



Norse Mythology

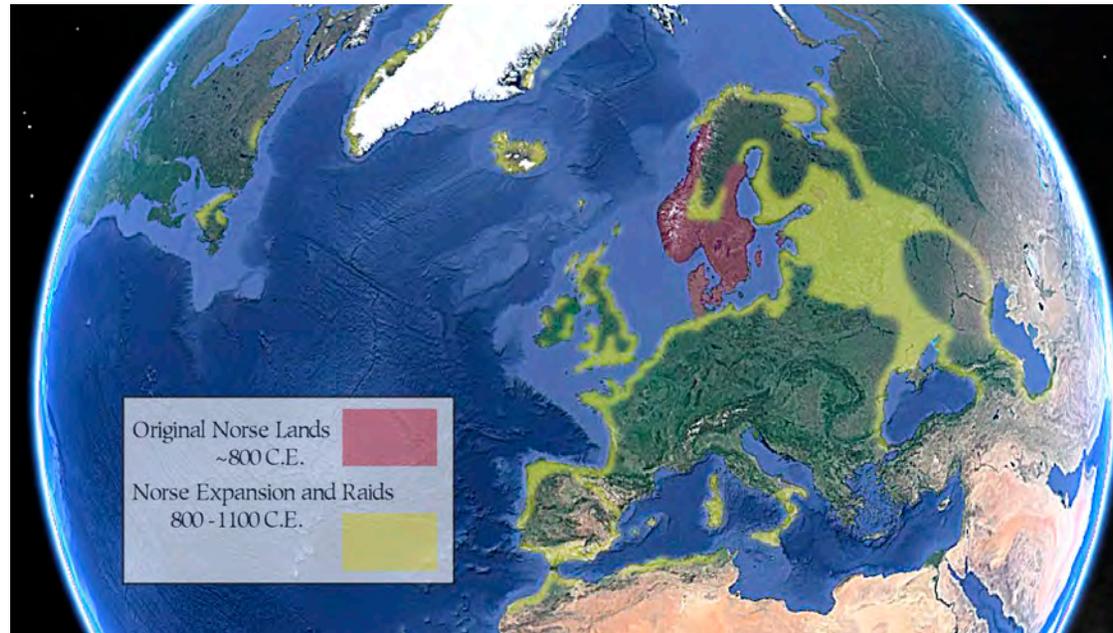
The Norse were adventurous seafarers and raiders from Scandinavia who spread through Europe and the North Atlantic in the period of vigorous Scandinavian expansion (793-1066 CE) known as the Viking Age. It is the period of history when Scandinavian Norsemen explored Europe by its seas and rivers for trade, raids and conquest. In this period, the Vikings also settled in Norse Greenland, Newfoundland, and present-day Faroe Islands, Iceland, Normandy, Scotland, Ukraine, Ireland, Russia and Anatolia. Though Viking travelers and colonists were seen at many points in history as brutal raiders, many historical documents suggest that their invasion of other countries was retaliation in response to the violence from Christians towards pagan peoples, or motivated by overpopulation, trade inequities, and the lack of viable farmland in their homeland. Information about the Viking Age is drawn largely from what was written about the Vikings by their enemy, and primary sources of archaeology, supplied with secondary sources like the Icelandic Sagas. From Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, they appeared as traders, conquerors, and settlers in Finland, Russia, Byzantium, France, England, Iceland, Greenland and the Netherlands.

For many centuries before the year 800, such tribes as the Cimbrians, Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, and Angles had been wandering out of Scandinavia. The Vikings were different because they were sea warriors and they carried with them a civilization that was in some ways more developed than those of the lands they visited. Scandinavia was rich in iron, which seems to have stimulated Viking cultural development. Iron tools cleared the forests and plowed the lands, leading to a great increase in population. Trading cities such as Birka and Hedeby appeared and became the centers of strong local kingdoms.

The Viking ship, with its flexible hull and its keel and sail, was far superior to the overgrown rowboats still used by other peoples. Kings and chieftains were buried in ships, and the rich grave goods of these and other burial sites testify to the technical expertise of the Vikings in working with textiles, stone, gold and silver, and especially iron and wood.

The graves also contain Arab silver, Byzantine silks, Frankish weapons, Rhenish glass, and other products of an extensive trade. In particular, the silver kufic (or cufic) coins that flowed into the Viking lands from the caliphate further stimulated economic growth. Viking civilization flourished with its skaldic literature and Eddic poetry, its runic inscriptions, its towns and markets, and, most of all, its ability to organize people under law to achieve a common task- such as an invasion.

Expansion was apparently propelled by the search for new trading opportunities and new areas in which to settle the growing population. By the end of the 8th century, Swedish Vikings were already in the lands around the Gulf of Finland, Danish Vikings had settled along the Dutch coast, and Norwegian Vikings had colonized the Orkney and Shetland islands.



The Nordic Geography

The Nordic countries are a geographical and cultural region in Northern Europe and the North Atlantic. It consists of five countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as their autonomous regions (the Åland Islands, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland). The Nordic countries have much in common in their way of life, history, language and social structure. Politically, Nordic countries do not form a separate entity, but they co-operate in the Nordic Council.

At 3,425,804 square kilometers, the Nordic countries form the 7th-largest area in the world, though about 52% of this area is uninhabitable and formed by icecaps and glaciers (mostly in Greenland). In January 2013, the Nordic countries had a combined population of around 26 million people. The Nordic countries are top performers in numerous metrics of national performance, including education, economic competitiveness, civil liberties, quality of life, and human development.

The Spoken Language

Although the area is linguistically heterogeneous, with three unrelated language

groups, the common linguistic heritage is one of the factors making up the Nordic identity. The North Germanic languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are considered mutually intelligible. These languages are taught in school throughout the Nordic countries; Swedish, for example, is a mandatory subject in Finnish schools, whereas Danish is mandatory in Icelandic, Faroese and Greenlandic schools. Besides these and the insular Scandinavian languages Faroese and Icelandic, all belonging to the North Germanic branch of the Indo-European language group, there are the Finnic and Sami branches of the Uralic languages, spoken in Finland and in northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, respectively, and Greenlandic, an Eskimo-Aleut language, spoken in Greenland. Especially in English, Scandinavia is sometimes used as a

synonym for the Nordic countries, but that term more properly refers to the three monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The Scandinavian Peninsula on the other hand, covers mainland Norway and Sweden as well as the northernmost part of Finland.

Exploration and Trade

It is well-known that the Vikings were great explorers and voyagers. However, one tends to overlook the extent of their voyages. The Vikings established and engaged in extensive trading networks throughout the known world and had a profound influence on the economic development of Europe, Scandinavia and the Near East. From their home territories of Scandinavia, the Vikings traveled south to England, Ireland, France and Spain, and settled there. Viking settlers founded many large cities. The names of cities and the nature of the

people are obvious signs of the significant role they played in these societies for almost three centuries. They also traveled to the Arabian world in northern Africa: Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. In fact, more than two million Arabian coins have been recovered in Viking burials all over Scandinavia, proving the extent of their exploring and trading. The Vikings traveled east to Russia and settled several places there, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The name "Russia" actually originates from the Swedish (Rus = Vikings).

Explorers often traveled to the Middle East trading silk, spices and jewelry with travelers from the Orient. The most common way of reaching these areas was through the big rivers of Europe, saving them weeks of effort sailing around the entire continent and through Gibraltar. They would sometimes pull their ships over dry land between the rivers. The Vikings also braved the open sea and sailed west to explore Iceland and Greenland. Historians have also proved that the Vikings were the first European settlers on the American continent.



The Viking explorers covered most of the known world during the Viking age. Viking settlers founded many large cities. Today, we find that Viking descendants all over Europe are proud of their heritage from these fierce and fearsome yet very culturally developed people from the North. In the winter, it was often easiest for the Vikings to travel overland, and sleighs were pulled by horses as they hunted by bow and dog to cover long distances.

With the means of travel (longships and open water), their desire for goods led Scandinavian traders to explore and develop extensive trading partnerships in new territories. It has been suggested that the Scandinavians suffered from unequal trade practices imposed by Christian advocates and that this eventually led to the breakdown in trade relations and raiding. British merchants who declared openly that they were Christian and would not trade with heathens and infidels (Muslims and the Norse) would get preferred status for availability and pricing of goods through a Christian network of traders. A two-tiered system of pricing

existed with both declared and undeclared merchants trading secretly with banned parties. Viking raiding expeditions were separate from and coexisted with regular trading expeditions. A people with the tradition of raiding their neighbors when their honor had been impugned might easily fall to raiding foreign peoples who impugned their honor.

Historians also suggest that the Scandinavian population was too large for the peninsula and there was not enough good farmland for everyone. This led to a hunt for more land. Particularly for the settlement and conquest period that followed the early raids, internal strife in Scandinavia resulted in the progressive concentration of power into fewer hands. Formerly empowered local lords who did not want to be oppressed by greedy kings emigrated overseas. Iceland became Europe's first modern republic, with an annual assembly of elected officials called the Althing, though only Goði (wealthy landowners) had the right to vote there.

During this period, around 200,000 people left Scandinavia to settle in other lands, mainly Newfoundland (Canada), Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, England, Scotland, the islands around Britain, France (where they became the Normans), and Sicily. They traded extensively with the Muslim world and fought as mercenaries for the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople (Istanbul). However, by the end of the 11th century the great days of Viking expansion were over.

One uniquely Norse invention that aided them was the fire starter they used. Vikings had no qualms about harnessing the power of one human waste product. They would collect a fungus called touchwood from tree bark and boil it for several days in urine before pounding it into something akin to felt. The sodium nitrate found in urine would allow the material to smolder rather than burn, so Vikings could take fire with them on the go. This would allow them to easily start fires in remote locations on the snow with little fuel.

Trade Goods

The organized trade covered everything from ordinary items in bulk to exotic luxury products. The Viking ship designs were an important factor in their success as merchants.

Imported goods included: Spices obtained from Chinese and Persian traders (who met with the Viking traders in Russia), Glass (imported glass was often made into beads for decoration and these have been found in their thousands), Silk (A very important commodity obtained from Byzantium (modern day Istanbul) and China) Wine (Imported from France and Germany as a drink of the wealthy, to vary the regular mead and beer).

To counter these valuable imports, the Vikings exported a large variety of goods. These goods included: Amber (It was worked into beads and ornamental objects, before being traded), Fur (Exported as it provided warmth and included the furs of pine martens, foxes, bears, otters and beavers), Cloth and wool (The Vikings were skilled spinners and weavers and exported woolen cloth of a high quality), Down (Collected and exported for bedding and quilted clothing) and Slaves captured from raids (known as thralls in Old Norse) in exchange for silver. Other exports included weapons, walrus ivory, wax, salt and cod. As one of the more exotic exports, hunting birds were sometimes provided from Norway to the European aristocracy, from the 10th century.

Many of these goods were also traded within the Viking world itself, as well as goods such as soapstone and whetstone. Soapstone was traded with the Norse on Iceland and in Jutland, who used it for pottery. Whetstones were traded and used for sharpening weapons, tools and knives. There are indications from Ribe and surrounding areas, that the extensive medieval trade with oxen and cattle from Jutland, reach as far back as c. 720 AD. This trade satisfied the Vikings' need for leather and meat to some extent, and perhaps hides for parchment production on the European mainland. Wool was also very important as a domestic product for the Vikings, to produce warm clothing for the cold Scandinavian and Nordic climate, and for sails. Sails for Viking ships required large amounts of wool, as evidenced by

experimental archaeology. There are archaeological signs of organized textile productions in Scandinavia, reaching as far back as the early Iron Ages. Artisans and craftsmen in the larger towns were supplied with antlers from organized hunting with large-scale reindeer traps in the far north. They were used as raw material for making everyday utensils like combs.

Except for the major trading centers of Ribe, Hedeby and the like, the Viking world was unfamiliar with the use of coinage and was based on so called bullion economy. Silver was the most common metal in the economy by large, although gold was also used to some extent. Silver circulated in the form of bars, or ingots, as well as in the form of jewelry and ornaments. Traders carried small scales, enabling them to measure weight very accurately, so it was possible to have a very precise system of trade and exchange, even without a regular coinage.



Whats in a Name?

Vikings didn't recognize fellow Norsemen as Vikings. The term simply referred to all Scandinavians who took part in overseas expeditions. The lands that now makes up Denmark, Norway and Sweden was a patchwork of chieftain-led tribes that often fought against each other and they never had a unified nation or empire. They never thought of themselves as a country or even a culture.

Historians disagree about the origin of the word Viking. In Old Norse the word means a pirate raid, from either *vikja* (to move swiftly) or *vik* (an inlet). This captures the essence of the Vikings, fast-moving sailors who used the water as their highway to take them across the northern Atlantic, around the coasts of Europe and up its rivers to trade, raid or settle. In their poetry they call the sea the whale road.

They stayed, they settled, they prospered, becoming part of the mix of people who today make up the British nation. Our names for days of the week come mainly from Norse gods, and many of their words have become part of English like: egg, law, die, bread, down, fog, muck, lump, spud, scrawny.

Etymology

The Old Norse feminine noun *Viking* refers to an expedition overseas. It occurs in Viking Age runic inscriptions and in later medieval writings in set expressions such as the phrasal verb *fara í viking*, "to go on an expedition". The derived Old Norse masculine noun *vikingr* appears in Viking Age skaldic poetry and on several rune stones found in Scandinavia, where it refers to a seaman or warrior who takes part in an expedition overseas. In later texts, such as the Icelandic sagas, the phrase "to go on a viking" implies participation in raiding activity or piracy and not simply seaborne missions of trade and commerce.

The word *viking* derives from the feminine *vik*, meaning "creek, inlet, small bay". Various theories have been offered that the word "viking" may be derived from the name of the historical district of Viken, meaning "a person from Viken", thus a *Vik'ing*. According to this theory, originally the word "viking" simply described persons from this area, and that it is only in the last few centuries that it has taken on the broader sense of early medieval Scandinavians in general. The form also occurs as a personal name on some Swedish rune stones. There is little indication of any negative connotation in the term before the end of the Viking Age. Regardless of its possible origins, at the time the word was used to indicate an activity and those who participated in it, and not to any ethnic or cultural group. In the modern Scandinavian languages, the word *Viking* usually refers specifically to those people who went on Viking expeditions.

The word *Viking* was introduced into Modern English during the 18th-century Viking revival, at which point it acquired romanticized heroic overtones of "barbarian warrior" or noble savage. During the 20th century, the meaning of the term was expanded to refer not only to seaborne raiders from Scandinavia and other places settled by them (like Iceland and the Faroe Islands), but secondarily to any member of the culture that produced said raiders during the period from the late 8th to the mid-11th centuries, or more loosely from about 700 to as late as about 1100.

Other Names of the Vikings

The Vikings were known as *Ascomanni*, *Ashmen*, by the Germans, *Lochlanach* (Norse) by the Gaels and *Dene* (Danes) by the Anglo-Saxons. Anglo-Saxon writers called them *Norsemen*, *Northmen*, the great army, *Sea rovers*, *Sea wolves*, and *Heathens*.

The Slavs, the Arabs and the Byzantines knew them as the *Rus'* or *Rhoos*, probably derived from various uses of *roops-*, "related to rowing", or derived from the area of *Roslagen* in east-central Sweden, where most of the Vikings who visited the Slavic lands came from. Some archaeologists and historians of today believe that these Scandinavian settlements in the Slavic lands played a significant role in the formation of the Kievan Rus' federation, and hence the names and early states of Russia and Belarus. The modern day name for Sweden in several neighboring countries is possibly derived from *ruops-*, *Ruotsi* in Finnish and *Rootsi* in Estonian. The Slavs and the Byzantines also called them *Varangians* (*Væringjar*, meaning "sworn men" from *var-* "pledge, faith," related to Old English *wær* "agreement, treaty, promise," Old High German *wara* "faithfulness"). Scandinavian bodyguards of the Byzantine emperors were known as the *Varangian Guard* or "*Vanguard*".

The Viking Culture

As mentioned, the Viking age lasted for more than 300 years, from the late 8th century to the late 11th century. The history of the Vikings is closely linked to their role as masters of the sea. They were feared as fierce and ruthless pirates. However this does not complete the story of the Vikings. They were also poets, lawmakers and great artists. Their superior ships explored unknown seas and they settled new lands. Norse society was based on agriculture and trade with other peoples and placed great emphasis on the concept of honor, both in

combat and in the criminal justice system. It was, for example, unfair and wrong to attack an enemy already in a fight with another.

Even if the Vikings were known abroad as ruthless pirates, at home they lived in an well-ordered society, based on laws and democracy. Viking society was divided into three classes: the elite with great economic power, free-holding farmers with the right to bear arms and attend the Ting, and slaves who had no rights. The Ting, or the general assembly, was responsible for maintaining law and order, and is by many considered to be one of the first true democratic organs in history. Learned men quoted the laws, and then lawsuits were heard. In simple cases everyone present, often hundreds of people, judged, and in important cases 12 chosen men judged. This is considered the beginning of the modern jury system.



The women held a strong position in Viking society and were responsible for the farm when their men were abroad. The symbol of the powerful housewife was her keys, hung from her gown. If her husband took the keys from his wife, she could divorce him instantly, and keep their shared property. No women were forced into marriages, unlike most other cultures at that time.

The Viking age produced rich, diversified art forms and crafts. A good blacksmith and a good poet would be equally acknowledged in Viking society. Crafts were most often produced by local craftsmen, but specialized masters also traveled to markets all over Northern Europe. A craftsman was often buried with his tools; they were important symbols of his status in death as well as in life. Viking craft was widely recognized as fine art all over the known world in the Viking age. The Viking craftsmen, carvers, painters and poets were responsible for most of our current knowledge about the Vikings.

A variety of sources illuminate the culture, activities, and beliefs of the Vikings. Although they were generally a non-literate culture that produced no literary legacy, they had an alphabet and described themselves and their world on runestones. Most contemporary literary and written sources on the Vikings come from other cultures that were in contact with them.[52] Since the mid-20th century, archaeological findings have built a more complete and balanced picture of the lives of the Vikings. The archaeological record is particularly rich and varied, providing knowledge of their rural and urban settlement, crafts and production, ships and military equipment, trading networks, as well as their pagan and Christian religious artifacts and practices.

This era coincided with the Medieval Warm Period (800–1300) and stopped with the start of the Little Ice Age (about 1250–1850). The start of the Viking Age, with the sack of Lindisfarne, also coincided with Charlemagne's Saxon Wars, or Christian wars with pagans

in Saxony. Historians Rudolf Simek and Bruno Dumézil theorize that the Viking attacks may have been in response to the spread of Christianity among pagan peoples. Professor Rudolf Simek believes that "it is not a coincidence if the early Viking activity occurred during the reign of Charlemagne". Because of the penetration of Christianity in Scandinavia, serious conflict divided Norway for almost a century.

Literature and Language

The most important primary sources on the Vikings are contemporary texts from Scandinavia and regions where the Vikings were active. Writing in Latin letters was introduced to Scandinavia with Christianity, so there are few native documentary sources from Scandinavia before the late 11th and early 12th centuries. The Scandinavians did write inscriptions in runes, but these are usually very short and formulaic. Most contemporary documentary sources consist of texts written in Christian and Islamic communities outside Scandinavia, often by authors who had been negatively affected by Viking activity.



Later writings on the Vikings and the Viking Age can also be important for understanding them and their culture, although they need to be treated cautiously. After the consolidation of the church and the assimilation of Scandinavia and its colonies into the mainstream of medieval Christian culture in the 11th and 12th centuries, native written sources begin to appear, in Latin and Old Norse. In the Viking colony of Iceland, an extraordinary vernacular literature blossomed in the 12th through 14th centuries, and many traditions connected with the Viking Age were written down for the first time in the Icelandic sagas. A literal interpretation of these medieval prose narratives about the Vikings and the Scandinavian past is of course doubtful, but many specific elements remain worthy of consideration, such as the great quantity of skaldic poetry attributed to court poets of the 10th and 11th centuries, the exposed

family trees, the self images, the ethical values, all included in these literary writings.

Indirectly the Vikings have also left a window open to their language, culture and activities, through many Old Norse place names and words, found in their former sphere of influence. Some of these place names and words are still in direct use today, almost unchanged, and sheds light on where they settled and what specific places meant to them, as seen in place names like Egilsay (from Egils Ø meaning Egil's Island), Ormskirk (from Ormr kirkja meaning Orms Church or Church of the Worm), Meols (from merl meaning Sand Dunes), Snaefell (Snow Fell), Ravenscar (Ravens Rock), Vinland (Land of Wine or Land of Winberry), Kaupanger (Market Harbor) and Tórshavn (Thor's Harbour) or the religious center of Odense, meaning a place where Odin was worshiped. It is also evident in concepts like the present day Tynwald on the Isle of Man. Common words in everyday English language, like some of the weekdays (Thursday means Thor's day), axle, crook, raft, knife, plough, leather, bylaw, skerry, ombudsman, husband, heathen, Hell, Norman and ransack stem from the Old Norse of the Vikings, and give us an opportunity to understand their interactions with the people and cultures of the British Isles. In the Northern Isles of Shetland and Orkney, Old Norse completely replaced the local languages and over time evolved into the now extinct Norn language. Some modern words and names only emerge and contribute to our understanding after a more intense research of linguistic sources from medieval or later records, such as York (Horse Bay), Swansea (Sveinn's Isle) or some of the place names in Northern France like Tocqueville (Toki's farm). Linguistic and etymological studies continue to provide a vital source of information on the Viking culture, their social structure and history and how they interacted with the people and cultures they met, traded, attacked or lived with in overseas settlements. It has been speculated that several place names on the west coast of southern France might also stem from Viking activities. Place names like Taillebourg (Trelleborg, meaning City of Thralls or Castle of Thralls) exist as far south as the Charente River. Gascony is an active area of Viking archaeology at present. A lot of Old Norse connections are evident in the modern-day languages of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese and Icelandic. Old Norse did not exert any great influence on the Slavic languages in the Viking settlements of Eastern Europe. It has been speculated that the reason was the great differences between the two languages, combined with the Rus' Vikings more peaceful businesses in these areas and the fact that they were outnumbered.

A consequence of the available written sources, which may have colored how we perceive the Viking Age as a historical period, is that we know a lot more of the Vikings' activities in western Europe than in the East. One reason for this is that the peoples living in north-eastern Europe at the time were non-literate, and did not produce a legacy of literature. Another is that the vast majority of Scandinavian written sources come from Iceland, a nation originally settled by Norwegian colonists. As a result there is much more material from the Viking Age concerning Norway than Sweden, which apart from many runic inscriptions, has almost no written sources from the early Middle Ages.

Social Structure

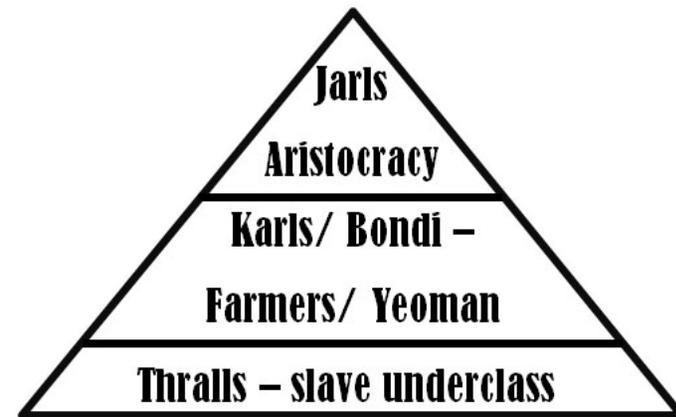
Three social classes existed in Norse society. The classes were nowhere near as rigid as they were in other parts of Europe at the time. Mechanisms existed such that a person could move himself from one class to another.

