How does this trope make the drama and suspense of these mythical stories different from those of modern stories?





# Shieldmaidens, Berserkers, and Bear Men

While *The Saga of the Volsungs* is the most famous tale of mythical human heroes in all of Norse literature, there are other mythical sagas in which heroic men and women come in contact with the Norse gods and live in a magic-haunted world. These are skilled warriors who stand outside the social norms of medieval Norse society yet well within the norms of its literature.

## Shieldmaidens

Women who fight in the sagas are known in Old Norse as shieldmaidens. These heroic women are a distinct category from the Valkyries, such as Brynhild in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The Valkyries serve Odin in a particular capacity as the reapers of dead men on the battlefield, and they have additional magic powers, such as flight.

A shieldmaiden is not supernaturally empowered but is an otherwise normal woman who chooses an unconventional life for a woman: the life of a warrior or raider.

And the term *maiden* may be misleading: There are famous grandmother warriors and granddaughter warriors who both fall into this category.

*The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek* is a famous tale that largely concerns the shieldmaiden Hervor and her favorite son.

A long time ago, a young girl was born to a widow in the mythical kingdom of her grandfather. This girl, given the name Hervor, grew up quickly into an exceptionally strong woman, and one with an exceptionally strong desire to do evil.

She was known to participate in archery contests and fencing, and when she was banned from doing this, she went into the woods with weapons and robbed travelers. She became such a menace that she had to be captured by her grandfather and his army, and she was brought home resentful and angry.

Hvor learns that her father, Angantyr, was a man of high status. She also knows by reputation that he must have been buried with his famous magical sword, Tyrfing. Hervor resolves to go to the magical island of Samsø and retrieve that great sword from her father's burial mound. Once she retrieves it, she realizes that there is a curse on the sword: When it is drawn, it must kill before it is returned to its scabbard.

Eventually, Hervor returns home to her grandfather's kingdom and resumes life as an ordinary noblewoman. Before long, she is wedded to a king, and they have two sons.

One son is popular and kind, and another is little-liked and mean. It is the latter, named Heidrek, who is the favorite of his mother, as he shares in her taste for bloody troublemaking. His father does not share in her favoritism, however, and has the boy raised in another kingdom by a foster father who sounds suspiciously like the god Odin in one of his usual disguises.

In time, Heidrek will become a great legendary king. And Heidrek's daughter decades later will be given the name of his mother, Hervor, and will follow in her grandmother's footsteps, dying in battle to defend the kingdom she and her brother inherit from their father, Heidrek. The whole story of this remarkable mythical family and their magical sword is told in *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*.

## Berserkers and Bear Men

The berserkers are heroic men blessed by Odin with a violent wild trance that enables them to outfight their enemies, which makes them social pariahs.

The term *berserker* may have once associated these fighters with the animal the bear, but if so, that association is lost to history. Yet there are other warriors strongly associated with bears in the mythical sagas. A prime example of one of these is found in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* in the mythical hero Bothvar, known as “Bothvar Little-bear,” whose father is a bear (and Bothvar turns into a bear later in the same saga).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Bothvar is not identified as a berserker in the source, the existence of long-passed-down stories of heroic bear men has more to do with the dim origins of the word *berserker*, “bear-shirt,” than do the stories of Odin's wild men who bear that name in the sagas.

We do not have firm evidence that women warriors were a real phenomenon in Old Norse culture, nor for the reality of historical men who were considered berserkers. But early 21st-century movies portray many superheroes who aren't actually walking our streets either.

Both the shieldmaiden and the berserker are skilled warriors who stand outside the social norms, and maybe even the social realities of medieval Norse society, but well within the norms of its literature.

In *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*, Hervor's father, Angantyr, was a berserker, along with his 11 brothers. In the Norse sagas, berserkers come either singly or in groups of 12. In classic berserker fashion, the 12 brothers also do not travel with an army any larger than their own 12, yet always defeat even overwhelming opposition because of the might and magic of the berserker.

Snorri describes the state of being a berserker:

Odin could make it so that, in battle, his enemies became blind or deaf or terror-stricken, and their blades would cut no more than sticks would. But his own men would go forth without armor, crazy as dogs or wolves, biting their shields. And they were as strong as bears or bulls. They would kill men, while neither iron nor fire had any effect on them. This was called "going berserk."

These men—Odin's men—would carry the Old Norse name of *berserker*, which has come down to English as a word for a wild, crazed fighter. *Serkr* is Old Norse for "shirt," but the first element in the name is more ambiguous, as *ber* in Old Norse could represent one of two homonyms, just like in English:

*bare*, as in “nude,” and *bear*, as in a “large omnivorous mammal.” But whether the name of these warriors originally represented them as shirtless or as wearing shirts of bear fur, we do not know, since neither condition is associated with them in the numerous sagas in which they appear.

However, Snorri’s description of the berserkers rings very true for their saga appearances. In a typical saga like *Egil’s Saga*, where the figure of the lone berserker is found, he is a traveling, marauding outlaw at large.

According to *Egil’s Saga*, a brutal berserker from Sweden was rampaging through Norway, taking advantage of the Norse code of honor and law that made the victor of a duel the owner of whatever the duel was being fought over. This same code made it nearly impossible for a man to keep his honor and his rights as a citizen if he did not accept another man’s challenge to a duel. So berserkers often simply wander the countryside, challenging men to duels for whatever they wanted or needed.