The vast majority of Norsemen belonged to the middle class, the karls. These people were freemen and land owners. They were the farmers, the smiths, and the just plain folks. Families of karls usually lived in clusters of two or more buildings, typically longhouses supplemented by barns and workshops.

Above them were the jarls, the noble class. The stories indicate that jarls lived in fine halls and led refined lives filled with a myriad of activities. But archaeological evidence to

back up these details is lacking. Jarls were distinguished by their wealth, measured in terms of followers, treasure, ships, and estates. The eldest son of the jarl was on the fast track to becoming the next jarl. But, by gaining enough fame and wealth, a karl could become a jarl. The power of a jarl depended upon the goodwill of his supporters. The jarl's essential task was to uphold the security, prosperity, and honor of his followers.

Below both of these classes were the Thrall. These included the slaves (usually booty from a raid) and bondsmen. If a Norseman of any class could not pay his debts, he was obliged to become a bondsman and to work for another man until the debt was paid. Icelandic law allowed for someone convicted of theft to be handed over as a slave to the victim of the theft. The Thrall must have led very difficult lives.



The actual social structure, not surprisingly, was more complex than this simple explanation would indicate. On one hand, the three class system in Norse society dates from ancient times and is described in an old mythological poem, *Rígsþula*. In the poem, a god called Rígr (who is thought to be Heimdall) is shown to be the progenitor of each of the three classes. The poem is thought to express the Norse view of the "right" ordering of society. But, on the other hand, the reality of the time was really quite different. There were many gradations in position, as well as substantial variations in class structure from one Norse land to another.

Because of Iceland's rich literary tradition, we probably know more about social structure in Viking era Iceland than in any of the other lands. The surviving law books describe in detail the rights and responsibilities of the various classes.

Iceland did not have kings or earls (jarls), as did the other Norse countries. Kings and earls in Norse lands were regional (rather than national) rulers in the beginning of the Viking era. But by the end of that era, individual kings had consolidated their power over most of the Scandinavian lands. The title of king or earl could be inherited, or it could be conferred by prominent supporters or the leader of military forces. Kings were not viewed as sacred, or special. Instead, they were viewed as exceptionally able and imperious men. The concept of a regal king was foreign to Norsemen. Dudo of St. Quentin records an encounter between a party of Danes and King Charles of the Frankish kingdom. In the presence of the king, the Danes were ordered to show their submission by kissing the foot of the king. The leader of the Danes refused. One of his followers complied. But, rather than kneeling to kiss the foot of King Charles, the Dane stood, grabbed the king's foot, and lifted it up to the level of the Dane's own head, dragging the king out of his seat and onto the floor. With the king held upside-down, the Dane kissed the foot.

While Icelanders had no use for kings or earls at home, many young Icelanders trav-

eled abroad and became a *hirðmaðr*, a follower of a king or earl. These were the inner circle of men who surrounded the king and supported him in all his endeavors. A man might join this inner circle for the honor it conferred upon him.

The king was expected to be generous not only with food and drink, but with clothes and weapons and gifts. He was expected to maintain his own and his followers' honor against outsiders. He had to lead. He was required to be a strong fighter, daring, crafty, and hard, since he fought hand to hand beside his men. He had to be a good public speaker, cheerful and inspirational, able to inspire and buoy his men.

Poets were held in similar stature to royalty. Norse culture was oral, rather than written. Poets were the means by which the culture was passed from one generation to the next. Accordingly, they were held in high esteem.

Next in order was the entire class of free men. The highest of these was the *goði*, who was the local chieftain who carried the legal and administrative responsibilities in Iceland. In addition, he may have been the priest for the Norse pagan religion, and thus was held to have a special relationship with the gods. Every freeman was required to choose a *goði* to support. The office was called a *goðorð* and was mostly hereditary. Allegiance to a particular *goði* was voluntary, so a *goði* who neglected to look after the people under his authority would find himself without any supporters and his *goðorð* up for grabs.

Next in prominence to the *goði* were the land-owning farmers in a region. They supported the *goði* and counted on the *goði* for support when needed. Not unexpectedly, some farmers were more prominent than others, because of the family ties with other powerful farmers, or because the size of their farms and their wealth, or because of the number of their supporters. These freemen enjoyed freedom of speech and liberty that was unknown outside the Norse lands at this time. They had the right to bear arms, to have a voice in public affairs, and to enjoy the full benefit of the law. The end of the Norse era saw the end of these privileges, as the same feudalising forces that burdened continental Europe also burdened the Norse lands.

Merchants, although they might not own land, were also held in similar regard as the land owners.

One aspect of being "legal" in Icelandic society was having a residence. Domicile was essential because in order to bring a charge against a person, one needed to summon him to appear at the *Þing* (assembly) for his region. Icelandic law permitted one to change his legal residence only during a single four day period each year, called *farðagar* (Moving Days).

Yet, there were far more people than there was arable land for them to own. Many freemen were not land owners. In this class were farmhands, who worked for the farm owner in exchange for room and board. Similarly, servant-women performed the farm chores required of women. Fishermen were also in this category. In Norse lands outside of Iceland, some families were tenants, who ran the farm for an absentee owner and who paid an annual rent. The rent was typically set at 10% of the value of the land per year.

Slaves who had been freed were nominally freemen, but their status was low. If a freed slave died without an heir, the inheritance would revert to the slave's original owner. Once tainted by slavery, no man's honor could ever be completely clean. However, the chil-

dren of freed slaves were completely free in Iceland. In Norway, four generations had to pass before the offspring of a freed slave was considered free.

Although still free men, paupers and vagrants were classed even below freed slaves, in part because they had no residence, and thus could not be charged. The poor were not allowed to marry. The medieval Icelandic law book *Grágás* states that anyone was free to take the property of a vagrant without penalty [K131] and that it was lawful to castrate a vagrant, even if death ensued.

Slaves were the bottom of Norse society. They had hardly any rights at all. They were chattel. They could inherit nothing, leave nothing. They could take no part in any business transaction. A slave's only relation with the rest of society was through his master. Slaves were put to death when they were no longer capable of working, due to old age, disease, or injury. However, slaves had a few rights. Slaves could accumulate property, and with care, could save enough to buy their freedom. Slaves could marry, and were permitted to take vengeance for interference with their wives. In general, slaves were considered cowards who were easily panicked, unreliable, stupid and foul.

Slaves may have made up a large proportion of trade in the Norse era (although that conclusion has been disputed recently). Many were booty from raids. They came from Baltic countries, to the east, and from lands to the west where the Norse commonly raided. Norsemen even took slaves from other Norse lands.

Slaves were necessary for running a farm. The practice was probably widespread, on both large and small farms. Chapter 1 of *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* says that Geir, his wife, and their daughter lived at their farm Geirland in south Iceland with ten slaves. In

Norway, three slaves were considered the minimum for running a farm with twelve cows and two horses. Yet slaves could not be permitted any advantage in number, especially on isolated settlements. Slaves did revolt, with fatal results.

A large, plantation-like slave economy did not exist in Norse society. Slaves generally worked alongside hired workers on family farms, although the harder and less desirable work frequently fell on the backs of the slaves. Slavery existed throughout all the Norse lands in the Viking age, ending during the 12th and 13th centuries. Men bought slaves as concubines. Chapter 12 of *Laxdæla saga* describes how Höskuldur bought the slave Melkorka in Norway and brought her back to his home in Iceland. The normal price for a male slave was 12 ounces of silver, and for a female slave, 8 ounces. Melkorka's price was set three times that, at 3 marks (24 ounces). The exchange rate varied during the Viking age and between the Viking lands, but Melkorka's sale price was roughly the equivalent of 3 milk-cows. Ólfr rowed out the island, found the slaves, and killed them. The island is called *Vestmannaeyjar* (Islands of the West Men), because the Irish slaves were "west men", coming from a place to the west of Norway.

There was a portion of the population that did not fall into any of the three classes of society. That is because they were outside of society, either by their own choice, or by punishment imposed by law. In this category were: beggars and tramps; magicians, witches, and seeresses; and outlaws. An outlaw was literally outside the law, little better than an animal, who could be killed without penalty, and who was treated, according to Danish law, "as if he were dead".

Key points on Viking Social Structure

- At the beginning of the Viking Age, there were many chieftains who ruled over small areas.
- They were subject to local assemblies (The Thing) where all freemen could voice an opinion.
- Strong families grew more powerful until in c. 1050 Norway, Denmark and Sweden were each ruled by a powerful King.
- Majority of population were Karls, including farmers, traders, craftsmen, warriors.
- Between 20-40% of the population were slaves.
- Slaves could be freed by their master, in a will or through buying themselves.



Norway, three slaves were considered the minimum for running a farm with twelve cows and two horses. Yet slaves could not be permitted any advantage in number, especially on isolated settlements. Slaves did revolt, with fatal results.



Farming and Cuisine

When the information from various sources are put together, a picture of a diverse cuisine, with lots of different ingredients emerges. Meat products of all kinds, such as cured, smoked and whey-preserved meat, sausages and boiled or fried fresh meat cuts, were prepared and consumed. There were plenty of seafood, bread, porridges, dairy products, vegetables, fruits, berries and nuts. Alcoholic drinks like beer, mead, björr (a strong fruit wine) and, for the rich, imported wine were served.

The Vikings in York mostly ate beef, mutton, and pork with small amounts of horse meat. Most of the beef and horse leg bones were found split length ways, to get out the marrow. The mutton and swine were cut into leg and shoulder joints and chops. The frequent remains of pig skull and foot bones found on house floors indicate that brawn and trotters were also popular. Hens were kept for both their meat and eggs, and the bones of game birds such as the black grouse, golden plover, wild ducks, and geese have also been found.

Seafood was an important part of the diet, in some places even more so than meat. Whales and walrus were hunted for food in Norway and the north-western parts of the North Atlantic region, and seals were hunted nearly everywhere. Oysters, mussels and shrimps were eaten in large quantities and cod and salmon were popular fish. In the southern regions, herring was also important.

Milk and buttermilk were popular, both as cooking ingredients and drinks, but were not always available, even at farms. The milk came from cows, goats and sheep, with priorities varying from location to location, and fermented milk products like skyr or surmjölk were produced as well as butter and cheese.

Food was often salted and enhanced with spices, some of which were imported like black pepper. Home grown spices that were used include caraway, mustard and horseradish as evidenced from the Oseberg ship burial; or dill, coriander, and wild celery, as found during the archaeological examinations of cesspits at Coppergate in York. Thyme, juniper berry, sweet gale, yarrow, rue and peppergrass were also used.

Vikings collected and ate fruits, berries and nuts. Apple (wild crab apples) plums and cherries were part of the diet, as were rose hips and raspberry, wild strawberry, blackberry, elderberry, rowan, hawthorn and various wild berries, specific to the locations. Hazelnuts were an important part of the diet in general and large amounts of walnut shells have been found in cities like Hedeby. The shells were used for dyeing and it is assumed the nuts were enjoyed as well.

The invention and introduction of the mouldboard plough revolutionized agriculture in Scandinavia in the early Viking Age and made it possible to farm even the poor soils. In Ribe, grains of rye, barley, oat and wheat dated to the 8th century have been found and examined, and these are believed to have been cultivated locally. Grains and flour were used for making porridges, some cooked with milk, some cooked with fruit and sweetened with honey, and also various forms of bread. Remains of bread from primarily Birka in Sweden were made of barley and wheat. It is unclear if the Norse leavened their breads, but their ovens and baking utensils suggest that they did.

The quality of food for common people was not always particularly high. The research at Coppergate shows that the Vikings in York made bread from whole meal flour (probably both wheat and rye) but with the seeds of cornfield weeds included. Corncockle (*Agrostemma*), would have made the bread dark-colored, but the seeds are poisonous, and people who ate the bread might have become ill. Seeds of carrots, parsnip, and cabbages were also discovered, but they were poor specimens and tend to come from white carrots and bitter tasting cabbages. The rotary millstones often used in the Viking Age inevitably left tiny stone fragments (often from basalt rock) in the flour and when eaten later on, these small stones wore down the teeth. The effects of this can be seen on skeletal remains of that period.



Runestones

The Viking peoples could read and write. They used a runic alphabet, called runor, built upon sound values. While there are few remains of runic writing on paper from the Viking era, thousands of stones with runic inscriptions have been found where Vikings lived. They are

usually in memory of the dead, though not necessarily placed at graves. The use of runic survived into the 15th century, used in parallel with the Latin alphabet.

The majority of runic inscriptions from the Viking period are found in Sweden and date from the 11th century. The oldest stone with runic inscriptions was found in Norway and dates to the 4th century, suggesting that runic inscriptions pre-date the Viking period. Many runestones in Scandinavia record the names of participants in Viking expeditions, such as the Kjula runestone that tells of extensive warfare in Western Europe and the Turinge Runestone, which tells of a war band in Eastern Europe. Other runestones mention men who died on Viking expeditions. Among them are around 25 Ingvar runestones in the Mälardalen district of Sweden, erected to commemorate members of a disastrous expedition into present-day Russia in the early 11th century. Runestones are important sources in the study of Norse society and early medieval Scandinavia, not only of the Viking segment of the population.

Runestones attest to voyages to locations such as Bath, Greece, Khwarezm, Jerusalem, Italy (as Langobardland), Serkland (i.e. the Muslim world), England (including London), and various places in Eastern Europe. Viking Age inscriptions have also been discovered on the Manx runestones on the Isle of Man.



Viking Burials

There are numerous burial sites associated with Vikings throughout Europe and their sphere of influence – in Scandinavia, the British Isles, Greenland, Iceland, Faeroe Islands, Germany, The Baltic, Russia, etc.. The burial practices of the Vikings were quite varied, from dug graves in the ground, to earthen mounds, and crematory ship burials.

According to written sources, most of the funerals took place at sea. The funerals involved either burial or cremation, depending on local customs. In the area that is now Sweden, cremations were predominant, in Denmark burial was more common, and in Norway both were common. Viking barrows are one of the primary source of evidence for circumstances in

the Viking Age. The items buried with the dead give some indication as to what was considered important to possess in the afterlife. We do not have any idea what mortuary services were given to dead children by the Vikings. It is clear from stories and evidence that the Vikings believed that the soul survived after death and the afterlife could be very rewarding or horrific depending on the honor and deeds in your life. Servants and wives were often buried with their leaders to continue to serve them in the next world.

Appearances

Jewelry was worn by women of the Karls and Jarls. Ornamented silver brooches, colored glass-beads and amulets. The three classes were easily recognizable by their appearances. Men and women of the Jarls were well groomed with neat hairstyles and expressed their wealth and status by wearing expensive clothes (often silk) and well crafted jewelry like brooches, belt buckles, necklaces and arm rings. Almost all of the jewelry was crafted in specific designs unique to the Norse. Finger rings were seldom used and earrings were not used at all, as they were seen as a Slavic adornment. Most Karls expressed similar tastes and hygiene, but in a more relaxed and inexpensive way.

Excavations of Viking sites have turned up tweezers, razors, combs and ear cleaners made from animal bones and antlers. Vikings also bathed at least once a week (on washing day), much more frequently than other Europeans of their day and enjoyed dips in natural hot springs. (Washing day is translated to Saturday and was sacred to the God Loki.)

To conform to their culture's beauty ideals, brunette Vikings—usually men—would use a strong soap with a high lye content to bleach their hair. In some regions, beards were lightened as well. It's likely these treatments also helped Vikings with a problem far more prickly and rampant than mousy manes by killing head lice.

Sports

Sports were widely practiced and encouraged by the Vikings. Sports that involved weapons training and developing combat skills were popular. This included spear and stone throwing, building and testing physical strength through wrestling, fist fighting, and stone lifting. In areas with mountains, mountain climbing was practiced as a sport. Agility and balance were built and tested by running and jumping for sport, and there is mention of a sport that involved jumping from oar to oar on the outside of a ship's railing as it was being rowed. Swimming was a popular sport and Snorri Sturluson describes three types: diving, long-distance swimming and a contest in which two swimmers try to duck one another. Children often participated in some of the sport disciplines and women have also been mentioned as swimmers, although it is unclear if they took part in competition. King Olaf Tryggvason was hailed as a master of both mountain climbing and oar-jumping, and was said to have excelled in the art of knife juggling as well.

Skiing and ice skating were the primary winter sports of the Vikings, although skiing was also used as everyday means of transport in winter time and in the colder regions of the north.



Horse fighting was practiced for sport, although the rules are unclear. It appears to have involved two stallions pitted against each other, within smell and sight of fenced-off mares. Whatever the rules were, the fights often resulted in the death of one of the stallions.

Icelandic sources refer to a ball game akin to hockey, knattleik. It involved a bat and a small hard ball and was usually played on a smooth field of ice. The rules are unclear, but it was popular with both adults and children, even though it often led to injuries. Knattleik appears to have been played only in Iceland, where it attracted many spectators, as did horse fighting.

Hunting, as a sport, was limited to Denmark, where it was not regarded as an important occupation. Birds, deer, hares and foxes were hunted with bow and spear, and later with crossbows. The techniques were stalking, snare and traps and par force hunting with dog packs.



Games and Entertainment

Both archaeological finds and written sources testify to the fact that the Vikings set aside time for social and festive gatherings.

Board games and dice games were played as a popular pastime, at all levels of society. Preserved gaming pieces and boards show game boards made of easily available materials like wood, with game pieces manufactured from stone, wood or bone, while other finds include elaborately carved boards and game pieces of glass, amber, antler or walrus tusk, together with materials of foreign origin, such as ivory from Africa. The Vikings played several types of tafl (boards that are checkered or latticed) games; hnefatafl, nitavl (Nine Men's Morris) and the less common kvatrutafl. Chess also appeared at the end of the Viking Age. Hnefatafl is a war game, in which the object is to capture the king piece – a large hostile army threatens and the king's men have to protect the king. It was played on a board with squares

using black and white pieces, with moves made according to dice rolls. The Ockelbo Runestone shows two men engaged in Hnefatafl, and the sagas suggest that money or valuables could have been involved in some dice games.

On festive occasions storytelling, skaldic poetry, music and alcoholic drinks, like beer and mead, contributed to the atmosphere. Music was considered an art form and music proficiency as fitting for a cultivated man. The Vikings are known to have played instruments including harps, fiddles, lyres and lutes.

Weapons and Warfare

Our knowledge about the arms and armor of the Viking age is based on archaeological finds, pictorial representation, and to some extent on the accounts in the Norse sagas and Norse laws recorded in the 13th century. According to custom, all free Norse men were required to own weapons and were permitted to carry them all the time. These arms were indicative of a Viking's social status: a wealthy Viking had a complete ensemble of a helmet, shield, mail shirt, and sword. A typical bóndi (freeman) was more likely to fight with a spear and shield, and most also carried a dagger as a utility knife and side-arm. Bows were used in the opening stages of land battles and at sea, but they tended to be considered less "honorable" than a melee weapon. Vikings were relatively unusual for the time in their use of axes as a main battle weapon. The Húscarls, the elite guard of King Cnut (and later of King Harold II) were armed with two-handed axes that could split shields or metal helmets with ease.

The warfare and violence of the Vikings were often motivated and fueled by their beliefs in Norse religion, focusing on Thor and Odin, the gods of war and death. In combat it is believed, that the Vikings sometimes engaged in a disordered style of frenetic, furious fighting known as berserkergang, leading them to be termed berserkers. Such tactics may have been deployed intentionally by shock troops and the berserk-state may have been induced through ingestion of materials with psychoactive properties, such as the hallucinogenic mushrooms, Amanita muscaria, or large amounts of alcohol.





Swords

More than anything else, the sword was the mark of a warrior in the Viking age. They were difficult to make, and therefore rare and expensive. The author of *Fóstbræðra saga* wrote in chapter 3 that in saga-age Iceland, very few men were armed with swords. Of over one hundred weapons found in Viking age pagan burials in Iceland, only 16 are swords.

A sword might be the most expensive item that a man owned. The one sword whose value is given in the sagas (given by King Hákon to Höskuldur in chapter 13 of *Laxdæla saga*) was said to be worth a half mark of gold. In saga-age Iceland, that represented the value of sixteen milk-cows, a very substantial sum.

Swords were heirlooms. They were given names and passed from father to son for generations. The loss of a sword was a catastrophe. *Laxdæla saga* (chapter 30) tells how Geirmundr planned to abandon his wife Þuríðr and their baby daughter in Iceland. Þuríðr boarded Geirmund's ship at night while he slept. She took his sword, *Fótbítir* (Leg Biter) and left behind their daughter. Þuríðr rowed away in her boat, but not before the baby's cries woke Geirmundr. He called across the water to Þuríðr, begging her to return with the sword.

He told her, "Take your daughter and whatever wealth you want."

She asked, "Do you mind the loss of your sword so much?"

I'd have to lose a great deal of money before I minded as much the loss of my sword.

Then you shall never have it, since you have treated me dishonorably.

Swords in the Viking age were typically double edged; both edges of the blade were sharp. Swords were generally used single handed, since the other hand was busy holding the shield. Blades ranged from 60 to 90cm (24-36 in) long, although 70-80cm was typical. Late in the Viking era, blades became as long as 100cm (40in). The blade was typically 4-6cm wide (1.5-2.3in). The hilt and pommel provided the needed weight to balance the blade, with the total weight of the sword ranging from 2-4 lbs (1-2 kg). Typical swords weigh in at the lower end of this range. Blades had a slight taper, which helped bring the center of balance closer to the grip. Hilt components were decorated using several techniques, including scribing and wire inlays. Some historical sword hilts were inlaid with silver and copper.

Of the thousands of Viking swords that have been recovered, 171 of them, all made between 800 and 1000 AD, bear the inscription "+VLFBERH+T" or "+VLFBERHT+". The translation of this word is unknown. Some of these Ulfberht swords were made of remarkably high-quality steel for their day. The steel had very few impurities (or slag), and unusually high carbon content, making it stronger, more flexible, and less brittle than most contemporary steel. Historians suggest that the Vikings made these swords from high-quality steel ingots from Central Asia which they acquired on the Volga trade route, which the Vikings are known to have used from the early-800s to the mid-1000s. Steel of this quality required production in crucibles at much higher furnace temperatures than European blacksmiths of the time were capable of producing at their forges. There was no evidence that Europeans could make crucible steel themselves until the Industrial Revolution 800 years later. They would have offered superior performance in battle and would have been capable of cutting and scaling other lesser weapons. They were extremely rare and valuable, and would have been prized possessions of the most elite Vikings.

Sword making in Viking times was important work, to the point that the best smiths had their work imitated and copied. On their travels, the Vikings were keen to pick up any innovative new means of improving their sword technology.



The Famous Viking Helmet

Apart from two or three representations of (ritual) helmets – with protrusions that may be either stylized ravens, snakes, or horns – no depiction of the helmets of Viking warriors, and no preserved helmet, has horns. The formal, close-quarters style of Viking combat (either in shield walls or aboard “ship islands”) would have made horned helmets cumbersome and hazardous to the warrior's own side. Historians therefore believe that Viking warriors did not wear horned helmets; whether such helmets were used in Scandinavian culture for other, ritual purposes, remains unproven. The general misconception that Viking warriors wore horned helmets was partly promulgated by the 19th-century enthusiasts of *Götiska Förbundet*, founded in 1811 in Stockholm. They promoted the use of Norse mythology as the subject of high art and other ethnological and moral aims.

The Vikings were often depicted with winged helmets and in other clothing taken from Classical antiquity, especially in depictions of Norse gods. This was done to legitimize the Vikings and their mythology by associating it with the Classical world, which had long been idealized in European culture.