In particular, this menacing berserker was making a habit of challenging men to duels for their daughters or sisters and defeating them with his superior combat abilities before having his way with the woman he’d issued the challenge for.

In the end, a duel between the titular character, Egil, and the berserker ensues, but eventually Egil chops off the berserker’s leg, and his enemy bleeds out on the ground then and there.

We’re told that few mourned the berserker’s loss, and that’s typical of this character type. They might be closer to Odin than other men, but that meant closer to an unpredictable and violent lord. And besides, Odin would have need of their sword arms in Valhalla before they got too old to swing them. To be closer to that war-mad god is not necessarily to be endeared to one’s fellow man.

Whether the berserker was originally meant to be the one “with a shirt of bearskin” or “bare of a shirt” is unknown. But because bears are intimately associated with mythical heroes, the bear interpretation might be more plausible.

## Reading

*The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek* (in *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes*).

*The Saga of Hrólfr Kraki and His Champions* (in *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes*).

Egil Skalla-Grímsson’s fight with the berserker is in chapter 65 of *Egil’s Saga* (see translation by Bernard Scudder in *The Sagas of Icelanders*).

*Beowulf* (translated by Dick Ringler).

## Questions

- 1 Do you find it significant that men specifically blessed by Odin—the berserkers—are portrayed in a negative light in the sagas? How is their behavior consistent with the conduct and goals of their divine sponsor?
- 2 Why might the bear be such a significant animal for heroes to be compared to, or even turned into? Why the bear and not the wolf or another predatory animal? Could it be significant that two of the Volsungs (alone) lived as wolves for a period?





# Norse Religion, Sacrifice, and Festivals

The stories of pre-Christian gods and heroes make up Norse mythology proper, and the stories we have were written down and preserved by writers in a Christian era, who transmitted stories about the gods for edification and entertainment. Yet because that transmission was through Christian hands, there was no attempt to pass on any information about how to worship those old gods. There is a line, then, drawn between Norse mythology—narratives about pre-Christian gods—and Norse religion, practices, and rituals for worshipping these beings. And we have only sparse, but intriguing, information about the latter. From what we do know, it appears that a religion had a different place in the lives of the pre-Christian Norse than a synagogue or church holds in traditional Judeo-Christian communities today.

## Norse Paganism

Norse paganism does not seem to have had “commandments” as such, nor a central focus on virtues and corresponding sins. And the gods don’t seem to sit over humans as celestial judges, but more like celestial loan sharks. The relationship with the gods of such a religion—and this is as true of Norse paganism as of, say, Greco-Roman paganism—is more transactional, with honor done to the gods as a way of propitiating them.

For example, sacrifices are done less in love of a god than in hopes that he will repay the community sacrificing to him with some equal or greater favor: good weather, good harvest, good fishing, or victory in war. The gods may demand and offer different things; Odin, for example, famously demands death in battle, with the questionable reward of a more glorious afterlife. But the gods’ claim is to human resources, material or otherwise, more than to human affection.

The gods’ rewards for humans, too, are often more material than a traditional Judeo-Christian mindset might contemplate. Other than the imperative to die in battle rather than go to the boring realm of Hel, the afterlife never appears to be a major factor in Norse thinking. Rather, sacrifices are made to the Norse gods to gain advantage in this life.

**In many ways, the focus on sacrifice in Norse holy days was typical of polytheistic belief systems. Like in Greek polytheism or Hinduism, one transacted with the gods by giving them the lives of valuable animals and, quite possibly in the early Norse world, human lives as well. In exchange, one hoped that the gods would bestow victory in war, fruitful harvest, or wisdom in a king.**

The Norse belief in a large set of gods is also less exclusive in attitude than people raised in modern monotheist religions are often aware. To worship Thor is not to exclude the worship of Odin—or even to exclude the worship of Christ. If Christ was a foreign god to the pre-Christian Norse, he was still a powerful one, and there was no ban on testing out any god to see whether currying favor with him might lead to advantages.

For example, in part 3 of the Icelandic *Book of Settlements*, another work whose oldest-surviving manuscript dates from a compilation in the 1200s AD, we read about the pioneer generations arriving in Iceland during the period from roughly AD 870 to AD 930. Specifically, we read about an early settler named Helgi, who was “very mixed in belief. He believed in Christ, but prayed to Thor for success in sea voyages and in hardship.”

This isn't unscrupulous for a Norse pagan in the way that traditional Christianity would recoil if a Christian worshipper turned to Thor occasionally. In this polytheistic conception, an unknown number of powerful beings are above humanity somewhere in the cosmos. Trying out a new god is no worse than checking the APR on competing credit card offers—and there's nothing wrong with having a few different credit cards at once, either.

There is no doubt that it was many centuries before such transactional attitudes had completely worn away in Christian Scandinavia. Keep in mind that medieval missionaries didn't immediately teach theology classes or translate the Bible into people's local spoken languages. People persisted in many pre-Christian modes of thought even after they were nominally converted.

Something similar can still be observed in places such as Madagascar or among the Arapaho in Wyoming, where the traditions of Catholic missionaries have melded with local traditions. What is produced is a vibrant and sincere Christianity, but one with a strong local flavor that has ancient roots.

Early Norse Christian poems even mention Christ sitting in judgment over the world near the roots of the tree of Yggdrasill—reminding us that changing the god you pray to doesn't necessarily change what you envision the god doing or where the god does it.