The latter-day mythos created by national romantic ideas blended the Viking Age with aspects of the Nordic Bronze Age some 2,000 years earlier. Horned helmets from the Bronze Age were shown in petroglyphs and appeared in archaeological finds (see Bohuslän and Vikso helmets). They were probably used for ceremonial purposes.

Viking helmets were conical, made from hard leather with wood and metallic reinforcement for regular troops. The iron helmet with mask and mail was for the chieftains, based on the previous Vendel-age helmets from central Sweden. The only true Viking helmet found is from Gjemundbu in Norway. This helmet is made of iron and has been dated to the 10th century.

Religious Beliefs

The religious beliefs of the early Icelandic settlers can be divided into two main categories; that is, belief in pagan gods and belief in other supernatural forces. In turn, the gods were divided into two families, the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*, and the supernatural forces were made up of “land-vættir” (guardian spirits of the land) and “náttúruvættir” (spirits of the nature). Some people

only believed in their own strength and abilities, whilst others formed a group which followed what has been called “a blend of faiths”. Helgi “magri” (the lean) for instance believed in both Christ and Thór. A number of the settlers were Christian.



Norse Cosmology

The cosmology of Norse mythology has “nine homeworlds”, unified by the world tree Yggdrasil. Mapping the nine worlds escapes precision because the Poetic Edda often alludes vaguely. The Norse creation myth tells how everything came into existence in the gap between fire and ice, and how the gods shaped the homeworld of humans.

A cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasil, lies at the center of the Norse cosmos. Three roots drink the waters of the homeworlds, one in the homeworld of the gods, the Æsir, one in the homeworld of the giants, the Jotnar, and one in the homeworld of the dead. Beneath the root in the world of the frost giants is the spring of Mimir, whose waters contain wisdom and understanding.

The root in the Æsir homeworld taps the sacred wellspring of fate, the Well of Urðr. The tree is tended by the Norns, who live near it. Each day, they water it with pure water and whiten it with clay from the spring to preserve it. The water falls down to the earth as dew.

Animals continually feed on the tree, threatening it, but its vitality persists evergreen as it heals and nourishes the vibrant needs of life. On the topmost branch of the tree sits an eagle. The beating of its wings cause the winds in the world of men. At the root of the tree lies a great dragon, Niðhoggr, gnawing at it continuously, together with other unnamed serpents.

The squirrel Ratatoskr carries insults from one to the other. Harts and goats devour the branches and tender shoots.

Creation Origin of the Cosmos

Before there was soil, or sky, or any green thing, there was only the gaping abyss of Ginnungagap. This chaos of perfect silence and darkness lay between the homeland of elemental fire, Muspelheim, and the homeland of elemental ice, Niflheim.

Frost from Niflheim and billowing flames from Muspelheim crept toward each other until they met in Ginnungagap. Amid the hissing and sputtering, the fire melted the ice, and the drops formed themselves into Ymir, the first of the godlike giants. Ymir was a hermaphrodite and could reproduce asexually; when he sweat, more giants were born.

As the frost continued to melt, a cow, Audhumbla, emerged from it. She nourished Ymir with her milk, and she, in turn, was nourished by salt-licks in the ice. Her licks slowly uncovered Buri, the first of the Aesir tribe of gods. Buri had a son named Bor, who married Bestla, the daughter of the giant Bolthorn. The half-god, half-giant children of Bor and Bestla were Odin, who became the chief of the Aesir gods, and his two brothers, Vili and Ve.

Odin and his brothers slew Ymir and set about constructing the world from his corpse. They fashioned the oceans from his blood, the soil from his skin and muscles, vegetation from his hair, clouds from his brains, and the sky from his skull. Four Dwarves, corresponding to the four cardinal points, held Ymir’s skull aloft above the earth.

Odin, passing through the world of the jötnar, found two beautiful young giants named Sól and Máni, sun and moon. They were brother and sister, and their father had named them after the beautiful lights in the sky. Odin decreed that Sól and Mani should drive the chariots of the sun and the moon across the sky, and to ensure that their journey was always constant and never slowed, he created two great wolves. These wolves were called Hati and Sköll, and they were placed in the sky to pursue the chariots and devour them if they caught them.

After the three gods, Odin, Hœnir (Vili) and Lodur (Ve), created Midgard, they started to create the human race, from tree trunks that they came upon at the beach. From these timbers, they made the first man and first woman: Askr and Embla. Each god gave them a gift: Odin gave them breath; Hœnir gave them understanding and spirit; and Lodur senses and outward appearance. It was also called Manheim, Mannheim or Manna-heim (the home of mankind).

Life Comes from Death

The first of the three conceptual meanings embedded in this myth is that creation never occurs in a vacuum. It necessitates the destruction of that which came before it. New life feeds on death, a principle which is recapitulated every time we eat, to cite but one example. This constant give-and-take, one of the most basic principles of life, features prominently in the Norse creation myth. The world was not created ex nihilo (“out of nothing”), as it is in the Judeo-Christian creation myth, for example. Rather, in order to create the world, the gods first had to slay Ymir, the representative of primal chaos, whose undifferentiated state is shown by his being a hermaphrodite. As such, he is essentially an extension of Ginnungagap itself. After all, Ymir’s kin, the giants, are constantly attempting to drag the cosmos back toward the chaotic nothingness of Ginnungagap (and, during Ragnarok, they succeed).

Whenever they ate, cleared land for settlements, or engaged in combat, the Norse could look back to this tale of the gods killing Ymir as the archetype upon which their own efforts were patterned.

The Norse creation myth contains nothing like a monotheistic god or an “unmoved mover.” Even Niflheim and Muspelheim are largely the product of their interactions with the

other seven of the Nine Worlds due to the fact that the trajectory of Norse mythology is cyclical rather than linear, meaning that the creation of the cosmos occurs after the cosmos is destroyed during Ragnarok. The cycle repeats itself eternally, without beginning or end. Their creation narrative is that the world is fashioned from the hot, bleeding flesh of Ymir, and is formed into the flesh of new living beings (just like our own bodies, when they return to the soil, give life to the other creatures who feed upon them). Animistic worldviews in general and Norse mythology in particular, speaks of all living creatures as intertwining limbs and sinews of a single but extremely amorphous “flesh” – in the Norse perspective, the flesh of Ymir.

In the heathen Norse perspective creation is ongoing and participatory. The Norse creation myth tells only of the initial shaping of the world. All of the inhabitants of the Nine Worlds have some role in this process, however great or small. Even in the above tale, we see that the “initial” shaping of the cosmos was an act that occurred gradually and in numerous stages, and was accomplished by a very wide variety of beings building from the accomplishments of those who came before them. As the famous Scottish-American naturalist and preservationist John Muir wrote, “I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in creation’s dawn.”

Belief in the Pagan Gods

Ásatrú, or the idea of pagan worship, is a nineteenth-century term used to describe religious belief in the pagan gods. The Icelandic settlers who believed in pagan gods followed many gods, or Æsir, and it appears that they pursued their beliefs through idolatrous sacrifice and mystery plays.

The realm of the Norse gods, the Æsir, is called Ásgarðr or the “Court of the Ás”. In Ásgarðr each god had its own home. Freyr was the male god of fertility, Tyr represented bravery and could grant men victory in battle. Loki the Crafty played many nasty tricks on the gods and was, amongst other things, to blame for the death of Baldur, the white god. But the greatest of all the gods was Óðinn. He was the foremost god of poetry and the god of sorcery and rune craft. He was also the god of the dead and of war. The symbols of Óðinn included two ravens and a spear. He was one-eyed, having sacrificed his other eye for wisdom. Odin’s hall, Válskjálf, is roofed in silver. He can sit within it and view all the worlds at once. Gimli, a hall roofed in gold, to which righteous men are said to go after death, also lies somewhere in Ásgarðr. Valhalla, the hall of the slain, is the feast hall of Óðinn. Those who died in battle are then raised in the evening to feast in Valhalla. Belief in Óðinn is not thought to have been widespread in early Icelandic, farm-based, society.

Another of Æsir, Thór, was the son of Óðinn and Jörð (Earth) and appears to have been worshiped widely. His symbols include a hammer, called Mjöllnir. Thór drove about the heavens in a chariot harnessed with two he-goats, and brought with him thunder and bolts of lightning. Heimdall, the gods’ warden, dwells beside Bifröst, the rainbow bridge. Each day, the gods ride over Bifröst to their meeting place at the Well of Urd.

The goddesses were no less praised than the male Æsir. The supreme goddess was Frigg: she was the goddess of marriage. Freyja was the goddess of fertility, and was often invoked during child birth. There were many other male (Æsir) and females (Ásynjur) gods.

According to Ásatrú, the gods were in constant struggle against the giants living in Jötunheimar (the Giants’ Land). Amongst them there were various monsters, such as the Miðgarðsormur (the Middle Earth Serpent) which lay in the ocean around the world biting its own tail, and Fenrisúlfur (the Monster Wolf), who showed mercy to no-one. The gods used

tricks to chain the wolf and Thór came close to killing Miðgarðsormur when he rowed out to fish. In the end, the giants united in an enormous campaign against the gods. There followed a great battle in which most of the gods fell and the giant Surtr (the fire giant) burned down the entire earth. This is the history of the gods and the world, also known as Ragnarök, the fate of the gods. But after the world fire, the earth rose a second time, fresh and green out of the sea. From then on, the best gods and people lived in the ancient homelands of their forefathers.



Norse Religion

Norsemen, if they set up any structure at all for worship, probably set up small shrines for their own personal use. Here might be kept a bowl for sacrifices, and an arm ring for oaths. It seems more likely that worship took place out of doors, beside a mound, a great stone, or a sacred tree. One of the few surviving descriptions of pagan law-code comes from Landnámabók. The law required that every public temple keep a silver arm ring, weighing no less



than two ounces. The goði (chieftain) was to wear the ring at all assemblies and to redden the ring in the blood of a sacrificial animal. Anyone with business to transact at the assembly was to swear an oath on the ring, calling on Freyr, Njörður, and hinn almáttki áss (the most powerful god). Does the passage refer to Óðin? Thórr? Tyr? It is not known. The passage concludes saying that each man must pay a temple-tax in the same way “as we now pay tithes to our churches”.

A large tree was frequently the source of luck and protection. The world tree, Yggdrasil, plays a central role in Norse mythology. Adam of Bremen writes that there was a great tree standing beside the temple at Uppsala which remained green both summer and winter.

The old Norse word vé appears in place names throughout the Norse world. It's related to the word vígja, which means to consecrate. A vé was a holy place, where no violence might be done. A person who shed blood in the vé became an outcast. What form a vé took, or how such a place was used is unknown.

Further information about Norse religious practices comes from the writings of Ibn Fadlan. In the year 921, a group of Arabs traveled up the Volga River to visit the King of the Bulgars. Along the way, they encountered Norse merchants, trading on the Volga. To the Slavic residents of the area, these Norse traders were known as the “Rus”. Ibn Fadlan, a member of the Arab deputation to the Bulgars, wrote about his encounters with the Rus traders.

He wrote that when the traders arrived at the dock of the market place, they disembarked from their boats, carrying “bread, meat, onions, milk, and alcohol [mead]” and went to a tall piece of wood, carved with faces, set in the ground. When the traders reached the idol, they prostrated themselves, and asked the gods for a successful trading mission, saying, “I have brought this offering. I wish you to provide me with a merchant who has many dinars and dirhams and who will buy from me whatever I want [to sell] without haggling over the price I fix.”

Tiny sheets of gold foil embossed with figures are found in many parts of the Norse world. Typically, these sheets are less than a centimeter square (3/8th inch), and are too light and fragile to have survived much handling. Many have been found in dwellings, under the posts that supported the structure, or under the location of the high-seat. Many depict a man and a woman embracing. One explanation for the foil figures is that they were deposited when the king or chieftain celebrated his wedding, and that the figures represent Freyr and his wife, the giant maiden Gerð. Another explanation is that the foils evoke the landvættir (land spirits) to protect and hallow the building.

The landvættir played an important role in the Norse religion, and their tradition lived on in Iceland for generations after the conversion to Christianity. They were linked with the land itself. Their good favor could bring good fortune in farming, hunting, and fishing, as well as providing protection to children and animals. These spirits were already living in the land when the first settlers arrived in Iceland. Men made sacrifices to the landvættir on hills, at waterfalls, in woods and groves, and at stones. Landvættir were offended by violence. Certain regions where violent acts had occurred were avoided by men, because of the displeasure of the landvættir. An early Icelandic law required that approaching ships remove their dragon-head prow when coming in to harbor in order to avoid offending the landvættir.

The Icelandic literature repeatedly refers to a seeress (völva), a woman who visited houses, making predictions, particularly about children and their destinies. The stories make clear her importance. A special rite, known as seiðr, was used to obtain hidden knowledge. The seeress, possibly accompanied by an assistant, chanted appropriate poems and spells from the high-seat. An account of this rite appears in chapter 4 of Eiríks saga rauða. Þorbjörg was a seeress who lived in Greenland. Þorkell, the chief farmer in the district, invited Þorbjörg to his winter feast. At that time, there was severe famine, and Þorkell wished to know when the current hardships might end. Þorbjörg was lavishly received, and a high-seat was made

ready for her. She was given a meal, in which the main dish consisted of the hearts of all the animals available there.

For the rite, Þorbjörg asked for the assistance of women who knew the witchcraft poems, but none were available at the settlement. Inquiries were made far and wide. Finally Guðríður, who was visiting from Iceland, admitted that she had been taught the poems. But she added, “This is the sort of knowledge and ceremony that I want nothing to do with, for I am a Christian.” Þorkell prevailed upon Guðríður to assist, and she consented. The women formed a circle around the ritual platform upon which Þorbjörg sat, and Guðríður recited the poems. Þorbjörg said that there were many spirits present that had been charmed by the chanting, and that many things had been revealed. She predicted that the famine would end soon, and that Guðríður would return to Iceland to start a great and eminent family. Both predictions came to pass.



Norse Rituals

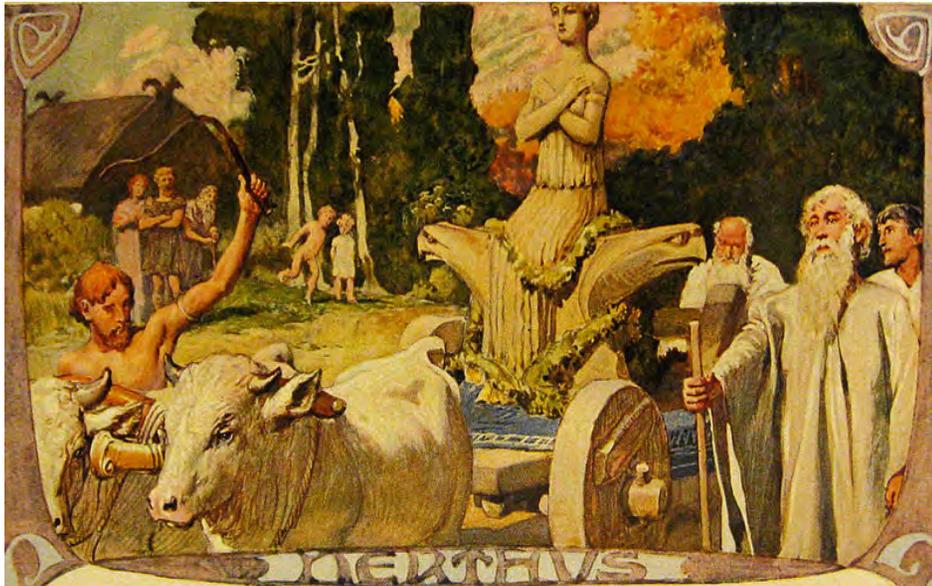
Though they were written in a later Christian era, the Icelandic sagas are of great significance as sources to everyday religion. Even when the Christian influence is taken into account, they draw an image of a religion closely tied to the cycle of the year and the social hierarchy of society. In Iceland the local secular leader had the title of gothi, which originally meant priest but in the Middle Ages was a term for a local secular leader

Ceremonial communal meals in connection with the blót sacrifice are mentioned in

several sources and are thus some of the most described rituals. Masked dancers, music, and singing may have been common parts of these feasts. As in other pre-Christian Germanic societies, there was no class of priests: anyone could perform sacrifices and other faith acts. However, common cultural norms meant that it was normally the person with the highest status and the greatest authority (the head of the family or the leader of the village) who led the rituals. The sources indicate that sacrifices for fertility, a safe journey, a long life, wealth etc., were a natural and fully integrated part of daily life in Norse society, as in almost all other pre-modern societies across the world.

The importance of goddesses can be found in place-name material that has shown that there are often place names connected to the goddess Freyja near place names connected to the god Freyr. Fertility and divination rituals that women could take part in or lead were also among those which survived the longest after Christianisation.

Different types of animals or objects were connected to the worship of different gods; for instance, horses and pigs played a great role in the worship of Freyr. This did not mean that the same animal could not also play a role in the worship of other deities (the horse was also an important part of the Odin faith). One of the most important objects in Norse paganism was the ship. Archaeological sources show that it played a central role in the faith from the petroglyphs and razors of the Bronze Age to the runestones of the Viking Age. Interpretation of the meaning of the ship in connection to the mythological material is only possible for the late period, when it was mainly associated with death and funeral rituals.



Statues and Sculptures

Several written sources mention statues of Norse gods. They are mostly described as either anthropomorphic or as wooden staves with a face carved at the top. Ahmad ibn Fadlan writes about such poles in his description of a Scandinavian sacrifice at the Volga. This account has a suggestion of the mythological connection but it is impossible to decipher it. No such large statues from the Viking Age have been found, only small figures and amulets. This may be because larger statues were deliberately destroyed. After Christianisation, the possession of such figures was banned and severely punished. Many accounts of missionaries have the destruction of statues and idols as their climax, symbolizing the triumph of the Christian

god over weak, devilish native gods. The sagas sometimes mention small figures that can be kept in a purse. Such figures are known from archaeological findings across Scandinavia. They include hammer-shaped jewelry, golden men or figures of gods.

Sources from different periods also suggest that chariots were used in fertility rituals across Scandinavia over a very long period. In his *Germania*, Tacitus refers to a sacred chariot in the faith of Nerthus. Also the Dejbjerg chariots from the Roman Iron Age, the Oseberg ship from the Viking age and the medieval tale about Gunnar Helming have survived until today. It is possible that this motif can be traced as far back as the processions of the Bronze Age.



Public Faith

Although no details are known, it is possible to form an unclear image of some of the rituals and religious practices through interpretation of the sources that have survived. The sources are heterogeneous since the written accounts are from the late Norse period and written in a Christian context. Thus it is also hard to determine whether a ritual was private or public. The only heathen shrine about which there is detailed information is the great temple at Uppsala in modern Sweden, which was described by the German chronicler Adam of Bremen in a time where central Sweden was the last political center where Norse paganism was practiced in public.

Remains of so-called multi-functional centers have been discovered in several places in Scandinavia. Near Tissø, archaeologists have unearthed a complex consisting of, among other things, a central mead hall connected to a fenced area with a smaller building. This complex is similar to others found in Scandinavia., such as Borg in Lofoten, Uppsala in Upland, Uppåkra in Scania, Gudme in Funen and Lejre in Zealand. Since the 1970s, discoveries have significantly expanded knowledge about the public faith. The excavations have shown that large buildings were used for both secular and religious purposes from the 600s and into the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Such structures are likely to have been both religious and political/economic centers. The combination of religious festivals and markets has been common to most cultures through most of history, since a society where travel is difficult and communication limited uses such occasions to get several things done at the same time. Thus the religious festivals were also the time and place for things, markets and the hearing of court cases. The religious festivals have to be seen in the light of these other activities. Excavations of the complex at Tissø have shown that it grew from the 7th century until the 10th century. The most recent findings are from 1020 to 1030, when the great hall seems to have been dismantled.

Locally there were several kinds of holy places, usually marked by a boundary in the

form of either a permanent stone barrier or a temporary fence of branches. Thus a holy space was created with rules of its own, like a ban on spilling blood on holy soil. The importance of these holy places should be understood in connection to the cosmological ideas people had. Local society was seen as a mirror of the cosmos, so the holy places in the village and in the fields were seen as mirroring Asgard and Midgard, while the forests, mountains and uninhabited moorland were all potentially dangerous places, analogous to Jotunheim. It is known that different types of divine forces were tied to different places and that there were different rituals connected to them. In addition to sacred groves, texts mention holy wells and the leaving of offerings at streams, rocks and trees; these may have been to the nature spirits as well as, or rather than, the gods. There is no mention of worship of the jötnar and it is unknown whether there were places sacred to them.

Other forms of the faiths buildings were the hall and the vé. Place names containing the word sal (hall) occur in several places and it is possible that this word was used for the multi-functional halls. Earlier scholars often translated sal as barn or stable, which has been shown to be inaccurate. Such a hall is more likely to have been a long-house with only one room. This was a prestigious type of building used for feasts and similar social gatherings in the entire Germanic area. In place names the word sal is mostly connected to Odin, which shows a connection with political power. Old place names containing the word sal may thus mean that a religious hall once stood there. Another word for hall, höll, was used to describe another kind of sacral building, not meant for habitation but dedicated to special purposes like holding feasts. In the legend of Beowulf, Heorot is named as such. However the word höll is not found in place names and is likely to have been borrowed into East Norse from German or English in the late period.

The vé is another kind of holy place and is also the most unambiguous name used for holy places in Scandinavia. The word comes from the proto-Germanic wiha, meaning "holy". Originally this word was used for places in nature but over time religious buildings may have been built.

Temple at Uppsala

Adam of Bremen's description of the sacrifices and the religious center in Uppsala is the best known account of pre-Christian rituals in Sweden. There is general agreement that Gamla Uppsala was one of the last strongholds of Norse religion in central Sweden and that the religious center there was still of great importance when Adam of Bremen wrote his account. Adam describes the temple as being gilded everywhere and containing statues of the three most important gods. The most important was Thor, who was placed in the middle, with Odin on one side and Fricco (presumably Freyr) at the other. He tells that Thor reigned in the skies where he ruled rain, wind and thunder, and that he provided good weather for the crops. In his hand he held a scepter. Odin was the god of war and courage, his name meant "the furious" and he was depicted as a warrior. Fricco, on the other hand, was the god for peace and physical satisfaction, and was thus depicted with a huge phallus. Each god had his own priests and people sacrificed to the gods whose help they needed: Thor was called upon in times of famine and disease, Odin was called upon to gain victory and Fricco was called upon for fertile marriages.

According to Adam, the temple at Uppsala was the center for the national worship of the gods, and every nine years a great festival was held there where the attendance of all inhabitants of the Swedish provinces was required, including Christians. At these festivals men and male animals were sacrificed by hanging. Adam recounts from Christian eye-witness accounts that up to 72 corpses could be hanging in the trees next to the temple during these sacrifices. He uses the Latin term triclinium, meaning banquet hall, for the central religious building and says that it was used for libations.

In recent times, remains of a large building have been found in Uppsala. It was 100



meters long and was in use from 600 C.E to 800 C.E.. It was built on an artificial plateau near the burial mounds and was presumably a residence connected to the royal power, which was established in the area during that period. Remains of a smaller building have been found below this house and the place is likely to have been in use as a religious center for very long time. The memory of the hall (sal) remains in the name Uppsala. The building was surrounded by a fence which could not have had any defensive function but could have marked the royal or sacral area. Around 900 the great hall burned down, but new graves were placed on the site. The traces of post holes under the medieval church have traditionally been interpreted as the site of the temple, but some scholars now believe the building was a later feast hall and that there was never a "temple" as such, but rather a hall used for banquets and political and legal functions as well as sacrifices. Gamla Uppsala was used for about 2000 years but the size and complexity of the complex was expanded up until the Viking Age, so that Uppsala in the period from 500 to 1000 was the center of royal power and a location of a sizable religious ceremonies.

Feasts and Sacrifices

Feasts and sacrifices were an important part of Norse religious rites. While feasts and sacrifices might be made on special occasions, there also were regular feasts in which all the community took part. One occurred at the beginning of winter, when sacrifices were made for plenty during the approaching winter season. Another occurred at mid-winter for the growth of crops that would be planted in the spring. And a third took place in the spring, for victory and success on raids and other expeditions to come in the summer.

These festivals were a time for extended feasting by the whole community. Sacrificial animals were killed and eaten, and ale was drunk in honor of the gods, and in honor of departed kinsmen and ancestors. An essential element seems to have been that the entire

community eat and drink together, although other community activities, such as games and contests, were likely to have been a part of the festivities.

The sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice appears to have been an important part of the sacrificial rite. The blood of the sacrifice was called hlaut, and the sagas speak of a bowl used for collecting the blood, which was kept in the shrine. Blood from these bowls was sprinkled on the walls and on the participants to infuse the space with power, and as a protective measure to avert ill-luck. When blood was sprinkled and toasts were drunk, men were symbolically joined with their gods and their dead ancestors.

In chapter 15 of Ynglinga saga, Snorri describes a situation in which a king was sacrificed during a time of extreme troubles. The events in this saga occurred early in Norse pre-history, perhaps in the 7th century. During a time of famine in Sweden, huge sacrifices were made at Uppsala in the fall. The first year, they sacrificed oxen. The second, they sacrificed humans. The third year, they decided that the famine was due to their king, Dómaldi, and that they should sacrifice him and redde the altars with his blood. This they did.

In most cases, it appears that the humans chosen for sacrifice were wrongdoers: thieves, and slaves, primarily. In chapter 12 of Kristni Saga, it is stated that "heathens sacrifice their worst men." A convenient way to impose capital punishment.

Despite these regular sacrifices, there appears to have been no regular priesthood, and no single-purpose temples. The leading men in each community performed the ceremonies in their homes.

The rituals held the community together, giving men fixed points in the year to which they could look forward, and enabling them to meet and unite in giving thanks.

Norse Beliefs

The Roman and Greek religions were populated with deities that were organized into an elaborate scheme. Each deity was responsible for one particular aspect of life. The Norse religion could not be more different. The responsibilities of the deities were not so clearly defined. Gods and goddesses had overlapping dominions. No one god had sole dominion over the sky, or the earth, or the underworld. While the character of each god is recognizable, the choice of one as a divine protector depended on the man doing the choosing. A king or warrior turned to Óðin. The common man, the traveler, or a man holding land and responsibility turned to Thór. Those who reared animals, cultivated the land, and raised families turned to Freyr, or another one of the Vanir.

Unlike Christianity, there was little connection between the Norse pagan religion and morality. A Norseman lost the favor of the gods not by breaking some universal commandment, but by offending the gods themselves in some way. The fundamental criteria by which

conduct was evaluated were honor and shame. The most desirable thing a man could attain was the esteem of the community during his life, and fame and good repute after his death. The chance of attaining fame and everlasting renown became the fundamental ideal for human life, and was worth any risk.

To the Norse, the gods were friends, or even distant family, to whom one turned both in good times and bad. To foster the two-way trust that was needed for such a relationship, Norsemen frequented sacred places, ate and drank in the gods' honor, and offered gifts and sacrifices in return for luck and protection. They made offerings to the Æsir for victory,

and to the Vanir for good harvests and fertility. In return, they expected that their prayers would be answered.

Worship included beings linked to the natural world: rocks, mounds, springs, lakes, caverns, and hills. Reliance on these beings was of paramount importance. Worship involved sacrifice and the giving of gifts, and was coupled with the desire to learn the future in order to adequately prepare for what was to come.

An important aspect of the religious beliefs is the belief in luck. Luck was essential if one was to survive. A lucky man fit into the natural world and possessed the protection of the powers that governed it. Skills and other outstanding gifts were insufficient to protect a man if he were unlucky.

There was no obligation to accept a particular god. If one's luck failed, one could desert one god in favor of another. No doubt that some Norse pagans turned to Christ because He gave hope for better luck than the pagan god they

previously worshiped. The comfortable overlap between pagan and Christian beliefs is exemplified by the description in Landnámabók of Helgi inn magri Eyvindarsont, one of Iceland's first settlers. He prayed to Christ when at home (where things were safe) but to Thór when at sea (where things were dangerous). Helgi called on Thór to show him where to settle in Iceland, but named his new home Kristnes (Christ's headland).

Norsemen pursued their daily activities, using what means they had at their disposal to make their way through life. But it was taken for granted that order was maintained and chaos held at bay by the intervention of the gods, and that to be on their side ensured continued luck and survival.

Written Sources of Norse Myths

Norse mythology is primarily attested in dialects of Old Norse, a North Germanic language spoken by the Scandinavian peoples during the European Middle Ages, and the ancestor of modern Scandinavian languages. The majority of these Old Norse texts were created in Iceland, where the oral tradition stemming from the pre-Christian inhabitants of the island was collected and recorded in manuscripts. This occurred primarily in the 13th century. These





texts include the Prose Edda, composed in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson, and the Poetic Edda, a collection of poems from earlier traditional material anonymously compiled in the 13th century.

The Prose Edda was composed as a prose manual for producing skaldic poetry—traditional Old Norse poetry composed by skalds (poets who composed at the courts of Scandinavian and Icelandic leaders during the Viking Age). Originally composed and transmitted orally, skaldic poetry utilizes alliterative verse, kennings, and various metrical forms. The Prose Edda presents numerous examples of works by various skalds from before and after the Christianisation process and also frequently refers back to the poems found in the Poetic Edda. The Poetic Edda consists almost entirely of poems, with some prose narrative added. In comparison to skaldic poetry, Eddic poetry is relatively unadorned.

The Prose Edda features a narrative in which deities and supernatural beings are presented as having been either actual, magic-wielding human beings who have been deified in time, or beings demonized by way of Christian mythology. Texts such as *Heimskringla*, composed in the 13th century by Snorri and *Gesta Danorum*, composed in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus in Denmark in the 12th century, are the results of heavy amounts of anthropomorphism. If the Norse believed that their gods were flesh and blood, or the stories are simply meant to relay the deities in a humanistic way is unclear.

Numerous further texts, such as the sagas, provide further information. The saga corpus consists of thousands of tales recorded in Old Norse ranging from Icelandic family histories (Sagas of Icelanders) to Migration period tales mentioning historic figures such as Attila the Hun (legendary sagas). Objects and monuments such as the Rök Runestone and the Kvinneby amulet feature runic inscriptions (texts written in the runic alphabet, the indigenous alphabet of the Germanic peoples) that mention figures and events from Norse mythology.

Objects from the archaeological record may also be interpreted as depictions of subjects from Norse mythology, such as amulets of the god Thor's hammer Mjöllnir found among pagan burials and small silver female figures interpreted as Valkyries, beings associated with

war, fate, and/or ancestor cults. Wider comparisons to the mythology of other Indo-European peoples by scholars has resulted in the potential reconstruction of far earlier myths.

Of the mythical tales and poems that are presumed to have existed during the Middle Ages, Viking Age, Migration Period, and prior; only a tiny amount of poems and tales survive. Later sources reaching into the modern period, such as a recorded medieval charms and spells found in the 17th century Icelandic *Galdrabók grimoire*, also sometimes make references to Norse mythology. Other traces, such as place names bearing the names of gods, may provide further information about deities, such as a potential association between deities based on placement of locations bearing their names, their local popularity, and associations with geological features.

The End of Norse Paganism?

Chapter 67 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* describes King Ólaf Tryggvason's attempts to force Christianity on Norway at the end of the 10th century. The king threatened to introduce new sacrifices if people refused to give up the old religion, and that victims would not be slaves or criminals, as was customary. The king said, "I shall not choose thrælls (slaves) or evildoers, but those selected as a gift for the gods will have to be the most distinguished men," naming ten prominent men in the group of farmers facing the king. He forcibly imposed Christianity on Norway. In several sections of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, King Ólafur is described destroying pagan temples. The idols were destroyed and the temple burned down.

When Iceland accepted Christianity, the Althing made the law that all men should be baptized and become Christian. However, the law also permitted many of the pagan practices to continue in public, such as the eating of horse meat, but not sacrifices. Sacrifices to the gods were permitted only in private.

The sagas suggest that after the law was passed, baptized Christians continued to observe some of the heathen ways. Chapter 54 of *Eyrbyggja saga* tells that Þóroddr and his men were lost at sea and presumably drowned. At their funeral feast, Þóroddr and the others walked in to the room, all soaking wet. The saga author comments that if drowned men attended their own funeral feast, it was a sign that Rán, the goddess of the sea, had accepted the drowned men. Thus, the guests at the feast thought the appearance of the men was a good omen. The author adds that at the time of the saga, many baptized Christians still held heathen beliefs.

Over the next 10 centuries Scandinavian, English, Germanic and Welsh speaking countries become more Christianized, but the old ways were still a part of the cultural heritage. The places, deeds and stories of the past still strike a deep cord of collective remembrance. The Vikings and the ways of the Norse culture have been romanticized and are still a source of modern myth making. To the author, this is good, because we need our myths to remember where we came from and we need our heritage to ground us.



Norse Deities

Note: Included here are (from the Proto-Indo-European language): (North Germanic): Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Scandinavia, Iceland, etc., and (Finno-Ugric): Finland, Lapland, etc. (This latter group is not related by language heritage to the North Germanic group but is listed here because of geographical connections.)



Aegir (Eggor) - Germanic god of the ocean, and husband of Ran. His nine daughters, known as the “billow maidens”, directed the swirling waves under his orders. He was sometimes depicted as a very old man with white hair and claw-like fingers. Whenever he left his glistening underwater palace it was with the single-minded purpose of destroying ships and their crews. To placate him the Vikings often sacrificed some prisoners before setting sail.

Aesir - The collective name for the principal race of Norse gods; the other was the Vanir. The Aesir gods under the leadership of Odin, included Balder (god of beauty), Bragi (god of eloquence), Forseti (god of mediation), Freyr (god of fertility, who originally was from the Vanir), Heimdall guardian of the bridge), Hodr (the blind god), Loki (god of fire and ally of the frost giants), Njord (the sea god, and another ex-Vanir), Thor (god of thunder), Tyr (god of war), Vili (brother to Odin), Ve (brother to Odin), and Vidar (Odin’s son). The goddesses included Freyja (the fertility goddess), Frigg (Odin’s wife), Sif (Thor’s wife), and Idun (keeper of the apples of youth). They lived in Asgard.

Alberich (Andvari) - (Scandinavian) King of the Dwarfs who steals the magic gold ring, Andvarinaut, (and the rest of the treasure) guarded by the Rhine Maidens, but is forced to give up all he has for his freedom after he has been captured. His curse upon the ring led to the

deaths of all who tried to possess it.

Alfhild - A maiden goddess of Scandinavia who dressed as a warrior to avoid being taken in marriage by King Alf. Only when they engaged in a fight to the death (almost), and he proved to be as strong as she, did she agree to mate with him.

Alvis - (Germanic) His name means all-wise. He was a member of the dwarf race. In return for the weapons he forged for the gods he was promised Thrud, Thor’s daughter, in marriage. Thor didn’t like this arrangement and devised a test of knowledge to stop the marriage. He told Alvis that he had to prove that his great wisdom made up for his small stature. Thor prolonged the test until sunrise when the rays of the sun fell upon the dwarf; all Dwarves turned to stone if touched by the sun’s rays. End of story.

Amma - A great mother in the Norse creation story, Amma (“grandmother”) gave birth to the race of Churls, who conducted business and learned trades.

Angerboda - (Norse) A frost giantess who was mate (or mistress) to the trickster god Loki. She bore three children; Jormungand (the Midgard Serpent), who grew so large he surrounded the earth; Fenrir (the Wolf of Ragnarok) and Hel (the death queen).



Asgard - The home of the Norse gods. To reach this land one had to cross the bridge Bifrost (rainbow). Asgard was divided into a number of separate kingdoms, each ruled over by a different god. Valhalla was ruled by Odin, Thrudheim by Thor, etc. The walls surrounding Asgard were built by Hrimthurs, who asked in payment the hand of Freyja plus the sun and the moon. Odin agreed providing the walls be complete in six months. Hrimthurs had a magic horse, named Svadifari, who helped him in his work. To Odin (and the other gods, especially Freyja’s horror, with but a few days left, Hrimthurs was almost finished. Loki, the trickster, turned himself into a mare and beguiled the stallion Svadifari away. The job was not completed in time and no payment was given.

Askr and Embla - (Norse) The first man and first woman and the progenitors of the human race. They were created out of tree trunks by Odin his two brothers.

Balder - (Norse) Balder was the second son of Odin, chief of the gods, and Frigg. His mother took oaths from all plants, creatures, elements and metals that they would not harm him, all except the mistletoe plant for she felt it was too young and too small to harm him. He was therefore thought to be immune from harm and the other gods, in sport, would throw things at him. Loki, the god of mischief, deceived Hod (Hoder), a blind god and Balder's brother, into throwing a spear made from mistletoe at Balder, thereby killing him.



Beiwe - A Lapland goddess who heralded the arrival of spring.

Berserk, Berserker - (Norse) Grandson of the eight-handed Starkadder and Alfhilde. He always fought ferociously and recklessly, without armor. That's the origin of berserk for a savage fighter, or one with the "fighting fever".

Bertha - (Norse) The goddess of spinning.

Beowulf - (Germanic) Denmark hero, killer of two mythical water monsters; Grendel, the sea monster and Grendel's mother, a monstrous mer-woman. In his old age he slew another monster, a fire-breathing dragon, but lost his own life in the battle.

Bergelmir - (Germanic) The frost giant who, with his wife, were the only frost giants to survive drowning in the blood when Odin and his brothers killed Ymir.

Bestla - (Scandinavia) The mother of Odin and his brothers Vili and Ve by her husband Bor.

Billing - (Germanic) Father of the beautiful Rind, who despite an initial repugnance toward Odin eventually capitulated to his wooing and bore him a son, Vali. Vali later killed Hoder, thereby avenging Balder's death.

Bor - (Norse) Son of Buri, husband of the giant Bestla, and father of Odin, Vili and Ve.

Bolverk - The alias Odin adopted when disguised as a giant to win the mead of poetry.

Bragi - (Norse) The god of poetry and eloquence, son of Odin and Gunnlod, a female giant. He was married to Idun (Iduna) guardian of the "apples of immortality".

Brono - (Norse) Brono was the son of Balder. He was the god of daylight.

Brunhild, Brünnehilde or Brynhild - (Germanic) A mighty female warrior, one of the Valkyrie. She defied Odin and in punishment he imprisoned her within a ring of fire on earth, decreeing that there she would remain until a brave hero rescued her. Enter Siegfried (Sigurd).

He braved the fire, broke her charmed sleep, and fell in love with her. He gave her the ring, Andvarinaut, unaware of its curse. Eventually she kills herself when she learns that Sigurd had betrayed her with another woman (Gudrun), not knowing he had been bewitched into doing so by Grimhild.

Buri - (Norse) The first god, was the father of Bor and the grandfather of Odin. His "birth" was by being released from the primeval ice when Audhumla (the cow) licked the ice.

Bylgja - (Norse) A daughter of Aegir and Ran.

Day - Son of Night and Delling. Said to ride around the earth on his horse Skinfaxi.

Earth - Daughter of Night and Annar.

Edda - Edda means great grandmother, and the term eddas, "tales of great grandmother" is the word used to describe the great stories in Scandinavian mythology. The dwarfish Edda was the first to create offspring with her husband Ai. She gave birth to the Thralls, the ones "enthralled" to service as food producers.

Einherjar - Band of dead warriors in Valhalla who await Ragnarok.

Eir - A companion of Frigg, Eir is the goddess of healing. She taught her art and the secret powers of herbs only to women, the only physicians in ancient Scandinavia.

Elle (Elli) - (Norse) Personification of Old Age; in the form of an old hag she wrestled Thor to defeat, much to his shame.

Embla - (Norse) The name of the first woman.

Erda - (Germanic) Ancient earth goddess.

Farbanti, Farbauti - (Norse) He was a giant who ferried the dead over the waters to the underworld. He was the father of Loki by Laufey, who gave birth to Loki when Farbanti struck her with a lightning bolt.

Fengi - (Scandinavia) The answer to the question, "Why is the sea so salty?": Once upon a time, in the days of King Frodi, there were two female giants who worked a mill called Grotti. Fengi and Mengi were the only beings strong enough to turn the giant millstone that magically produced food and plenty for Frodi's land. The king kept them working constantly, letting them rest only as long as it took them to sing a song. One night, angry and exhausted, they sang a magical charm that caused Frodi's death. But the new king, Mysing, set the giants to work as before, this time grinding salt. They ground so much that the entire ocean was filled with it.

Fenris (Fenrir) - (Norse) Fenris is the monstrous wolf, son of the god Loki who will swallow Odin at Ragnarok but will be slain by Odin's son, Vidar.

Fjalar - (Norse) The evil dwarf who, with his brother Galar, killed the wise man Kvasir in order to gain Kvasir's magic powers. They mixed his blood with honey in a cauldron and ended up with a mead that bestowed wisdom to the drinker. But the mead was taken by Suttung, a

frost giant, who boasted of his acquisition to all. When the boasts reached Odin, he decided to go to Jotunheim (land of the frost giants) to get the mead for himself. He disguised himself as the evil frost giant Bolverk, and persuaded Baugi (another frost giant) to dig a tunnel through the mountain to where Suttung kept the mead under the guard of his daughter Gunnlod. Then Odin turned himself into a snake and slithered through the tunnel to the treasure. When he reached the cavern he turned himself into a handsome giant and for three days and nights was Gunnlod's passionate lover. She allowed him to drink all of the mead whereupon he changed himself into an eagle, flew home to Asgard and spit up the mead into some empty jars.

Fjorgyn - (Norse) The mother of the Norse god Thor, she appears in few myths.

Forseti, Forsetti, Forsite - (Norse) God of justice. Son of Balder and Nanna.

Frey, Freyr - (Norse) A god of the Vanir race. Twin brother of Freyja. He was the god of peace, fertility and weather. He was married to Gerd (Gerda).

Freyja, Freya - (Norse) She was originally from the Vanir. Goddess of love, fertility, and beauty, sometimes identified as the goddess of battle and death. She was also quite accommodating in sexual matters. She is said to have traded sexual favors (by sleeping with the four Dwarves who had fashioned the necklace) to possess the necklace of the Brisings. When it was taken from her by Loki, she started a war of retaliation. Her father was Njord, a fertility god. Blond, blue-eyed, and beautiful, Freyja traveled in a chariot drawn by cats. She resided



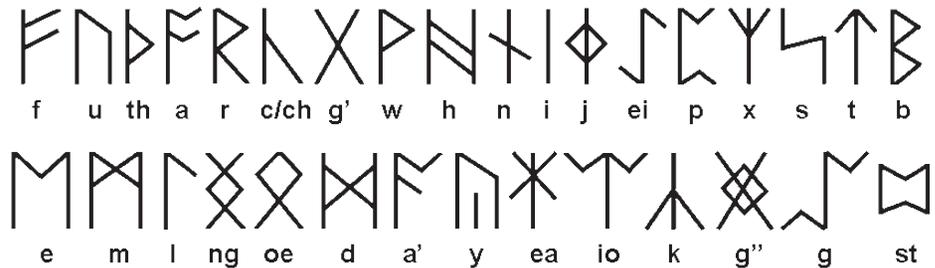
in the celestial realm of Folkvang, where it was her privilege to receive half of all the warriors slain in battle and take their souls to her hall, Sessrumnir, in Folkvang; the god Odin received the other half at Valhalla. She loves music, spring and flowers, and spends much time with the fey. She is seen wearing a cloak of bird feathers, which allows the wearer to change into a falcon and the beautiful necklace of the Brisings given to her by Dwarves, which the Norse still refer to as the Milky Way. In Germany, Freyja was sometimes identified with Frigg, the wife of Odin. She was also the sister of the god Frey.

Frigg, Frigga, Frija, Fricka - (Norse) Goddess of the sky. Daughter of Fjorgyn, goddess of the earth. She was Odin's wife and mother of Balder and Hoth. Friday is named after her. Frigg is the patroness of marriage and motherhood. She assists women in labor and is associated with the naming of children. Frigg has the reputation of knowing everyone's destiny, but never reveals it. Being the wife of the god Odin, she was known as the Queen of the Heavens. She is the central deity in Asgard where her hall, Fensalir ("water halls") is located.

Fulla - (Norse) From her name we get our word for abundance. Fulla is Frigg's handmaiden and messenger. Prayers are addressed to her for intercession with

Frigg, and for guidance in service. She was pictured as a young woman with long, full hair bound at the temple with a golden band.

Futhark - The name of the Norse Runic formal symbols that evolved over time to be the writing standard for Norse and many Celtic peoples.



Fylgja (singular), **Fylgakona** (plural) - (Iceland) A family's guardian spirit (sometimes called Haminga). Some legends consider them to be ominous as well as protective spirits.

Gangnrad - Pseudonym of Odin when he visits Vafthrudnir.

Garm - (Norse) The hound which stands in front of Hel's home and snarls with jaws dripping blood at the pilgrims from the upper world.

Gefion, Gefinn, Gefjon - There are two Scandinavian females with this name (or can it be one with two very different set of character traits?). One Gefjon was a trickster giantess; she was promised as much land as four oxen could plow in a day. So she conceived four ox-shaped sons by a another giant; when her sons had grown, Gefjon brought them back to Sweden, where they plowed off a part of that country and dragged it to a new location, where it became the island of Zealand.

The other Gefjon, a goddess, sold her hymen for a jewel but miraculously retained her virginity. She was an attendant of Frigg. All women who die as maidens were said to pass into this Gefjon's possession. She is also the bringer of good luck and prosperity.

Geirrod - (Norse) A frost giant and father of two daughters, Gjalp and Greip. He was a bitter enemy of Thor, and having captured Loki (when Loki was flying around as a hawk) received from him a promise that he, Loki, would bring Thor to Geirrod's castle without Thor having his magic belt and magic hammer. Loki did as promised and led Thor into the trap. On the way there, though, they stopped to rest at the home of a giantess named Grid. She told Thor what was up when Loki left the room, and gave him her magic belt, iron gloves and magic staff. Needless to say Thor used each with supreme efficiency and slew Geirrod, his daughters and all other frost giants in the vicinity.

Gerd, Gerda - A Scandinavian deity of light. She was the most beautiful of creatures, the daughter of a female giant and a mortal man. Frey became infatuated with Gerd and sent his servant to fetch her. Gerd refused, but Frey kept sending gifts and, finally, threats. A spell in runes eventually won Gerd, and she traveled to Asgard, the home of the gods, to live with Frey.

Ginnungap - (Norse) Ginnungap was the "Yawning Void" that existed before the gods.

Gioll - (Norse) The river which surrounded the underworld, Hel.

Gleipnir - (Norse) The chain which binds Fenris. It is made from the footfalls of cats, the beards of women, the roots of mountains and the breath of fish.

Gna - (Norse) The messenger of heaven and of heaven's queen, Frigg. She was a wind deity.