## Pre-Christian Religion in Scandinavia

There is little we can say about pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia from the surviving sources, which are relatively scanty compared to the sources for mythical narratives.

It is no surprise that we know so relatively little about pre-Christian Norse religion. Christians in the Middle Ages who were interested in their countries' past pagan beliefs would always walk a line, cautious to avoid suspicion that they were encouraging or practicing heresy. Yet the stories of the Norse gods remained popular in Iceland (at least) after the conversion, so they continued to be told—stripped of any remnants of pagan ritual.

We know that even before Snorri wrote his Prose Edda in the 1220s, there was still some traditional awareness of the stories about the old gods. In a contemporary account, we learn that Snorri's father, Sturla, was in conflict with a neighbor woman who tried to stab him through the eye. She missed the eye, but as she thrust at him, she screamed, "Why not make you more like the one you most want to be like? That's Odin!"

**Because later writers preserved myths but not religious rituals or practices, archaeology is the surest guide to what might remain of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia. Yet, unfortunately, even relevant archaeological finds have been frustratingly meager.**

This shows us that in the last half of the 1100s AD, before anyone had bothered to write down the ancient poems about the gods, enough stories about them were passing around orally for a woman to refer casually to the physical features of a god—Odin’s one eye—and his character traits, such as his domineering, manipulative ways, which she hated in her neighbor Sturla, too.

This is similar to how stories of the Greek and Roman gods were passed down by Christian scholars throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period as well. Consider that even today, parents can read to their children from a story about Hercules on Saturday night and then go to church the next morning. The myth has been wholly separated from any kind of religious practice, and even from any suspicion of religious inclination.

Much the same was true of Iceland in the 1200s AD; otherwise, we would have none of the stories of Odin, Thor, Loki, et al., preserved.

And even where a genuine medieval written source means to give us a little information about religion, it’s much less than what the interested reader today wants.

For example, the famous Icelandic *Book of Settlements* recounts what it calls the beginning of the “old heathen laws.” We might expect to find some profound links to mythology here, but that’s not what we get.

Instead, we get a reminder that men should not sail toward land with the frightening dragon heads of their Viking ships’ prows up. No, they should take those dragon heads down as they near land.<sup>1</sup> The reason given is that the “land spirits”<sup>2</sup> might take fright and cause trouble for the seafarers.

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1 These prow decorations are removable, and some of them even screw in to threaded receivers.

2 No such “land spirits” are conspicuous players in any preserved myth, but this might well constitute a memory of a cult of minor supernatural beings who were regarded as guardians or at least denizens of particular places.

Another practice mentioned in the *Book of Settlements* is a heavy golden ring on which men were expected to swear their most binding oaths. For such an occasion, this ring was dipped in the blood of an ox sacrificed by the attending priest, and in the presence of witnesses, he was to call on the aid of gods.<sup>3</sup>

The specific gods you were to swear this oath on were Njorth and Frey—father and son, two Vanir gods—as well as “the almighty one of the Aesir.” It is not easy to know which god is meant here. Odin is the head of the Aesir family, but “almighty” could make us think more of his fighter son, Thor. Or perhaps someone else entirely is intended in the oath.

In one of the poems of the Volsungs legends in the Poetic Edda, the very old poem *Atlakvitha*, an oath is sworn on the ring of Ull. This god is mentioned in a few other places in the Poetic Edda, always in terms just as vague, such as Ull owns a certain hall or Ull will favor a certain good man.

Snorri, likewise, knows almost nothing of Ull. He calls Ull a good skier and a good archer. This is not much to go on. However, in the way that many desperate modern commentators have tried to find roles for all the gods mentioned even once in the Eddas, Ull has come to be called the “god of winter” in popular culture. In fact, Breckenridge, Colorado, has named its major annual skiing festival the Ullr Fest, using the original Old Norse spelling of his name.

This is too much to read into the few paltry mentions the Eddas give us of this god. But Ull must have once been more important because Norway and Sweden have numerous farms and natural landmarks named for him, such as Ull’s Acre, Ull’s Valley, and Ull’s Hill.<sup>4</sup>

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**3** This might remind us of saying something like “so help me God” when swearing oaths in a court.

**4** While not as many as the thousands of such places named for Thor, there are more named for Ull than for Odin. And intriguingly, places named for Ull, Frey, and Njorth often cluster together.

Could it be that we know so little about Ull because he was primarily a procedural god—presiding over oaths and other ritual functions—rather than a god that stories were told about?

If Ull presided over oaths, as the poem *Atlakvitha* in the Poetic Edda hints, Ull could well be the “almighty one of the Aesir” that the *Book of Settlements* counsels men to swear by.

But it is sobering to note that the Eddas would never lead us to assign an important role to him. It’s only the additional, indirect evidence provided by the frequency and locations of Ull in place-names that leads us to wonder if he had such a role.

## Reading

An excellent overview of what we know about Norse religion (and neighboring belief systems) is in Thomas DuBois’s *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*.

The tale of the reluctant convert Hallfreth is translated as *The Saga of Hallfred Troublesome-Poet* by Diana Whaley in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*.

For the life of King Hakon the Good, Norway’s first Christian king who ruled in a still-pagan land, see *Hakonar saga goda*. (In spite of the Old Norse title, this is an English translation in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, translated by Faulkes and Finlay.)

## Questions

- 1 What is the distinction between Norse mythology and Norse religion? Why are we relatively rich in information about the former and relatively poor in information about the latter?
- 2 How was the polytheistic Norse relationship toward the gods different from the relationship of more familiar monotheistic believers to God today (for example, in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam)?





# Norse Magic: Spells, Curses, and Runes

The worldview of the medieval Norse did not deny human beings access to some of the supernatural powers that the gods commanded. Rather, it embraced a belief in some limited supernatural powers that mortal men and women could learn to command.

## Seith Magic

The *volva*, the seeress or clairvoyant witch who appears among gods and humans alike, is a major figure.<sup>1</sup> Yet the magic of the *volva*, the art called *seith* in Old Norse, makes her an outsider. And any man who attempts such unmanly magic is a disgrace, even a criminal.

We might wonder why this distinctive and important magical art is considered so unmanly. Loki pointedly insults Odin for using this magic as one of his many insults in the poem *Lokasenna*.

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of the *volva* is highlighted in the myths of creation and Ragnarok, which are narrated by a *volva* summoned by Odin.

The reasons for the unmanly shame of doing this magic are never spelled out in the written sources, but they might have something to do with the specific costume worn by the *volva*. In a scene in *The Saga of Eirik the Red*, the strange and distinctly feminine outfit the *volva* wore is described at length, with combinations of different animal skins, including catskin gloves. The fact that so much time is spent in describing this outfit makes us wonder if wearing it is required of the practitioner of *seith* magic. If so, then the requirement to wear women's clothing might be all that was needed to convict the male practitioner of unmanliness.

When Loki insults Odin for practicing *seith* magic, there is a strong overtone of sexual shame associated with men practicing the art. It is not difficult to imagine that a man wearing the costume of a *volva* would inspire this kind of outrage in such a hypermasculine society as that of the Vikings.

Snorri credits Odin with a range of powers that are headed under the category of the normal Norse word for “magic,” including everything from knowing magically where to dig for precious metals, to teaching his ravens language, to shape-changing. But the practice of *seith* is different.

Snorri says that thanks to this skill, *seith* in particular,

[Odin] could know people's fates, and things that were yet to come, and he could cause people death or bad luck or bad health, or take away someone's intelligence or strength and give it to someone else.

Snorri associates *seith* magic specifically with “priestesses”<sup>2</sup>:

And this magical lore that he practiced involves so much sexual passivity that it was thought to be a shameful pursuit for men, and it was a skill taught to priestesses.

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<sup>2</sup> This could also mean “goddesses,” as the word is the same in Old Norse.

It is the realm of knowing fate and the future, with almost a peripheral mention of causing death or sickness, that's subsumed under the label of *seith* and described as shameful if pursued by men as opposed to women. Other magical practices are discussed in a neutral tone.

Those who practice other magical arts are also not marked out as magical professionals in the way that the *volva* is. There are only a very few dedicated practitioners of magic, and other than in the form of *seith*, magic is mostly present in small, almost everyday instances of curses and blessings. And these forms of magic can be attempted by anyone.

## Curses, Blessings, and Oaths

Curses and blessings are the most basic form of magic, accessible to anyone who can say or write them. Some of the most commonplace expressions of the modern-day English language and other languages evolved from what were once simple curses or blessings of just this kind.

To say “goodbye” in English was originally “God be with you,” invoking divine protection on the person we take leave of. This simple formula has been worn down to the point that we don't recognize the original blessing. But it persists even today as a small everyday reflection of the ancient belief that words have real power.

In a broad sense, even swearing an oath is an act of magic of this kind, casting a sort of spell to bind oneself in the future. Such oaths—both in the Norse world and in an earlier English-speaking society that took such words more literally—may be strengthened by invoking a god, calling on a beyond-human power to enforce the human words.

**Primarily, the Norse conception of magic is one that sees the will itself as having power over the world, as long as it's channeled through the spoken or written word.**

“So help me God” or “I swear in the presence of the gods” is meant to bind the oath maker tighter to this “spell” cast upon themselves, using the strength of gods to overcome their own mortal weaknesses. An oath taker also potentially calls on the gods to punish himself for failure to live up to his promise.

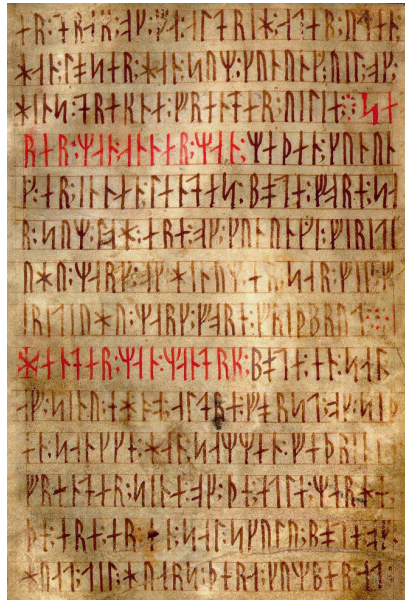
This is the simplest kind of magic, but it might have truly powerful effects, even when spoken by someone who is not otherwise known to be magically adept.

## Runes and Written Spells

If the fleeting spoken word potentially has power, the lasting written word has even more power—and this is where runes come into the picture.

*Rune* is a term for a letter in one of the carved alphabets used by speakers of Germanic languages, including Old Norse and Old English, before the adoption of the Roman alphabet (the alphabet in which we write English today).