Godar - (Scandinavian) The Scandinavian gods were served by a class of priest-chieftains called Godar. Worship was originally conducted outdoors, under guardian trees, near sacred wells, or within sacred arrangements of stones. Later, wooden temples were used, with altars and with carved representations of the gods. Here animals and even human beings were sacrificed.

Goilveig - (Scandinavian) She is a mighty witch who, according to legend, was killed three times but still lived. Some believe she is an avatar for the mightiest of the Vanir, Freya.

Gold-comb - (Norse) The cock who shall crow when Ragnarok comes.

Gondul - (Norse) One of the most famous Valkyries, Gondul was sent to earth to bring back the spirits of famous kings who fell in battle.

Gonlod - (Scandinavian) The mother of poetry. She was the giant who owned the cauldron of inspiration that the god Odin took by trickery. She was also said to be the mother of Bragi, god of poets.

Gotterdammerung - (Norse) The end of the world.

Grimnir – Pseudonym of Odin when he visits his foster son Geirrod, King of the Goths.



Groa - (Scandinavian) A wise old woman who, in the eddas, is credited with being a sorcerer, a healer and a caster of spells.

Gulltopr - (Norse) Heimdall's horse.

Gullveig – A Vanir goddess (probably Freyja) who is burned three times by the Aesir.

Gungnir - (Norse) Odin's spear, obtained from the Dwarves by Loki for Odin.

Harbard – Odin disguised as a ferryman when he wrangles with Thor.

Heimdall, Heimdallr - (Norse) He is said to be the son of nine mothers. He lived at the foot of Bifrost, the rainbow bridge, and guarded it. He was known as the watchman of the gods. Heimdall was the keeper of the Gjallarhorn, the "ringing" horn, which he was to sound when

Ragnarök, the end of the world, was near. In an Irish myth he is called Rígr, and is considered the father of mankind. He consorted with three women, from whom descend the three classes of mankind: serf(thrall), freeman(karl), and nobleman(jarl).



Hel - (Norse) The goddess of the dead. She dwelt beneath one of the three roots of the sacred ash tree Yggdrasil and resides in her hall, Elvidnir (misery) in the underworld of Niflheim, the World of Darkness. She was the daughter of Loki, the spirit of mischief or evil, and the giantess Angerbotha (Angerboda). Odin, the All-Father, hurled Hel into Niflheim, the realm of cold and darkness, itself also known as Hel, over which he gave her sovereign authority. Here the dead suffered unimaginable tortures, except for those who died heroically in battle (who ended up in Valhalla, the Hall of the Heroes). Hel is described as being half white and half black. She is responsible for plagues, sickness and catastrophes.

Hermod - (Norse) Son of Odin and Frigg, and brother of Balder. He was divine messenger of the gods (same as Hermes and Mercury).

Hod, Hodr, Hodur - (Norse) The blind brother of Balder, tricked by Loki, throws a mistletoe dart at his brother and kills him.

Hogni - (Norse) He and his brother Gunner, persuaded by Brynhild to avenge her honor, arranged Sigurd's death. They inherited his fortune, including the cursed ring Andvarinaut, and were in turn doomed at the hands of Atli.

Holer, Holler - (Norse) The god of death and destruction and the one who brings diseases

and disasters. He takes people to his dungeon where he tortures them to death.

Honir, Hoenir - (Norse) The long-legged god of the Aesir, and brother of Odin. He and the wise god Mimir were sent to live with the Vanir to seal their truce. The Vanir gladly accepted them and made Honir one of their leaders. Honir, however, was not as smart as the Aesir had claimed (was very indecisive, actually) and relied heavily on Mimir. He gave noncommittal answers whenever Mimir was not around. The Vanir, feeling cheated, cut off Mimir's head and sent it back to Odin. Honir is one of the gods that will survive Ragnarok.

Hreidmar - (Norse) The father of Regin, Fafnir and Otter. See Fafnir.

Hresvelgr - (Norse) The giant who lives in the extreme north; the motion of his wings causes wind and tempest.

Hrungnir - (Norse) The strongest of the frost giants, killed by Thor in a personal duel.

Hugi - (Norse) The young frost giant who defeated Thialfi (Thor's human servant) in a foot race; one of the many adventures undergone by Thor and Loki in their journey to Utgard, land of the frost giants.



Huginn - (Norse) Huginn (thought) was one of the two ravens which sat upon Odin's shoulder and which brought him news each day of what was happening in the world. The other was **Muninn** (memory).

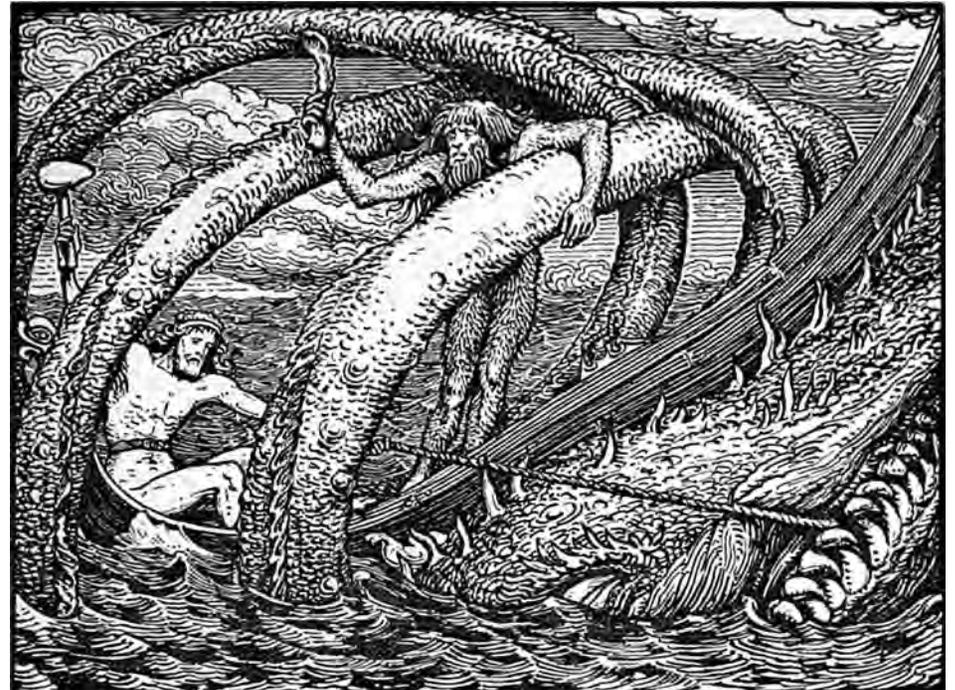
Hymir - (Norse) Hymir is a sea giant, the husband of **Hrod**, who lives at edge of the heaven. He possessed an enormous cauldron which the Aesir coveted because they could brew enough beer in it for all the gods, and Thor was sent to obtain it. In the final battle against the gods, Hymir will sail the terrible ship Naglfar, which is made entirely from the nails of the dead. The flood that precedes Ragnarok will free the ship after which the giants will board it and, with Hymir as commander, sail towards the battlefield of Vigmond.

Idun, Iduna, Idunnor - (Norse) She was the goddess of spring and eternal youth. Wife of Bragi, and guardian of the golden apples of immortality which the gods ate whenever they wanted to renew their youth.

Ilmarinen - (Finnish) The primeval smith in Kalevala.

Jabme-akka - (Lapland) The goddess of the dead who presides over Jabme-aimo (Jabmeanimmo), the realm of the dead.

Jörd - (Norse) Mother of Thor and mistress to Odin.



Jormungandr - (Norse) Jormungandr is the great dragon-serpent, son of Loki and the frost giantess Angrboda, which lives in the stream that circles earth. He is known as the Midgard Serpent.

Jotunheim - (Norse) The abode of the giants. It is on the edge of the ocean, far to the north-east. It is one of the nine worlds sheltered by the cosmic tree, Yggdrasil.

Judur - (Scandinavia) One of the Valkyries.

Jumala - (Finland) The ancient creator god and supreme deity. His sacred tree was the oak.

Kajsa - (Sweden) Goddess of the wind.

Kara - (Scandinavia) One of the Valkyries, and wife of the hero, Helgi (who accidentally killed her during a battle).

Kied Kie Jubmel - (Lapland) Lord of the herds. Reindeer were sacrificed to him before a hunt. He is called Storjunka in Sweden.

Kolga - (Norse) Kolga is a daughter of Aegir and Ran.

Kvasir - (Norse) He was considered the wisest of all men. He was a teacher, never at loss for an answer to a question. Fjalar and Galar killed him when they became tired of learning and poured his blood into a magic kettle. When mixed with honey this concoction formed mead, which gave wisdom (or the gift of poetry in some myths) to those who drank it.

Laga - (Norse) Laga is the goddess of wells and springs. She is a "friend" of Odin.

Leib-Olmai - (Lapland) The god of bears; hunters had to offer up prayers to him before he would allow them to kill a bear.

Lemminkäinen - (Finnish) Also seeks a wife from Pohjola. He attempted to kill the swan of Tuoni (god of the dead) and was torn apart by Tuoni's son; his magician mother put his body back together and restored him to life.

Lif and Lifthrasir - (Norse) The man and woman destined to be the only survivors of Ragnarok by hiding in the world tree Yggdrasil. They are to re-populate the new world.

Linda - (Finland) The bird goddess; usually pictured as a swan. She is the wife of Kalev.

Lofn – Goddess of illicit unions.

Loki, Lopt - (Norse) He was one of the Aesir (the principal gods), but a cause of dissension among the gods. Loki was a sometimes friend to the gods who admired his clever plans when he was helping them. But he was mischievous and evil too. He was responsible for the death of Balder, Odin's son. Loki had the ability to change his form and even to change his sex. He, through Angrboda, produced Hel, goddess of death, Jörmungand, the evil serpent who was Thor's mortal enemy, and Fenrir, the wolf. With his second wife, Sigyn, he fathered Vali and Narvi.

Lorelei - A young maiden of Germany, who threw herself into the river in despair over a faithless lover and was transformed into a siren, a creature whose hypnotic music lured fishermen to destruction.

Lufn, Lofn - The goddess of forbidden love, Lufn encourages illicit unions.

Luonnotar - (Finland) The creator goddess. Mother of Väinämöinen.

Maan-emo - (Finland) An earth goddess. The wife of Ukko, god of thunder. She presides over the fertility of women.

Madder-Akka - (Lapland) Creator goddess, with her companion Madder-Atcha, of mankind. Their three daughters were: Sarakka (supported women during childbirth), Juksakka, (changed the sex from female to male of a proportionate number of births), and Uksakka (protected the new-born child).

Magni - (Norse) Son of Thor and the frost giantess Jamsaxa, and the brother of Modi. Magni and Modi are due to inherit Mjollnir (Thor's magic hammer) after Ragnarok.

Mani - (Scandinavian) means "moon". The beautiful boy driver of the moon-car (a chariot pulled by horses), the son of Mundilfoeri and brother of Sol. He is followed by a wolf (Hati), which, when time is no more, will devour Mani and his sister Sol (the Sun).

Marjatta - (Finland) A virgin goddess, who conceives a son after swallowing a cranberry. She is a character in the Finnish Kalevala.

Midgard - (Scandinavian) The abode of the first pair of human beings in Norse mythology, from whom came the human race. It is midway between Niflheim and Muspelheim and joined to Asgard by the rainbow bridge Bifrost.

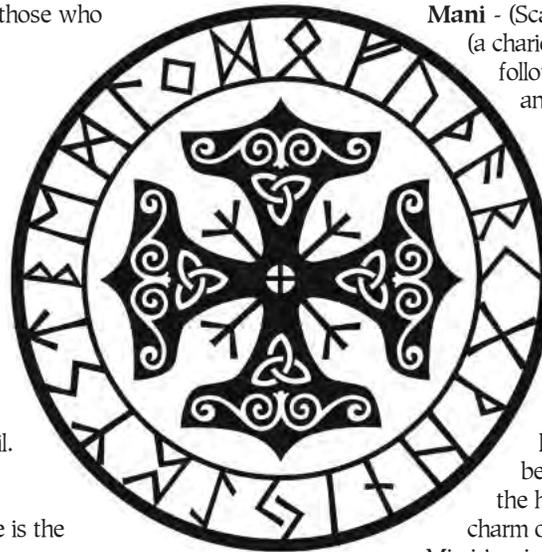
Mimir - (Norse) Suppose to have been the wisest of the Aesir tribe of gods, and thus a god of wisdom and knowledge. He was sent to live with the Vanir after the war between the gods. There, unfortunate being, he had his head cut off and sent back to the Aesir. Odin smeared the head with magic herbs so that it would never rot, and recited a magic charm over it that restored its power of speech; all this so he could have Mimir's wise counsel as needed. Mimir dwelt by the ash-tree Yggdrasil, guarding the "Well of Wisdom". Here he allowed Odin to drink for the price of one of his eyes; that is why Odin is usually depicted as having but one eye.

Modgud - (Norse) The servant of Hel, Modgud is the maiden that stands guard on a gold-paved bridge on a path leading to the underworld.

Modi – Son of Thor and the giantess Jamsaxa. Will inherit Thor's hammer Mjollnir with his brother **Magni** after Ragnarok.

Moon – Son of Mundilfari. Guides the moon on its course.

Mokkuralfi - (Norse) The Mist Calf from the story of Thor's battle with Hrungrnir. When he appeared after Thor slew Hrungrnir, it is said Thor wet himself. Thor's man-servant Thialfi wasn't quite as afraid and attacked the giant with his axe.



Mothir - A mother in the Norse creation myth, Mothir gave birth to the Jarls or leaders, the ones who hunted, fought, and attended school.

Möðull - (Scandinavia) Goddess of snow and ice.

Muninn - (Norse) Muninn ("memory") was the other one of the ravens which sat upon Odin's shoulder and brought Odin news each day of what was occurring in the world.

Muspelheim - (Scandinavian) In Norse mythology a hot, glowing land of fire in the south, where the giant Bergelmer and his wife caught flying sparks and fastened them in the heavens as stars. The "Home of Brightness" to the south of Niflheim, where Surt ruled with his flaming sword, and where lived the sons of Muspel the fire giant.

Nanna - Wife of Balder and daughter of Nep.

Narvi - Also known as **Nari**. Son of Loki and Sigyn who was killed by his brother Vali.

Nastrand - (Norse) The worst area of hell. It's roofs and doors were covered with hissing snakes, spitting poison, and it was through this that murderers and perjurers were forced to wade as punishment.

Nidhogg - (Norse) The dragon which devours the corpses of evil doers. He lives in Hwergelmir, a secluded part of Hel.

Night - Daughter of **Narvi** and mother of Day. Rides around the earth on her horse Hrimfaxi.

The Nine Realms - The "nine homeworlds", are unified by the world tree Yggdrasill. Mapping the nine worlds escapes precision because the Poetic Edda often alludes vaguely. The Norse creation myth tells how everything came into existence in the gap between fire and ice, and how the gods shaped the homeworld of humans.

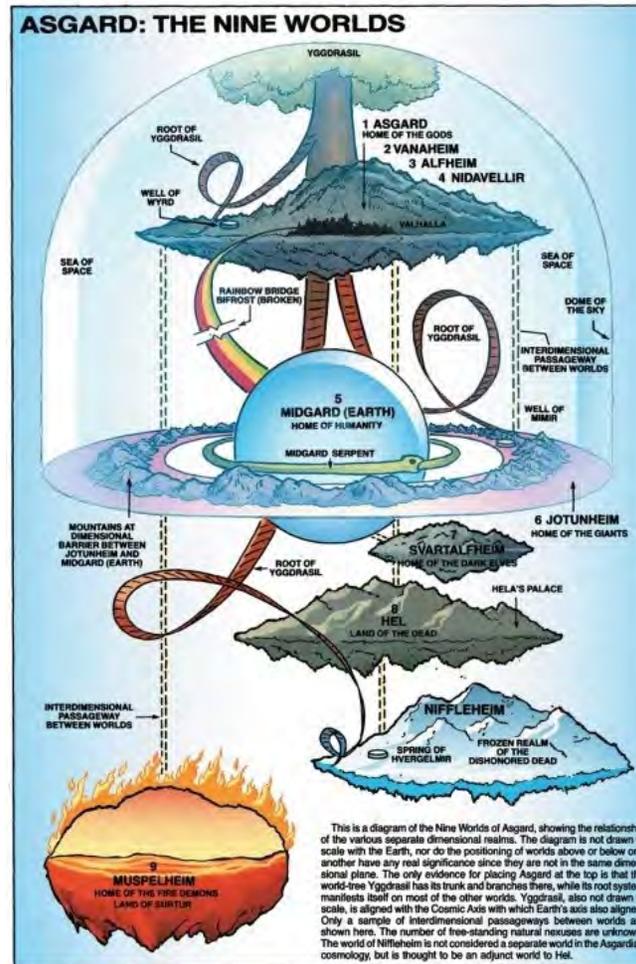
The Nine worlds are:

- Asgard, the home of the Aesir gods
- Vanaheim, home of the Vanir gods
- Alfheim, home of the "light" elves
- Nidavellir, home of the dwarfs
- Midgard, home of humankind
- Svartalfheim, home of the "dark" elves
- Hel, home of the unworthy dead and
- Niflheim, the region of everlasting cold and endless night.

Njörd - (Norse) Also Niörd, Niördhr, or Njörthr. The god of the wind and the sea. He was the father of Frey and Freyja by his own sister. He was the protector of ships, who lived at

Noatun by the sea-shore. His wife Skadi lives in the mountains because the cries of the gulls disturbs her sleep.

Niflheim - (Scandinavian) The realm of the dead in Norse mythology.



Norns - (Norse) The three goddesses of the destinies of both gods and men are the three sisters called Urd, the goddess of the past (fate), Verdandi, the goddess of the present (necessity) and Skuld, the goddess of the future (being).

Nott - (Norse) The goddess of night and the daughter of Narvi. Nott was married three times and with each husband she had one child. Her first husband was Naglfari, and their son was Audr (Udr). Her second husband was Annar, father of Jord. Her third husband was Delligr, the personification of twilight, father of Dagur (Day). She and her son were given horse-drawn chariots by the gods and were placed in the sky to round the world every two half-days. Notts chariot is pulled by the horse Hrimfaxi ("frosty-maned") which covers the earth with dew (the drippings from his foaming mouth) early in the morning.

Od (Hod) - Missing husband of Freyja who she constantly mourns for. He is seen as an old god and a precursor to Odin.

Odin - Also Odhinn, Woden, Wodan, and Woutan. He is the supreme god and oldest of all in Norse mythology, god of wisdom, poetry, magic, and war. He belonged to the Aesir race of gods. Among his many names is All-father, for he is the father of all the gods. One story about him relates how he acquired great wisdom. Supposedly he gained this wisdom when he hanged himself on the world tree for nine days and nights and was pierced by a spear. This was a spiritual death in which he sacrificed himself to himself. Another story about his acquiring wisdom is that he sacrificed an eye for the privilege of drinking from Mimir's, fountain of wisdom. He had two black ravens, Huginn or Huninn (Thought) and Muninn (Memory), who flew forth each day to gather the news of the world to bring back to Odin. His greatest treasures were Sleipner (an eight-legged horse), Gungur (a spear), and Draupner (a ring).

Outgard - (Norse) The home of giants and monsters.

Ottar - (Norse) The human lover of Freyja. She transformed him into a boar so that she could keep him with her in Asgard.

Poshjo-akka - (Scandinavia) Goddess of the hunt.

Ragnarok - (Norse) Ragnarok is the ultimate battle between good and evil from which a new order will come (The end of our world). This battle takes place at the end of each cycle of the

universe in a cyclical fashion.

Ran - (Norse) Ran is goddess of the sea and storms, and wife to the sea god Aegir. She collects the drowned in her net and takes them to her hall located at the bottom of the ocean.

Rana Nedia - (Lapland) Goddess of spring. Her sacred object is the spinning wheel.

Rauni - (Finland) She had intercourse with the thunder god, Ulkko, and from this union came all the plants of earth.

Rig - (Norse) Rig was the name taken by Heimdall when he created the three types of mankind: the thrall (slave), the karl (free peasant) and the jarl (noble or chief).

Rind - (Norse) She was the daughter of King Billing and the mistress of Odin, who had pursued her in various disguises. Their affair led to the birth of Vali, the child who was later to avenge the death of Baldr.

Roskva - (Norse) She was a farmer's daughter who became a servant of the god Thor. How this came about was when Thor stopped at her father's house and asked for food and shelter. They were too poor to provide meat, so Thor offered the goats who pulled his chariot on the condition that no bones were broken. But Roskva's brother Thialfi accidentally broke one of the thigh bones and when Thor came to resurrect the goats one of them had a limp. The enraged god was only pacified by the promised service of Roskva and Thialfi, who traveled with him thereafter as his servants.

Rota - (Scandinavia) One of the Valkyries.

Saga - Saga, the all-knowing goddess, is an aspect of Frigg in some mythology tales. She lives at Sinking Beach, a waterfall of cool waves where she offers her guests drinks in golden cups. Her name, which means "omniscience," is applied to the epic heroic tales. Goddess and drinking companion of Odin.

Siegfried or Sigurd - A northern Germanic hero. He was the foster-son of Regin, who sent him to recover a fabulous hoard of gold. Regin's father Hreidmar had first acquired this treasure, which once belonged to the dwarf Andvari. To get their hands on the gold Regin and his brother Fafnir had then killed Hreidmar, but Fafnir wanted the treasure for himself and turned into a dragon to guard it. By cunningly stabbing the monster from underneath, Sigurd succeeded in slaying Fafnir, thus gaining both wealth and wisdom (by licking the blood of the slain dragon), since Fafnir was said to have understood the language of birds. When he realized that Regin intended to kill him for the gold, Sigurd slew him before carrying it away himself. The story also accounts for his marriage to Gudrun, his love and betrayal of Brunhild (Brynhild), and his death through Brunhild's jealous contrivance.

Sif - (Norse) Sif is the golden-haired wife of Thor and the goddess of crops and fertility. She was the mother, by a previous marriage, of Ulu, god of archery and skiing.

A myth about her: Loki, one night cut off her beautiful golden hair. Next morning Thor was beside himself with rage at Sif's distress. When Loki protested that it was only a joke, Thor demanded to know how he was going to rectify the situation, the fire god said he would get the dwarfs to weave a wig as a replacement. So Loki asked the sons of Ivaldi to make a wig from spun gold. The wig when finished was quite remarkable, for it was so light

and realistic that even a slight breeze was enough to ruffle it and so real that it grew on her head like magic. Thinking to get the gods even more into their debt, the sons of Ivaldi constructed a collapsible boat named Skidbladnir for Freyr and a magic spear called Gungnir for Odin. On his way back to Asgard Loki met the dwarf brothers Brokk and Eitri. They were so jealous of the workmanship that had gone into the wig, the boat and the spear that Loki easily persuaded them to make something better; he even bet his own head on their inability to do so. As a result, the dwarf brothers fashioned the magic hammer known as Mjollnir. The gods were delighted with the treasures Loki and Brokk had brought back. However, Brokk demanded Loki's head. The gods would not agree, but they had no objection to Brokk sewing up Loki's lips with a thong when Thor dragged the god back home after he tried to flee, which caused Loki to plan revenge against Thor.



Signy - (Norse) She was the daughter of Volsung, a descendant of Odin. Married against her will to King Siggeir, she tried to warn her father and her ten brothers about his plot against them, but she and her brothers were ambushed in a forest and bound to a fallen tree. Each night a wolf devoured one of them in turn, until only her youngest brother Sigmund was left alive. Signy got a slave to smear Sigmund's face with honey so that the wolf would lick him instead of biting him. Sigmund was thus able to catch the wolf's tongue in his teeth and overcome the beast. Signy helped Sigmund to plot revenge. She even slept with him in disguise and bore a son named Sinfiotli. When Sinfiotli grew up she placed him in Sigmund's care, but they were both captured by Siggeir. A magic sword freed them and killed Siggeir and his sons. Signy chose to die herself in the burning palace, but not before she had told Sigmund the truth about Sinfiotli's parentage.