In medieval northern Europe, the Roman alphabet came alongside Christianity, as a tool for the church for writing its language, Latin. Because of the prestige of this alphabet, and arguably its more efficient system for representing the sounds of spoken language, it gradually came to supplant the runes in writing Old Norse and its descendent Scandinavian languages after the conversion to Christianity.



In Iceland, the runes were supplanted quickly, and our first manuscripts written in Old Norse in the Roman alphabet come from Iceland from about AD 1150. The Poetic Edda, the Prose Edda, and the sagas were all written after this—in the Roman alphabet.

Note that the change of alphabet did not bring with it a change in language. So when runes were gradually replaced by the Roman alphabet in Scandinavia, the spoken language went on being Norse. It was only the letters used to write that language that changed.

The lion's share of runic inscriptions are not magical, and most are not even very long. Most of them say something like “So-and-so owns me” or “So-and-so made me” on some constructed object, such as a sword. There are also many memorial runic inscriptions, which usually offer a sentence or two of praise in memory of the fallen.

The runes come to be used in magic as a way of making “permanent” the incantation one wishes to perform. Spoken words last only as long as a person is speaking, but written words can last much longer if they're carved in wood or bone or stone or metal.

When runic inscriptions have magical content, that content is in the words, not in the alphabet they are written in. So it is the incantation itself, not the letters it's written in, that is intended to work the magical effect. The very same letters that spell these words are used, in the majority of inscriptions, to spell words of much humbler and simpler import.

**The Norse view of magic differs from our own popular culture's conception of magic. Instead of a field of study, as magic spells might be for Merlin or Harry Potter, magic can be achieved simply by wishing someone well or ill.**

The Norse believed in a pantheon of gods, an opposed quasi-pantheon of equally powerful anti-gods, and a host of minor supernatural creatures. Magic is how the members of humankind could participate in and hold some of the supernatural powers of these beings—by speaking or writing the correct words.

There was no single runic alphabet used to write all the early Germanic languages, such as Old English and Old Norse. Rather, there were several in the course of more than a millennium of development.

The fact that the rune letters were not inherently considered magical on their own does not mean that there aren't inscriptions with magical content. Our Roman alphabet today can be used to write down a recipe or to write out the instructions for building an airplane; the content is in the combined words, not in the letters.

The nature of spells written out in the Middle Ages is particularly likely to be related to the prime purpose of medieval magic: healing. Small copper amulets are found from the 1000s AD in Sweden, which converted to Christianity roughly a century after Iceland.<sup>3</sup> These amulets are apparently intended to be worn, as they have small holes (punctured after the runic carving was executed) to allow a string to pass through them.

Beyond specific imprecations to Thor for healing in these runic amulets and formulas, numerous memorial stones contain the words “May Thor bless.”

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**3** Sweden, in spite of seeming more centrally located, was the last Scandinavian country to accept Christianity.

## Reading

The poem *Hávamál*, stanzas 146–164, in *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

English translations of *Eirik the Red's Saga*, *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, and *Egil's Saga* are in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

An English translation of *Ynglinga saga*, in which Snorri Sturluson gives an account of Odin's magic, is in *Heimskringla* (translated by Faulkes and Finlay).

An excellent account of Norse beliefs in magic is Stephen Mitchell's *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*.

The best introduction to runes in English is Michael Barnes's *Runes: A Handbook*.

## Questions

- 1 How is the Norse concept of magic related to the notion that the word, spoken or written, has power?
- 2 What role do runes play in Norse magic? Are the runes inherently magical symbols?





# After Life: Hel and Valhalla

**F**or the Norse, living in a world beset by violence and untreatable disease, death was always near, and no one would have gotten through an average year without having to take part in at least one funeral. Yet the concept of a separable soul was quite foreign to pre-Christian Norse culture. So the body, when it was put away, continued to be inhabited—somewhere. Whether this shadow of life continued on within the grave itself or somewhere in the halls of benevolent or malicious gods, it was the whole departed person who was there, not just a spirit.

The literary sources, foremost among them the Eddas, present a fairly neat dichotomy between Valhalla for the men who die in battle and Hel for all the other dead. It is likely that this picture is a late one, favored at the end of the Viking Age in Iceland and other western parts of Scandinavia. At the same time, there are hints scattered throughout the sources, Icelandic and otherwise, that in an earlier conception of the afterlife, everyone went to Hel and that the idea of Valhalla emerged later.

## Hel: The Place and the Being

The name *Hel* comes from a root that means “cover” or “hide,” the same that is found in English words like *hole*, *hel-met*, *hol-ster*, and indeed *hell*.

Based on this etymology, the name *Hel* can be taken as simply “covered place”—or, in other words, potentially the grave itself in the word’s original meaning. The word *Hel* can also be used to speak of just the grave or metonymically of death in general.

The written sources speak of the realm of Hel as being vaguely beneath the living but also sometimes northward from the living. To this day, “go north and down” is an unpleasant thing to say to someone in Scandinavia.

The association with the underground is readily understandable because of the grave. The association with the north is perhaps due to the inhospitable condition of the landscape as one travels farther north in Scandinavia, such that some of the bleak lands within the Arctic Circle might seem more fitting for the dead than the living.

It is also related to Hel’s association with Niflheim, the watery realm to the north that preceded the creation of the earth. The location of this place that comes to be called Hel is in the area that had been Niflheim: the watery side of the pre-creation cosmos. This suggests a damp, cool place of the dead, corresponding with the damp, cool graves the deceased would be placed in during the seasons in Scandinavia when graves and burial mounds can be dug into the thawed earth.

**Viking Age burials from Scandinavia are some of our best physical traces of Viking society. Intriguingly, along with the mythical funerals of Balder and Sigurth, they hint at an importance of water in the afterlife that the Eddas never outline explicitly.**

So Viking Hel is not hot. And it's even a surprisingly normal place. In his Prose Edda, Snorri has a compelling description of it, and of the being—also named Hel—who rules it:

Odin cast Hel into Niflheim and gave her the power in all the nine realms to portion out room and board for all those who were sent to her, and those are the people who die of sickness or old age. There she owns large homes and farms.

This conception of the afterlife has a lot of physicality. Hel is a place where people eat and drink and indeed where food is grown on farms. More than mere spiritual nourishment is required for the dead. But Hel is not all large farms and magnificent fences.

Hel the being has more of the grim accompaniments we'd expect:

Her hall is named Storm-Increaser, her plate is Hunger, her knife is Starvation, her slave is Walking Man, and her slavewoman is Walking Woman. The threshold of her door is Falling Pit, her bed is Deathbed, and the tapestries hanging above it are Glittering Misfortune. She is half blue, and half flesh-colored, and for this reason she is easy to recognize and also both sad-looking and cruel-looking.

Hel is half blue<sup>1</sup> and half flesh-colored. The half of her that is blue presumably looks dead, as dead bodies (and the walking dead) are said to be blue in the sagas.

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**1** The Old Norse language has few color categories, and the color blue can cover any cool color except green, including not only what we would call blue but also purple, indigo, or violet. Somewhere in these possible shades is the hue that the Norse associated with dead and rotten human bodies.

But Snorri's comment is all that survives about the physical appearance of the being Hel. Most artists and interpreters in the centuries since have imagined her appearance as half that of a living woman and half that of a dead one. Whether her appearance is split vertically or horizontally, and which side is which, is not something Snorri specified—which is very typical for the Eddas.

**While the funerals of the god Balder and the mythical hero Sigurth were cremations aboard ships, accounts in the Icelandic sagas tend to describe burial of the dead in mounds. Apparently, Norse funeral customs were different from place to place, and time to time, as they were in our own century.**

## Literary versus Sincere Descriptions of Death

Our picture is also complicated by the way death may be described in terms more literary than sincere.

Our own descendants would be confused if they tried to figure out our afterlife beliefs from our movies. In one day, you could watch a show about ghosts, another about heaven and hell, another about reincarnation, and yet another with an atheistic expectation of no afterlife.

And on a busy day, you might tell one person that you'll see them in hell, another about your hopes for heaven, another that you'll haunt them after you die, another that you hope to come back as a bird, and another that you'll be rolling over in your grave. Which one do you actually expect?

Potentially none of them, since these phrases are often just used as flourishes. They certainly seem mutually exclusive.

So how can we be sure that the same sort of literary flourishes aren't what's happening in Old Norse literature? In Viking Age poems that pepper the sagas of Icelandic heroes, men who kill one another in battles or duels may state that they have sent their fallen foe to Hel. That is not what we would expect from Snorri's statement that men who die in battle go to Valhalla. So it might be as formulaic as English-language expressions like "see you in hell."

At the same time, expressions like that come from somewhere, and we might be seeing glimpses of the residual layer of an earlier time when Hel was the destination for everyone—or at least a term that could be applied to any place in the afterlife.

Like Hades in the Homeric poems or Sheol in the Old Testament, Hel seems originally to have been the destiny for all the dead, or at least a term that covered all the afterlives. By contrast, the term *Valhalla* does not even originally look like it meant an afterlife.

So whatever elaborate picture Snorri might draw in his Prose Edda of Hel as one place—and it clearly is a particular place one can travel to in many old myths, such as the death of Balder—Hel is also simply the grave. It is most broadly the place where the dead are, wherever that might be.

And a dead man is, most fundamentally, where the living left him and last saw him—in the grave. This is true even of men destined for Valhalla.

**Snorri paints a straightforward distinction of weapon-killed men going to Valhalla and all the other dead going to the realm of Hel. The afterlife is a physical location, and it is a place neither of opulent delight nor of torment.**

## Reading

Snorri's description of Hel (the being) is on page 27 of the Prose Edda (Faulkes translation).

An English translation of *Gisli Sursson's Saga* by Martin Regal is in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin Classics, 2001). The "Hel-shoes" incident is in chapter 14; the burial in a boat is in chapter 17.

An English translation of *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek* by Jackson Crawford is in *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes*. The hero Hervor's encounter with her undead father Angantyr is in chapter 4.

In the poem *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II* in the Poetic Edda, Sigrun encounters her undead husband Helgi in stanzas 40–51 (and accompanying prose).

The encounter with the undead hero Gunnar is in chapters 78–79 of *Njal's Saga* (translated by Robert Cook).

An English translation of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's travelogue can be read in *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness* (translated by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone).

An English translation of *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* by Andrew Wawn is in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

## Questions

- 1 What is the mainstream picture of the Norse afterlife that we get from Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda? In what ways is the Norse conception of the afterlife more physical than most popular conceptions today?
- 2 What might be behind what seem like contradictory ideas of the afterlife between different sources? Might an outside observer be confused in a similar way by our own culture's tropes of life after death?





# The Enduring Appeal of Norse Mythology

**B**eyond the inherent fascination of the stories of the Eddas, it is not a coincidence that it is specifically Norse mythology that is so popular today, even in an often-distorted form. Part of it is also how much these mythological stories have influenced our own science fiction and fantasy so deeply over the last century.