Signyn - (Germanic) Sigyn, also known as Sigunn or Sigryn, was the faithful wife of Loki and mother of his sons Narvi and Vali. Once the gods realized that in Loki they had allowed the growth of evil in their midst, they bound him in a cave. First they took hold of three slabs of rock, stood them on end and bored a hole through each of them. Then the entrails of Loki's son Narvi, whom they slew, were employed as a rope which bound the fire god to the stones. When the gods had tied the last knot, the entrails became as hard as iron. To ensure Loki's

discomfort the frost giantess Skadi, Njord's wife, fastened a snake to a stalactite above the god's head and there Loki was to remain until Ragnarok. Despite all that her husband had done, Sigyn remained true to him and did what she could to lessen his suffering by catching the venom dripping from the snake in a wooden bowl. However, whenever she went away to empty its poisonous contents, the venom fell on Loki's head and caused him to twitch violently from the pain. According to the Vikings, it was these compulsive movements that accounted for earthquakes.

Sjofn - (Norse) Sjofn is the goddess to inspire human passions. She was also a goddess concerned with causing men and women to think of love. It was her duty to stop fights between married couples.

Skadi (Skade) - A giantess, called the 'snow-shoe goddess', and thus the embodiment of winter. When her father Thiassi was slain by the gods for stealing some golden apples from Idun, Skadi wanted to take revenge so she armed herself and went to their stronghold where she demanded a husband and a belly full of laughter as compensation. The gods thought it wise to reconcile and offered her a marriage with one of them. She was free to marry any god, but had to choose from those eligible without being allowed to see anything but their feet. She noticed a very elegant pair and, convinced that their owner was the handsome Balder, she chose them. Unfortunately for her, those feet belonged to the older god Njord. The belly full of laughter was provided by Loki, who tied his testicles to a goat. The marriage between Njord and Skadi was not a happy one. She wanted to live where her father had lived, in the mountains, and Njord wanted to live in his palace by the sea. So they agreed to spend the first nine days in the mountains and the following nine days by the sea. This arrangement did not work out very well, and they separated. Eventually, Skadi left Njord for the god Ull.

Skirnir - (Norse) Skirnir was a servant of Freyr. When Freyr wished to marry the frost giantess Gerda, being a shy guy, he promised Skirnir his horse and his sword to make his pitch to Gerda for him, and sent him to Jotunheim. Skirnir had some difficulty in persuading Gerda to agree to the match, however. Eleven apples of youth, the magic fruit that kept the gods young, were no temptation to her. Nor was one of Odin's arm-rings. Gerda showed no fear when Skirnir threatened to behead her, but she began to panic the moment he started to recite a powerful spell. It promised to deny her any joy or passion, for the beautiful frost giantess would be transformed into a loveless outcast, a companion of the "unworthy dead". As a result of this threatened fate, Gerda at last consented to meet Freyr and so Skirnir received his promised rewards. On another occasion, Skirnir acted in his role as messenger by going to the dwarfs on Odin's behalf to order a magical fetter so that Odin could restrain the terrible wolf Fenrir.

Sun – Daughter of Mundilfari and guide of the sun.

Surtr (Surt) - (Norse) Surtr (means "black") was a giant who lived in the extreme south, and whose flaming sword guarded Muspelheim. In Ragnarok, he is the one who sets the nine worlds on fire; all the gods, frost giants, the living, the dead, dwarfs, elves, monsters and animals would be consumed. Then the earth would sink into the cosmic sea and another world arise, all fresh and green, to begin again.

Syn – Goddess of the accused at trial.

Thiassi - (Norse) Thiassi was the father of Skadi (see above) who is burned to death in his

futile effort to catch Loki. Odin took the eyes from the dead giant and flung them up into heaven where they shone thereafter as stars.

Thokk - (Norse) After Baldr's death, Hel, the queen of the underworld, said that she would allow him to return to the land of the living if "everything in the nine worlds, dead or alive, weeps for him". Everyone did mourn except for Thokk, a giantess, who refused. Baldr stayed dead. Some myths claim that Thokk was really Loki in disguise.

Thor - (Norse) The god of thunder and lightning, eldest son of Odin, ruler of the gods, and Jord, the earth goddess. Thor was the strongest of the Aesir, the chief gods, whom he helped protect from their enemies, the giants. Thor owed three magical treasures. Mjollnir his hammer (thunderbolt) which when thrown at an enemy returns to Thor. He is able to handle Mjollnir with the second of his treasures, iron-clad gloves. The third treasure is his magic girdle, a belt that increases and replenishes his divine strength when he wears it. Thunder was supposed to be the sound of the rolling of his goat-driven chariot. Thursday is named for Thor.



Thrud - (Germanic) Thrud was the daughter of Thor and his wife Sif. She was promised to the dwarf Alvis as a payment for his work. But Thor prevented the dwarf from claiming Thrud by keeping him talking until morning, when the sunlight turned Alvis into stone.

Thrym - (Germanic) Thrym was the frost giant who came to acquire Thor's magic hammer. The gods were in a panic because only this weapon could protect them from the frost giants. When Thrym said he would exchange the hammer for the hand of Freyja in marriage, Loki persuaded Thor to go to the frost giant's castle disguised as the bride in order to recover the hammer. Loki also went along in the form of a maidservant. And so they arrived at Thrym's hall. Even though the frost giant was suspicious about his bride-to-be, Loki cleverly managed to talk him into producing the hammer, which Thor then used to slay all the frost giants in sight.

Tuoni - (Finland) Tuoni was the god of the dead, who lived in the dark land of Tuonela, from which few visitors return. With his wife Tuonetar he had several children who were deities of suffering, including Kipu-Tytto, goddess of illness. One of the few heroes who managed to escape from Tuonela, he was Vainamoinen. After successfully crossing the river that marked the border of Tuonela, he was received there by Tuonetar, who gave him beer to drink. But while he slept, her son created a vast iron mesh across the river so that Vainamoinen could not return that way and would be trapped forever. But when he woke, the hero changed into an otter and swam easily through the net.

Tyr, Tiu, Tiw, Tiv, Tiwaz - (Norse) Son of Odin and Frigg, and younger brother of Thor. A god of war and of justice. It was he who placed his hand in the mouth of the giant wolf, Fenris, to show good faith as the rest of the gods, pretending sport but intending a trap, chained the wolf. When Fenrir realized he had been tricked he bit off Tyr's hand. Tuesday is derived from Tyr's name.

Ukko - (Finland) The god of sky and air who controlled the rain. He replaced Jumala as supreme deity. His wife was Akka.

Ull - (Norse) Ull was the stepson of Thor, the thunder god. He was the god of hunting, and was involved with snowshoes, bow and weapons of war.

Väinämöinen - (Finland) Son of the primal goddess Luonnotar. He possessed the wisdom of the ages from birth, for he was in his mother's womb for thirty years. The 'eternal sage', who exerts order over chaos and establishes the land of Kaleva, that so many of the events in Kalevala tale revolve around. His search for a wife brings the land of Kaleva into friendly but later hostile contact with its dark and threatening neighbor in the north, Pohjola.

Vali – Son of Odin and the giantess Rind. Conceived to avenge the death of Balder.

Valhalla - (Norse) The hall of dead heroes. Heroic warriors, killed in battle, were "stored" here for the advent of Ragnarök, or Doomsday. Odin kept them "alive" in this pleasure palace for that day so they could be at his side.

Valkyries - The name in Old Norse, valkyrja, means literally, "chooser of the slain." The Valkyrie is related to the Celtic warrior-goddess, the Morrigan, who likewise may assume the form of the raven. The Valkyries are beautiful maidens that help Odin choose which brave warriors of those slain on the battlefield may then serve Odin in Valhalla. They are also Odin's messengers, and when they ride forth on their winged horses, their armor shines and flickers causing the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights). They scout the battle ground in search of mortals worthy of the grand hall. If you are deemed by the Valkyries as unworthy of the hall of Valhalla you will be received after death by the goddess Hel in a cheerless underground world.

Some of the names of the Valkyries are: Brynhild, Geirahöd, Geirolul, Geirskogul, Gol, Goli, Göndul, Gudr, Gunnr, Guth, Herfjötur, Hervor, Hildir, Hiorthrimul, Hlathguth, Hlökk, Hrist, Judur, Kara, Mist, Olrun, Randgr, Rathgrith, Reginfleif, Róta, Sangridr, Sigdrifa, Sigrún, Sigrinn, Sigrun, Skeggjöld, Skölgul, Skuld, Svafa, Sváva, Svipul, and Thrud. This list is not considered complete.

Vanir - (Norse) They were the other race of gods, who become united with the Aesir. Frey

and Njörd were Vanir gods. Sometimes thought of a fertility gods.

Var – Goddess of marriage oaths.

Ve – Son of Bor and brother of Odin and Vili.



Vidar (Vithar) - (Norse) A son of Odin and the giantess Grid who will avenge Odin's death after Ragnarok. Noted for his taciturnity, and his fearless destruction of Fenrir (Fenris).

Vili – Son of Bor and brother of Odin and Ve.

Vor – Goddess who knows all.

Waldmichen - (Germanic) This wood nymph was a form of the goddess Freya. Her servants were rabbits; two of them held the train of her cloak while two others lit her way with candles. She lived in a grotto, where a visitor could see the souls of unborn babies cavorting; she owned a mill where she ground old men and women young again.

Wave Maidens - (Scandinavia) These nine giantesses (Atla, Augeia, Aurgjafa, Egja, Gjalp, Greip, Iarnsaxa, Sindur and Ulfrun) were daughters of the sea goddess Ran. When they favored a sailor, they played in the waves around his ship, pushing him forward to his destination.

Yabme-Akka - (Scandinavian) Death goddess who appeared as an old woman.

Ygg - (Norse) Odin's name when considered as the god of storm and war.

Ymir - (Norse) The "evil" source of creation in Norse myths. The primeval father of all the Giants. He was fed by the 4 milky streams that flowed from Audhumla, the cow. He fathered the race of frost giants who were enemies of the gods. Ymir grew so large and so evil that Odin and his brothers (Vili and Ve) could no longer live with him. They killed him, and the blood gushed from his body in such torrents (A flood myth)

that all the giants except Bergelmer and his wife were killed. These two took refuge on a chest and came to the shores of Jotunheim. From them another race of frost giants was born.

Zempat - (Prussia) God of the earth. God of cattle.

Zisa - (German) A harvest goddess.

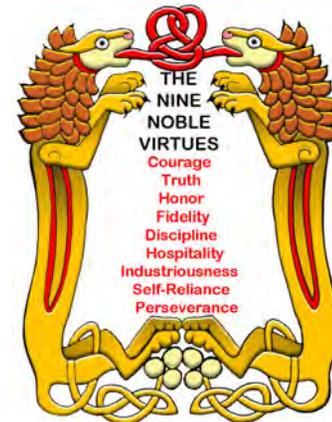
Mythological Realms of The Norse Gods



- Alfheim** – The land of the light elves in Asgard
Algron – Island where Odin (Harbard) stayed for five years
Asgard – Land of the Aesir
Bilskirnir – Thor's hall in Asgard
Bifrost - The flaming rainbow bridge between Asgard and Midgard
Breidablik – Balder's hall in Asgard
Elivagar – The eleven rivers that flow from the spring of Hvergelmir in Niflheim.
Eljudnir – Hel's hall in Niflheim
Fensalir – Frigg's hall in Asgard
Folkvang – Site of Freyja's hall in Asgard
Franang's Falls – Waterfall in Midgard where Loki, disguised as a salmon, was caught by the gods.
Gimli – Hall of the gods after Ragnarok
Ginnungagap – The void between Muspell and Niflheim before the creation.
Gladshheim – Sanctuary of the Norse gods on the plain of Ida.
Glitnir – Silver and gold hall of Forseti, son of Balder, in Asgard.
Gnipahellir – Cave in front of Niflheim where the hound Garm is chained up.
Helheim – The realm of the dead in Niflheim, ruled over by the goddess Hel.
Himinbjorg – Heimdall's hall in Asgard
Hlsey – Island near the undersea hall of Aegir and Ran.
Hlidskjalf – Odin's high throne in Valaskjalf.
Hnitbjorg – Stronghold of the giant Suttung.
Hvergelmir – Spring in Niflheim under the root of Yggdrasill.
Idavoll – The central plain of Asgard. Contains the halls of Gladshheim and Vingolf.
Iving – River dividing Asgard from Jotunheim
Jotunheim – Land of the giants
Lyfjaberg – Mountain beside Menglad's hall in Jotunheim.

- Lyngvi** – Island on lake Armsvartnir where Fenrir is bound.
Lyr – Menglad's hall in Jotunheim
Midgard – The realm of mankind.
Mimir's Well – Well of wisdom under the root of Yggdrasill in Asgard which is guarded by the head of Mimir.
Muspell – Southern land of fire guarded by the giant Surt.
Nastrond – Site of the hall of evil-doers in Hel. The dragon Nidhogg gnaws at corpses here.
Niflheim – Land of freezing mist and darkness and home of Hel.
Okolnir – Land of warmth created after Ragnarok. Site of the hall of Brimnir.
Sessrumnir – Freyja's hall in Asgard.
Sindri – Red gold roofed hall which will appear after Ragnarok.
Sokkvabekk – Saga's hall in Asgard
Svartalfheim – Realm of the dark elves.
Thrudheim – Thor's realm in Asgard and site of his hall Bilskirnir.
Thrymheim – Stronghold of the giant Thiazzi which was passed on to his daughter Skadi.
Utgard – Realm in Jotunheim ruled by Utgard-Loki.
Valaskjalf – Odin's hall in Asgard.
Valhalla – Hall presided over by Odin where the Einherjar await Ragnarok.
Vanaheim – Land of the Vanir in Asgard.
Vigrid – Plain in Asgard where the final battle will occur.
Vingolf – Hall of the goddesses in Asgard.
Ydalir – Ull's hall in Asgard.
Yggdrasill – The world tree (Hodmimir's wood)

Many believe the Norse gods and the other mythological beings of ancient Scandinavia represent aspects of the self, our emotions and the many qualities that make up the psyche of the human self.



Norse Myths of the Gods

The Aesir-Vanir War

Note: In Norse mythology, gods and goddesses usually belong to one of two tribes: the Aesir and the Vanir. Throughout most of the Norse tales, deities from the two tribes get along fairly easily, and it's hard to pin down firm distinctions between the two groups. But there was a time when that wasn't the case.



The War of the Gods

The Vanir goddess Freya was always the foremost practitioner of the art of seidr, a form of magic principally concerned with discerning and altering the course of destiny. Like historical seidr practitioners, she wandered from town to town plying her craft for hire. Under the name Heiðr ("Bright"), she eventually came to Asgard, the home of the Aesir. The Aesir were quite taken by her powers and zealously sought her services. But soon they realized that their values of honor, kin loyalty, and obedience to the law were being pushed aside by the selfish desires they sought to fulfill with the witch's magic. Blaming Freya for their own shortcomings, the Aesir called her "Gullveig" ("Gold-greed") and attempted to murder her. Three times they tried to burn her, and three times she was reborn from the ashes. Because of this, the Aesir and Vanir came to hate and fear one another, and these hostilities erupted into war. The Aesir fought by the rules of plain combat, with weapons and brute force, while the Vanir used the subtler means of magic. The war went on for some time, with both sides gaining the upper hand by turns.

Eventually the two tribes of divinities became weary of fighting and decided to call a truce. As was customary among the ancient Norse and other Germanic peoples, the two sides agreed to pay tribute to each other by sending hostages to live among the other tribe. Freya, Freyr, and Njord of the Vanir went to the Aesir, and Hoenir (pronounced roughly "HIGH-neer") and Mimir went to the Vanir.

Njord and his children seem to have lived more or less in peace in Asgard. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of Hoenir and Mimir in Vanaheim. The Vanir immediately saw that Hoenir was seemingly able to deliver incomparably wise advice on any problem, but they failed to notice that this was only when he had Mimir in his company. Hoenir was actually a rather slow-witted simpleton who was at a loss for words when Mimir wasn't available to counsel him. After Hoenir responded to the Vanir's entreaties with the unhelpful "Let others decide" one too many times, the Vanir thought they had been cheated in the hostage exchange. They beheaded Mimir and sent the severed head back to Asgard, where the distraught Odin chanted magic poems over the head and embalmed it in herbs. Thus preserved, Mimir's head continued to give indispensable advice to Odin in times of need.

The two tribes were still weary of fighting a war that was so evenly-matched, however. Rather than renewing their hostilities over this tragic misunderstanding, each of the Aesir and Vanir came together and spat into a cauldron. From their saliva they created Kvasir, the wisest of all beings, as a way of pledging sustained harmony.

This storyline continues in the tale of the [Mead of Poetry](#).

Polytheism and Pluralism

This tale bears out many points in Polytheistic Theology and Ethics. Unlike the One God of monotheistic religions, polytheistic gods are often at variance with one another and are tied to contradictory systems of values and ways of being in the world. Polytheism accepts this pluralism as inevitable and healthy. Monotheistic religions, however, try to crush this pluralism and subject everyone to the same set of values and standard of conduct.

We can catch an attitude of monotheism in the Aesir's initial attempt to destroy Freya for encouraging them to follow pursuits that were antithetical to their own values. However, the Aesir eventually realized that their attempt to kill her was futile, and that the two tribes of deities should instead learn to live side by side in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect. This is a message that the defenders of a universal standard of morality have yet to learn.

Esteemed Old Norse scholar E.O.G. Turville-Petre offers the following summary of the meaning of the tale, which he places side by side with similar tales from other branches of the Indo-European family: "The Norse, Irish, Roman, and Indian tales seem to serve the same

purpose. They explain how gods and men, who have such different interests and ambitions, as the agriculturalist, the merchant, the warrior, and the king, can live together in harmony."

Kvasir's Blood

Note: This article is divided into three parts. The first section recounts the tale of Odin's theft of the mead of poetry (Old Norse Óðrœrir, "Stirrer of Inspiration"). The second and third sections explore what this tale shows us about the pre-Christian world view of the Norse and other Germanic peoples, and compares these aspects of their world view with the dominant world view of modern society.



The Mead of Poetry

At the conclusion of the Aesir-Vanir War, the Aesir and Vanir gods and goddesses sealed their truce by spitting out to a great vat. From their spittle they formed a being whom they named Kvasir ("Fermented Berry Juice"). Kvasir was the wisest human that had ever lived; none were able to present him with a question for which he didn't have a satisfying answer. He became famous and traveled throughout the world giving counsel.

Kvasir was invited to the home of two Dwarves, Fjalar ("Deceiver") and Galar ("Screamer"). Upon his arrival, the Dwarves slew Kvasir and brewed mead with his blood. This mead contained Kvasir's ability to dispense wisdom, and was appropriately named Óðrœrir ("Stirrer of Inspiration"). Any who drank of it would become a poet or a scholar. When the gods questioned them about Kvasir's disappearance, Fjalar and Galar told them that Kvasir had choked on his wisdom.

The two Dwarves apparently delighted in murder. Soon after this incident, they took the giant Gilling and drowned him for sport. The sounds of Gilling's weeping wife irritated them, so they killed her as well, this time by dropping a millstone on her head as she passed under the doorway of their house.

But this last mischief got the Dwarves into trouble. When Gilling's son, Suttung ("Heavy with Drink"), learned of his father's murder, he seized the Dwarves and, at low tide,

carried them out to a reef that would soon be covered by the waves. The Dwarves pleaded for their lives, and Suttung granted their request only when they agreed to give him the mead they had brewed with Kvasir's blood. Suttung hid the vats of mead in a chamber beneath the mountain Hnitbjorg ("Pulsing Rock"), where he appointed his daughter Gunnlod ("Invitation to Battle") to watch over them.

Now Odin, the chief of the gods, who is restless and unstoppable in his pursuit of wisdom, was displeased with the precious mead's being hoarded away beneath a mountain. He bent his will toward acquiring it for himself and those he deemed worthy of its powers. Disguised as a wandering farmhand, Odin went to the farm of Suttung's brother, Baugi. There he found nine servants mowing hay. He approached them, took out a whetstone from under his cloak, and offered to sharpen their scythes. They eagerly agreed, and afterwards marveled at how well their scythes cut the hay. They all declared this to be the finest whetstone they had ever seen, and each asked to purchase it. Odin consented to sell it, "but," he warned them, "you must pay a high price." He then threw the stone into the air, and, in their scramble to catch it, the nine killed each other with their scythes.

Odin then went to Baugi's door and introduced himself as "Bölverkr" ("Worker of Misfortune"). He offered to do the work of the nine servants who had, as he told it, so basely killed each other in a dispute in the field earlier that day. As his reward, he demanded a sip of Suttung's mead.

Baugi responded that he had no control of the mead and that Suttung guarded it jealously, but that if Bölverkr could truly perform the work of nine men, he would help the apparent farmhand to obtain his desire.

At the end of the growing season, Odin had fulfilled his promise to the giant, who agreed to accompany him to Suttung to inquire about the mead. Suttung, however, angrily refused. The disguised god, reminding Baugi of their bargain, convinced the giant to aid him in gaining access to Gunnlod's dwelling. The two went to a part of the mountain that Baugi knew to be nearest to the underground chamber. Odin took an auger out from his cloak and handed it to Baugi for him to drill through the rock. The giant did so, and after much work announced that the hole was finished. Odin blew into the hole to verify Baugi's claim, and when the rock-dust blew back into his face, he knew that his companion had lied to him. The suspicious god then bade the giant to finish what he had started. When Baugi proclaimed the hole to be complete for a second time, Odin once again blew into the hole. This time the debris were blown through the hole.

Odin thanked Baugi for his help, shifted his shape into that of a snake, and crawled into the hole. Baugi stabbed after him with the auger, but Odin made it through just in time. Once inside, he assumed the form of a charming young man and made his way to where Gunnlod guarded the mead. He won her favor and secured a promise from her that, if he would sleep with her for three nights, she would grant him three sips of the mead. After the third night, Odin went to the mead, which was in three vats, and consumed the contents of each vat in a single draught.

Odin then changed his shape yet again, this time into that of an eagle, and flew off toward Asgard, the gods' celestial stronghold, with his prize in his throat. Suttung soon discovered this trickery, took on the form of another eagle, and flew off in pursuit of Odin.

When the gods spied their leader approaching with Suttung close behind him, they set out several vessels at the rim of their fortress. Odin reached the abode of his fellow gods before Suttung could catch him, and the giant retreated in anguish. As Odin came to the containers, he regurgitated the mead into them. As he did so, however, a few drops fell from his beak to Midgard, the world of humankind, below. These drops are the source of the abilities of all bad and mediocre poets and scholars. But the true poets and scholars are those to whom Odin dispenses his mead personally and with care.

The Origin of Truth and Knowledge

As entertaining as this tale is, it's also extraordinarily rich in themes that reveal some of the most important differences between the world view of the pre-Christian Norse and other Germanic peoples on the one hand and the world view of modern society on the other. The first of these differences we'll consider has to do with where thoughts come from.

In the modern world, we take it for granted that we arrive at our beliefs through an active process over which we have total control. We call this process "reason." But any logical proof has to start with an assumption – that is, a statement for which one can't offer any proof, but rather simply accepts on its own merits. This is so because of the "problem" of "infinite regress:" for every statement one attempts to validate rationally, an additional statement must be added to the chain to support that first statement, a process which can only continue infinitely if the process isn't stopped somewhere. When and why do we stop this process, then? When can we know when we've hit upon an idea that's so sound that it would be superfluous to question it?

René Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher who was one of the foremost prophets of the modern, rationalistic world view, held that some truths are simply self-evident and cannot be called into question.

But no truth is self-evident. If there were such a thing as a self-evident truth, everyone, everywhere, would already believe in it, and argumentation would be unnecessary. "I think, therefore I am" rests on especially shifty ground in this regard. "I think" – how many assumptions are embedded within these two little words! For one thing, "I think" presupposes "I am," not the other way around; in order for me to have agency in the thinking process, I must first, of course, exist. Even more importantly for our purposes here, "I think" presupposes that my thoughts come from myself and not from anyone or anywhere else. History is brimming with people who have held diametrically opposed views on the ultimate origins of thought. Take, for example, the words of the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who wrote, "We never come to thoughts. They come to us." Evidently, Descartes's "self-evident truth" is possibly anything but. Some parts of the thought process we can rightly ascribe to ourselves. But his larger point, that there are parts of the thought process over which we don't have control, mirrors the indigenous Germanic perspective on thought very nicely.

As the tale of Odin's theft of the Mead of Poetry shows, the pre-Christian Germanic peoples held that the kinds of visionary insights that can make a person into a true poet or scholar – the kinds of insights that can form the basis of a logical proof – come from Odin. The fact that this gift is symbolized by mead is far from random. One of the central rituals of the pre-Christian religion of the Germanic peoples was the *sumbl* (Old Norse) or *symbel* (Old English), which was centered around the drinking of alcohol to induce a state of ecstasy. It was held that one can more readily perceive truth in this inspired state, when one finds it hard to not be utterly honest with oneself and others. In this ritual context, the drinker is closer to the gods and to the sacred realities that underline the profane reality of everyday life than when one's inner faculties are bound to the kind of cold, dispassionate mindsets that we in the modern world prize.

To be sure, the ancient Germanic peoples no doubt held that a more sober, analytical mode of thought had its place as well. But the thoughts that they arrived at through such means were secondary and profane, and derived from the thoughts that were given to them during fleeting moments of ecstatic insight, in much the same way as the contents of any logical proof are derived from an initial assumption that cannot itself be logically supported. In light of the failure of the rationalistic world view to account for the origins of the life-determining assumptions that form the basis of any and all thought, might it not be wise to concede that the heathen Germanic people were on to something?

All Knowledge is Personal Knowledge

So, in the perspective of the people who told the tale of the Mead of Poetry around their hearth-fires on long winter nights, ultimate knowledge comes from the gods and arrives in flashes of overpowering inspiration.

In the modern world, we insist on dividing thought into two black and white categories: "objective" and "subjective." But where in this dichotomy should we place the Germanic method of acquiring insight? I leave it to you to decide.

The text of the tale as it's recorded in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda could hardly have been worded in a way that more directly dissolves the object-subject dichotomy if this had been a conscious aim of Snorri's (which we can safely assume it wasn't). Snorri writes that "anyone who drinks of the mead will become a poet or a scholar." In the terms of the subject-object dichotomy, poetry is a "subjective" activity because of the creativity and imagination it involves, whereas the work of the scholar is "objective" because of the dispassionate observation and analysis that he or she brings to his or her topic. But if, as in the above tale, poetry and scholarship have the same source – namely, the inspired thought of Odin – what is the difference? The subject-object dichotomy is useless. Observation and analysis can never be truly dispassionate, and creativity and imagination have some bearing on truth (they don't belong solely to the realm of aesthetics or fantasy).

How, in this perspective, should we characterize knowledge? Rather than being "objective" or "subjective," knowledge is personal – that is, all knowledge is held by someone with a particular perspective on reality, whose knowledge comes from someone in particular, and this knowledge is inevitably a knowledge of something to which the giver and the receiver of the knowledge stand in a particular relation. In other words, knowledge and truth are attributes of our relationships rather than things that just "are." As our relationships with those around us – our fellow humans, gods, animals, trees, grasses, rivers, mountains, stars, clouds, winds (all of which are perceived to have personalities in the animistic Germanic world view) – change, truth and knowledge change as well. In the old ways, before Christianity the Greeks had a religion based upon this world view called Gnosism. Thus it shouldn't be surprising that different people hold such different views on what constitutes reality, since their relationships with those around them are different. Whether an idea is right or wrong can be judged only with reference to a particular matrix of interpersonal relationships, not by any absolute, impersonal, static – "objective" – standard.

The Creation of Thor's Hammer

One day, Loki the trickster found himself in an especially mischievous mood and cut off the gorgeous golden hair of Sif, the wife of Thor. When Thor learned of this, his quick temper was enraged, and he seized Loki and threatened to break every bone in his body. Loki pleaded with the thunder god to let him go down to Svartalfheim, the cavernous home of the Dwarves, and see if those master craftspeople could fashion a new head of hair for Sif, this one even more beautiful than the original. Thor allowed this, and off Loki went to Svartalfheim. There he was able to obtain what he desired. The sons of the dwarf Ivaldi forged not only a new head of hair for Sif, but also two other marvels: Skidbladnir ("Assembled from Thin Pieces of Wood"), the best of all ships, which always has a favorable wind and can be folded up and put into one's pocket, and Gungnir ("Swaying"), the deadliest of all spears.

Having accomplished his task, Loki was overcome by an urge to remain in the caves of the Dwarves and revel in more recklessness. He approached the brothers Brokkr and Sindri ("Metalworker" and "Spark-sprayer," respectively) and taunted them, saying that he was sure the brothers could never forge three new creations equal to those the sons of Ivaldi had fashioned. In fact, he even bet his head on their lack of ability. Brokkr and Sindri, however, accepted the wager.



As they worked, a fly (who, of course, was none other than Loki in disguise) stung Sindri's hand. When the dwarf pulled his creation out of the fire, it was a living boar with golden hair. This was Gullinbursti ("Golden-bristled"), who gave off light in the dark and could run better than any horse, even through water or air.

Sindri then set another piece of gold on the fire as Brokkr worked the bellows. The fly bit Brokkr on the neck, and Sindri drew out a magnificent ring, Draupnir ("Dripper"). From this ring, every ninth night, fall eight new golden rings of equal weight.

Sindri then put iron on the hearth, and told Brokkr that, for this next working, they must be especially meticulous, for a mistake would be more costly than with the previous two projects. Loki immediately stung Brokkr's eyelid, and the blood blocked the dwarf's eye, preventing him from properly seeing his work. Sindri produced a hammer of unsurpassed quality, which never missed its mark and would boomerang back to its owner after being thrown, but it had one flaw: the handle was short. Sindri lamented that this had almost ruined the piece, which was called Mjollnir ("Lightning"). Nevertheless, sure of the great worth of their three treasures, Sindri and Brokkr made their way to Asgard to claim the wages that were due to them.

Loki made it to the halls of the gods before the Dwarves and presented the marvels he had acquired. To Thor he gave Sif's new hair and the hammer Mjollnir. To Odin went the ring Draupnir and the spear Gungnir. And Freyr was the happy recipient of Skidbladnir and Gullinbursti.

As grateful as the gods were to receive these gifts – especially Mjollnir, which they foresaw would be of inestimable help in their battles against the giants – they nevertheless

concluded that Loki still owed the Dwarves his head. When the Dwarves approached Loki with knives, the cunning god pointed out that he had promised them his head, but not his neck. Brokkr and Sindri contented themselves with sewing Loki's mouth shut, and returned to their forge.

Why Odin is One-Eyed

Odin's quest for wisdom is never-ending, and he is willing to pay any price, it seems, for the understanding of life's mysteries that he craves more than anything else. On one occasion, he hanged himself, wounded himself with his spear, and fasted from food and drink for nine days and nights in order to discover the runes.

On another occasion, he ventured to Mimir's Well – which is surely none other than the Well of Urd – amongst the roots of the world-tree Yggdrasil. There dwelt Mimir, a shadowy being whose knowledge of all things was practically unparalleled among the inhabitants of the cosmos. He achieved this status largely by taking his water from the well, whose waters impart this cosmic knowledge.

When Odin arrived, he asked Mimir for a drink from the water. The well's guardian, knowing the value of such a draught, refused unless the seeker offered an eye in return. Odin – whether straightaway or after anguished deliberation, we can only wonder – gouged out one of his eyes and dropped it into the well. Having made the necessary sacrifice, Mimir dipped his horn into the well and offered the now-one-eyed god a drink.



An Interpretation

The most general and obvious message of this tale is that, for those who share Odin's values, no sacrifice is too great for wisdom. The (unfortunately fragmentary) sources for our current knowledge of the pre-Christian mythology and religion of the Norse and other Germanic peoples are, however, silent on exactly what kind of wisdom Odin obtained in exchange for his eye. But we can hazard a guess.

The fact that Odin specifically sacrificed an eye is surely significant. In all ages, the eye has been "seen" as a poetic symbol for perception in general – consider the astonishing number of expressions, both in everyday usage and in the works of the great canonical poets, that use vision as a metaphor for perceiving and understanding something. Given that Odin's eye was sacrificed in order to obtain an enhanced perception, it seems highly likely that his pledge of an eye symbolizes trading one mode of perception for another.

What mode of perception was exchanged for what other mode, then? The answer to this question lies in the character of Mimir. Mimir, whose name means "The Rememberer,"

is the divine animating force within cultural/ethnic memory. His wisdom is the wisdom of the traditions that the heathen Germanic peoples held to be sacred. As in the tale of Odin's discovery of the runes, in which he sacrificed what we might call his "lower self" to his "higher self," so Odin did in the tale of his relinquishing an eye: he exchanged a profane, everyday mode of perception, beleaguered with countless petty troubles, for a sacred mode of perception, in which the world reveals itself to be divine, the very flesh of the gods, constantly enacting the stories of which the gods are the actors, shimmering with meaning and wonder.

Another interpretation might be had from Eastern Sources when we consider the stories of the third eye. This central eye of spiritual awakening sees the world for what it really is and is attuned to the higher planes. The physical eyes, while very helpful for navigating this world, only get in the way when trying to discern the truth of existence.

Odin Seeks the Sacred Word

Note: The runes are the written letters that were used by the Norse and other Germanic peoples before the adoption of the Latin alphabet in the later Middle Ages. Unlike the Latin alphabet, which is an essentially utilitarian script, the runes are symbols of some of the most powerful forces in the cosmos. In fact, the word "rune" and its cognates across past and present Germanic languages mean both "letter" and "secret/mystery." The letters called "runes" allow one to access, interact with, and influence the world-shaping forces they symbolize. Thus, when Odin sought the runes, he wasn't merely attempting to acquire a set of arbitrary representations of human vocal sounds. Rather, he was uncovering an extraordinarily potent system of magic. It is a truly sacred and magical way of writing, holy in its sounds and form.

First, we'll look at the tale itself. Then, we'll consider two different but complimentary interpretations of the tale. The first is Odin's "sacrificing himself to himself," which presents a model of personal development. The second is what this tale tells us about how knowledge is acquired – if you look closely, it presents a perspective that's fuller, richer, and more mature than the scientific method.

Odin's Discovery of the Runes

At the center of the Norse cosmos stands the great tree Yggdrasil. Yggdrasil's upper branches cradle Asgard, the home and fortress of the Aesir gods and goddesses, of whom Odin is the chief. Yggdrasil grows out of the Well of Urd, a pool whose fathomless depths hold many of the most powerful forces and beings in the cosmos. Among these beings are the Norns, three sagacious maidens who exert more influence over the course of destiny than any other beings in the cosmos. One of the foremost techniques they use to shape destiny is carving runes into Yggdrasil's trunk. The symbols then carry these intentions throughout the tree, affecting everything in the Nine Worlds.

Odin watched the Norns from his seat in Asgard and envied their powers and their wisdom. And he bent his will toward the task of coming to know the runes. Since the runes' native home is in the Well of Urd with the Norns, and since the runes do not reveal themselves to any but those who prove themselves worthy of such fearful insights and abilities, Odin hung himself from a branch of Yggdrasil, pierced himself with his spear, and peered downward into the shadowy waters below. He forbade any of the other gods to grant him the slightest aid, not even a sip of water. And he stared downward, and stared downward, and called to the runes.

He survived in this state, teetering on the precipice that separates the living from the dead, for no less than nine days and nights. At the end of the ninth night, he at last perceived shapes in the depths: the runes! They had accepted his sacrifice and shown themselves to him, revealing to him not only their forms, but also the secrets that lie within them. Having fixed this knowledge in his formidable memory, Odin ended his ordeal with a scream of exulta-

tion.

Having been initiated into the mysteries of the runes, Odin recounted:

Then I was fertilized and became wise;

I truly grew and thrived.

From a word to a word I was led to a word,

From a work to a work I was led to a work.

Equipped with the knowledge of how to wield the runes, he became one of the mightiest and most accomplished beings in the cosmos. He learned chants that enabled him to heal emotional and bodily wounds, to bind his enemies and render their weapons worthless, to free himself from constraints, to put out fires, to expose and banish practitioners of malevolent magic, to protect his friends in battle, to wake the dead, to win and keep a lover, and to perform many other feats like these.

Sacrificing Myself to Myself

Our source for the above tale is the Hávamál, an Old Norse poem that comprises part of the Poetic Edda. In the first of the two verses that describe Odin's shamanic initiatory ordeal itself (written from Odin's perspective), the god says that he was "given to Odin, myself to myself." The Old Norse phrase that translates to English as "given to Odin" is gefinn Óðni, a phrase that occurs many times throughout the Eddas and sagas in the context of human sacrifices to Odin. And, in fact, the form these sacrifices take mirrors Odin's ordeal in the Hávamál; the victim, invariably of noble birth, was stabbed, hung, or, more commonly, both at the same time.

Odin's ordeal is therefore a sacrifice of himself to himself, and is the ultimate Odinnic sacrifice – for who could be a nobler offering to the god than the god himself?

So, it seems that a statement above is in need of qualification. Part of Odin survived the sacrifice in order to be the recipient of the sacrifice – in addition to the runes themselves – and another part of him did indeed die. This is suggested, not just by the imagery of death in these verses, but also by the imagery of rebirth and fecundity in the following verses that speak of his being "fertilized," and, like a seedling, "growing," and "thriving."

Even a casual browsing of the Eddas and sagas alerts the reader to how accomplished, self-possessed, and inwardly strong many of their central figures are, especially the most Odinnic of them (such as Egill Skallagrímsson, Starkad, Sigurd, and Grettir Asmundarson). Perhaps their strength of character was largely due to the example set by their divine patron, with the songs sung in his honor telling of how he wasn't afraid to sacrifice what we might call his "lower self" to his "higher self," to live according to his values unconditionally, accepting whatever hardships arise from that pursuit, and allowing nothing, not even death, to stand between him and the attainment of his goals.

An Animistic Theory of Knowledge

The means by which Odin discovered the runes are unlike anything in modern science. When was the last time you heard of a chemist going out into the woods, suspending herself from a tree, fasting for several days, and staring down into a lake until the waters divulged to her some new chemical formula? We can gain much by asking: what are the underlying principles and techniques used by Odin to gain his knowledge of the runes? And how do these principles compare with the methods of science?

If these very questions seems absurd, it's because the modern world has taught us that the scientific method is unquestionable, and that any claimed knowledge acquired outside of science can't really be considered true knowledge until verified by science. Read on and you may be surprised by how well or how badly these taken-for-granted assertions stack up against the alternatives.

In the modern world, we tend to think that the scientific method has a monopoly on knowledge – that is, just as the medieval church claimed that “outside the church there is no salvation,” many, if not most, people nowadays believe that “outside of science there is no knowledge.” The softer formulation of this assertion is that while there may be other ways of acquiring legitimate knowledge, this knowledge is legitimate only provisionally – that is, if a scientific study “disproves” this other knowledge, the scientific knowledge invariably takes precedence. In either its stronger or weaker formulation, the underlying idea here is that the scientific method is the ultimate standard by which all claims to truth are to be judged. When you question people who hold this perspective, their defenses almost always boil down to the statement that, as Richard Dawkins says, “science gets results.” Dawkins, one of the most dogmatic and fundamentalist of the contemporary apologists who treat science as a monotheistic religion, goes on to say: “Science boosts its claim to truth by its spectacular ability to make matter and energy jump through hoops on command, and to predict what will happen and when.”

Of course science gets results. It would be extraordinarily difficult to dispute that. What can and should be disputed, however, are the claims that 1) the standard beliefs concerning why science gets results are the best way of conceptualizing science’s achievements, and that 2) the scientific method is a universally applicable standard that is inherently better and fuller than any and all other means of acquiring knowledge.

All world views are based on assumptions that can neither be proven nor disproves any kind of “objective” standard. There’s simply no such thing as a truth that’s “self-evident” to all people, in all places, at all times. If there were such a truth, all people across time and space would inevitably come to hold the same beliefs about the world. In philosophy, this “problem” is called “infinite regress” – since the format of a logical proof requires that any statement be proven by another statement, there comes a point at which one has to arbitrarily limit this process of corroboration and refuse to examine one’s assumptions any further. Otherwise, the examination of assumptions would be carried on literally infinitely, and nothing would ever be “proven” or accomplished.

The proofs of science are no exception. There are unquestioned assumptions – myths – built into the scientific method. Without these assumptions, the scientific method doesn’t make sense at all. (This shouldn’t be taken to mean that the scientific method is objectively wrong, however, because, again, there isn’t any objective, impersonal, absolute standard by which knowledge or truth can be evaluated. The insistence on such a standard is just thinly-veiled assumption.)

The foremost of these assumptions that underlies the scientific method is the idea that the world is inert and will-less, effectively just a machine. As René Descartes, a 17th century philosopher whose writings were indispensable for the formation of science as we today think of it, wrote: “[Animals] have no mind at all, and... it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, just as a clock, which is only composed of wheels and weights, is able to tell the hours and measure the time more correctly than we can do with all our wisdom.” For Descartes, only the human mind possesses anything like a will or consciousness. Humans can therefore tinker with the more-than-human world like a machine, but, by definition, we can never interact with it. It can never give us knowledge like the runes gave themselves to Odin. Knowledge can only be gained by being detached and observing the world, as if from a distance.

The scientific method is a procedural enforcement of this assumption. By the scientific method, knowledge is gained by uprooting the subjects of the experiment from their original, worldly context, inserting them into a controlled environment designed to isolate certain variables, observing this contrived simulation from a position of observation and recording, and then quantifying the results. In order for these results to be considered valid, the experiment

must be infinitely repeatable.

The pre-Christian Norse and other Germanic peoples, exemplary animists, would laugh at this perspective. For them, as for the twentieth century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our everyday perception shows us that the entire world is conscious and willful, and that we humans are conscious and willful precisely because we’re an inextricable part of this wider world. Our hands, which can touch, can also be touched. Our eyes, which can see, can also be seen. And if human limbs can be touched and touch in return, why can’t tree limbs, which can be touched, also touch in return? We’re all a part of the same field of perception, after all. For the animist, anything that can be perceived has some kind of ability to perceive in turn. (It should be noted that, in this perspective, bodies themselves think. Perception and cognition, being diffuse throughout the world, aren’t centralized in any specific organ, including the brain. Nor is there any need for the concept of an aloof, utterly incorporeal “mind” in the sense in which Descartes speaks of the mind and thought.)

Willful, sentient beings who are themselves and not anyone else by virtue of their relationships with all the other beings with whom they interact can’t be properly understood in an artificial, experimental context. Nor could the repeatability of the experiment be guaranteed if the willful, sentient beings who comprise its subjects were allowed to exercise their will. The scientist, meanwhile, would limit his or her knowledge of the beings on whom he or she experiments to the degree that he or she insists on remaining a detached observer rather than an involved participant. Of course, being an involved participant means that the outcome of the experiment might change, as would the knowledge that could be gleaned from it – to which the pre-Christian Germanic peoples would say, “duh.”

How, then, would an animist characterize the scientific method? If experimental subjects are conscious, feeling, thinking beings rather than machines, what’s actually going on during the implementation of the scientific method? Thankfully, the modern English language still retains a word to denote the process of treating a sentient, willful being as a mere object: “objectification.” Or, to use some synonyms: domination, abuse, slavery. This isn’t metaphor. Consider the words of a contemporary of Descartes, reflecting on the attitudes that were becoming commonplace among the experimental scientists of his day, and which, by today, have been enshrined as the unquestioned norm:

The scientists administered beatings to dogs with perfect indifference and made fun of those who pitied the creatures as if they felt pain. They said the animals were clocks; that the cries they emitted when struck were only the noise of a little spring that had been touched, but that the whole body was without feeling. They nailed the poor animals up on boards by the four paws to vivisect them to see the circulation of the blood, which was a great subject of controversy.

Animistic world views insist that knowledge is inherently personal and participatory. Knowledge of something is an outgrowth of one’s relationships with that something. If we want to truly understand another human being, on as deep a level as possible, we must win her goodwill and friendship, spend time with her in numerous different situations, and come to know her through the subtle mixture of experiencing the world with her and patiently listening as she slowly divulges the kinds of intimate secrets that one only reveals to one’s most trusted confidantes.

In this way, we will come to know her far more deeply than we would if adopting the method suggested by another of the most influential forerunners of modern science, Francis Bacon, who spoke gleefully of “putting [nature] on the rack and extracting her secrets.” Bacon added, in suitably prophetic language, “I am come in very truth leading you to Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave... the mechanical inventions of recent years do not merely exert a gentle guidance over Nature’s courses, they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.”

One can easily criticize these sentiments for their nauseatingly calloused ethics. One can also criticize them for their superficial and immature perspective of how legitimate knowledge is acquired. Knowledge extracted under torture is seldom ever reliable; the one being tortured generally will, to return to Dawkins's metaphor, jump through whatever hoops the torturer puts in front of him or her.

From an animistic perspective, then, the knowledge science brings to us isn't exactly false, but it's only applicable under very narrow, artificial, and in many cases downright horrifying conditions. The knowledge gleaned in the laboratory is only valid elsewhere if the world outside is made to resemble the laboratory as closely as possible by being rendered sterile, artificial, and controlled – which is exactly what modern civilization has had to do to the world in order to “get results” from the scientific method. (The degree to which this process is conscious or unconscious is a fascinating question in and of itself, but is well beyond the scope of this chapter.)

The American Indian philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr. has aptly criticized the approach of Bacon, Descartes, and their modern followers in terms that could just as readily come from a pre-Christian Germanic perspective: “In order to maintain the fiction that the world is dead and that those who believe it is alive are succumbing to primitive superstition, scientists, and more broadly scientific explanation, have to reject any nuance of interpretation of activities in the natural world that imply natural sentience, or an ability to communicate back and forth between humans and the world, or, leaving humans out of the picture, between non-humans.”

The means by which Odin obtained his insight into the runes came by following methods such as those advocated by Deloria rather than those of modern science. He didn't “put the cosmos on a rack and extract her secrets.” Rather, he approached the runes on their own terms, even putting himself in great peril in order to demonstrate that he was worthy of receiving their knowledge and power. He patiently stared down into the Well of Urd for as long as it took – in this case, no less than nine days and nights – for them to appear to him. The knowledge he gained was given to him after he took care to establish a particular relationship with the runes, and when they showed themselves to him, he perceived them directly, in their original, live context – not in an artificially controlled environment. After this startling, ecstatic encounter, he was able to “get results” of which, when we confine ourselves to the methods of science, we can only dream about.