## Popular Culture

J. R. R. Tolkien was a primary driver of the renewed influence of Old Norse mythological lore in the last century. Tolkien was an Oxford professor who specialized in the Old English and Old Norse languages, and the myths and sagas left a deep imprint in his own creative works. This includes everything from simple details like the way the dwarves in *The Hobbit* are all given the names of dwarves used in the poem *Voluspa*, to the way major events in the hero Aragorn's life are patterned after the career of the great Volsung hero Sigurth.

In turn, Tolkien's work influenced generations of writers of fantasy novels, games, and movies. Indirectly, through this influence, many tropes of the sagas live on in the work of people who have never read them.

And Tolkien's popularity has also lifted the public profile of the original Old Norse works themselves as readers seek more stories with a similar "feel" to Tolkien's.

Of course, this is not the only reason why more and more people have sought to discover Norse mythology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. But certainly new audiences seeking the works that inspired Tolkien's legendarium are part of that surge of interest.

**A multimillion-dollar movie and television franchise follows the exploits of Thor as he fights to save the universe from his so-called brother Loki. But in the Eddas, unlike in the movies, Thor and Loki are not brothers, and not even foster brothers.**

## The Original Sources

If you are intrigued enough to go to the original sources and read the Eddas yourself, seek out recent translations made by active scholars and teachers in the field, as the understanding of these poems has improved since the 19th and 20th centuries, when some popular translations were produced. Twenty-first-century scholars are also less likely to translate into artificially archaic English, as many earlier translators did.

In the case of the Prose Edda, only one good translation of the complete work is so far available, and it's by Anthony Faulkes.

Curiously, a larger number of skilled translators have tried a hand at the more difficult Poetic Edda, including Carolyne Larrington and Jackson Crawford. For those with a particular interest in Odin's wisdom in *Hávamál*, Crawford's *The Wanderer's Hávamál* includes the original Old Norse text as well as a revised English translation and his commentary on the work.

The mythical sagas, too, are rewarding, particularly these three:

- ◆ *The Saga of the Volsungs* preserves some material in prose form about the Volsungs that was not preserved in the Poetic Edda. Crawford's published translation also includes its medieval "fan fiction" sequel, *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*.
- ◆ *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek* focuses on the shieldmaiden Hervor, who broke into her zombie father's grave to retrieve his cursed sword, Tyrting, together with her son Heidrek, who answered the riddles of a disguised Odin. And the saga includes even more ancient poetry and strange adventure than that. Crawford's translation has been published in one volume, *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes*, together with another recommended saga, *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki and His Champions*.
- ◆ A more quasi-historical set of sagas are the *Sagas of Icelanders*, which focus on the adventures of Viking Age settlers in early Iceland. These sagas offer an immersive dive into the culture that produced the myths alongside gripping action scenes and gritty human drama. In the anonymously authored *Egil's Saga*, also called *The Saga of Egil Skalla-Grimsson*, Egil is a somewhat Odinic hero, a poet, a runemaster, and a relentlessly self-serving freebooter. Another excellent, shorter example from the *Sagas of Icelanders* is *The Saga of Gisli Sursson*, which is about an upright, valorous man, or *drengr*.

## Travel and Language

Beyond all of the expansive reading material, the available terrain for those who want to get to know the Norse lore also includes the real terrain where these myths and sagas took shape, both in continental Scandinavia and in Iceland.

All of the Scandinavian-speaking countries have fascinating artifacts and landscapes to explore that will deepen your appreciation of the myths and sagas and provide rich experiences in their own right.

In Iceland's capital and only major city, Reykjavik, you can see the original manuscript of the Poetic Edda. It's usually on display at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, but sometimes it's at the museum called the Culture House in downtown Reykjavik.

This manuscript is usually called in English by its Latin name, the Codex Regius, and is known as the Konungsbók in Icelandic. The manuscript is surprisingly small, only the size of an average paperback book. It's also surprisingly easy to read, written in a clear and beautiful medieval style of handwriting called Carolingian-Insular on calfskin pages that are largely unfaded.

Visitors to Iceland are likely to meet some people with names that are familiar from Norse myths and sagas. About a quarter of Icelanders still have a name with *Thor* in it somewhere, and the names of the Viking Age and the sagas—Snorri, Thorstein, Egil, and more—are still common.

To this day, Iceland also still uses the Old Norse system of patronyms rather than inherited family names—that is, a man named Thorstein Egilsson is literally the son of Egil. His own son will have the last name Thorsteinsson, and his daughter will have the last name Thorsteinsdottir. Icelandic women do not change their last names when they marry—Thorsteinsdottir stays Thorstein's daughter—so a family of four might have four different last names.