The Walls of Asgard

Asgard, the celestial stronghold of the Aesir tribe of gods and goddesses, is encircled by a high, protective wall. This wall (the -garðr element in the Old Norse name Ásgarðr) defends the Aesir from incursions by the giants and other beings who are often the enemies of the gods. But this wall wasn't always there. This tale recounts how the wall was built – and this riotous story is probably one of the raunchiest and most scandalous tales in all of world mythology.

The Fortification of Asgard

A certain smith arrived at Asgard one day and offered to build the gods a high wall around their home to protect them from any who might wish them ill. The smith (certainly a giant himself) said he could complete his work in a mere three seasons, but demanded a steep compensation: the hand of the goddess Freya in marriage, as well as the sun and moon.

The gods took counsel together. Freya was adamantly against the giant's terms from the start. But Loki suggested that the builder should obtain that which he desired, although only if he could complete his work in a single winter, with no aid from anyone but his horse. After much deliberation, the gods consented to Loki's plan. Of course, the gods had no intention of actually giving Freya away, nor the sun or the moon; they thought that the task they demanded was impossible.

The giant smith, however, agreed to their terms, provided that the gods swear oaths to ensure that, if their conditions were met, they would fulfill their end of the bargain, and that he himself would be safe in Asgard while he worked. The builder set about constructing the wall, and the gods marveled at how quickly the structure was raised. What was even more perplexing to them was that the giant's stallion, Svadilfari (“Unlucky Traveler”) seemed to be doing almost twice as much work as the smith himself, hauling enormous boulders over considerable distances to add to the edifice. When the end of winter was only three days ahead, the wall was strong enough to be impenetrable by almost any enemy, and – alarmingly – lacking little before it was finished. Only the stones around the gate had yet to be put in place.

The anxious gods seized Loki and rebuked him for giving them such foul advice. They threatened him with death if he couldn't find a way to prevent the giant from finishing his task and making off with their beloved goddess Freya and the sun and moon, bringing never ending darkness and dreariness to the Nine Worlds. Loki pleaded with the gods to spare his life, and swore an oath that he would do as the gods desired, come what may.

That night, the giant and Svadilfari ventured into the snow-draped forest in search of stones. Along their way, a mare, who was none other than Loki in disguise, whinnied to the stallion from a short distance away. When the stallion saw the mare, his heart wasn't the only organ that was roused by delight and lust, and he snapped his reins and bounded into the woods after her. The mare ran all night, and all night Svadilfari chased after her. When morning came, the giant's horse was still missing, and the now-despairing giant knew that there was no way that he could now finish the wall in time.

The Aesir then paid the giant the wages they deemed he deserved: a fatal blow from Thor's hammer, which shattered his head into pieces no bigger than breadcrumbs. Meanwhile, deep in the forest, Svadilfari had caught up with Loki, who soon gave birth to a gray, eight-legged horse – Sleipnir, who became the steed of Odin.

Oath Breaking

The mythology of the Norse and other Germanic peoples evidences a keen appreciation for what today would call moral ambiguity – the recognition that living in accordance with one's values is far from a black-and-white task. One often faces situations where living in accordance with a particular principle means going against another.

When the gods realized that Loki's advice had been intended to bring about their ruin, they had a difficult choice to make. In ancient Germanic society, few things were more dishonorable than breaking an oath. The gods could have either keep their oaths and their honor and lost Freya, the sun, and the moon, or they could have saved Freya and the two celestial orbs and broken their oaths. But, one way or another, a win-win situation was impossible. Their predicament was especially dire because, within the narrative structure of the earliest poems that reference this tale, there's a clear implication that their oath breaking hastened the arrival of Ragnarok, the downfall of the cosmos. But, of course, had they kept their oaths and allowed the giant to finish the wall, Ragnarok would have practically already arrived. Besides, the gods got a nifty wall out of the deal, too, a wall which did indeed serve them well on a number of occasions afterwards.

Loki's dealings with Svadilfari saved the cosmos from immediate annihilation, but, by the standards of the people who told this tale in pre-Christian times, for a man to assume the receptive position in homosexual sex was generally viewed as a highly shameful act.

Loki's doings possess other layers of ambiguity as well. Loki had shape-shifted into a mare; would the fact that he was effectively temporarily female have alleviated, or at least mitigated, the dishonor of his coitus in the eyes of the Viking Age Norse? Could Loki have fulfilled his oath by merely allowing Svadilfari to chase him, without actually ever presenting himself to the stallion? And, from their union, Odin got a horse that served him and other gods

well on numerous shamanic journeys throughout the cosmos.

Óðin broke a ring-oath. A more heinous act can not be imagined. This act foreshadows another broken oath that will have dire consequences for the gods. From this point forward, the world of the gods was no longer one of dignified councils or care-free games or confident giant-smashing. The golden age was over, and the downward spiral of the gods had begun.

The Binding of Fenrir

Loki, who is by turns the friend and the enemy of the other gods, had three fearfully hideous and strong children with the giantess Angrboda (“She Who Bodes Anguish”). The first was the serpent Jormungand, and the second was the death-goddess Hel. The third was the wolf Fenrir.

The gods had terrible forebodings concerning the destiny of these three beings. And they were absolutely correct. Jormungand would later kill the god Thor during Ragnarok, the end of the great mythical cycle, an event which would be largely brought about by Hel’s refusal to release the radiant god Baldur from the underworld. During these cataclysmic events, Fenrir would devour Odin, the chief of the gods.

In order to keep these monsters at bay, they threw Jomungand into the ocean, where he encircled Midgard, the world of humankind. Hel they relegated to the underworld. Fenrir, however, inspired too much fear in them for them to let him out from under their watchful eyes, so they reared the pup themselves in their stronghold, Asgard. Only Tyr, the undeniable upholder of law and honor, dared to approach Fenrir to feed him.

Fenrir grew at an alarming rate, however, and soon the gods decided that his stay in Asgard had to be temporary. Knowing well how much devastation he would cause if he were allowed to roam free, the gods attempted to bind him with various chains. They were able to gain the wolf’s consent by telling him that these fetters were tests of his strength, and clapping and cheering when, with each new chain they presented him, he broke free.

At last, the gods sent a messenger down to Svartalfheim, the realm of the Dwarves. The Dwarves, being the most skilled craftspeople in the cosmos, were able to forge a chain whose strength couldn’t be equaled; it was wrought from the sound of a cat’s footsteps, the beard of a woman, the roots of stones, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird – in other words, things which don’t exist, and against which it’s therefore futile to struggle. Gleipnir (“Open”) was its name.

When the gods presented Fenrir with the curiously light and supple Gleipnir, the wolf suspected trickery and refused to be bound with it unless one of the gods would lay his or her hand in his jaws as a pledge of good faith. None of the gods agreed, knowing that this would mean the loss of a hand and the breaking of an oath. At last, the brave Tyr, for the good of all life, volunteered to fulfill the wolf’s demand. And, sure enough, when Fenrir discovered that he was unable to escape from Gleipnir, he chomped off and swallowed Tyr’s hand. The fettered beast was then transported to some suitably lonely and desolate place. The chain was tied to a boulder and a sword was placed in the wolf’s jaws to hold them open. As he howled wildly and ceaselessly, a foamy river called “Expectation” (Old Norse Ván) flowed from his drooling mouth. And there, in that sordid state, he remained – until Ragnarok.

Moral Ambiguity

The pre-Christian Norse and other Germanic peoples had a keen appreciation for what we today would call “moral ambiguity,” the fact that one often faces situations where acting in accordance with a particular ideal means sacrificing other ideals in the process. Because of the vicissitudes of the real world, it’s impossible to be 100% morally consistent 100% of the time. Nowhere is this more aptly demonstrated than in this tale (alongside the tale of The Fortifica-

tion of Asgard).

Consider Tyr’s actions. Tyr, one of the rulers of the gods and one of the most honorable and law-abiding among them, was placed in a situation where the welfare of his people demanded that he allow his hand to be lost to the wolf. In so doing, however, he acquired a dreadful physical blemish, which, in Norse northern European society, could have singlehandedly (no pun intended) rendered a ruler unfit to rule. Perhaps even more significantly, the breaking of an oath brought the gravest dishonor upon the oath-breaker. But, given the circumstances, what choice did Tyr really have? No matter what he did, he would have committed a supremely dishonorable act and acquired a deformity, or he would have selfishly sacrificed the well-being of the gods – and, indeed, of all life. He chose a universal good over a personal one and sacrificed of himself for the good of all.



Thor Fishing for Jormungand

The gods had arranged a lavish feast with Aegir and Ran, two gracious and hospitable giants who dwell beneath the sea. Aegir and Ran offered to host the banquet, but only if the gods could provide them with a kettle big enough to brew mead for all of the invited guests. The gods knew that, of all the beings in the Nine Worlds, only the giant Hymir possessed a cauldron large enough for this purpose. Thor, the brawniest and bravest of the gods, as well as the one most accustomed to dealing with the giants – not all of whom are as friendly to the gods as are Aegir and Ran – volunteered to obtain this cauldron from Hymir.

Upon the god’s arrival at his house, Hymir slaughtered three bulls for provisions for the two during Thor’s stay. The giant was shocked and dismayed, however, when Thor ate two of the bulls in one sitting to assuage his legendary hunger. Because of this, the angry giant declared, they would need to go fishing in the morning for the next day’s food. In the morning, Hymir sent Thor to procure bait for their hooks. Thor went to Hymir’s pastures and slaughtered the biggest of the giant’s remaining bulls, intending to use the head as bait. Hymir was now more irritated than ever at the rash youngster, but hoped his strength and daring would be of help on their fishing trip.

The two got into the boat, with Thor in the stern. The god rowed them out to Hymir’s usual fishing grounds, where the giant, to his delight, caught two whales. But then, Thor began to row the boat further out from land. His companion grew fearful and demanded that they row back at once, “because,” he reminded Thor, “Jormungand lurks below these wild waves.” Thor, the age-old enemy of that monstrous sea serpent, refused. At last, Thor dropped the oars and cast his line into the water. After an ominous silence and calm, Thor felt a mighty tug on his line. As he reeled it in, a violent rumbling shook the boat and whipped the

waves. The giant grew pale with terror, but Thor persisted. His feet were planted so firmly in the bottom of the boat that the planks gave way and water began pouring in.

When the serpent's head, with the hook in his venom-dripping mouth, at last came up above the water, Thor reached for his hammer. At this moment, Hymir panicked and cut the line. The howling snake slunk back down into the ocean. Thor, enraged at having missed this opportunity to end his greatest foe, heaved Hymir overboard. Thor, with the two whales slung over his shoulders, waded back to land, picked up Hymir's cauldron, and returned home.

The Death of Baldur

Baldur was one of the most beloved of all the gods. The son of Odin, the chief of the gods, and the benevolent sorceress goddess Frigg, Baldur was a generous, joyful, and courageous character who gladdened the hearts of all who spent time with him. When, therefore, he began to have ominous dreams of some grave misfortune befalling him, the fearful gods appointed Odin to discover their meaning.

Baldur's father wasted no time in mounting his steed, Sleipnir, and riding to the underworld to consult a dead seeress whom he knew to be especially wise in such matters. When, in one of his countless disguises, he reached the cold and misty underworld, he found the halls arrayed in splendor, as if some magnificent feast were about to occur. Odin woke the seeress and questioned her concerning this festivity, and she responded that the guest of honor was to be none other than Baldur. She merrily recounted how the god would meet his doom, stopping only when she realized, from the desperate nature of Odin's entreaties, who this disguised wanderer truly was. And, indeed, all that she prophesied would come to pass.

Odin returned in sorrow to Asgard, the gods' celestial stronghold, and told his comrades what he had been told. Frigg, yearning for any chance of saving her treasured son, however remote, went to every thing in the cosmos and obtained oaths to not harm Baldur. After these oaths were secured, the gods made a sport out of the situation. They threw sticks, rocks, and anything else on hand at Baldur, and everyone laughed as these things bounced off and left the shining god unharmed. The wily Loki sensed an opportunity for mischief.

Loki, in disguise, he went to Frigg and asked her, "Did all things swear oaths to spare Baldur from harm?" "Oh, yes," the goddess replied, "everything except the mistletoe. But the mistletoe is so small and innocent a thing that I felt it superfluous to ask it for an oath. What harm could it do to my son?" Immediately upon hearing this, Loki departed, located the mistletoe, and brought it to where the gods were playing their new favorite game. He approached the blind god Hodr (Old Norse Höðr, "Slayer") and said, "You must feel quite left out, having to sit back here away from the merriment, not being given a chance to show Baldur the honor of proving his invincibility." The blind god concurred. "Here," said Loki, handing him the shaft of mistletoe. "I will point your hand in the direction where Baldur stands, and you throw this branch at him." So Hodr threw the mistletoe. It pierced the god straight through, and he fell down dead on the spot.

The gods found themselves unable to speak as they trembled with anguish and fear. They knew that this event was the first presage of Ragnarok, the downfall and death, not just of themselves, but of the very cosmos they maintained. At last, Frigg composed herself enough to ask if there were any among them who were brave and compassionate enough to journey to the land of the dead and offer Hel, the death-goddess, a ransom for Baldur's release. Hermod, an obscure son of Odin, offered to undertake this mission. Odin instructed Sleipnir to bear Hermod to the underworld, and off he went.

The gods arranged a lavish funeral for their fallen friend. They turned Baldur's ship, Hringhorni, into a pyre fitting for a great king. When the time came to launch the ship out to sea, however, the gods found the ship stuck in the sand and themselves unable to force it to budge. After many failed attempts they summoned the brawniest being in the cosmos, a cer-

tain giantess named Hyrrokkin ("Withered by Fire"). Hyrrokkin arrived in Asgard riding a wolf and using poisonous snakes for reins. She dismounted, walked to the prow of the ship, and gave it such a mighty push that the land quaked as Hringhorni was freed from the strand. As Baldur's body was carried onto the ship, his wife, Nanna, was overcome with such great grief that she died there on the spot, and was placed on the pyre alongside her husband. The fire was kindled, and Thor hallowed the flames by holding his hammer over them. Odin laid upon the pyre his ring Draupnir, and Baldur's horse was led into the flames.

All kinds of beings from throughout the Nine Worlds attended this ceremony: Gods, Giants, Elves, Dwarves, Valkyries, and others. Together they stood and mourned as they watched the burning ship disappear over the ocean.

Meanwhile, Hermod rode nine nights through ever darker and deeper valleys on his quest to rescue the part of Baldur that had been sent to Hel. When he came to the river Gjöll (Gjöll, "Roaring"), Móðguðr, the giantess who guards the bridge, asked him his name and his purpose, adding that it was strange that his footfalls were as thundering as those of an entire army, especially since his face still had the color of the living. He answered to her satisfaction, and she allowed him to cross over into Hel's realm. Sleipnir leapt over the wall around that doleful land.

Upon entering and dismounting, Hermod spotted Hel's throne and Baldur, pale and downcast, sitting in the seat of honor next to her. Hermod spent the night there, and when morning came, he pleaded with Hel to release his brother, telling her of the great sorrow that all living things, and especially the gods, felt for his absence. Hel responded, "If this is so, then let every thing in the cosmos weep for him, and I will send him back to you. But if any refuse, he will remain in my presence."

Hermod rode back to Asgard and told these tidings to the gods, who straightaway sent messengers throughout the worlds to bear this news to all of their inhabitants. And, indeed, everything did weep for Baldur – everything, that is, save for one giantess: Tokk (Þökk, "Thanks"), who was none other than Loki in another disguise. Tokk coldly told the messengers, "Let Hel hold what she has!"

And so Baldur remained with Hel until Ragnarok, when, after the cosmos was destroyed and re-created, he returned to bless the land with light and exuberance.

The Role of Baldur's Death in the Norse Mythological Cycle

Amongst the Norse and other Germanic peoples, Baldur was regarded as the divine animating force behind the beauty of life at the peak of its strength and energy. Accordingly, his happy youth is the peak of the Norse mythical cycle as a whole, as summer is to the cycle of the year or noontime is to the cycle of the day. His death marks the beginning of the decline into old age, night, winter, and ultimately the death and rebirth that characterize Ragnarok.

Thor the Transvestite

One morning, Thor awoke to find his hammer, Mjollnir ("Lightning"), missing. This was no small matter; without the thunder god's best weapon, Asgard was left vulnerable to the attacks of the giants. In a rage, he searched everywhere for his most prized possession, but it was nowhere to be found.

The goddess Freya owned falcon feathers, with which one could change shape into that of a falcon. She lent these to Thor and Loki so that the hammer could be located. Loki, who knew how to shift his shape, donned the feathers and flew off in search of the treasure. He quickly surmised that it had probably been stolen by the giants, so he rode the winds to their homeland, Jotunheim.

Upon his arrival, he changed back into his god-form and approached the chief of the giants, Thrym ("Noisy"). When questioned regarding the hammer, Thrym answered that

he had indeed taken it, and that it was buried eight miles below the ground. And, added the lonely, ugly giant, he had no intention of returning it until Freya was made to be his bride. Loki flew back to Asgard and told this news to his fellow gods, who were alarmed and furious – especially Freya. As they sat in counsel, Heimdall put forth the following solution: that Thor go to Jotunheim disguised as Freya, and thereby win back his hammer and take vengeance on its thieves. Thor protested, saying that this was a dishonorable and unmanly thing to do, and that all of the inhabitants of Asgard would mock him for it for the rest of his days. Loki pointed out, however, that if he didn't consent to Heimdall's plan, Asgard would be ruled by the giants. The gods thereby obtained Thor's acquiescence.

No detail was spared in the assemblage of Thor's bridal dress. After the humiliated god had donned the costume, Loki offered to go with him as his maid-servant. The pair climbed into Thor's goat-drawn chariot and made their way to Jotunheim. When they arrived, they were welcomed by the Thrym, who boasted that the gods had at last brought him the prize he was due.

At dinner, Thor and Loki found themselves in trouble. Thor singlehandedly ate an entire ox, eight salmon, and all of the dainties that had been prepared for the women – not to mention the many barrels of mead he drank. This made Thrym suspicious, and he declared that he had never in his whole life seen a woman with such an appetite. Loki quickly devised a response: "The fair goddess has been so lovesick for you," he claimed, "that she hasn't been able to eat for a week." Thrym accepted this answer, and was overcome by a desire to kiss his bride. When he peeled back the veil, Thor's eyes glared at him so intently that they seemed to burn holes right through him. He exclaimed, "Never have I seen a maiden with such frightfully piercing eyes!" Loki, the master of deceit, explained to the giant that while Freya had been unable to eat, she had also been unable to sleep, so fierce was her longing for him.

The ceremony soon followed. As was customary, Thrym called for the hammer to hallow their union. When Mjollnir was laid in Thor's lap, he grabbed its handle and slew first Thrym, then all of the guests before contentedly returning to Asgard and changing back into his preferred garb.

Ragnarok

Ragnarok (Old Norse Ragnarök, "The Doom of the Gods") is the name the pre-Christian Norse gave to the end of their mythical cycle, during which the cosmos is destroyed and is subsequently re-created. "Ragnarok" is something of a play on words; an alternate form, which sounds almost identical when spoken, is Ragnarøkkr, "The Twilight of the Gods." The significance of this variation will be discussed below.

The Doom of the Gods

Ominous prophecies and dreams had long foretold the downfall of the cosmos and of its gods and goddesses along with it. When the first of these prophesied events came to pass – the beloved god Baldur was killed by Loki and consigned to the underworld – the gods had to face the fact they could no longer escape their tragic destiny. They prepared as well as they could. Odin took a great deal of time and care selecting the ablest human warriors to join him in the final battle against the world-devouring giants. But, deep down, they knew that all of their desperate actions were in vain.

In Midgard, the realm of human civilization, people abandoned their traditional ways, disregarded the bonds of kinship, and sank into a wayward, listless nihilism. The gods weren't exactly innocent of these same charges, however. They had broken oaths and fallen short of their expectations of one another on many occasions. (See, for example, The Fortification of Asgard and The Binding of Fenrir.) Three winters came in a row with no summer in between, a plodding, devastating season of darkness and frigidity which the prophecies had called the

Fimbulwinter ("The Great Winter").

At last, Loki and his son, the dreaded wolf Fenrir, who had both been chained up to prevent them from wreaking further destruction in the Nine Worlds, broke free of their fetters and set about doing precisely what the gods who had imprisoned them had feared. Yggdrasil, the great world-tree that holds the Nine Worlds in its branches and roots, began to tremble. The far-seeing Heimdall, the watchman of the gods' fortress, Asgard, was the first to spy a vast army of giants headed for the celestial stronghold. Among the gruesome mass was the gods' fickle friend, Loki, at the helm of the ship Naglfar ("Ship of the Dead"). Heimdall sounded his horn Gjallarhorn ("Resounding Horn") to alert the gods, who quite alarmed.

The giants set about destroying the abode of the gods and the entire cosmos along with it. Fenrir, the great wolf, ran across the land with his lower jaw on the ground and his upper jaw in the sky, consuming everything in between. Even the sun itself was dragged from its height and into the beast's stomach. Surt, a giant bearing a flaming sword, swept across the earth and left nothing but an inferno in his wake. But, like the heroes of a Greek tragedy, the gods fought valiantly to the end. Thor and the sea serpent Jormungand slew each other, as did Surt and the god Freyr, and likewise Heimdall and Loki. Odin and Tyr both fell to Fenrir (also called "Garmr" in some texts), who was then killed by Vidar, Odin's son and avenger.

At last, in the ultimate reversal of the original process of creation, the ravaged land sank back into the sea and vanished below the waves. The perfect darkness and silence of the anti-cosmic void, Ginnungagap, reigned once more.

After Ragnarok - by Emil Doepler (1905)

But this age of death and repose did not last forever. Soon the earth was once again raised from the ocean. Baldur returned from the underworld, and the gladdened land became more lush and fruitful than it had been since it was created the previous time. A new human pair, Líf and Lífthrasir, the equivalents of Ask and Embla in the Norse creation narrative, awakened in the green world. The gods, too, returned and resumed their merrymaking.

The Twilight of the Gods

While some scholars have attempted to portray Ragnarok as being much like the Christian "End Times," where the world is destroyed once and for all and historical time is abolished, other scholars, such as historian of religions Mircea Eliade and old Norse philologist Rudolf Simek, have realized that the tale of Ragnarok conveys a very different message. Given that the accounts of the destruction of the world in the Old Norse primary sources are immediately followed by accounts of its re-creation, the assertion that Ragnarok describes the end of linear history is completely unfounded. A more sensitive reading of the primary sources makes it obvious that what Ragnarok describes is a cyclical end of the world, after which follows a new creation, which will in turn be followed by another Ragnarok, and so on throughout eternity. In other words, creation and destruction are points at opposite ends of a circle, not points at opposite ends of a straight line.

With this understanding, we can grasp the meaning of the play on words in the name "Ragnarok," as was mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article. This cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth for which Norse mythology provides an archetype occurs at every scale of existence: the cycle of the seasons, of day and night, of the phases of the moon, of the life of any organism, and of the flourishing of life between mass extinctions. The "Twilight of the Gods," in other words, expresses the meaning the pre-Christian Norse perceived within every physical twilight, every autumn, every waning moon, and every aging being. This, finally, is the heart of the pre-Christian world view of the Norse and other Germanic peoples: by imbuing existence with these sacred meanings, they sanctified all of existence, and, if they kept the proper mindset, lived their lives immersed in the sacred at every turn.

Norse Genealogy

Established from the Poetic Edda Stories and Other sources

Note: There are many stories and fables of the Norse apntheon and they do not always tell the same lineage, but this genealogy was one of the most complete and clever of all the sources.