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gylli marg dya kj amefal occur. eldi v eonay vcan goeur  
 ey er s. i. þi  
 guibo f. darba f. dar. 7 vitar e h svo til sem þe drugi  
 h vti. ey lvin legna svo ac þr dpti h nji vcciao lixi sof  
 anda. Ey lypbleit m legna svo ac þr drepi h m istogi  
 7 s leg igdurum qþo nji rano ac sig. 7 gvea ff. heidi til  
 þingf ristit þa e h var drepi ey þ legna all einig ac þr  
 toico h rerygd z vogo ac ho horanda. 7 obvno. Gvdy far  
 vj sig. darbo. ho gret es se adrar konoe e ho v buri til  
 ac spinga az harri. Til gego hopti konoe z karlar ac huga  
 ha. ey þ var az adruet. þ er svagn ma ac gvdi. heidi  
 cep z ravnit hanta. z ho teip þ fvgll raddo. þra e ey q  
 r var þr gvdum goeda m d r u n m þrc v gvdvno  
 ar deyna. e ho tar sag pull yj sigþi. þpco ho hvfi  
 ne honos sla ne queina v sem honoe adrar. Gengo  
 varlar allnoct ym þr ey harde hugar ha larco. þeygi  
 gvdy. gra macti s v ho mobug mdr ho spinga. Saco rj  
 tarla brop gylli binnar f. gvdvno. hu sagdi þa sig of tr  
 oga þaj er btrasta v beþit haddi. þa qþ graf lvg gvea  
 svt mic vete ec amodo munnay lasasta. hegi ec. v. vera  
 rospell beþit n. dot m. svt. um. broþ þo er ein lvi.  
 þ eyg s. gra macti s v ho mobug ac may dnda 7 harþhv  
 gvþ v hrey jylet. þa q. þ hboig hvna þ denig hegi ec  
 harþara harri ac legna min um. svn svnan þ vdr m  
 vin. val jello. þab z mob um. broþ þav a vagi vinde of  
 lec harþi bara vþ hoþ þri haly seida et gongra haly  
 seida et gveva haly seida ec hainda h þoe þra. þ  
 ec ate v beþ ein mise. s ar m y enge munnay lerrabi.  
 þ a þpcc harra z h mma samit millerz s þ vpa. seida  
 ec lareya 7 svo binda hlis guan hūnay mægg. ho ead  
 m q. anþrþi z heop mic haco heþþi. þat ec hv  
 guma hug m bet ey hofreyro hugi vera. þeygi s  
 q m. s. v. h. m. ac. m. darpa. 7 harþhvud. v. h. j. þa q.  
 þ goll rando gv. d. þa hancu jostia pot þv þp sef

It's easy to exaggerate the vaunted unchangingness of Icelandic society. Iceland is a modern country with a well-traveled, multilingual, and tech-savvy population. But there is certainly a strong continuity with the past. You can see that in these traditional names that remain in common use.

Moreover, the spoken—and much more, the written—Icelandic language has changed only slightly relative to other languages since the Viking Age more than a thousand years ago.

An English speaker has to make a special effort to study the Old English language, akin in effort to studying a foreign language like Dutch or French, to read a thousand-year-old poem such as *Beowulf* in the original.

But an Icelandic speaker, on the other hand, has only to keep in mind a smattering of archaic words and grammatical forms to read the sagas, or the poems of the Eddas, or Snorri's works. The effort is more like what an English speaker might need to make to read the King James Bible, even though twice as many centuries have elapsed since the Old Norse works were written down.

Of course, it's not necessary to be in Scandinavia or Iceland to appreciate their Viking Age myths. But if you have the means and the opportunity, the sight of a pair of ravens flying over you in Scandinavia or Iceland might stir you, just as it might also have stirred the poets of the Eddas.

**Bluetooth technology is named for the Viking Age Danish king Harald Bluetooth. The Bluetooth logo combines the rune letters that correspond to *H* and *B* in the Viking Age runic alphabet, the Younger Futhark.**



After all, Odin counsels us in stanza 18 of *Hávamál*, the poem of his wisdom:

Only a man  
who is wide-traveled  
and has wandered far  
can know something  
about how other men think.  
Such a man is wise.

**The Old Norse language and the English language are strikingly related at a deep level. Of the thousand words you use most often each day in English, about one-tenth are borrowings from Old Norse.**

## Reading

*The Insight Guides* to Scandinavia and Iceland, respectively, offer practical advice to travelers, high-quality maps and directions, and good cultural insights on many destinations.

An English translation of *Egil's Saga* by Bernard Scudder is in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

The best English translation of *Njal's Saga* is by Robert Cook (Penguin Classics, 2002).

A deeper discussion of the challenges of translating Old Norse is in the Introduction to *The Wanderer's Hávamál*.

## Questions

- 1 The Norse myths profoundly influenced the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, one of the most popular writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Now that you've reviewed the major narratives of Norse myth, where else do you detect its influence? What tropes are associated with the beings and stories of Norse myth, and do you find that they have justification in the original sources?
- 2 If all the sources for Norse mythology were suddenly and unequivocally lost, except for one, and you could choose which one was retained, what would you choose? Why? What would this source give to future scholars that other sources would not? What would it lack that other sources could have contributed?

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Works or compilations without a known author (such as the Poetic Edda or most sagas) are alphabetized by title. Note that Icelanders, medieval and modern, do not have inherited “last names” or “family names;” their patronyms indicate the name of their father (e.g., Snorri *Sturluson* is the son of a man named *Sturla*). Because they are not used in isolation to identify a person like last names are in English (e.g., there is no such thing as a designation like “Mr. Sturluson”), they are traditionally not used for alphabetization, and thus Icelanders are traditionally and correctly alphabetized by given name (e.g., *Snorri* rather than *Sturluson*, *Ármann* rather than *Jakobsson*, *Hermann* rather than *Pálsson*). Likewise, *Saxo* is the given name of the medieval scholar; *Grammaticus* is a traditional byname or nickname and not a last name, so it is not used for alphabetization.

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